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## **The Balancing Act: Tipping the Scales of Interdependence, Happiness, and Identity through Food in Dueling Cultural Identities within the Asian-American Experience**

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The Balancing Act: Tipping the Scales of Interdependence, Happiness, and  
Identity through Food in Dueling Cultural Identities within the Asian-American  
Experience

by

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Spring Term 2020

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the University Honors Scholar  
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## Table of Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Acknowledgements   | 2  |
| List of Figures  | 4  |
| Abstract   | 5  |
| Research Question  | 6  |
| Chapter I: Overview of the Literature  | 8  |
| Chapter II: Research Methodology   | 10 |
| Chapter III: Cultural Values and Expectations within Asian Cultures                        | 12 |
| Chapter IV: Psychological Impact of Cultural Standards and Expectations on Asian-Americans | 21 |
| Chapter V: Identity Formation  | 29 |
| Chapter VI: Food and Identity  | 36 |
| Chapter VII: Findings and Analysis   | 48 |
| Limitations of the Study   | 48 |
| Survey Results and Analysis  | 49 |
| Interview Results and Analysis   | 57 |
| Conclusion   | 74 |
| Appendix A   | 77 |
| Social Media Post and Survey Questions   | 77 |
| Interview Questions  | 79 |
| Works Cited  | 80 |

## List of Figures

*Social Media Survey Data*

|   |    |
|---|----|
| 1. Please specify your ethnicity.   | 49 |
| 2. How old are you?   | 51 |
| 3. What gender do you identify with?  | 51 |
| 4. Did you grow up with traditional cultural values within your household (i.e. filial piety, pressure and expectations in career and education etc . . .)? | 52 |
| 5. Have you ever felt pressure to abide to these values for family approval?  | 52 |
| 6. Has this ever impacted you emotionally?  | 53 |
| 7. Was this impact positive or negative?  | 54 |
| 8. Has this ever impacted you socially?   | 54 |
| 9. How did this impact your social life?  | 55 |
| 10. Does food play a role in your family and in your personal experiences?  | 56 |
| 11. How important has food been to you on a scale from 1-10?  | 57 |

### **Abstract**

The Balancing Act takes an in-depth look at the challenges faced by Asian-Americans regarding differences in dueling cultures, and the many factors and facets that connect to identity formation and self-expression within society. This will include all Asian-Americans that were born in America, as well as Asian immigrants that have assimilated into the Western world. Within this analysis, the imbalance between individualistic and collectivistic cultures for Asian-Americans in all aspects of their lives, from family relations, will be discussed, along with the impact this negotiation of identities has created between oneself, family, and friends. This mediation between independence and individuality versus interdependence serves as the premise for the cultural conflict at hand. It can also be traced back to the immigrant experience, historical assimilation, and how values being imposed on Asian-Americans lack alignment between parents and children, leading to upheaval within family and within oneself. The theory of cognitive flexibility is used as another lens that can create the needed change and reform for both Asian-Americans and their families to create compromise. Moreover, food, has continuously been a link between the varying dissimilarities among individuals. Thus, this brings into question its relation to the pivotal role food plays in identity, the human experience, and the power of unity it possesses to unify us despite our differences leading to a possible solution to the long-battled struggle of dueling cultural identities for Asian-Americans.

## Research Question

How are self-identity, happiness, and fulfillment differentiated from, and negotiated between traditional cultural experiences through the lenses of familial expectations, pressures, and independence? While Asian-Americans face a constant struggle with dual cultural identities, upbringings, and values that affect all facets of their lives, can they negotiate between independence and interdependence through the lenses of family and tradition, while cuing in the concept of food in self-identity and the human experience in order to find a resolution to this constant cultural conflict?

I am a 1<sup>st</sup> generation Asian-American raised the traditional “Chinese way,” with expectations of entering the medical field and finding my long-lost Chinese husband that is fully immersed in all facets of Chinese culture. Facing these pressures shaped my own identity up until I could gain the power to think for myself. It was only up until right after my 20<sup>th</sup> birthday that I realized what I truly wanted, whom I was developing into, and what choices I had to make to live my life through independence, not through familial expectations and pressures. This included making decisions that would alter my life path according to my own desires, while dissenting from the belief system I was rooted into and was familiar with. Entering into the culinary industry, which is a career that I am often told by family members is deemed obscure, mediocre, and for “drop outs”, felons, and “second-chances”, has given me a new perspective on my own identity and values regarding culture, and what it really means to be an Asian-American growing up in a traditional Asian household in America.

Asian-Americans are often raised in environments that foster traditional practices and beliefs surrounding filial piety and parental approval on both a professional and personal level.

This manifests as pressure to live up to expectations and standards deeply rooted in collectivistic

ideals. In addition, it places large emphasis on family, and essentially making decisions in one's own personal and professional life based on seeking out the happiness of others. This balancing act presents a challenge for Asian-Americans of varying different cultures and backgrounds.

There is a constant tug-of-war between dual cultural identities of growing up in traditional Asian households in Westernized environments that instill contradictory teachings, while figuring out which ones to follow based on the needs of others.

While having just embarked on a path of re-discovery to making decisions towards self-oriented and focused goals, I hope this thesis will serve as a platform for the collective communities of Asian-Americans that have faced the very same issues. Moreover, the status quo of current and traditional family relationships can be challenged through the perspective of food with whether Asian-Americans are straying away from traditional expectations and standards, while analyzing the impacts it has made on us. Historically, food has also been at the foundation of the human experience, regardless of whether one views it as a means of survival and sustenance, a conversation piece that brings family and friends together, or something that fuels their passion to live. Food has also found its way to play a pivotal role in culture and tradition while bridging the gap between self-identity, gender, sexuality, family, and social status. Possessing the power to shape our reality and existence in society, the multiplicity of food culture might be able to open a gateway towards a solution to conflict as a result of our dueling cultural identities.

## Chapter I

### Overview of Literature

Negotiation between self-happiness, identity, and its intersection with parental approval, sacrifice, and expectations has long been a topic of discussion. Back in 2011, the article “Career Happiness Among Asian Americans: The Interplay Between Individualism and Interdependence” by Henderson et al., published in the *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* discusses the heart of the issue that plagues many Asian-Americans. Essentially, the negotiation starts with the intersection of one’s own happiness, which, for Asian-Americans, is often connected to approval from parents and other family members with the family’s opinion of your status in career and love. This is where the balancing act often begins. In addition, the concept of collectivistic culture, and the ideals and belief systems centered around it are deeply engrained into Asian cultures. This then leads to a cyclical passing down of traditional teachings that are carried down from generation to generation, continuing to allow these expectations and standards to remain the same (Henderson et al.). Studies on collectivistic culture and its impact on those raised around it have also been performed.

One article by Michele J. Gelfand, a contributor to the *Journal of Psychology*, delved deeper into the effects of collectivistic beliefs by performing a study based on negotiation between professionals during a two-week, intercultural, computerized experiment comparing those from both collectivistic (Eastern) and individualistic cultures (Western). The psychological theory of the “fixed pie error” was tested (which states that the negotiator goes into the negotiation assuming conflict with their counterpart), and results showed those from collectivistic cultures did not have a difficult time seeing their counterpart’s point of view, but rather viewed it as collaboration, while those from individualistic cultures had only considered their own. (Gelfand

et al) In the case of cultural values and beliefs and their influence on Asian-Americans, we will also have the tendency to see ourselves in terms of a whole with our family, and not as a separate entity.

Moreover, another issue at the core of this discussion is the struggle for members of the Asian-American community in terms of their sense of cultural identity, as well as their identity within America (or the country they were born in). A study conducted by the *Sociological Forum* that was detailed in “What It Means to (Not) Belong: A Case Study of How Boundary Perceptions Affect Second-Generation Immigrants’ Attachments to the Nation” surveyed a group of individuals of Middle-Eastern descent who now live in Denmark”. The goal was to gain insight on cultural boundary perceptions, external factors and their influence, and how these affected their identity and sense of belonging to the country they currently live in. Results concluded that these individuals felt the push and pull of being raised traditionally, with a collectivistic view on life, while also having grown up in a more individualistically focused environment (Simonsen). This also provides a more inclusive take on others within 2<sup>nd</sup> generation groups that face the same issue, with varying differences in their experiences. An analysis done by the publication *Progress in Asian Social Psychology: Conceptual and Empirical Contributions* further discussed filial piety, which states that the primary duty of children is to uphold respect and obedience for their parents and grandparents, displays its beneficial and harmful impacts through a series of studies. According to D.Y.F. Ho, filial piety has had negative consequences on children’s behavior and overall mental health, also correlating with disobedience in the future (Yang et al.).

