

An immigrant's split personality MULTICULTURAL VOICES" At school she was Canadian, eating bologna sandwiches and giggling about teen idols. At home she was Korean, eating kimchee and bowing to visitors. She no longer leads two lives but finds she doesn't quite fit into either reality

Sun-Kyung, Yi . The Globe and Mail ; Toronto, Ont. [Toronto, Ont]02 Apr 1992: A.20.

[ProQuest document link](#)

ABSTRACT (ABSTRACT)

Many have tried to convince me that I am a Canadian, like all other immigrants in the country, but those same people also ask me which country I came from with great curiosity, following with questions about the type of food I ate and the language I spoke. It's difficult to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance when you are regarded as "one of them." "Those Koreans, they work hard. . . .

FULL TEXT

An immigrant's split personality MULTICULTURAL VOICES" At school she was Canadian, eating bologna sandwiches and giggling about teen idols. At home she was Korean, eating kimchee and bowing to visitors. She no longer leads two lives but finds she doesn't quite fit into either reality

Thursday, April 02, 1992

SUN-KYUNG YI

BY SUN-KYUNG YI I AM Korean-Canadian. But the hyphen often snaps in two, obliging me to choose to act as either a Korean or a Canadian, depending on where I am and who I'm with. After 16 years of living in Canada, I discovered that it's very difficult to be both at any given time or place.

When I was younger, toying with the idea of entertaining two separate identities was a real treat, like a secret game for which no one knew the rules but me.

I was known as Angela to the outside world, and as Sun-Kyung at home. I ate bologna sandwiches in the school lunch room and rice and kimchee for dinner. I chatted about teen idols and giggled with my girlfriends during my classes, and ambitiously practiced piano and studied in the evenings, planning to become a doctor when I grew up. I waved hellos and goodbyes to my teachers, but bowed to my parents' friends visiting our home.

I could also look straight in the eyes of my teachers and friends and talk frankly with them instead of staring at my feet with my mouth shut when Koreans talked to me.

Going outside the home meant I was able to relax from the constraints of my cultural conditioning, until I walked back in the door and had to return to being an obedient and submissive daughter.

The game soon ended when I realized that it had become a way of life, that I couldn't change the rules without disappointing my parents and questioning all the cultural implications and consequences that came with being a hyphenated Canadian.

Many have tried to convince me that I am a Canadian, like all other immigrants in the country, but those same people also ask me which country I came from with great curiosity, following with questions about the type of food I ate and the language I spoke. It's difficult to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance when you are regarded as "one of them." "Those Koreans, they work hard. . . . You must be fantastic at math and science." (No.) "Do your parents own a corner store?" (No.) Koreans and Canadians just can't seem to merge into "us" and "we."

Some people advised me that I should just take the best of both worlds and disregard the rest. That's ideal, but unrealistic when my old culture demands a complete conformity with very little room to manoeuvre for new and different ideas.

After a lifetime of practice, I thought I could change faces and become Korean on demand with grace and perfection. But working with a small Korean company in Toronto proved me wrong. I quickly became estranged from my own people.

My parents were ecstatic at the thought of their daughter finally finding her roots and having a working opportunity to speak my native tongue and absorb the culture. For me, it was the most painful and frustrating 2 months of my life.

When the president of the company boasted that he "operated little Korea," he meant it literally. A Canadianized Korean was not tolerated. I looked like a Korean, therefore I had to talk, act, and think like one, too. Being accepted meant a total surrender to ancient codes of behaviour rooted in Confucian thought, while leaving the "Canadian" part of me out in the parking lot with my '86 Buick.

In the first few days at work, I was bombarded with inquiries about my marital status. When I told them I was single, they spent the following days trying to match me up with available bachelors in the company and the community.

I was expected to accept my inferior position as a woman and had to behave accordingly. It was not a place to practice my feminist views, or be an individual without being condemned. Little Korea is a place for men (who filled all the senior positions) and women don't dare to speak up or disagree with their male counterparts.

The president (all employees bow to him and call him Mr. President) asked me to act more like a lady and smile. I was openly scorned by a senior employee because I spoke more fluent English than Korean. The cook in the kitchen shook her head in disbelief upon discovering that my cooking skills were limited to boiling a package of instant noodles. "You want a good husband, learn to cook," she advised me.

In less than a week I became an outsider because I refused to conform and blindly nod my head in agreement to

what my elders (which happened to be everybody else in the company) said. A month later, I was demoted because "members of the workplace and the Korean community" had complained that I just wasn't "Korean enough," and I had "too much power for a single woman."

My father suggested that "when in Rome do as the Romans." But that's exactly what I was doing. I am in Canada so I was freely acting like a Canadian, and it cost me my job.

My father also said, "It doesn't matter how Canadian you think you are, just look in the mirror and it'll tell you who you really are." But what he didn't realize is that an immigrant has to embrace the new culture to enjoy and benefit from what it has to offer. Of course, I will always be Korean by virtue of my appearance and early conditioning, but I am also happily Canadian and want to take full advantage of all that such citizenship confers.

But for now I remain slightly distant from both cultures, accepted fully by neither. The hyphenated Canadian personifies the ideal of multiculturalism, but unless the host culture and the immigrant cultures can find ways to merge their distinct identities, sharing the best of both, this cultural schizophrenia will continue. Sun-Kyung Yi is a Toronto freelance writer.

DETAILS

Publication title:	The Globe and Mail; Toronto, Ont.
Pages:	A.20
Publication year:	1992
Publication date:	Apr 2, 1992
Publisher:	The Globe and Mail
Place of publication:	Toronto, Ont.
Country of publication:	Canada, Toronto, Ont.
Publication subject:	General Interest Periodicals--Canada
ISSN:	03190714
Source type:	Newspapers
Language of publication:	English
Document type:	NEWSPAPER
ProQuest document ID:	385370278
Document URL:	http://ra.ocls.ca/ra/login.aspx?inst=centennial &url=https://www.proquest.com/docview/385370278?accountid=39331

Copyright:	All material copyright Bell Globemedia Publishing Inc. or its licensors. All rights reserved.
-------------------	---

Last updated:	2017-11-07
----------------------	------------

Database:	ProQuest Central
------------------	------------------

LINKS

[Search for full text](#)

Database copyright © 2020 ProQuest LLC. All rights reserved.

[Terms and Conditions](#) [Contact ProQuest](#)