

Canwen Xu's Speech

My name is Canwen and I play both the piano and the violin. I aspire to someday be a doctor and my favorite subject is calculus. My mom and dad are tiger parents who won't let me go to sleepovers, but they make up for it by serving my favorite meal every single day — rice. And I'm a really bad driver.

So my question for you now is, how long did it take you to figure out I was joking?

As you've probably guessed, today I am going to talk about race. and I'll start off by sharing with you my story of growing up Asian-American. I moved to the United States when I was two years old, so almost my entire life has been a blend of two cultures. I eat pasta with chopsticks. I'm addicted to orange chicken, and my childhood hero was Yao Ming.

But having grown up in North Dakota, South Dakota, and Idaho, all states with incredible little racial diversity, it was difficult to reconcile my so-called exotic Chinese heritage with my mainstream American self. Used to being the only Asian in the room, I was self-conscious that the first thing people noticed about me was that I wasn't white. And as a child I quickly began to realize that I had two options in front of me — conformed to the stereotype that was expected of me, or conformed to the whiteness that surrounded me. There was no in between. For me, this meant that I always felt self-conscious about being good at math, because people would just say it was because I was Asian, not because I actually worked hard. It meant that whenever a boy asked me out, it was because he had the “yellow fever” and not because he actually liked me. It meant that for the longest time my identity had formed around the fact that I was different. And I thought that being Asian was the only special thing about me.

These effects were emphasized by the places where I lived. Don't get me wrong. Only a small percentage of people were actually racist, or even borderline racist, but the vast majority were just a little bit clueless. Now, I know you're probably thinking, “what's the difference?” Well, here's an example. Not racist can sound like “I'm white, and you're not.” Racist can sound like “I'm white, you're not, and that makes me better than you.” But clueless sounds like “I'm white, you're not, and I don't know how to deal with that.”

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The truth is, Asian Americans play a strange role in the American melting pot. We are the model minority. Society uses our success to pit us against other people of color as justification that racism doesn't exist. But what does this mean for us, Asian Americans? It means that we are not quite similar enough to be accepted, but we aren't different enough to be loathed. We are in a perpetually gray zone, and society isn't quite sure what to do with us. So they group us by the color of our skin. They tell us we must reject our own heritages, so we can fit in with the crowd. They tell us that our foreignness is the only identifying characteristic of us. They strip away our identities one by one, until we are foreign, but not quite foreign, American but not quite American, individual, but only when there are no other people from our native country around.

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I just turned eighteen, and there are still so many things that I don't know about the world. But what I do know is that it's hard to admit that you might be part of the problem, that all of us might be part of the problem. So, instead of giving you a step-by-step guide on how to not be racist towards Asians, I will let you decide what to take from this talk. All I can do, is share my story.

My name is Canwen, my favorite color is purple. And I play the piano, but not so much the violin. I have two incredibly supportive, hardworking parents, and one very awesome ten-year-old brother. I love calculus more than anything, despise eating rice, and I'm a horrendous driver. But most of all, I'm proud of who I am. A little bit American, a little bit Chinese, and a whole lot of both. Thank you.

Xu, Canwen. Speech at TEDxBoise, 15 Apr. 2016. TED.com, transcript, 13 Jun. 2024. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_pUtz75INaw>.