## Chapter II

### Research Methodology

Research has already been performed through various different methods, which I will be extracting key information from in order to support the background of my question while discussing a possible solution. In addition, I will be gathering information through my analyses own narration, as well as through a social media survey and face-to face interviews. This research and data aim to serve the purpose of showing the constant fight between independence and interdependence in these cultures from first-hand experiences. With food being regarded as part of center of the human experience, the narratives and perspectives of these individuals can demonstrate a parallel to the challenges and negotiation of identities being faced by the Asian-American collective.

Moreover, most of the new research and analysis of the information that is found within the data analysis chapter (Chapter 7) and Appendix A is from two sets of data collected through a two-phase approach. The first phase will consist of an eleven-question survey that will be published on Facebook to a group called *Subtle Asian Traits*, which has over one million members from across the United States and internationally and is targeted towards the Asian community. This first step will serve as insight to gain a general sense on how other Asian-Americans feel about topics such as whether they ever felt pressured to follow cultural expectations, as well as rating how important food is to them from a scale of 1 – 10. Survey results will help in better understanding the data that will be collected in the second phase through the face-to-face interviews. In the second phase, I will be holding interviews with five Asian-Americans that is categorized as the group of “industry professionals”, which will

be individuals between the ages of 30-50 in varying different careers, and “college students”, who will fall between 18-24 years old. For the industry professionals group, this will include a male Pastry instructor and Chef at a vocational culinary high school in New York City. An ESL teacher from the same school, as well as an accountant and freelance photographer will also be interviewed in order to provide the female perspective and experience of cultural and filial expectations. Under the “college students” group, two college students that are in their junior year will interviewed, with one attending New York University (NYU) as a political science major, and another attending Johnson and Wales University as a Pastry and Food Service Management major. Sample sizes and those that have been selected to participate in the interview have been impacted due to COVID-19, decreasing the number of individuals that I initially planned to interview.

### Chapter III

#### Cultural Values and Expectations within Asian Cultures

All too often, both East and South Asian cultures are subjected to racial stereotyping. Just some include excelling in math (or being “the human calculator”), having a strong adoration for noodles and rice, marrying someone from our own culture, and eventually evidencing the fruits of our labor through graduating from an Ivy League or medical school in order to become a lawyer, doctor, or accountant. Although stereotypes supposedly stem from doses of truth, I am a Chinese-American that is mediocre at best in math, feels extremely neutral about noodles (though I admit to having a fervor for rice), has only ever dated outside of my culture, and decided to attend culinary school to major in pastry and business in order to achieve my gluten-filled dreams. From individuals that are outside of the community that look within, these generalizations may appear as light-hearted and humorous at best. Unfortunately, many of them involving education, career, love, and aspects of our personal lives are glimpses of reality translated into expectations from family, which is deeply rooted in Asian tradition and culture.

What encompasses the umbrella term of “traditional cultural values” for Asian families varies among specific backgrounds, though there are basic commonalities and beliefs that we grew up on. Childhood upbringing in these cases are closely connected to parents ensuring the success of the child throughout their professional lives, and often rely heavily on parental and familial approval/happiness. In order to explicate this, we must examine the root origins of these values and how they are applied on a sociological level within Asian families. From personal experience, much of the values that are often associated with Asian culture, including professional and academic success, being culturally integrated, and following tradition revolve

around the concept of filial piety. According to a study of 701 families from both immigrant and non-immigrant groups, with 471 immigrant families (of Vietnamese, Mexican, and Armenian descent) and 230 non-immigrant families (of African-American and European descent), parents were found to endorse the concept of family obligation more than children across the board. After performing a three-part analysis, values including filial piety reflected slightly differently among both types of families (Phinney et al.). This provides more insight into the immigrant experience that corresponds with Asian-American narrative, in which both value systems cannot be held mutually exclusive due to the immigrant backgrounds of the families of Asian-Americans. My own mother immigrated from Hong Kong in the 1960's and has based my childhood around traditional cultural upbringing. However, this tradition was linked to her experience as an immigrant, along with the hardships she faced during times of financial hardship and scarcity in her home country.

This thesis serves as a platform for Asian-Americans of all backgrounds, though familial values and expectations can be linked as far back as ancient philosophy in different cultures, with others stemming more from the immigrant experience itself. Confucianism within Chinese culture is a prime example of this variation. It cannot be applied to the broad spectrum of Asian backgrounds and is a cultural belief of the Chinese that is distinct from that of other Asian-Americans. Nonetheless, the immigrant experience and system of beliefs behind this are what are shared amongst the various different Asian cultures. Confucianism is a deviation from the wider scope of the relationship between Asian-Americans and the immigrant experience but can better help us to further understand this focus on familial obligation that is widespread among different Asian cultures. At the center, filial piety, a moral pillar in Confucian thought, focuses on the material and emotional values that eventually turned into moral norms in relation

to the parent-child relationship (Bedford and Yeh). Historically, filial piety began to penetrate Chinese civilization during the pre-Qin dynasty era, when China was under the Warring States Period (ending in 221 BC) in which the country was in a state of war and division. This divide continued until Tang Lu Shu Yi, a law code created and promulgated throughout the Tang Dynasty that marked the incorporation of filial piety into China's legal structure. Filial piety not only evolved into an imperative part of Chinese values, tradition, and moral high grounds, but as a legal institution (Chungang). As we go forward, this historical context of these common teachings is meant to provide an understanding of its origin while similar values saturate varying different Asian cultures that are coupled with the mirroring values associated with the immigrant narrative. Despite this, the challenges for families and their children involve other internal and external determinants and factors as well, though this might give way into an explanation as to why it is practiced and taught so strongly.

At the heart of filial piety lies affection and “bao”, which means reciprocity, Olwen Bedford and Kuang-Hui Yeh state:

“Confucius described parent-child interaction as motivated by natural affection and the principle of bao (reciprocity), which requires that all helpful behavior be returned (Hsu, 1975). Affection and bao should flow both ways. However, because children have a fundamental obligation to their parents for giving them life, their obligation can never be fully repaid. Thus, motivated by affection, children can return the care they received from their parents by carrying out filial duties such as being respectful and looking after their parents in their old age “ (Bedford and Yeh).

It is evident that this might have been where the degree of expectations of reciprocity to parents from children, sacrifice, and standards partly originated. Despite this, regardless of an

individual's background or culture, it can be argued that this type of familial duty and reciprocation from a child to their parents/family is normal and expected. However, the extent to which this cultural concept has been brought to and implemented in Asian cultures has continued to perpetuate and branch out into all facets of our lives. Children of immigrant families have also been reported to face complex issues from the exposure of conflicting cultural values while simultaneously making their transition into adulthood (Phinney et al.) This can thrust our individuality into association with our family, which has led Asian culture into commonly being known as a "collectivistic" culture. Hence, it is more likely for these individuals to emphasize the needs and goals of an entire group instead of on individual terms, leading to interdependency (Tjosvold et al.). Moreover, the makeup of our identity, including our individuality, gender, race, education, career, sexuality, and Beliefs are tested by being incorporated into our families' ideals. In other words, the components that make up the human experience and self-identity are not only ours, but also capitulates to our families and their perceived judgements and approval. For Southeast Asians and Filipino culture, these mirroring ideals do not stem from Confucianism, but still give way to the principle of coming from families of immigrants that overlaps with these values. Thus, there is the notion that success, especially in America, is not predestined, but is a result of dedication and hard work.

We honor and respect the sacrifices our families have made for us, and this is our way of giving back. The idea circling around being "family oriented", interdependent, unified, and raised in a collectivistic culture centered around the principle of placing "family first" is admirable. However, the roots of these traditional perspectives and values are far from flawless. Looking through the lens of the last few hundred years and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, this translates into the upbringing of Asian children. Specifically, for Asian-Americans and their families,

traditional ideas of children fulfilling filial obligations and reciprocating the sacrifice that their parents made for them have resulted in internal conflict and upheaval. This can be traced back to the “tiger parent” trope, which, from a personal perspective, is a preliminary step into placing family pressure onto Asian-American children. Although popular, this term was not coined until 2011 by Amy Chua, a law professor at Yale University. Her book *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* discussed the common parenting style associated within Asian-American households (Kim). Compared to authoritarian parenting, the concept of “tiger parenting” is strongly associated with Asian families. This is where values of filial piety, success within career and academics, and children having an interdependent outlook on life are strongly emphasized. In contrast, authoritarian parenting is usually found within Western and European families, in which harsh parenting practices such as instilling fear in the child through threats, punishments and more with a lack of support and warmth are carried out.

