

THE STRUGGLE TO BE AN ALL-AMERICAN

Girl

Elizabeth Wong

It's still there, the Chinese school on Yale Street where my brother and I used to go. Despite the new coat of paint and the high wire fence, the school I knew ten years ago remains remarkably, stoically¹ the same.

Every day at 5 p.m., instead of playing with our fourth- and fifth-grade friends or sneaking out to the empty lot to hunt ghosts and animal bones, my brother and I had to go to Chinese school. No amount of kicking, screaming, or pleading could dissuade² my mother, who was solidly determined to have us learn the language of our heritage.

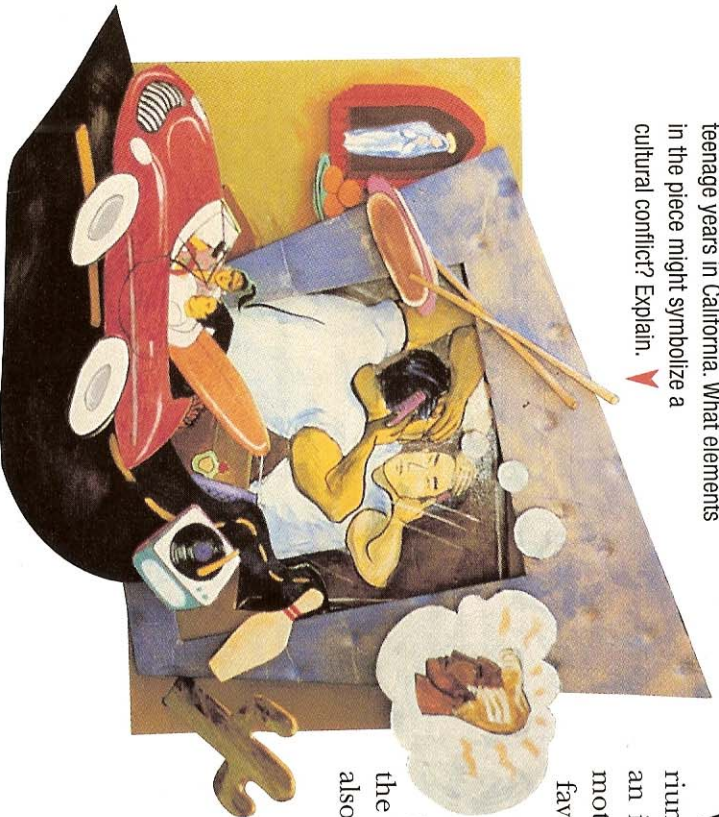
Forcibly, she walked us the seven long, hilly blocks from our home to school, depositing our defiant tearful faces before the stern principal. My only memory of him is that he swayed on his heels like a palm tree, and he always clasped his impatient twitching hands behind his back. I recognized him as a repressed maniacal³ child killer, and knew that if we ever saw his hands we'd be in big trouble.

We all sat in little chairs in an empty auditorium. The room smelled like Chinese medicine, an imported faraway muskiness. Like ancient mothballs or dirty closets. I hated that smell. I favored crisp new scents. Like the soft French perfume that my American teacher wore in public school.

There was a stage far to the right, flanked by an American flag and the flag of the Nationalist Republic of China,⁴ which was also red, white and blue but not as pretty.

1. **stojically** (stō/'ə klē), *adv.* in a manner that is indifferent to pleasure and pain; self-controlled.
2. **dissuade** (di swād'), *v.* persuade not to do something.
3. **maniacal** (mə nī/'ə kal), *adj.* violently insane.
4. **Nationalist Republic of China**, country consisting of Taiwan and adjacent islands; not to be confused with the mainland People's Republic of China.

In *I need some more hair products* (1988), Chinese American artist Ken Chu takes a wry look at his teenage years in California. What elements in the piece might symbolize a cultural conflict? Explain. ▼



Although the emphasis at the school was mainly language—speaking, reading, writing—the lessons always began with an exercise in politeness. With the entrance of the teacher, the best student would tap a bell and everyone would get up, kowtow,⁵ and chant, “Sing san ho,” the phonetic for “How are you, teacher?” Being ten years old, I had better things to learn than ideographs⁶ copied painstakingly in lines that ran right to left from the tip of a *mooc but*, a real ink pen that had to be held in an awkward way if blotches were to be avoided. After all, I could do the multiplication tables, name the satellites of Mars, and write reports on *Little Women* and *Black Beauty*. Nancy Drew, my favorite book heroine, never spoke Chinese.

The language was a source of embarrassment. More times than not, I had tried to disassociate myself from the nagging loud voice that followed me wherever I wandered in the nearby American supermarket outside Chinatown. The voice belonged to my grandmother, a fragile woman in her seventies who could shout the best of the street vendors. Her humor was raunchy, her Chinese rhythmless, patternless. It was quick, it was loud, it was unbeautiful. It was not like the quiet, lilting romance of French or the gentle refinement of the American South. Chinese sounded pedestrian.⁷ Public.

In Chinatown, the comings and goings of hundreds of Chinese on their daily tasks sounded chaotic and frenzied. I did not want to be thought of as mad, as talking gibberish.⁸ When I spoke English, people nodded at me, smiled sweetly, said encouraging words. Even the people in my culture would cluck and say that I’d do well in life. “My, doesn’t she move her lips fast,” they would say, meaning that I’d be able to keep up with the world outside Chinatown.

My brother was even more fanatical⁹ than I about speaking English. He was especially hard on my mother, criticizing her, often cruelly, for

her pidgin¹⁰ speech—smatterings of Chinese scattered like chop suey in her conversation. “It’s not ‘What it is,’ Mom,” he’d say in exasperation. “It’s ‘What *is* it, what *is* it, what *is* it!’” Sometimes Mom might leave out an occasional “the” or “a,” or perhaps a verb of being.¹¹ He would stop her in mid-sentence: “Say it again, Mom. Say it right.” When he tripped over his own tongue, he’d blame it on her: “See, Mom, it’s all your fault. You set a bad example.”

What infuriated my mother most was when my brother cornered her on her consonants, especially “r.” My father had played a cruel joke on Mom by assigning her an American name that her tongue wouldn’t allow her to say. No matter how hard she tried, “Ruth” always ended up “Luth” or “Roof.”

After two years of writing with a *mooc but* and reciting words with multiples of meanings, I finally was granted a cultural divorce. I was permitted to stop Chinese school.

I thought of myself as multicultural. I preferred tacos to egg rolls; I enjoyed Cinco de Mayo¹² more than Chinese New Year.

At last, I was one of you; I wasn’t one of them. Sadly, I still am.

5. **kowtow** (kou/’tou/), *v.* kneel and touch the ground with the forehead to show deep respect, submission, or worship.

6. **ideograph** (id/’e a graf), *n.* graphic symbol that represents things or ideas directly, without representing the sounds of the words for the things or ideas. Most Chinese characters are ideographs.

7. **pedestrian** (pa des/’trē an), *adj.* without imagination; dull; slow; commonplace.

8. **gibberish** (jib/’ər ish), *n.* senseless chatter; confused, meaningless talk or writing.

9. **fanatical** (fa nat/’ə kal), *adj.* unreasonably enthusiastic or zealous.

10. **pidgin** (pif/’ən), *n.* a simplified speech used for communication between people with different languages. **verb of being.** The irregular forms of the verb “to be” can cause learning difficulties for non-native speakers of English.

12. **Cinco de Mayo** (sēn/’kō dā mā/’yō), May 5th, a Mexican national holiday.