

C. Allyson Lee / SINOPHOBIA

By virtue of the shape of my eyes and the colour of my hair, I am considered by Canadian society to have membership in a “visible” minority. I am also called a “woman of colour.” That is, I could never “pass” for white, even if I tried. It has been long regarded as a privilege to be able to be thought of as white, to have no physical characteristics which could set one apart. After all, in Canada, a white person can walk down any street and not be called a “jap,” “chink,” or “nigger” and not be asked “where do you come from — originally?” or “Where were you born?”

Aside from the obvious external racism, many people of colour often suffer from a more concealed form of oppression: internalized racism or fear or hatred of one’s own ethnic heritage or prejudice against one’s own race. It has taken me decades to claim ownership of such feelings. For most of my life I belonged to the “Don’t Wanna Be” tribe, being ashamed and embarrassed by my Asian background, turning my back and rejecting it. I didn’t want to be associated with, let alone belong to, a group which was stereotyped by whites as being noisy, slanty-eyed rice gobblers, “gooks,” or chinks.

Despite being born and raised on the prairies, in a predominantly white neighbourhood with all white friends, my father tried his best (albeit unsuccessfully) to jam “Chineseness” down my throat. He kept telling me that I should be playing with Chinese kids — there were none in our neighbourhood. He chastised me for not being able to speak Chinese — by the time I entered Grade One. I was fluent in both English and Chinese, but my parents, worried that I may not develop proper English skills, stopped conversing with me in Chinese. My father warned me ominously, “You’d better marry a Chinese. If you marry a white, we’ll cut you out of our will.” This succeeded in driving me further away from my roots, leading me to believe that if I acted white enough, i.e. not chatter noisily in Chinese and not hang around in groups, I would actually not look Chinese.

Throughout my home life it was unacceptable for me to unconditionally embrace my father's traditional Chinese culture and values because, in my mind, I would be accused by others of "sticking to my own kind" and would therefore be set apart from whites. But along with my father's wish for my awareness of cultural identity came his expectation that I grow up to be a "nice Chinese girl": that is, ladylike, submissive, obedient, a morally impeccable puppet who would spend the rest of her life deferring to and selflessly appeasing her husband. I rebelled with a fury, rejecting and denying everything remotely associated with Chinese culture.

When I moved away from the prairies to the west coast, I remained somewhat colourless and blind. I still denied any association with my ethnic background. I often voiced, along with others, utter contempt for Hong Kong immigrants who were, in our minds, nothing but repugnant, obnoxious, spoiled rich kids. Yet it was in Vancouver that I first experienced being called chink and gook on the street.

The connection between sinophobia (fear or hatred of anything or anyone Chinese) and rebellion against my father did not become obvious to me until years later. Moving to another province meant that there was no longer daily contact with my father, the object of my defiance. As I became less resistant to Chinese culture, I busied myself with the task of forming a new life in the city. And by forming a new life, I had less time to practice my sinophobia.

Becoming a lesbian challenged everything in my upbringing and confirmed the fact that I was not a nice, ladylike pamperer of men. Somehow I must have known from an early age that I would never fit into this configuration. My friendships with women had always been more satisfying and intense than those with men. I grew up with a secret morbid fear of marriage, and I did not know why until I became involved with a woman.

By coincidence, my first lover was a woman of colour, proud of her own heritage. She became interested in my background, and through her support and love, I began to look more positively at my culture and see that it did hold a few interesting qualities.

Our heritages, although distinct and separate, had some notable and fascinating similarities. Both celebrated yearly festivals. Both cherished the importance of higher education and the formation of a solid family structure. She helped me see that it could be fun to explore various aspects of my culture, but I still could not claim it as my own.

Years later, white woman lovers came into my life, teasing me and calling me a “fake” Chinese because, after all, I did not even speak the language. This helped to bring back the old feelings of sinophobia again. It never occurred to me that certain white people would seek me out and be attracted to me because of my ethnic background. I had heard of “rice queens,” white men who would go after Chinese men. But there was no such term for white women who felt a strong affinity towards Chinese women. I recently coined the expression “Asianophile” to describe such women.

Another woman entered my life; she was Chinese, born in Canada, and proud of her heritage. Simultaneously, I found this to be both mystifying and affirming. She had not developed an attitude of sinophobia in her childhood and as a result never felt contempt or derision for her background or any associations with it. It felt like a bonus to be able to talk with her without having to explain little idiosyncrasies of our common culture and language. She helped me to reclaim a heritage I had previously denied.

I felt certain that we were the only two Chinese lesbians in the world until I participated in an Asian lesbian conference in California. It was there I was introduced to others who shared similar struggles against externalized and internalized racism. Meeting Asian lesbians in my own city became a course in Anti-Racism 101. These special women helped raise my political awareness to the point where I realized it was fine to get upset over injustice and oppression, great to speak out about it, and necessary to fight against it. Gradually my background was no longer the source of my shame, but the beginning of my empowerment.

My attempt to conquer sinophobia continues to be an uphill struggle, as I deliberately seek out friendships with other Asian lesbians. Years ago I would have shunned them, or at best, ig-

nored them. There is still a sense of discomfort, however, when I go out socially with a group of Asian women. I find myself looking around the room hoping not to catch contemptuous racist stares from white patrons, or my white friends tell me that they feel left out or uncomfortable around a large group of my Asian women friends.

As I struggle, however, there are many bonuses in my life. I am enriched by supportive and loving friends: Asian women, other women of colour, white women and men. I have reached a point of understanding about the origins of my previous self-hate and how it magnified the dysfunctional relationship with my father. There is always that private joy in knowing that my father (who doesn't even know it) won't have to worry about me marrying a white boy.