Su Yeong Kim, an associate professor at the University of Texas in Austin, found that despite the similarities in parenting, authoritarian parenting resulted in poor academic results in North American and European students. In contrast, Asian students that were raised with the style of “tiger parenting”, which is often deemed as extremely strict in regard to academic and professional success, have been found to be more successful in the academic arena. Compared to authoritarian parenting, tiger parenting was also found to encompass both positive and negative ways of teaching and parenting children, which provides warmth and support (positive) as well as strict rules (negative). With authoritarian parenting, longitudinal studies (that collect data over time to track the development of a child based on parenting type) have found that this only consists of negative ways of parenting (i.e. strict rules), which makes these parents easy going.

This leads to a more “hands off” approach while being less positively and negatively engaged with their children, which can provide an explanation of poorer academic performance (Kim).

Regardless, I myself have always wondered why my own family holds such high standards for academic and professional success. Eventually, this impacted my mental health and state of identity as compared to my American peers and colleagues. With this, I continued to think “Aren’t I American, too?” This is where the primary issue lies. Striving for success in both of these arenas is critical throughout society, but has led to internal family dispute among many Asian families. Thus, it not only stems from parenting style and the dueling cultural identities at play, but also originates out of deep roots of intergenerational conflict and discrepancies in terms of cultural values, standards, and *expectations* of the child or children of the family. Due to academic success and rigor being so deeply engrained into our upbringings because of tradition, it has found a way to become a makeup of our identities as Asian-Americans rather than being separate. In addition, it is not necessarily academic success that impacts us, but also the way in which it is taught, enforced, and applied by our parents that is deep-rooted in Asian culture. A study published in the journal of *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minorities* investigated the perceptions of 93 Asian-American college students of Korean and Chinese descent. The investigation revealed major differences in belief systems and values compared to Asian parents as compared to their Asian-American children, which, with further examination, was contributed by generational values (Chae and Nagatta). Ultimately, this dwindles down to the disparities found within tradition, and the values children have now possessed while growing up in a Westernized environment and world.

Moreover, researchers mentioned above examined a pool of Korean-American students that were interviewed on their coping strategies with family conflict, and their application of

cognitive flexibility. Results showed that the students valued traditional Asian values much less than their parents did. This difference derives from both internal and external factors, from the intergenerational conflict mentioned above, to growing up surrounded by a Westernized environment in education, the workplace, and throughout daily life. After researching the origin of traditional cultural values and why it has permeated Asian culture so prominently, as an Asian-American, I also questioned whether I was able to *separate* my own identity, goals, and wants in life from my family's. With traditional expectations and pressures throughout childhood, this was a particular internal conflict that seemed even more ambiguous and clouded as I entered adulthood. Only upon writing this thesis and immersing myself into discovering the whys behind my own culture did I unearth the theory of cognitive flexibility in relation to this discussion.

As part of psychological theory, the theory of cognitive flexibility describes the cognitive ability to adapt to two different concepts and essentially *switch* between each idea, while also possessing both simultaneously (Spiro and Veltovich). This ability allows an individual to switch selectively between different mental processes and thoughts in order to carry out the appropriate response for the environment or situation. It also helps individuals in adjusting their own behavior according to changes within their environment. Similar to multi-tasking in different aspects of life like culture, it has proved to help individuals in coping with negative and stressful events as they grew up (Dajanni and Uddin). The acculturation complexity model, which examines integration into biculturalism, shows that this immersion into other cultures further promotes cognitive flexibility (Tadmor et al.). Olivia Speigler and Birgit Leyendecker of the University of Bochum in Germany examined identity acculturation in immigrant children of Turkish-German origin. After providing questions on how they identify with Turks and

Germans, results showed that the bicultural children (of both Turkish and German descent) outperformed the participants who strongly preferred one background over another in having the ability to switch between different tasks. Ultimately, the study concluded that this finding can highlight potential benefits of the application of cognitive flexibility in dual cultural identities (Speigler and Leyendecker). For Asian-Americans, peering through the lens of cognitive flexibility in order to meet the demands of both cultures simultaneously might be a gateway towards learning how to better negotiate between both identities along with our own expectations of ourselves compared to our families.

This is a key concept in understanding the default situation that many Asian-Americans have often faced when being born in a Western country while growing up with our own culture and tradition. Applying this to my own childhood, I can finally grasp and pinpoint the feeling of the challenge between understanding my own goals versus my family's. What many Asian-Americans might want for their careers may very well differ from their families. Although this might be the case, a large portion of the Asian-American population enter the fields of accounting, law, and medicine. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, over half of the Asian population in the United States were in occupations categorized under "Management, professional, and related" in 2018. Growing up, I was signed up for Chinese school as well as another math course that took place on Saturdays and Sundays while attending American first and secondary school during the weekdays. This progressed into SHSAT/SAT prep courses, and summer camps that left me drowning in puddles of calculus questions I never understood. Later, when I realized that I wanted to enter a rather unorthodox career that steered away from traditional Chinese culture, pressures of filial piety and fulfilling my obligations as the child of

an Asian family placed a mental roadblock in between my family's wants and goals, and my own.

Regardless of whether this internal conflict between what I wanted for myself compared to my family which I could not differentiate at the time) was self-actualization, the question still stands: Are Asian-Americans able to decipher whether their goals are for themselves, or attached and associated to their families' due to strong filial ties and values, hence making it a challenge to categorize them as separate goals? The theory of cognitive flexibility might act as a steppingstone to assist us in creating this needed separation. If we are able to be fully embrace both of our identities, the role of American culture can become significant in bridging the gap between familial and cultural conflict.

## Chapter IV

### Psychological Impact of Cultural Standards and Expectations on Asian-Americans

As a child of an immigrant, I have felt increasing pressure over my childhood and into adulthood as an Asian-American to ensure that I was seen as “Chinese” to my family (including my elders, especially those I would encounter upon entering a Chinese restaurant or supermarket). If I were to carry out an action, behavior, or thought that was not considered “Chinese enough” or “too American” I would face retaliation and backlash, except these backlashes only became a normality I soon accepted. Catalysts for these outbursts included seemingly trivial practices such as crossing my chopsticks (which I still do, and sincerely, deeply apologize to my ancestors to this day), to being judged for my inauthentic accent when speaking Mandarin and wanting to have sleepovers at my friends’ houses. This preconceived judgement extended to more monumental decisions I made such as deciding to pursue my own career in the culinary industry and considering moving out after graduating college.

Despite this, on an individual basis, I whole-heartedly and entirely embrace my Chinese background and take pride in where my family came from, along with our values and traditions. However, I soon came to the realization that this disapproval from family placed strict limitations and difficult constraints on what defined the Chinese identity. Thus, I received the title of being called an “American”, and my personality and lifestyle were deemed “not Chinese *enough*”, as though being American was defined as privilege and class, but acting “American” and assimilating into certain Westernized habits were disparaged. From personal experience, a value that is often enforced into Asian-Americans is also class and privilege, which

is often associated with America's progressiveness and advancements. This overlaps with the immigrant experience and immigrants' view of America as the land of opportunity. The hypocrisy here lies in being chastised for being too American while expecting to fulfill expectations since we *are* in a country that is associated with class. Ultimately, this has led me to question where I belong in my own identity, as well as in this country. Despite this, my respect and appreciation for the sacrifices made by family and an understanding of where this mentality stems from will always be maintained regardless of how much I disagree with their outlook on the impossibility of being able to be both Asian and American, while preserving qualities of both worlds. Unfortunately, these contradictions and strict divisions of identity and culture ultimately placed emotional and mental strain on my health. Although it paved a path towards strength, this road consisted of angst, self-doubt, and anxiety in my own goals, who I was, and how I could ever accept the constant polarization of what it means to be Asian in America between myself and what I saw as my entire world: my family (whom I attempted to center my entire life around with every menial and monumental decision I made). Traditional and historical values of filial piety and its obligation placed onto children only worsened this internal battle and continues to pull apart the rope that connects two identities that historically cannot coexist. For 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian-Americans, who are those that were the first and second of their family to have been born in the United States, acculturation into the American lifestyle is a challenge that remains constant but is not linear.

