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smiled at my naivete. They welcomed me back to my place in line. They gave me hard candies, cigarettes, and words of encouragement. Yes, they said, the visitors were sometimes treated worse than the inmates, and no, they said, it really wasn't fair.

By 4 p.m., I was in the women's jail. I'd cleared the first hurdle. A new rule requires visitors to show two forms of identification instead of one. Half a dozen of my fellow travelers were turned back after waiting in line for 1 1/2 hours because they didn't know the new rule. "But it's my passport!" one man said. "Doesn't matter. Two IDs," the officer replied.

Then I was in a new line for another hour. We had numbers so we could sit while we waited. Next to me, a woman with her two-week-old granddaughter waited to visit her daughter, the baby's mother. The regulars helped the newcomers navigate the system. Packages had to be unwrapped. Toiletries had to be in clear bottles. Toothpaste was not permitted because it is in an opaque tube, and might hide contraband. Gifts of clothing could not be blue or white because those are the colors correction officers wear.

Children as well as adults had to be searched. Trousers were unzipped. Shoes removed. Only one shirt — not a shirt and a sweater — could be worn into the prison. No spare diapers were permitted. It was 4:30 p.m.

My number was called.

The corrections officer was pleasant, but firm. I couldn't visit Stella because she'd already had a visitor that day. Prisoners are permitted one visitor a day. Those were the rules.

I was devastated. All this way, all this time, and I couldn't see Stella? The others bolstered me with more candies and sympathetic tongue-clucking.

Unlike them, though, I had an ace in the hole: a New York City Police Department press pass. If I couldn't visit as a friend, could I visit as a reporter? The warden was called, and after another 2 1/2 hour wait, special permisssion was granted.

Stella was thrilled to see me. She gave me a big hug. She looked great in her gray prison jumpsuit. She had a wonderful, wide, smile, with beautiful new teeth, paid for, she said, with the proceeds of the drug trade. We chatted for half an hour or so and then our time was up. Back on the bus, I saw the grandmother with the newborn baby. "Was your daughter glad to see you?" I asked. "She cried," the woman said. "She's lucky to have you as a mother," I said. "Thanks," she said. It was 8:15 p.m.

ABOUT PEOPLE

The Language Of Tradition

By Grace Lim

AS IN MANY households with children, my parents and I often have trouble communicating. But unlike other families, we literally don't speak the same language. I speak English. They speak Taiwanese and Mandarin.

For a while I wanted it that way. Like the children of other immigrants, I felt I had to discard my ties to the past to fit in and move on. But I'm hoping to become a working journalist; my currency will be English words, ideas in a language that is foreign to my parents. It is frustrating not to be able to share my thoughts, and achievements, with them.

I recently spent 15 minutes telling my father about a murder story I covered. I described in great detail every journalistic move I made, anticipating his praise. He looked at me blankly and asked, "What does murder mean?"

When I was six, and living in a predominantly black neighborhood in Akron, Ohio, I thought being Chinese was bad, and I decided then to have nothing to do with my past. I stopped speaking Mandarin to my family. I would pretend I didn't understand my grandparents when they spoke to me. The less I remembered about Taiwan, the more American I felt.

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As I grew up, I continued to reject all that is expected of a young Chinese female. Instead of playing the piano or violin, I played the drums, and basketball. My parents were my biggest fans, even though they didn't understand the game. Once when I fouled an opponent, the sports announcer's voice blared over the loud speakers: "Number 24. Grace Lim. Her third personal foul." My mother, recognizing my name, stood in the bleachers and clapped. I was mortified.

I continued to defy the traditions of my Chinese heritage. I didn't get straight A's. I didn't go to Harvard. When I told my parents I was going to journalism school for my master's degree, I jokingly said, "Maybe I'll go for a PhD. You've always wanted a doctor in the family." (In New York, I learned that Chinese mother are like Jewish mothers.)

Not only did I make a point of rejecting my past, but I also failed miserably at being the perfect Chinese daughter. For one thing, at five foot eight, I'm too tall. (My mother blames my height on so much jumping during my basketball days.) And I'm marrying an Anglo. I received my parents' blessing only when my brother told them that I was getting too old (I am 25) and no one else would want to marry me, or tolerate my very American ways.

I don't regret not marrying a Chinese man. Those whom I dated were very old-fashioned; one even cross-examined me over dinner at a Chinese restaurant, asking if I could cook "like this — the way his mother did?" (I told him that I didn't cook, I vacuumed, and quickly called it an evening.) But I am starting to question who I am. After 20 years of rejecting my past, I don't know what that means.

Whereas Alex Haley went to Africa in search of his roots, I went south on Broadway and made a left on Canal Street. In the hub of Chinatown, I looked. At a crowded dim sum restaurant, the hostess handed me a number. My party was number 88. I can count in Mandarin only if I start with number one. While I waited, I counted to 88, so when the hostess called my number, I'd be prepared. But one of my friends started talking to me, disturbing my counting, and I had to start again. Minutes later, the hostess waved at me. "Number?" she asked. I wanted to respond in Mandarin, but I couldn't. "Eighty-eight," I said in English.

Near a vegetable stand, a toddler shared his stroller seat with a grocery bundle almost as big as he was. His mother came to a sudden stop and the tot tumbled out of the seat. "Di dee . . . " the mother said, as she picked up the startled boy. I understood only "di dee," which in Mandarin means "little brother" or "piggy," depending on the intonation. The little boy responded in Mandarin, and my heart ached as I thought of my children being unable to talk with my parents.

As I continued to walk, I saw snapshots from my past: an elderly Chinese woman holding the hand of a little girl maybe five years old. She jabbered away in Mandarin, pointing to a bucket full of fish. "Amah! Amah!" (Grandmother! Grandmother!), the little girl said. The grandmother looked, smiled and said something in Mandarin I didn't catch. The little girl said delightedly in English, "Fish!"

Her grandmother nodded and repeated in English "fish." Then and there I decided that my children would learn Mandarin. And I will study it too.