

“Orientation Day”

At the age of 7, Jennifer Wang came to the United States from Beijing, China, with her family. At 17, she wrote an essay entitled “Orientation Day” in response to a familiar experience: introducing oneself to a group of strangers. Wang writes in part:

Something about myself? How do I summarize, in thirty seconds, everything, which adds up and equals a neat little bundle called Me? How do I present myself in a user-friendly format, complete with “Help” buttons and batteries? Who am I, and why do I matter to any of you?

First of all, I am a girl who wandered the aisles of Toys “R” Us for two hours, hunting in vain for a doll with a yellowish skin tone. I am a girl who sat on the cold bathroom floor at seven in the morning, cutting out the eyes of Caucasian models in magazines, trying to fit them on my face. I am the girl who loved [newscaster] Connie Chung because she was Asian, and I’m also the girl who hated Connie Chung because she wasn’t Asian enough....

During that time I also first heard the term *chink*, and I wondered why people were calling me “a narrow opening, usually in a wall.” People expected me to love studying and to enjoy sitting in my room memorizing facts for days and days.

While I was growing up, I did not understand what it meant to be “Chinese” or “American.” Do these terms link only to citizenship? Do they suggest that people fit the profile of either “typical” Chinese or “typical” Americans? And who or what determines when a person starts feeling American, and stops feeling Chinese? ...

I am still not a citizen of the United States of America, this great nation, which is hailed as the destination for generations of people, the promised land for millions. I flee at the mere hint of teenybopper music. I stare blankly at my friends when they mention the 1980s or share stories of their parents as hippies. And I hate baseball.

The question lingers: Am I Chinese? Am I American? Or am I some unholy mixture of both, doomed to stay torn between the two?

I don’t know if I’ll ever find the answers. Meanwhile, it’s my turn to introduce myself.... I stand up and say, “My name is Jennifer Wang,” and then I sit back down. There are no other words that define me as well as those do. No others show me being stretched between two very different cultures and places — the “Jennifer” clashing with the “Wang,” the “Wang” fighting with the “Jennifer.”*

* Jennifer Wang, “Orientation Day” [pp. 199–200] from Vickie Nam, *Yell-Oh Girls!*
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1. Underline the words and phrases that Jennifer uses to describe herself.

2. Based on her description of herself, what words or phrases would you use to describe Jennifer?

3. How does being Chinese shape Jennifer's identity?

4. How does being American shape her identity?

5. What experiences does Jennifer identify as important to who she is and how she sees herself? Which of those experiences do you think has had the greatest impact on her identity?

6. What experiences are important to who you are and how you see yourself? Which of those experiences has had the greatest impact on your identity?