

My Anti-American Dream

Bāngzhù nǐ de nǎinai xuǎn huāshēng?

Qù jiāo shuǐ zhíwù

Bǎ shuǐniú dài dào hú biān qù qǔshuǐ

In the novel, *Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, by Gloria Anzaldua the author revamps the contemporary understanding of what a border truly is. Using prose, poems, and essays, Anzaldua describes the borders as the social and cultural turf that dwells in ourselves instead of a simple divide between me and her or us and them. While Anzaldua may feel like she resides on the borders, I remain stagnant on the side where my real home is. I refuse to admit that America is my home, because my village is where I truly belong.

It was 7:00 am in the He-Shen village in Guangdong, China and I was already running late in doing my morning chores. I quickly rushed down to the kitchen to find that it was empty except for a bowl of cold rice congee on our small wooden table. I vigorously shoved it into my mouth and began to clean the dirty dishes before anyone found out that I was running late. After the dishes were done, I ran past our water buffalo and into the chicken pen where I fed our 15 chickens. At ten years old, I was still too short to reach the bag of seeds that was placed high up on the shelf, so I had to grab the stool in the corner to retrieve it. As I was throwing the seeds around, I chuckled as the chickens cawed in excitement and anger because I arrived so late. It was a daily struggle as I climbed back up on the stool and placed the heavy bag of seeds back where they belong before I had to run to the pig pen to feed our four beastly pigs. Feeding the pigs was the worst job out of all the jobs I had on the farm because the food reeked, the ground was littered with their stool, and they were overly dramatic when they were not fed on time.

After the pigs were fed, I felt relieved because my morning chores were finally done and my favorite part of the day has begun.

To get to the rice paddy field, I have to sneak past my *Yéye* who was harvesting peanuts or he will say, "*Nǐ wǎnle. Nǐ wèishéme zhème lǎn?*" As I was quietly leaping behind him, my heart was racing because I did not want to be punished by my strict and conservative *Yéyé*. When I finally made it to the rice paddy field, I joined my *Nǎinai* who laughed because she saw me sneaking past my *Yéyé*. *Nǎinai* jokingly asked, "*Nǐ xiàng bǎn qiú yīyàng tiàoyuè shénme? Nǐ hàipà nǐ de yéyé ma?*" Instead of answering, I just gave her a grin because she already knew my answer. Nothing makes me happier than standing in the rice paddies as my feet touched the soft and moist dirt drenched in the cool waters. I bent over and began to harvest the mature rice that will feed my family and, if we harvested enough, it will bring in profits from the local market that will take place in two days.

By noon, I took our water buffalo up the mountains of the He-Shen village to eat grass. When we reached our destination, I climbed up on our water buffalo and, as he ate his meal, I stared at the white cranes that perched on top of the mountains. As the sun was about to go down, I rode the water buffalo back to my home and began to help *Nǎinai* get dinner ready for the family. Before I boiled the feathery chicken, *Nǎinai* had to slit its throat and drain out all of its blood. Next, I plucked all of its feathers out and cut open its stomach to pull out the organs. I gave the chicken its final bath to clean out the bloody interior before *Nǎinai* boiled him in his own fat and flavored it with salt. While *Nǎinai* cleaned the rice, I washed the *shang-hai qing* that originated from our farm and thinly sliced the ginger that will enhance the flavor of the chicken and the *shang-hai qing*. (When I arrived in America, I was afraid to eat the "McNuggets" or the chicken patty sandwiches they had because I had no idea where they came from. I was told that

they do not kill the chickens the way we do on the farm and it baffled me to no end!) After dinner was over, we were finally able to settle down from a long day of back-breaking labor but *wǒ zǒng shì rènwéi nàxiē rìzi zài nóngchǎng de lǐwù*, especially after I arrived in America when I turned 13.