“Family conflict” is a term that rings familiarity to many Asian-Americans across the United States who were raised by immigrant parents. This cultural commonality was indicated and discussed in the article “Factorial Invariance of the Asian-American Family Conflicts Scale Across Ethnicity, Generational Status, Sex and Nationality” written by Dr. Matthew Miller and

Dr. Richard Lee. Both Miller and Lee investigated the link behind stress as it relates to familial, cross-cultural, and intergenerational dispute. The acculturation Asian-Americans face as they continue to live in a Westernized environment already exacerbates this internal upheaval. The cultural divide is further widened between parent and child when the parent is not familiarized with American culture and norms. Compared to their parents, children are immersed into American culture by default, leaving the relationship in misalignment. Within the study, they recruited 1,012 Asian-American participants in order to measure whether they experienced internal conflict based on psychometric tests, which calculates psychological values such as aptitude, intelligence, mental capabilities, and behavior styles. Results showed that this issue that plagued Asian-Americans of all subgroups. Asian-Americans across the board were found to have conflict with family, where cultural values and differences in the ability to adapt to surrounding (Westernized) environments were evident in being the cause of disagreements (Miller and Lee). The cultural divergence also originates from more elusive factors, such as the rate of acquiring proficiency for the English language, which Asian-American children can more easily grasp compared to their parents, furthering the pre-existing cultural barrier.

The pressures and expectations placed onto children from their parents to conform to cultural standards paved a path to lower self-esteem and confidence within oneself. Growing up with academic rigor and success as a central part of childhood, straight A's (a 95% on an exam did *not* count), carrying out an exceptional academic performance, and making major strides in all areas of education played a key role in shaping my own identity through the ascendancy of a desire for family approval. By the age of ten years old, which was when I began to gradually connect the small pieces of who I was as a person together, my preconceived notion of my

performance in academics consumed me. Any grade under an A was not acceptable and led to poor self-image, while trivializing the efforts I put into the countless hours of studying. Most importantly, I thought that for any amount of work carried forth, it was simply *not enough* if the outcome did not achieve familial satisfaction (which became a coveted goal in my own mind). Anything I worked on, whether it was an assignment or request from family that I was unmoved by, turned into something that became paramount in my life. Rather, their approval of all my work, choices, actions, behaviors, and decisions reigned superior and “motivating”. Unfortunately, what would result was a spiral of emotions, including worthlessness, chagrin, and lack of self-esteem if standards and expectations were not completely met.

A study done by the *American Association for the Advancement of Science* found that over half of Asian-Americans who were 25 years of age have obtained a bachelor’s degree. After surveying over 5,000 Asian and White students, and looking into GPAs, teacher evaluations, and social factors (such as immigration status), it was revealed that although success rate was greater for Asian-American students, they also reported back with lower self-esteem (Hsin and Xie). Another survey accompanied by the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health during 1994 and 1995 revealed that Asian students had a lower rate of “feeling good about themselves” compared to their White peers. This was examined by asking students to agree or disagree on the statement “I feel good about myself”, along with asking them to rate how much time they spend with friends on a daily basis from “rarely” to “almost every day” (Hsin and Xie). Students were also asked to rate parent-child relationship satisfaction through a five-point scale, with results indicating that Asian students experienced lower self-esteem, and higher rates of family conflict (Goyette and Xie). From this evidence, parental expectations for academic success, family conflict, and low self-esteem and confidence have been correlated. As I wrote this, I entered

into a heated debate with my own mother on this topic. I have confronted several times before on this very issue and receive the same explanation every time that overlaps academic success and identity into one cohesive makeup of an individual. This does not obscure my gratitude, love, and care for her, but also leads me to question the influences it has had on my own mental health. For twenty years, I attempted to cope with the impact of cultural pressures and expectations that only led to unhappiness. Only when I finally realized what truly made me happy and by way of practicing cognitive flexibility did I make decisions and carry out actions out of my own wants and desires. In this way, cognitive flexibility has also helped me in separating opposing sides of my own identity, which resulted in building self-confidence after losing self-worth and self-esteem, while finding ways to build my life based on my own happiness.

Despite the overwhelming disputes and quarrels my mom and I dove into regarding college, my career, and becoming “Americanized”, I was confident and optimistic upon entering my second year of college. Tensions between my dueling identities heightened simultaneously, yet my outlook on the future was bright. It is important to mention that at this time, I had not yet come to the realization that the way I wanted to start my own non-profit organization was by moving out and working back in my hometown of New York City (this was not until the summer before my Junior/Senior year). Prior to this, I was fortunate enough to be supported by my mother who approved of my career choice, at least until I deviated from her idea of what she thought it should be.” Leaving home for college, which she always reminds of the fact that I was lucky that she allowed me to leave New York for higher education, was another major strain that spiked family conflict. Regardless, I was continuing my education at school during this time while still being unaware of how my life would gradually begin to change at home. The strong

and compelling influence, psychological impacts, and realization that the pressures placed on Asian-Americans from their families did not strike me until I received a message from a childhood friend.

While doing an assignment for a pastry lab that I was currently in at the time, a notification from a friend I had been connected with since I was five years old appeared on the screen. Immediately upon clicking it, my heart sunk. He informed me that a friend of ours from elementary school had committed suicide. Although we will never fully understand the reasoning behind this choice that millions endure each year, I would simply want to ask him “why”, as this seemed abrupt and perhaps surprising. He was intelligent and was attending a school of high prestige. Nonetheless, he was also an Asian-American that shared the same experience of high pressure and standards from his family and their culture. In data collected from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services of Minority Health and the Centers for Disease and Control (CDC), the leading cause of death for Asian-Americans from ages 15-25 in 2017 were due to suicides. In addition, Asian-American *females* were found to be 20% more likely to commit suicide compared to their White, female counterparts. In addition, among females from all other racial backgrounds within the age group of 65-84, Asian-Americans had the highest suicide rate. This goes along with a finding that showed a higher lifetime rate of suicidal thoughts by Asian-American women compared to the rest of the U.S. population. In general, Asian-American college students were also found to be more likely to have suicidal thoughts and to make suicide attempts compared to White students. As an Asian-American woman myself, I can theorize that this links to the double standards found within the familial expectations and pressures placed onto daughters and granddaughters of Asian families compared to men (this is more likely due to historical misogyny deeply rooted in Asian culture). In general, Asian-

American college students were also found to be more prone to carrying out suicide attempts and suicidal thoughts compared to White students (Hijoka and Wong). Despite this information, I still do not know what our late friend felt prior to committing suicide, and what led to this irreversible act that disguises itself as a remedy, but can say that I too, have felt this way.

Self-affliction, depression, and suicidal thoughts took possession of the self-worth and esteem I clung onto as a child once I became an adolescent. Typically, my family blamed this on hormones and a strong desire for attention, and ultimately diminished it down to a “phase” that girls in middle and high school “usually experienced”. Thus, there was no cause for concern, and open discussions about negative feelings were to be avoided. It was only up until I entered my 20’s that I began to feel confident in myself as I detached from my family’s expectations. This can also be connected to the traditional cultural mentality that our parents, as immigrants, had to endure that stems from experiencing poverty and other major challenges in order to arrive to where they are today. That is the reasoning for why their Asian-American children, who were physically born in the land of opportunity, are not entitled to share or express opinions and feelings when it does not align with our parents. A literature search in order to identify suicide risk-related studies among immigrants and ethnicities was also conducted from the years of 1980-2017. Findings showed that immigrants and ethnic minorities might be at higher risk for suicidal ideation and behavior compared to the native population. Non-European immigrant women were also found to be at higher risk for carrying out suicide attempts (Forte et al.). These figures are not a coincidence when considering difficulty in assimilation, cultural conflict, stigma, and the high pressures associated with both the Asian-American and immigrant experience.

Eventually, I brought up the idea of visiting a therapist, which unsurprisingly received negative feedback from family. For immigrants, they were found to have developed more disorders that impede their mental health due to language barriers, levels of acculturation within their family (such as with Asian-American children within Asian families of immigrants), gender (men have been found to acculturate at a faster rate than women), family and intergenerational issues, as well as issues in occupation (such as working undocumented) (Kramer et al.). For Asian-Americans specifically, data collected by the National Latino and Asian American Study (NLAAS), results showed that Asians displayed a 17.3% rate of their overall lifetime for developing a psychiatric disorder. Despite this, they also discovered that they were three times less likely to seek out mental health services compared to Whites (Nishi). Again, the Asian-American experience as well as the immigrant experience are not fully mutually exclusive and must be considered both as separate entities as well as due to the immigrant roots that impact Asian-American individuals and their families. This discrepancy highlights the plight Asian-Americans often fall into in relation to mental health and impacts of family and cultural conflict on self-esteem and depression. Throughout the last portion of this chapter, I deplore the timing in which this was written, as this was too late. Hopefully, our friend's story will inspire others to continue this discussion while ushering it onto a main platform for others to become aware of.

