

Mixing it up: Multiracialism redefines Asian American identity, SF Gate, 2011

By Jeff Yang, Special to SF Gate

How the mainstreaming of multiracialism is forcing a more fluid definition of Asian American identity

Like many immigrants, my parents see identity as a bucket. My mother and father had come to America carefully bearing a pail of old-world traditions, cherished customs, shining morals and rock-ribbed ethics; they'd worked hard and sacrificed greatly to give me and my sister the things they never had. And then, they handed us the bucket -- knowing that in the transfer, a little bit of culture would inevitably slosh out over the side.

They look at my kids now, downloading apps, watching "Spongebob," singing along to GaGa but unable to speak guo yu, and they shake their heads, aghast. Last week we celebrated Lunar New Year; as my younger son Skyler stubbornly refused to make the customary bow and gong xi fa cai greeting in exchange for his annual red envelope bribe, my dad sternly suggested to me that I needed to send the kids "back to Taiwan" for the summer. This was his way of suggesting an immediate intervention was required -- an emergency jolt of culture to prevent the patient from going identity flatline. Clear!

And yet, there was an unspoken subtext in Dad's suggestion, which was that my kids could readily be rehabbed with just a quick transfusion to top them off. They are, after all, the children of Chinese parents and grandkids of Chinese grandparents -- the culture should come out through the blood. My sister's half-Korean kids on the other hand -- and the multiracial children of some of my many cousins -- well, now, that begged a tougher question: How does one refill the "cultural bucket" when the bucket is only half-full to begin with?

What if it's a quarter full, or less?

Going fourth

It's something that needs to be considered. As multiracial identity becomes the Asian American mainstream -- by 2020, it's projected that one out of five Asians in the U.S. will be multiracial; by 2050, that ratio will exceed one in three -- the population of persons with one-fourth Asian heritage or less is poised to spike.

"I'm half Japanese, and my husband is all Irish," says sociologist Dr. Rebecca Chiyoko King-O'Riain. "Our kids have very Celtic coloration -- pale skin and fair hair. They're not obviously Asian in appearance at all, and yet they still feel very connected with that part of their heritage. And that's becoming more common, particularly among Japanese Americans, where multiracial identity is so common. There's even a term for it I heard in California: 'Quapa.' If hapas are half Asians, quapas -- like my kids -- are quarter-Asians."

Quapas have an overwhelmingly non-Asian ancestry; many don't look Asian and don't have Asian surnames. Yet anecdotal evidence suggests that as Asian America becomes more multiracial, a growing number of quapa Asians are affirmatively reconnecting with their Asian heritage, and actively embracing a sense of Asian American identity -- challenging society's conventional means of defining race in the process.

Japanese and damn proud

For rising folk-pop star Meiko -- just the one name -- embracing the culture of her Japanese grandmother Chikako was both an homage to a woman who'd played an outsized role in her life, and a way of turning her feelings of being different from a liability into an asset. The singer-songwriter, whose eponymous first album made her a critics' darling and a top iTunes download, grew up in Roberta, Ga., a tiny town in rural Crawford County.

"Roberta only had about 800 people, and it was pretty much split down the middle, half black and half white," says Meiko. "I think there was one Mexican girl who came in as an exchange student when I was in 9th grade; other than that, my sister and I were the only ones who didn't fit on either team. But my grandmother taught me that being a quarter Japanese was something that made me special, and that's what I always felt."

Meiko and her older sister Kelly -- now a rising fashion designer and a host for E!'s "The Daily 10" -- were close to Chikako, a war bride who'd emigrated to the U.S. from Nagoya, Japan after marrying their grandfather. "We spent a lot of time with her when we were little," she says. "She got me addicted to sushi, which ruined my life, because good sushi is tough to find when you live in rural Georgia."

Chikako's death when Meiko was eight was a crushing blow. "After she passed away, I felt totally disconnected from my

Japanese heritage," she says. "I wanted to know more about her and about that part of myself, but there was no way of doing that in the town we lived in. So I decided to change my name -- I started calling myself 'Meiko,' which I pronounced 'meeko.' And I know now that's totally wrong, but by the time I figured it out, it was kind of too late."