I was 6 months old when my mother and I were separated. While she stayed in America to look for a decent job to support me and my future brother, I lived with my grandparents on their farm. I had to move to America because my grandparents and my mother wanted a better future for me. They wanted me to be educated, employed with a salary making 90K, and owning a house in the suburbs-the total opposite of the rural life that I grew up with and loved. Growing up in both China and in America, money was always a struggle, but we always made ends meet through side jobs and long hours that we slaved over. I always looked at my mom and felt this overwhelming guilt that she was working long hours because of me. Because I was not some child genius that could have made her life a lot easier but instead I was just another kid that needed all the schooling in order to achieve what everyone else sees as success. Because of our different views on what success is, it created a borderland between my mother and I.

When I first entered an American high school, Americans automatically assumed that I was some sort of *tiāncái* and expected great *chéngjiù* from me. However, it was difficult for me to meet their expectations because I was still learning English and had a slight form of dyslexia. Since the school did not offer ESL, I had to learn English on my own through listening to other people's conversations and reading books. " My mother would say that I spoke English like a [Chinese person]" (Anzaldua 76) because my English was not perfect and is still not perfect to this day. There was a borderland between my mother's desires and my own desires. The borderlands between the mother and the daughter created a cold atmosphere that needed to be

broken. It drove me crazy that I could not satisfy the *qīwàngs* of both cultures and like Anzaldua, " I found myself suddenly in the dark" (56). *Wǒ juéde wǒ méiyǒu wánquán jiēshòu zhōngguó wénhuà, yīnwèi wǒ méiyǒu wánměi de yīngyǔ*, and I was not accepted in American culture because I did not have perfect grades. I would often hear, " Oh. You're not taking APs next year?" Or " Aren't you and the other Asian fighting to see who's the smartest?" Or " You're so Asian. No wonder you got the highest grade. " And " I thought you didn't speak English."

It was not until half way into my sophomore year that I realized that almost every student wanted to achieve that " American Dream" where they live in the suburbs with a family making a high salary. Instead of harvesting rice and using physical labor, most Americans achieved success through intelligence and grades which was out of the ordinary back at He-Shen. As each year progressed, I grew weary of all the *qīwàng* from everyone I despised the schooling system. I am not against the schooling system because I am a *báichī*, I am against it because I grew up knowing that success comes from your own hands not from numbers and percentages. I preferred the long hours that I invested into harvesting our vegetables because I know those back-breaking hours were worth feeding my family. How am I going to feed my family with graded assignments? On the farm I could feed my family *hēi gǎnlǎn, jī, zhū dù, shuǐ bōcài*, and *yú* through hard work, that sometimes took over twelve hours, not assignments and scores.

When my grandparents moved to America with me, they were over joyed because life in America did not involve a lot of physical labor that took over twelve hours. Instead they enjoyed the eight hour shifts from cleaning a Asian-owned laundry facility or working in a Chinese restaurant as a cook because it did not demand as much physical labor from the farm. Despite the easier life style they experienced in America, they (including my mother) wanted me to have that "*huángjīn shēnghuó*" also known as the " American Dream", so I do not have to live the rest of

my life from paycheck to paycheck like my mother did while working at a Chinese restaurant or from crop to crop like my grandparents did on the farm. But I wanted something else.

I am unlike Anzaldua because the majority of my identity as a *zhōngguó cūnmín* lies on the Asian borderlands which are far from the American borderlands. However, I am also like Anzaldua in that I also exist in the middle of the two borderlands because part of me wants to achieve that American Dream so my mom can live it. I want to give my mom that dream so that she can live her life without worrying about the financial stability that crippled us all these years. Even though I try to deny that I love the American Dream, part of me loves it because it gives my mother hope for a better future.

