

I'm American by Lan Jiang

If you asked me twenty years ago when I first set foot on this land, “Do you want to be an American?” I would be surprised by your candidness. “No,” I would said. “I come to study and gain work experience. I will have good job opportunities back in China because I learn from the most advanced country.” Nearly ten years ago when I got my naturalized citizenship, if you asked me, “Are you American?” I would say, “Yes, on paper, but, I’m not really sure.” Now, my answer is, “Yes, I’m American.”

It was a winter morning when I arrived at Detroit International Airport. The crispy cold air and my heavy winter bundling were a perfect match. After stopping at KFC near the airport, my stomach protested; it missed the Chinese flavored KFC in Shanghai. After I earned a master’s degree and worked five years for the University of Michigan, my director ran a nationwide talent search, and justified that no American citizens were more qualified than me for his work. So I, a green card holder, joined the workforce of the federal government and conducted research for the “well-being” of veterans in this country.

However, as time passed, it became clear that I was expected to have citizenship for furthering my career in a government setting. On the day of my naturalizing interview, the official asked me which side I would take should a conflict or even a war arise between China and America.

I had been avoiding such question. However, facing the officer, I was calm and replied, that first, the human civilization has progressed to such level that extraneous things like world wars wouldn’t be expected. Secondly, although there are disagreements between the two countries, it is of mutual interest to reach resolutions without going extreme routes such as raising wars. Lastly, I’ve invested years in my research career serving American veterans. In other words, I’ve already taken my side.

After the naturalization oath ceremony, my heart was pounding. From now on I am American, a Chinese American. But what does it really mean to be a Chinese American? During the ten years since my naturalization, I was promoted; I voted in the presidential election; I attended town meetings and school committee meetings; I debated with friends on country policies; I condemned the current administration, worrying about the relationship between the two countries. Gradually, I appreciate the fact that I live on a land of freedom, that I can celebrate Chinese customs, eat and cook the most exotic Chinese food without feeling outnumbered or embarrassed; that I can mock the president for all the reasons, or for no reason at all, without having to worry about the consequences that are a natural reaction in many countries including my hometown when you discuss the government leaders; and that I, alongside other Chinese Americans, vote on all important laws that protect everyone’s freedom, including ours, Chinese Americans’.

Yes, if you ask me today, “I am American.”