## Chapter V

### Identity Formation

The moment I crossed the threshold of being not only aware of myself but of others as a 3 or 4-year-old toddler and then into pre-adolescence was when I traversed across the endless possibilities of what and who I wanted to be. During pre-adolescence, my adoration for animals grew as my mom began to accumulate rescue cats in the house, and merging this with my specific, yet oddly common avidity for horses led to my first realization of how I wanted to leave my mark on the world: as a veterinarian. Only several years later at the age of 9 did this dream turn into becoming a marine biologist (mostly due to believing that I acquired the coveted ability of speaking dolphin after kissing one on vacation). When I was 12 years old, this goal evolved into being a world-famous fashion designer after being inspired by Bratz Dolls, and then to a psychologist after taking part in heated debates on Sigmund Freud. As I entered adolescence, my ceaseless dreams continuously grew despite just having found my passion for food. Although my heart is set on entering the food industry, ideas of becoming a doctor, forensic analyst, majoring in political science, or becoming a civil rights prosecutor or immigration lawyer continue to traverse my mind as I graduate from culinary school while stepping over the threshold into the professional field. More often than not, I then end up asking myself “Who and what am I meant to be?”. This career and identity crisis rings familiarity to the narrative of individuals with dueling cultural identities like those of Asian-Americans. In the “Asian American Achievement Paradox” by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, pressure and emphasis placed on education and career compared to Whites as compared to Asian-Americans were in part attributed to the values encapsulated in the immigrant experience (Lee and Zhou 2015). Immigration policies after 1965 also seemed to favor individuals with more educational

and professional skills, which made immigration slightly easier while allowing them to come to America to pass their values onto their children. Sumie Okazaki, a professor of counseling psychology in New York University's online masters in school counseling Program, also stated "There's a lot of motivation for parents who are immigrants to provide opportunities for their children. They bring lots of hopes and dreams that are placed onto their children." (Okazaki and Yee). Thus, career expectations are further amplified for Asian-Americans (as well as other members of minority groups) through the immigrant experience.

With the exception of varying factors and aspects that are not often in our control, the quandary we are ushered into is not one of ease or clear direction. Rather, the very essence of what makes up our identity, from gender, race, education, career, to our family, personal life, belief systems, and the makeup of our morality are in constant conflict. Despite this plight, food as a core of my identity and culture has helped in navigating the harsh waters of understanding that the way we define and identity ourselves is twofold. The connection of food to identity transcends on a universal level and echoes the basic needs of individuals, as well as the collective narrative of challenges, triumphs, culture, emotions, differences, and life lessons encompassing the human experience.

Amin Maalouf, French writer and author once expressed identity in such a way that he referred to it as "the genes of the soul". In his book *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, Maalouf stated that identity "is like a pattern drawn on a tightly stretched parchment. Touch just one part of it, just one allegiance, and the whole person will react, the whole drum will sound." (Maalouf). From the psychological perspective, identity essentially answers the question of "who we are", which continues to unlock doorways to new answers while closing others as we develop new experiences and self-growth throughout our lives. At the

basic level, aspects such as gender, culture, family history and background, our hometowns, career, and those that we love (such as our family and friends) consists of the make-up of human identity. They are able to operate as separate entities, while intermingling in order to influence and determine the choices we make. According to Dr. Shahram Heshmat, associate professor of the University of Illinois, identity is not often chosen. Rather, it is structured on the internalization of values and beliefs, typically linked to our upbringing along with what constitutes the belief system of our parents (Heshmat). This is reminiscent of the idea of a child being the reflection of their parent, which has reverberated throughout history. Defining the child-parent relationship being analogous to that of a mirror was a foreign conceptualization of identity but held increasing resonance as I embarked on re-discovering my truth as an Asian-American. Only up until I entered a Shakespearean phase in elementary school did this strike me through William Shakespeare's Sonnet III. The great literary poet, playwright, actor, and writer who echoed this when he stated what would carry on with me indefinitely: "Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee". This line translates into an anecdote about having a child, as a child is "thy mother's glass", or mirror and reflection of what she embodies in her values, beliefs, and perspectives on life. He goes on to express that having a child will enable and allow oneself to look back at their own youth once they become old. If one does not decide to have a child, they will not have anyone to be a living image of themselves (Shakespeare). Throughout my childhood, my mother often told me that I was a representation of her once I stepped foot into the outside world. This rang true when teachers in elementary would echo phrases such as "your mom did well" or "what did your parents teach you to do?". The mirror mentality is a common expectation for children in the general population but is quickly magnified by high cultural expectations along with the common "tiger parenting" style compared to the

authoritarian style of parenting that is common among Americans. At this point, I could not fathom that the one greatest writers of all time had literarily conceived the concept of the intertwinement between the identities of parents and children, though this realization struck me many years down the road at the peak of my identity crisis. With this, it has been made clear that our identities are strongly linked to our parents. Unfortunately, this portion of identity along with its values and beliefs does not always align with an individual's authentic self, and untainted by the reflection of others (Heshmat).

The overlap of the parental role in identity formation and its effect on childhood development was revealed in an investigation by the *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*. In the article "Identity formation and parent-child value congruence in adolescence", Ariel Knafo and H.Schwartz of The Hebrew University of Jerusalem conducted an experiment of 267 adolescents that reported the beliefs they had, as well as the beliefs they perceived their parents to have (Knafo and Schwartz). They measured this through clinical development psychologist James Marcia's four identity statuses of early psychological development (Klym and Ciecuch). For this investigation, Knafo and Schwartz utilized Marcia's statuses of diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. Through what was an extension of Erik Erikson's development theory, Marcia described the status of diffusion as a stage in which the adolescent does not feel as though they have a sense of choice to make their own decisions. The next status, foreclosure, describes adolescents' willingness to commit to specific values, roles, and goals for the future, as well as the tendency to conform to others' expectations in relation to their future. This might be where cognitive flexibility is coming into use, as adolescents in the status of foreclosure are more open-minded and adaptable to the views and beliefs of others that surround them. For Asian-Americans, this parallels with what is often

expected of us throughout our childhood and into adulthood. The status of moratorium relates to identity crisis, where the adolescent is exploring different types of commitments and paths but has not chosen one yet, while the achievement stage marks the conquering of the crisis after having committed to identity and a sense of oneself (Muus).

Referring back to Knafo and Schwartz's examination on identity formation, they found that the adolescents categorized in the "exploratory" statuses of achievement and moratorium viewed their parents' values with an accurate perspective. In comparison with those individuals that were placed under the status categories of foreclosure and achievement, which are high-commitment statuses, they were found to be more accepting of and receptive to parental values (Knafo and Schwartz). Erik H. Erikson, renowned developmental psychologist, coined the identity formation theory that constructed a blueprint of the various stages of development from birth into adulthood. Erikson states that development of the identity, which partly dictates personality and behaviors, has a prominent presence during the stage of adolescence (ranging over the period of 13 to 19 years old). Up until this point, these individuals are tasked with the mentally and physically arduous integration of past experiences, along with the characteristics they have developed along the way in order to create stability in their identity (Erikson). Similar to the concept of being cognitively flexible, this group of individuals is by default forced into finding ways to adapt and switch back and forth between new and old values, beliefs, and experiences.

Various models of developmental psychology have been reported to lack the explanation in parental influence on children, but other studies have discovered a strengthened link between Asian-American children and the identity theory formation, along with Marcia's identity statuses. Paired with the default understanding of the pressure Asian-American children face to

follow cultural norms and expectations along with the mentioned developmental theories, there is a clear link between the foreclosure status of adolescence, and the way this fits into the ideal mold of an Asian-American throughout their lifetime. However, the tendency for an adolescent to enter a stage in which they have the ability to wager major potential commitments while being easily swayed cannot be weighed alone. Partnering this theory with dueling identities, beliefs, wants, and desires, along with how Asian families often imprint cultural ideals and obligations that translate into life-long goals for their children cannot be overlooked. In a study published in the *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, a sample of 342 Asian-American adolescents' ethnic identity status and outcomes were assessed. Results concluded that there is a link between the developmental progression of ethnic identity status (focusing on foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement), and ethnic identity outcome (Ying and Lee). While emphasizing the importance of development throughout adolescence, the major impacts and influences of the entanglement between the psychological and cultural standpoint are strengthened in the case of Asian-Americans.

