

Growing Up In A Cult Hijacked My Cultural Identity

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By unlearning the harmful stereotypes of Asians I grew up believing, I will finally be able to take pride in my own culture.

One night in my college dining hall, I told my friends that I wished all Asians would die out.

My friends stared at me. They probably hadn't expected that as we were generally a diverse and tolerant group. Probably the most shocking thing about my statement was that amongst them, I was the only Asian.

"You're dating an Asian," one of them finally said.

"He's an exception," I replied. Another friend then asked me how my boyfriend was doing, putting an end to my comments. To them, it was just another joke, one of the many we made as a good-humored celebration of our differences. I don't think they ever guessed that my statement had a much darker reason lying beneath its surface.

Growing up, my concept of what it meant to "be Asian" was defined entirely by my parents and by my doomsday Christian Chinese church. My mom first learned about the church as a high school student in Malaysia. She'd had a chaotic upbringing within a Buddhist Chinese household, and to her, the church represented a steady, righteous contrast to her own broken

family. She became a fervent member for several years before deciding to take a break. She married my dad, another Malaysian Chinese with a more typical denominational Christian upbringing, and together they immigrated to the U.S. and started a family. We settled in Ohio, where I attended kindergarten and had a fairly normal life.

All of that changed when I was five. During a family trip to California, my mother convinced us to stop by the church, which had started establishing branches outside of Asia. My parents rediscovered their Christian faith, and we began a new chapter in which following the church's teachings and integrating ourselves into its social structure became a significant component of our lives.

As part of our family's re-integration, I had to quit school and distance myself from all my old friends. The church supported itself by selling organic produce, grown in farm communes throughout the world. To keep the farms operating, the church heavily discouraged members from sending their kids to school. Instead, they were pressured to send their kids to the farm communes at ages as young as eight or nine, where they were looked after by senior church leaders and spent most of their days harvesting vegetables or packaging produce.

Since we lived in Ohio and the closest commune was in California, my mom decided to homeschool me. I was discouraged from spending time with my former friends as they did "ungodly" things like get their ears pierced and listen to Britney Spears. I wasn't allowed to participate in clubs or competitions as they supposedly encouraged the pursuit of worldly fame and glory. My parents themselves didn't have many friends in small-town suburban Ohio, contributing to our overall isolation.

The only time I felt any hope of belonging was when we visited the farm commune in California. During services and prayers, I would hear people who spoke my parents' native dialects (Mandarin Chinese and Hokkien). I would eat the food my mom cooked at home. Most importantly, I had other kids to play with.

As I got older, I begged my parents to let me stay on the farm commune. I felt myself drifting apart from the other kids as they were given more work responsibilities and thought the only way I could secure my friendships was to fully immerse myself in the church. My parents eventually relented and allowed me to spend three to four months on the farm commune each year.

We woke up at 5AM for morning service, where we prayed, read the Bible, and listened to recordings of the prophet's daily lectures. Then we'd have breakfast, work in the fields for the morning, have lunch and an hour-long nap, process fruits and vegetables in the afternoon, and then have dinner. Some days we'd have an hour or two of "classes," which were permanently taught around the 4th to 6th grade level (the church didn't believe you needed more than that). If a big harvest came in, or the church started building a new barn or expansion, classes would stop.

Over time, I started asking myself how far I was willing to go to belong in my church. We were constantly bombarded with the message that we, a "humble group" of Malaysian and Taiwanese Asians, had been chosen to "replace the Jewish people" and that we had to live a God-based life in preparation for the Lord's coming. This meant limiting our interactions with the outside world (no movies or books except for ones approved by the church), following the prophet unquestioningly (perform symbolic activities such as killing snakes and cursing world leaders), and generally obeying the church's leadings as much as possible.

Every time a new rule or teaching was released, I followed it as best as I could. However, I kept noticing more social nuances that I hadn't seen when I was younger. Children from families that had longstanding ties within the church were generally treated better as their own parents were in charge of enforcing discipline. Another unspoken emphasis was on wealth and social appearances. At age thirteen, I was a book-loving nerd who wore oversized jeans and secondhand dresses. I didn't realize that the way I presented myself made me appear to others as a sloppy kid from a poor family (even though my family wasn't poor) and that people in the church were watching and judging my every move. It took me a while to fully understand why my friends' parents kept offering me their cast-off old clothes.