Meiko asserted her Japanese American identity in other ways as well. "When I was in middle school, we had this Veteran's Day assembly, and these really old soldiers came to tell us war stories. Well, they kept using the word 'Jap,' and every time they did, I cringed," she says. "At the end of the assembly, it was question time, and I went up to the mike and I said, 'Yeah, I have a question: Why do you keep referring to Japanese people as 'Japs'?' It kind of blew things up, and I ended up getting suspended. They're being racist and I'm the one who gets in trouble! But you know, small town, small minds. I'm still happy I did that."

Meiko now lives in Los Angeles, a considerably bigger and more diverse place than her rural Georgia hometown (with better sushi) -- and though she's no longer the only Asian girl for miles, she continues to find her Japanese heritage to be a source of strength and a creative inspiration. "I don't speak Japanese, and I've never even been to Japan -- I'm hoping to go at the end of this year, after I finish touring for the new album -- but it's still something that I feel is one of the most important things about myself," she says. "It's why I still use the name Meiko. I want it to be the first thing that someone knows about me, that I'm part Japanese and damn proud of it."

Chinese in the heart

Author Lisa See ("Snow Flower and the Secret Fan") has similar feelings about her heritage: Even though it's not evident in her strawberry-blonde, green-eyed features or obvious from her name -- she notes that people are more likely to think she's connected to the candy business than Chinatown -- her sense of being Chinese is still at the core of her self-identity.

"In my first book, I wrote a line that sums up what I feel: 'I don't look very Chinese, but I'm Chinese in my heart,'" she says. "And every interview, every book event I've ever done, that's still the first thing everyone asks about. But the fact is, even though I'm only one-eighth Chinese, I grew up as a part of a very large Chinese American extended family -- I have around 400 relatives, and they're still my mirror; when I look inside myself, they look back."

See's great-grandfather on her father's side was one of the grand patriarchs of Los Angeles's Chinese community, and as a result, their family's store was a regular gathering place for Chinatown's most notable and colorful personalities. Because See's family moved so frequently -- she attended seven different schools by the time she was in eighth grade -- the F. Suie One Co. family antique store was the place See says felt closest to being like home.

"It had been in business since 1874, and it was in a building that used to be part of this Chinatown theme park, so it was a fantastic place, full of extraordinary things," she says. "And at the back of the store was an area where people were always getting together to talk and eat snacks and tell stories."

Those stories eventually inspired See to write her first book, "On Gold Mountain," a memoir of her family's history. It took a lot of convincing to get her relatives to give her the permission to write it: Like many Chinese families that lived through the Exclusion Acts, the Fong See clan was forced to break America's laws simply to live as Americans -- falsifying names in order to enter the country, purchasing land under the table to evade the ban against Chinese owning property, living without legal marriage because of the laws against miscegenation. "If those laws hadn't been broken, I wouldn't even exist, but there was still a lot of shame and fear about it," she says. "And my side of the family, the white side, felt that was something you had to keep absolutely secret."

But once See broke the dam holding them back, the stories flooded out. Many of them ended up in "On Gold Mountain"; others inspired her later novels, which have led her deeper into her ancestral culture even as they've scaled higher up the bestseller lists. Her last book, "Shanghai Girls," was set in the Los Angeles Chinatown that's still See's cultural anchor; her next one, "Dreams of Joy," coming out in May, follows an American-born character from "Shanghai Girls" as she returns to a China she never knew.

"Both 'Shanghai Girls' and 'Dreams of Joy' are really about home and identity: Who's American, and who's Chinese? Where is home? What is home? And all of that comes from my own attempts to answer the questions inside myself," she says. "When I was writing 'On Gold Mountain,' I was talking to people I'd known forever -- older people from Chinatown. And even though I thought of them as uncles and aunties, when I went back to interview them they'd look blank and then say, 'Oh yes! You were the lo faan nuer, the little white ghost girl!' I'd thought of them as part of me -- and they'd always seen me as an outsider."

Inside but out

Multiracial individuals note that mixed identity requires a constant negotiation of insider-outsider status; belonging to both can often mean feeling at home in neither. But for mixed-race individuals with less than half Asian ancestry, actual programmatic boundaries exist to inclusion. Some Asian American cultural and civic activities are restricted to those who

have 50 percent Asian heritage or more -- for example, San Francisco's Cherry Blossom Queen pageant, which has been a fixture of the Japanese American community in Northern California since 1968.