Now that I have pushed past foreclosure and started to traverse the planes of the achievement status, my success in accepting and becoming who I truly want to be is a continuous effort. While the differences and conflicts remain among Asian-American children and their parents, one pivotal aspect of identity, culture, and unanimity among all human beings stays relevant to both sides of this cultural conflict, which is that of food. Upon entering my teenage years, when the stages of identity development were critical and more easily influenced, I noticed that food began impacting the person I was becoming, ultimately helping me in accepting where my own self-growth was taking me. Growing up in an Asian household, food was salient among my relationship with myself, my family, and our culture, but I never fully

appreciated or recognized it until I discovered my own passion for creating it, which allowed me to reconnect with my truth as an individual. The multi-faceted nature of identity and the human experience encompasses food in all its forms, and its relevance to the narrative of all individuals. This continues by opening up to discussion of food's critical role in identity, while considering this statement in response to Amin Maalouf's "In the Name of Identity":

“What emerges is a reminder that only by acknowledging the multiplicity of our identity can we begin to simultaneously own our uniqueness and fully inhabit our ties to our fellow human beings” (Popova).

## Chapter VI

### Food and Identity

Although identity is seemingly multi-faceted in all aspects of the human condition and experience, food is one universal commonality shared among our narratives. As diverse as food can be with ingredients and cuisines from different cultures and backgrounds, it is also a universal code and language. Whether one eats to live and values food for sustenance and survival, or lives to eat and treasures culinary creations and complex flavor profiles, food is distinctive for its duality, for being simultaneously diverse and unifying. In the context of cognitive flexibility, this same ability to adapt to varying different elements from different cultures is within the nature of food itself. Rather than focusing on what makes every person different, it has a way of creating one linkage among society by forming connections, relationships, and relatedness between all humans show that food transcends the divided world we currently live in by furthering the understanding of ourselves, our identities, and our social relationships with others (Shah 2). From the history of breaking bread, to extending an olive branch representative of peace, and joining friends and family towards the end of the day for a meal around one table, this shows that food is the one language we can all understand and speak. As I have continued to apply this mentality into my everyday life, it has been ingrained into my identity as an Asian-American, while questioning whether this powerful unifier can be a stepping stone towards a resolution to cultural conflict and inner battle with identity.

Throughout my childhood, my most vivid and jovial memories are marked by the scent and taste of the multitude of ingredients and aromatics found in Northern Chinese cuisine. Star anise, rice wine, cinnamon sticks, soy sauce, sesame oil and copious amounts of aromatics including garlic, scallions, and ginger (the “Chinese trinity”) are reminiscent of my

grandmother's traditional cooking. Once school ended, I had already anticipated the waft of smells when I walked through the door that carried reminders of her love for family along with prompting memories of my own roots as a Chinese-American. As a culinary student in Beijing during the 1930's, my grandma (or "Lau-Lau", which is one of many Mandarin versions of "grandma") eventually became a private Chef instructor who taught other women how to cook in her home. Like many families, she passed her repertoire of Northern Chinese culinary techniques and knowledge down to my Mom while she was growing up. By that time, my grandparents and mother had already immigrated to America. Reflecting back on my family's history of food, it is no coincidence that food has played a paramount role in my life, saturating all aspects of my own identity. Coupled with holidays like Chinese New Year where we rejoiced over what others might deem as an excessive number of dumplings along with its role in how many Asian-Americans can reconnect with their own cultures, food has evolved into common ground for me and my family.

Regardless of our differences, as an Asian-American myself versus their immigrant experience in America, we have yet to face conflict over a pot of fresh white rice or dim sum, or with foods from other cultures such as pasta and hamburgers (although Chinese food is preferred by family for tradition, I have noticed how they have all adapted to other foods out of accessibility and necessity after being in America for an extended amount of time). With this, food has been one of the only gateways towards balance and compromise within my family thus far and is often something that we as Asian-Americans can rejoice in and connect with regardless of what walk of life we come from. The importance of food is not only evident in our culture, but in other social connections and relationships such as among friends, where we are able to communicate and relate to one another through what we eat and cook.

Historically, food has been ingrained into ancient society as a product of trade, where one can find varying products and ingredients originating from different countries in local supermarkets and households today. One major contribution to this is trade during ancient times, as classical texts have revealed distant trade routes from the Roman Empire to Arabia, India, and China (McLaughlin 2). This uncovers evidence behind food origin, habits, and choices that can also reveal stories behind immigration and migration, resistance or urge for assimilation, evolution of values and changes over time, as well as the identity of an entire group or people (Almerico).

Despite the differences among varying cultures, are these demarcations between backgrounds and peoples very independent from one another? As such widely used and globalized ingredients such as tomatoes are being incorporated into cuisines across the world, this sheds light on the connectedness of all cultures, with a thin veil over the divides that historically separate us. This same question must be explored in conflict of identity and dueling cultures within the Asian-American experience. This led me to wonder whether two opposing cultures can coexist in harmony given the globalization of food and ingredients. If ingredients from varying countries can be incorporated into other parts of the world, this exchange between different cultures can result in the end of the negotiation between being Asian and American. Since food plays a salient role in culture and our families' lives, this raises the possibility that the same can be applied when it comes to our cultural identities that are closely linked together.

In regard to conflict, food serves as a powerful tool in bridging the gap between cultural differences, while serving as a medium for communication. In Roland Barthes "Toward a Psychosociology of Contemporary Food Consumption", he introduces the concept of food as communication, whether it be through purchasing food, consuming it, or serving it. Barthes

states that, "(Barthes 24). The instrumentality of food is widespread and diverse but acts as a channel of communication for humans at its most basic level. During an excursion to an Indian store with a friend (who is Indian-American), we expressed our disinclinations of entering ethnic markets that do not place emphasis on our own cultures. Prior to entering the store, I felt a slight ease as I thought sticking by my friend would help in detracting attention from how dissimilar I looked as a Chinese-American. While waiting for our Vada Pav (a deep-fried potato dumpling in between sliced bread and finished off with different sweet and spicy chutneys and sauces), I wandered off to the produce section to look at what appeared to be a bitter melon, but differed compared to those that I saw in Chinese markets. That was when an Indian auntie (all Asian cultures refer to their elders, regardless of relation, as "Uncles" and "Aunties") approached me with this question – "Do you know how to cook it? This is an Indian bitter melon. I know Chinese people have their own type of bitter melon too. How do you cook yours?"

Unfortunately, the difficulty of being a member of two different cultures remains. Author Mimi Korieh expressed the constancy of the internal battle of identities through her article "First Generation Americans in Conflict". She encapsulates the larger picture of what it means to be a child of immigrant families while being raised in a nation of differing values, belief systems, identities, and experiences. Familial standards and expectations to uphold respect and loyalty to our roots while being under constant scrutiny for not fully fitting into the American mold is paradoxical. As a 1<sup>st</sup> generation American, Korieh stated,

"What people don't seem to realize is that not only is there a tension accompanied by being both American and of another national identity, but one that resides in our homes, and even within ourselves. There is a constant battle to remain loyal to your race, country, or culture, but also to be a part of this great nation we call the United States of

America. Not only are we being chastised for being a part of a culture or race that is dissociated by what it means to be an American, but for not being wholly devoted to your parents' culture associated with the country *they* call home" (Korieh).

This sentiment translates into my daily diet, which, in my home, is often looked down upon if I consume too many burgers and French fries, and not enough traditional Chinese food. Food has become a constant reminder of my Chinese roots, but I have yet to understand how something that allows me to travel back to my roots can also separate my Asian identity simultaneously. During my adolescence when I began self-actualizing and understanding my own identity, my awareness of this heightened and I started to use food as the steppingstone to return and connect with my Chinese identity. Throughout college in Rhode Island, my environment lacked a sense of cultural familiarity that immediately subsided upon discovering the few Chinese supermarkets in the state only when I entered my Junior year. Despite this, there is also a notion of "not being Asian enough", as if our cultural identities were constantly upheld to a measurable scale. In an autobiography of the author Eric Liu, Liu documents his experience as a Chinese-American child residing in the suburbs visiting Chinatown in New York City. He states that his family utilizes hour long trips into Chinatown in order to "replenish" their "supply of things Chinese: food and wares, and something else *appetite* – even I could feel somehow fortified by a trip to Chinatown." (Liu). A crossroad still appears despite the connectedness that we find within ourselves through what we see as both foodstuffs and cultural nourishment.

