

A Tourist in My Own Homeland

As an only child for my first seven years of life, I had acquired a habit of wandering on my own. Like any curious child, I tended to slip from my mother's grasp and stray away to follow whatever piqued my interest. However, when the spell had broken and I turned back for my mother's hand, I would find myself alone.

Right now was no different. The only problem was that I was alone in every sense. This time I had wandered too far into the maze of a city; one filled with ghosts roaming about who had long since perished. On either side of me were buildings that intimidated and towered over my small body. On top of their golden roofs sat statues of mystical creatures whose gazes followed my every move. The roof's edges came to a curved point at the end that were recognizable architectural designs that I had seen on a lot of other older buildings so far. My gaze landed on red everywhere I looked, on the walls and pillars with paint peeling in places of weathering. Decorating each wall and roof were symbols created in fine detail that represented a long history of powerful imperial families that prospered through dynasties of ruling. From what my mother had told me before, this palace complex of tall, all-encompassing buildings was a symbol of Chinese culture and imperial power given its location in the capital.

I continued to wander in curiosity along the path of cracked stones under my feet. Surrounding me were empty red buildings filled with stuffed cushions attached to furniture that was no longer in use and aging artifacts covered in a layer of dust. The rooms were void of human life other than the inanimate remnants of their lifestyle during the imperial age. It was like looking through a window right into a time when imperial reign in China was at its highest prominence. From my imagination, people walked throughout the Forbidden City and going

about their daily duties in long silk robes decorated with intricate embroidery. The wax figurines in the closed off rooms of the palace came to life behaving in the regal way that I had envisioned during the imperial dynasties.

After being a little spooked by the stillness of the displays in front of me, I then noticed the absence of my mother and grandmother. How had I ended up all alone on this path? A feeling of panic started to spread throughout my body weighing down on my chest. My heart started to beat a little faster, and my breathing became shallower. My head whipped left and right frantically looking for any visual sign of my mother or grandmother nearby. I looked for two stereotypical American tourists among a sea of dark-haired people with faces like mine. It didn't help that we had traveled to a part of the city and country as a whole that heavily attracted tourists. With our travel group, we were doing all of the typical tourist attractions as if this had been my first time visiting this new, foreign country. Ironically, this was the first time I was seeing China with my own eyes while remembering my time here. The last time I had stepped foot in this country, I was taking some of the first steps of my life. Now, my adoptive mom and grandma accompanied me to adopt my new baby sister just like my mom had done when I was one year old. When my initial attempts to locate my family had failed, I stuffed my fingers in my pocket feeling for that small, wrinkled scrap of paper; the only hope I had if I was truly lost. The laminated sheet had merely nine of sentences in Chinese stating my name, age, and how to contact my mom and the U.S. embassy. Other than that, I was a young girl who had no hope of navigating the vast city of Beijing.

With my level of panic rising, I continued glancing around looking for anything familiar but all I saw were the stagnant displays trapped between the red walls of the Forbidden Palace. Ones that were frozen in time, forever remaining in this preserved, museum-like state. My

imagined world no longer felt magical but instead haunted when I realized I was alone. I tried not to think of the potential situation of me asking for help from the people surrounding me. The greatest issue was the language barrier between us that was only obvious to me. On the outside, my physical appearance caused me to blend in because I looked every bit a Chinese native from my olive skin to the distinguishable shape of my eyes. But inside I felt far away from the people walking past me. While my Chinese blood ran fully true, my mannerisms, my accent, and my upbringing matched the American clothes on my back. On the sidewalk between the buildings of the Forbidden City, I felt like an outsider looking in through a window at a culture that I should know but did not feel like I belonged to. Since landing in China, everything around me had felt foreign and each experience new. The food was nowhere close to what I ate at home, the buildings were designed differently, and most glaringly, the people here all looked like... me, another first in my life.

All around me were people who shared similar features with me such as my eyes and my almost black hair. But I had never felt more alone in the world. I had strayed too far from my family who has been by my side since I could remember, despite not having the same blood as me or outward appearance. However, I felt so disconnected from the country, people, and culture that I did share some semblance of blood with or at least looked like me. The natives that walked past me reminded me of what I saw in the mirror, yet I was still separated from them by a strong language barrier and experience.

My lost feeling was literal in the physical sense as well as pertained to the growing awareness of my identity upon the first return to the place where my story began. Here being surrounded by so many reminders of Chinese culture and history, I could feel my detachment from my heritage as if it was a tangible in the air surrounding me. I had wandered from my

American family in the country of my birth, especially in a place that greatly symbolized its history. My situation embodied my cultural uncertainty in a world where I was not sure which country I identified with: the one that I was currently being raised in with its language on my tongue or the one that I had no concrete memory of and had only known from the books and movies my mom introduced me to. Now I was a young girl lost in the very country she was born in surrounded by a language she did not understand, places she didn't recognize, and a culture that no longer felt like hers. But why was it so important to belong somewhere and to have a culture that defined you? Did my Chinese identity even feel like mine despite my lack of connection to many of its cultural beliefs and customs?

But I was only seven years old then gaining a new baby sister and barely grasping the concept of adoption, much less the complexity of my own personal identity and relationship to a country I no longer call home and haven't since I was thirteen months. My tongue could not form the words of a language that filled my ears with every step I took across the country of my birth. Soon enough though I would grow older, and my eyes would see what I used to glaze over. I would notice the differences in my upbringing compared to others in my neighborhood back in America. I would question the skin that I am in with the features that don't quite fit who I felt like in a country across the ocean that stereotypes my culture while being in a family unlike any other. While my mom may not always understand my circumstances and the way that I exist/move through this world, I knew that my sister would grow up similarly to me in America. I didn't know if she would experience the same lost feeling as me, but I suspect she would question her differences as I did. I did know that I would be there every step of the way to guide her. I couldn't wait to meet her. The past few days, I could hardly contain my excitement that my mom and I were welcoming a new addition to our family with my baby sister. She would be

every inch of my family and feel every ounce of my love as if she were my own blood. We will share a story like so many other adopted Chinese girls around the world, but our story will still be infinitely ours, nonetheless.

My feet continued to carry me in search of my family, people I loved dearly, and now I know years later would support whoever I decided to be. After a search that probably only lasted a few minutes but felt much longer, relief washed over me when I spotted my mom's short blonde hair and her achingly familiarly grey and black stitched puffy coat. My pace quickened towards her... and my small hand found its way back into hers.