"Racial eligibility rules were originally put in place because Asian Americans faced discrimination -- it was a way for these communities to say, hey, our women are beautiful too," says Dr. King-O'Riain, whose book "Pure Beauty" explores the history of Japanese American beauty pageants. "But now you have a problem, because on the one hand, there are fewer and fewer Japanese American girls who meet that 50 percent standard, and on the other, the community's old guard is concerned that throwing open the racial eligibility rules will lead to blond-haired hakuji women becoming Cherry Blossom Queen, and then where would you be? So even though there's this debate about lowering the racial percentage to 25 percent or getting rid of it entirely, I personally think the people running the pageant will shut it down before they do that."

Of course, these concerns sidestep the fact that not all multiracial Japanese Americans are blond, blue-eyed and white. Among the dozens of pageant participants Dr. King O'Riain interviewed were a handful whose mixed heritage was black or Latino. "I interviewed two girls who were half African American, whose mothers were from Japan, who'd lived in Japan, who spoke Japanese beautifully," she says. "They had a deeper sense of the culture than most of the 'pure' Japanese candidates. And yet they didn't win, and they felt there was unquestionably discrimination against them. In the Los Angeles Cherry Blossom pageant, there's actually a no-tanning rule -- you have to stay out of the sun. And the reason they give is that dark skin doesn't look good with a kimono."

Sheena Quashie, a Chinese-Caribbean journalist who proclaims herself a "proud blasian," says that that sense of rejection is a fundamental part of black-Asian mixed-race identity. "You do sometimes feel very rejected," she admits. "I'm one-quarter Asian, but Asian people look at me and just see this big, tall black girl. And sometimes they'll actually ask me to defend my Asianness -- like I need to present a receipt or something! And I'm like, 'Man, what golden treasure do I get for lying about being it?'"

Nevertheless, Quashie -- whose family name was Au-Yeung before her father changed it -- remains resolutely connected to her roots. "Who I am is who I am," she says. "I've been through my angry period, and I'm done with it. I'm Trinidadian, and I'm proud of that. And I'm Chinese, and I'm proud of that."

More than the sum of our parts

The mainstreaming of multiracialism hasn't just made it harder to define identity; it's raised the question of whether it makes sense to try to define it at all. More and more mixed-race individuals are calling for an end to the tyranny of racial algorithms, of the blood quantum that measures us by inherited fractions.

They're not, however, suggesting that race should be erased entirely: Attempts at "color-blindness" miss the practical realities that lie behind racial identities -- the historical narratives they recount in shorthand, the social and political challenges they serve to benchmark, the cultural contexts they illuminate and enrich. As Quashie points out, race may simply be a construct, but so is a brick wall -- and you ignore either at your peril.

There are other ways, as my friend TzeMing Mok notes; in her native New Zealand, the Maori determine identity not by name, appearance or percentage, but by whakapapa -- the act of narrating lineage.

To be accepted as Maori, you must be able to recount your ancestral line back up to an iwi -- a tribe -- and then beyond that, to the atua, the gods. You can be 1/1024th Maori by blood, but if you can speak the story of your family's descent from the Earth Mother Papatuanuku to the present, you're as Maori as anyone. It's a viral rather than dilutive interpretation of race; a way of looking at identity as a story, of which each individual is a chapter.

The bottom line: Race is complicated, and only getting more so. Why shouldn't it be an essay question, rather than multiple choice?

PopMail

Just wanted to make a quick pitch for an incredibly talented troubadour and friend, Kevin So, who's in the fair city of San Francisco for a single concert on Saturday, February 12, at the Union Room (8:30 pm, \$10, 401 Mason St.). I actually had the pleasure of writing the lyrics of a song that he put to tune as part of a memorial event for the first anniversary of 9/11. It's called "Our America," so shout for it -- his live version is incredible. Singer/songwriter Cynthia Lin opens. Check it out!

Jeff Yang forecasts global consumer trends for the market-research company Iconoculture (www.iconoculture.com). He is the author of "Once Upon a Time in China: A Guide to the Cinemas of Hong Kong, Taiwan and Mainland China," co-author of "I Am Jackie Chan: My Life in Action" and "Eastern Standard Time," and editor of "Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology" (www.secretidentities.org). He lives in New York City. Check out Jeff Yang's blog at originalspin.posterous.com for updates on this column and alerts about politics, technology, and pop culture news, or

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