Liu made this apparent through his description of his family on being Chinese, while also being outsiders. Their unexpected meeting with Liu's Po Po led to the realization that Po Po's daily routine in Chinatown was a tourist jaunt for them (Liu). This realistic and raw view into stark differences among Asian immigrants and Asian-Americans provides a better lens to

peer through in order to understand where traditional Asian families come from in regard to upbringing. In most cases, despite conflict, my family comes from having their best interest in mind. However, the issue is often under looked, and goes unnoticed. This is where food is demonstrated as a vessel for our beliefs and values. Differences aside, what eventually led me to embrace my Chinese heritage stems from a *lack of* cultural familiarity in my external environment through adolescence. Enculturation through my family was a prominent theme throughout my childhood. From turning a typical school week into seven days of torture with Chinese school and extra math courses on Saturdays and Sundays, to the abundance of Peking duck and rice (I am not complaining about this one), and the pre-calculus in SAT prep courses that still remains a mystery, they attempted to fully blend me into Chinese culture. My family thought that these influences in my environment would then better shape me into the mold of being the ideal Asian, being “fully Chinese”, while leaving behind my “American” identity. Due to this constant pressure, I detested my own Asian identity. The opposite occurred as I continued to grow up into adulthood, when I began to have gratitude for having the ability to speak Mandarin and looking forward to celebrating Chinese New Year’s (and not just for the red envelopes of money). These opposing perspectives aided in re-discovering my identity as an Asian American through the parallel of food, and as my environment became less influenced by Chinese culture.

In Anne Allison’s “Japanese Mothers and Obentos: The Lunch-Box as Ideological State Apparatus”, Allison analyzes the Japanese “Obento”, which is a small box with different compartments for food. Rice, a protein, and a vegetable are all included. What differentiates an Obento, or bento box, is its’ key intricacies and characteristics that emphasize the attention to detail and aim for “naturalness” despite people recreating this (describing it as “a tool of the

state). With vegetables, rice, and meat being cooked, cut, crafted, and arranged as something they are not defines an Obento, but more importantly, tells the tale of the Japanese culture. Allison documented how an Obento was used by teachers in Japan to gauge how “Japanese” they were, while tying the quality of the lunch box with discipline, and other traditional Japanese values (Allison 156). The application of Chinese food by my family throughout my childhood was the same in that my consumption and preference for it made me “more Chinese”. On the other hand, if I consumed American food, this made me less Chinese and more Westernized. This entanglement of food and values is reminiscent of the enculturation I experienced myself throughout childhood and proves to show that food transcends beyond substance and physical survival.

While saturating all facets of our lives and identities, the vast globalization *and* glocalization of food has proved that food possesses the power to diversify and promote change. The notorious, highly processed chunk of ham, additives, and preserves, otherwise known as Spam is a prime example, and is a childhood favorite that is surprisingly prominent in Asian cuisine. Cubed up pieces of the canned meat were incorporated in my mom’s fried rice, and were also sliced, fried, and eaten for breakfast with eggs, along with plain white rice for dinner. What is more astonishing is the adaptation and origin of Spam, which is in fact an “American meat icon” (DeJesus). It is also extremely popular in the Philippines, which led to the emergence of Jollibee, a Filipino fast food franchise that now has locations in the United States, and throughout the world as well as locations in Canada, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Qatar, the Philippines, and the United Kingdom (Roberts). In Ty Matejowsky’s “Spam and Fast Food Globalization”, Spam was utilized as a food source in times of scarcity for the military. Through time, the traditionally American item was prized by those in the Philippines and

became *glocalized* throughout the country. In other words, despite Spam's American background, Filipinos have adapted the processed treasure to adjust to their cuisine and local market. The perception of Spam in Filipino versus American culture displays just how intersectional food can be within culture. According to Matejowksy, Spam is prized in the Philippines partially due to its American background, which is associated with abundance, class, and prosperity. In contrast, Americans see it as cheap, unhealthy, and processed, diminishing its characteristics and quality, while labeling it as food for those who are struggling to live. It has turned into both a commodity, cultural symbol, and aspect of identity for Filipinos, which is further showcased through the creation of the Spam Jam Cafe that highlights fast casual food featuring a Spam-focused menu, similar to today's current Jollibee branches (Matejowsky). Simultaneously, the commodity is viewed as inexpensive, low-class, and low-quality in America.

Coming from a Chinese background, my view on Spam and its integration into our own identity and cuisine parallels to traditional cultural views on status and class in the same country. For those in the Philippines, the glocalization of Spam was also due to being under one circumstance as they united together, propelling them into this newness that would alter their culture. Thus, they had no choice but to be cognitively flexible in this sense. Even more so, this shows that cultures can adapt from one another to make a product one's own, such as Filipinos making an American product like spam a cultural commodity. Ultimately, this demonstration of cognitive flexibility can pave a path towards the notion that change and adaptability is possible in all cultures with positive results. Compared to my own family, this was more easily done by the Filipinos because cognitive flexibility was not necessarily a choice, but a way to handle the circumstance that they were under historically. This might show that in many

cases, being cognitively flexible is more situational. It might also explain why cognitive flexibility is more difficult for my family of immigrants.

The study of food identity in Asian-American culture has been used in navigating both the parallels and differences within the human experience. Ultimately, recognition that there are *already* parts of our own culture that stem from others can turn into an opportunity to change the strict perspective that our families have on culture. Cognitive flexibility also prevails in this context as it might be able to provide the framework for our families to become more accepting of both cultures coexisting with one another (as it is often done through food) if we actively decide to start discussions with them in order to provide a new lens for them to look through. In the autobiography *Eating Identities: Reading Food in Asian-American Literature*, author Wenyng Xu documents Asian-American food writers as they analyze their identity makeup, including politics, race, sexuality, gender, culture, and values through the lens of food (Xu). Through her analysis, Xu stated, “Food, as the most significant medium of traffic between the inside and outside of our bodies, organizes, signifies, and legitimates our sense of self and distinguishes us from others, who practice different food ways.” (Xu). Taking the antithetical views on Spam in Asian cultures as a popular commodity in contrast to how Spam in America is seen as cheap, processed, and as convenience food can unite individuals just as much as it can create a divergence among them. Despite the polarities food can highlight, it is closely linked with the way in which humans express themselves, and can be further analyzed as a possible catalyst for change in this respect.

As new food movements and trends are rising in popularity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, so is the idea of using food as a channel for self-expression and individuality in order to find one’s place in society. Dylan Clark’s “The Raw and the Rotten” brings readers through the underground

scene of individuals that identify as “punks” who use food as a form of resistance against large corporations that they believe are a source of corruption in America. For five years in the Rio Grande, they ran the Black Cat Café, an unconventional food establishment whose sanitation and cuisine were atypical compared to most restaurants in the United States (Clark 231). In the same way that this group used food as a tool for self-expression and social justice, food in both my internal and external environment has helped me to understand the coexistence of both of my cultural identities. With the power it seems to possess to promote systemic change, its connectedness to the self might be able to do the same between Asian-American families. In the interviews detailed in the following analysis chapter, the way in which the five participants displayed the ability to be cognitively flexible while using food as a tool for resistance is similar to that of the Punks in Clark’s article. Although, the fundamental difference between the Punk and Asian-American experience lies in the fact that Punks, being a predominantly white culture, are considered as “different” in America. As Asian-Americans, we are considered as an “other” regardless of how we identify, which is inescapable, and psychologically speaking, more challenging. In addition, the use of food for Punks in this case is in the form of resistance, whereby for Asian-Americans, we are not necessarily resisting or rejecting Asian or American culture but are attempting to find balance and compromise between the two. Harnessing the ability and practice of cognitive flexibility has helped me in understanding my own identity while learning how to handle cultural pressure so as to stay true to myself (and not conforming to familial expectations).

Throughout my experience growing up in a traditional Chinese household, it also became clear that food was another value at the heart of our cultural identity as Asians while helping me to understand how to be adaptable and flexible between both cultures and environments. Jessica

Zhang, a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian-American felt the same way and detailed her mirrored experience through food in her article “Asian Fusion and the Asian-American Identity”. She describes growing up both Chinese and American as having the ability to enjoy the pizza and chicken nuggets they served at lunch in her public school, while also appreciating a big bowl of rice on the table upon her return home. Zhang continues by opening up the discussion to her own dueling identity conflict in relation to the concept of combining Eastern and Western foods together, which is a booming trend in the food industry, as well as a reality in some parts of typical Asian cuisine (referring back to Spam being prominent in Asian culture). With the interconnectedness of food, individuality, identity, and cultures, looking through this lens can be a suggested steppingstone towards balancing the scales of cultural conflict. Zhang continues to open up this possibility for further discussion through her own words:

“ . . .I’ve found a general way to live with accepting my situation as is, by talking to other Asian Americans with similar experiences and discovering things that represent myself, like Asian Fusion restaurants. Food is such an essential and pleasurable part of my life, so finding a cuisine that fits my palate has helped me find my place in society” (Zhang).

