

BEST *Essay Award*



How My Chinese Ancestry/Heritage Affects My Goals and Interactions With This Society

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“Now hold your bamboo leaves in a triangle and add the sticky rice,” Qi LaoShi told the class. My kindergarten self was in awe. My grandmother always made ZongZis around the Dragon Boat Festival, and here my teacher was making the same. Suddenly, my worlds collided. Learning the history behind ZongZi and the tragedy of throwing sticky rice into the river to keep fish from eating the dead body of Qu Yuan, who committed suicide after defeat during the Warring State Period. I was astonished when I realized my parents never learned this important piece of heritage because they grew up in the United States.

From Kindergarten to 8th grade, I studied at International School of the Peninsula, ISTP now called Silicon Valley International School, a bilingual immersion school where I took classes in Mandarin Chinese and English. After 9 years, I know over 5000 characters and received a 5 on the AP Chinese Language and Culture Test. I experienced my heritage through a unique lens not offered in a typical American education.

A benefit included examining history from multiple perspectives, which fostered open-mindedness in my worldview. Learning about the Opium War and Sino-Japanese War from the perspective of a Chinese National, I saw documentaries and primary source photos highlighting the brutality and effects of the wars. I distinctly remember the devastating look and voices of the victims and families. This allowed me to also better understand my grandparents' experiences as they did not speak about it.

At ISTP, I leapt at the chance to engage in exchange programs in HangZhou, ChengDu, and TaiPei. My first time was in 4th grade when I stayed with a host family and attended classes with their daughter. During my week's stay, I noticed the students' respect for teachers, often bowing in

greeting and sweeping each morning to keep the classroom tidy. I saw typical family structure in China and the importance of family meals. I gained a deeper understanding of other cultures and found myself embracing some of these ideals. I respectfully greeted each of my teachers at the start of class and helped whenever I could.

In 8th grade, I flew with my parents to GuangDong Province to visit the villages of my ancestors. During the trip, I acted as a translator for my parents as relatives showed us around. I was told many stories about how difficult my grandparents' lives were as they balanced school and working in the fields. Our appreciation and respect grew for them as we learned these new stories.

Exposed to world travel, I continued to connect with others through Crystal Children's Choir. I had the opportunity to perform “CaiDiao,” a Chinese riddle song, on Carnegie Hall's Perelman Stage. I felt inspired being in one of the most diverse cities sharing a Chinese folk song. I always thought of English and Latin dominated choir songs, and I loved engaging the audience with this unique style. I felt proud hearing the thunder of applause at the end. With each place I travel to and each song I sing — I find myself digging into history.

While my current school does not provide Chinese classes at my level, I volunteer through Rakuten Viki, a streaming service for Asian dramas, as a Qualified Contributor. Through this program, I create and edit subtitles and captions in English and Chinese for various Asian dramas, including Please Feel at Ease, Mr. Ling (一不小心捡到爱) and Fall in Love (一见倾心). In this new avenue, I get to combine my love for dramas and my joy of maintaining my fluency in Chinese. I also get to help bring Chinese dramas to people around the world as the English subtitles are then translated into languages like French and Arabic. My love for Chinese dramas have also inspired me to write my own novels. My current one is a XuanHuan novel exploring identity inspired by common themes and traditions I was taught at my Chinese immersion school.

Chinese is a valuable asset to my own identity, I would feel incomplete without this intimate knowledge of my heritage. I will continue volunteering through Viki and I hope one day my novels will be published allowing for others to appreciate Chinese culture.