I started calling home every day to vent. My parents didn't want to blame Christianity, so they blamed "Asian culture" for tainting the message of the church. When I questioned the church's extreme messages, my parents sidestepped by telling me that Chinese culture was heavily ethnocentric and that this influenced the rhetoric of the church. When I complained about passive-aggressive comments people made about the way I presented myself, my parents would tell me that Chinese people always insult others in a backhanded manner and that I should deal with it. When I cried about the gossip and what I perceived as inequalities, my parents would tell me that, in Asian cultures, it was normal for people to judge you based on social standing and wealth. If I hadn't been isolated from the world, I would have seen the flaws in their logic and that these issues aren't just present in Asian society. Unfortunately, I didn't have any other social context to understand the toxic environment I was in, so I took what my parents said at face value.

My behavior and moods worsened with every year I stayed on the farm commune. Eventually, my parents' overprotective instincts kicked in, and they told me that I needed to decide whether staying on the farm commune was truly what was best for me. At that point, I was fed-up with trying to fit into what I perceived as a typical "Asian" society. I wanted freedom to live my life and think for myself. So I told my parents that I wanted to quit and that I wanted to go to college.

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I stopped living on the farm commune and started distancing myself from my old life. My parents still didn't want me to go to high school, but they supported my studies for the GED, SATs, and all my college entrance requirements. Based on my traumatic experiences, my parents also made the difficult decision to start separating themselves from the church.

When I finally began my freshman year, I was still scarred from my church experiences and clung on to the opinion that Asians were toxic as an excuse to avoid making any new Asian friends. I tried to fit in with friends I met in my dorm and through classes. When we weren't studying, we'd hit the mall, watch mindless comedies, and trash talk people we viewed as annoying.

After I went home for summer break and had time to reflect, I realized that all the gossip and useless chatter left me feeling empty. I'd left the church because I couldn't stand the toxic behavior there, but I had ultimately brought some of those toxic behaviors with me. It had nothing to do with "being Asian" and everything to do with being closed-minded and hostile to new ideas.

In an attempt to face my fears and work on self-improvement, I forced myself to attend a hot pot event hosted by the Asian American student club when I got back to campus. There, I met my college boyfriend. Though he'd had his own struggles as a first-generation Chinese American, he was genuinely proud of his identity. On date nights, we'd order the best Chinese takeout in town, laugh over his favorite Asian American YouTubers, and then spend the rest of the night talking about my traumas. He helped cement the idea that being Asian didn't only involve all the terrible behaviors my parents had blamed on it. It was a whole identity with points of both pride and shame, and which every Asian had to navigate and figure out for themselves.

As I redeveloped my definition of what it meant to be Asian American, I started questioning my parents again. Why had they blamed the church's problems on "Asian culture," and yet never allowed me to see my Malaysian relatives during Chinese New Year to understand what it was like for myself? Just like when I'd asked them about the church, they deflected. They claimed that our extended family in Malaysia also had its share of toxic people who called us *ang mor sai* (English-educated shit) for going to the States and had refused to help my parents out when they were young, poor and struggling. My parents would cut short the conversations by telling me that if I was so interested, I could teach myself about my own culture. They didn't want to dig any deeper than that.

After years of arguing, I've finally accepted that it is not my parents' responsibility to give me the answers I want. The toxic culture of our church, combined with my parents' bad experiences growing up in Malaysia, severely limited my understanding of my own identity. Going forward, that does not mean I should allow their impressions of the world to limit my own. Instead, I

must define for myself what it means to be a Malaysian-Chinese American, whether through reading books and articles, watching documentaries, or asking about my family's history. I realize now that "wanting Asians to die out" was never the solution to my problems. By unlearning the harmful stereotypes of Asians I grew up believing, I will finally be able to take pride in my own culture.

Note: Author has not included social media links to remain anonymous.