I remained on the Asian borderlands for an extended period time because of my refusal to convert to the American norms where your QPA determines your future and your work ethic does not. I always look back and remember the days where I see Chinese red peppers hanging from the ceiling to dry up, the smell of roasted *zhū dù*, the fresh taste of the *qiézi* straight from the farm, and those quiet nights that were spent on my *zhú* bed. I get this warm sense of nostalgia when I remember those days at the local market where my *Yéyé* sells *hēi gǎnlǎn*, *huāshēng*, *zhū jiǎo* to the local villagers and we share the crunchy and sweet *mìjiàn* when we manage to sell everything. Those instances of happiness and comfort stop when I look around and notice the English speakers that surround me, the differences in culture, and the pressure to conform to their standards of success. This burden of sadness is not a complete "smack-down" on the American culture, but it is a "smack-down" on my own identity. It was a "smack-down" because it made me realize that the " American Dream" is not my dream because my identity did not match up with it. The " American Dream" is everyone else's dream.

Attending a university allowed me to find my true identity and I found out that it has nothing to do with my current "home" whether that be the Pitt dorms or where I reside now. Through food and the people that are one campus, I was able to find my true identity. Whenever I eat Westernized food, my stomach hurts and I get nauseous all the time, and every time it happens I always remember my days in the village where I know the food is fresh and free of preservatives. I was so afraid of eating the Westernized food that I just skipped meals because it was better than having a strand of spaghetti crawl up my esophagus. While some people stick to the quiet, shy, and intelligent Asian girl stereotype, others agree with my choice as a *zhōngguó cūnmín*. I was finally able to breathe a sigh of relief that there are people who accept and respect my choice as an individual even though they had no background experience as a peasant farmer like me.

The soreness from my limbs from the farm, the dirt stained clothes and feet from the rice paddies, the reeking stench from the animals I fed, and the lively market where we sold our vegetables was where I found happiness. I loved waking up to the clucking sound of the chickens that raved over the seeds that I fed them, I loved riding on our water buffalo as it climbed up the rocky mountains so it can eat grass, I loved staring at the cranes that beautifully perched on the mountains as they watched over our village, and I loved the quiet and still nights when all of our animals were sleeping quietly. When I stretch out my throbbing limbs on my bamboo bed from a day filled with picking peanuts and olives, I am constantly reminded that I at least made the farm work easier on my grandparents. It sounds strange but I was glad that I my back hurts at night because I knew that it would mean less pain for my grandparents to bare. The physical soreness gives me adrenaline to work harder because, like the dreaded "squats" from gym class, I know I am doing something right.

My true and real home is, and always will be, the He-Shen village. Even though I support the American troops that fight for this country, I still support the lifestyle of the farmers in rural China that fight to survive. Even though I understand the novels I read in English, I still prefer Chinese. And even though I use both languages in the same sentence, and am registered as an Asian American, my home lies on the rural farmland. I have been sitting on the borderlands for too long and I finally chose the Asian side but with my right foot on the American side. Although the rest of myself wants to stay in that Asian borderlands, my right foot will stay planted on the American side for the sake of achieving my mom's " American Dream". I am a *zhōngguó cūnmín* who prefers to live on the land to have *chénggōng*.

Foot Notes

Bāngzhù nǐ de nǎinai xuǎn huāshēng?: Did you pick off the ripe peanuts?

Qù jiāo shuǐ zhíwù: Go water the plants

Bǎ shuǐniú dài dào hú biān qù qǔshuǐ: Take the water buffalo out to the lake to get water

Yéye: Grandfather

Nǐ wǎnle. Nǐ wèishéme zhème lǎn? : You're late. Why are you so lazy?

Nǎinai: Grandmother

Nǐ xiàng bǎn qiú yīyàng tiàoyuè shénme? Nǐ hàipà nǐ de yéyé ma?: What are you a cricket? Are you afraid of your grandfather?

shang-hai qing: green vegetable

Wǒ juéde wǒ méiyǒu wánquán jiēshòu wǒ zǒng shì rènwéi nàxiē rìzi zài nóngchǎng de lǐwù:

America is not my home because my village is my home

Qīwàng: expectations/ accomplishments

hēi gǎnlǎn, jī, zhū dù, shuǐ bōcài, and yú : black olives, chicken, pork stomach, bok choy, and fish

zhōngguó cūnmín: Chinese villager

Chénggōng: success

huángjīn shēnghuó: American Dream/ Golden Lifestyle