The concept behind fusion cuisine not only combines two or more different cultures together into one dish that resonates harmony and balance but shares links to the purpose and role of food in identity, family, and relationships. Food helps others in finding their own place in society while creating familiarity and a sense of connectedness within oneself, as well as with others. Ideas behind key ingredients and products within existing cultures that have different origins further expands the possibility for change if we are able to show our families that they are already using these ingredients that they are familiar with. This may also show that separate cultures are more interconnected than one would think, and the simultaneous thought processes

and adaptiveness associated with cognitive flexibility can help in both a healthy and positive way.

Similar to individuals in the Philippines having to be cognitively flexible under their circumstance that led to the glocalization of Spam, the way in which food united them in this context can be a new lens to look through for immigrant families and their children. Ever since I entered the food industry professionally, I have sought whether food can help in bridging the disconnect between me and my family on a cultural basis. Although practicing cognitive flexibility is a choice as compared to a circumstance in this case, this can shed a light on a compromise and understanding of dueling cultures in Asian-American culture through acceptance of both sides. Ultimately, this research on food in identity demonstrates the role food has and remains to have within the Asian-American and immigrant experience that not only helps us in staying connected with our roots, but also helps in assimilation. Their experiences further open up the discussion of using it as tool can encourage our families to accept our dueling cultures, while being a vehicle to further find their own identities and place within America. The survey and five interviews with Asian-Americans of all backgrounds analyzed in the following chapter show that food and its omnipresence in all elements of our lives can open up the possibility to change.

## Chapter VII

### Findings and Analysis

The goal of this study is to provide a platform for the Asian-American community to share their stories of growing up with dual identities, while finding a way to freely express themselves. Since food serves as a gateway to the human experience as a commonality among individual differences, I am proposing this as a possible solution to the struggle between the negotiation of independence and interdependence. The first step in collecting the preliminary data was to learn more about the opinions of Asian-Americans in regard to family conflict, dueling identities, and the role that food plays in their lives through a survey of 50 participants conducted on social media. This provides general information to assist in the second step of interviewing five Asian-American individuals who will give more in-depth data through their personal experiences.

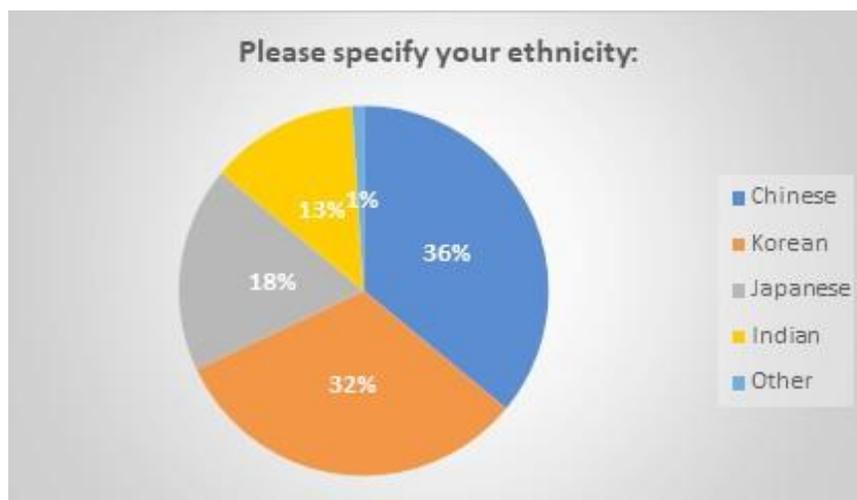
#### *Limitations of the Study*

The two main limitations of this study were found in the age of the participants, along with the restrictions on whom I was able to interview as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. First most of the individuals in the social media participant pool were in the younger age range, with most individuals ranging from 18-24 years old. Although this skewed the study to exclude more perspectives from older groups, the study in fact places an emphasis on younger Asian-Americans because intergenerational conflict with their families is common for this population. Second, rather than being able to interview individuals from varying different cultural and educational backgrounds, the circumstances of the pandemic limited the individuals I interviewed to those I knew personally. This resulted in a majority of participants being Chinese-American, which is the largest subgroup in America. In addition to the lack of

diversity in the participant pool, their similar experiences with cultural and familial conflict may have been a result of “like” attracting “like”, as most of those I surround myself with share the same challenges of having dueling cultural identities. It is also possible that potential participants in the culinary industry were unavailable because of the lockdown of the restaurant industry. Furthermore, interviews that were carried out and conducted were restricted to phone interviews rather than being able to meet face-to-face, which may have curtailed the ability to capture a fuller and possibly more nuanced description of their experiences.

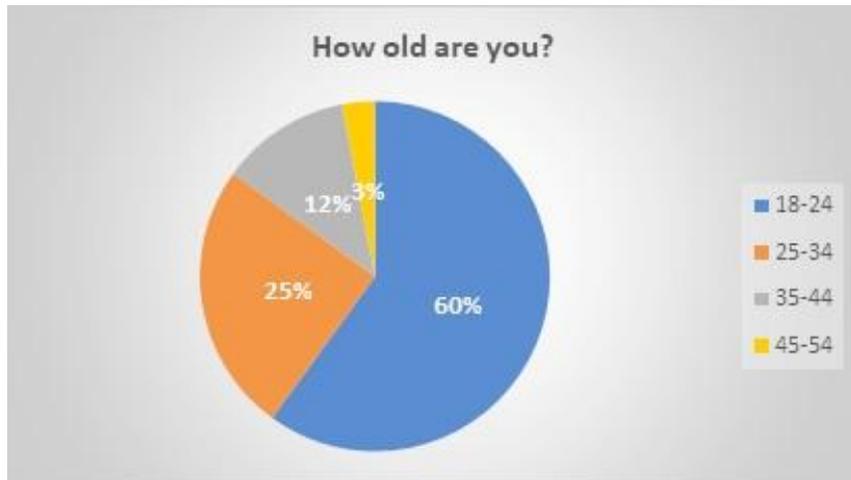
### ***Survey Results and Analysis***

In the first approach, I created and posted a survey (see Appendix A) on the group *Subtle Asian Traits* on Facebook, which consists principally of Asian-American members from across the United States. This group is used as a digital meeting place for Asians of all backgrounds across the United States and the rest of the world (though most are based in America) to post and share jokes, stories, life events, recipes, and more that are related to different Asian cultures. From the participant pool of this group, I received responses from 50 individuals, with 36% identifying as Chinese American, 32% as Korean-American, 18% as Japanese-American, 13% as Indian-American, and 1% as “other”:

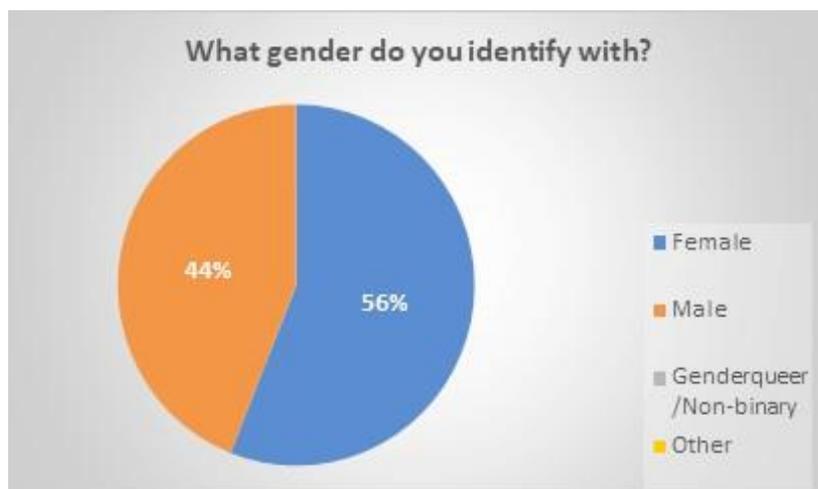


The social media survey was used to gain an initial and general understanding of what other Asian-Americans felt through a broader population in which I did not have any personal connections with anyone. Age limitations are also a factor with social media, as I knew that the platform would gear more focus towards 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian-American millennials due to their younger age (with many in college like myself), which is my general target population. The survey consisted of closed-ended questions regarding cultural experiences, as well as their opinions about how food has played a role in their identity and lives, and whether they regarded it as important. Despite this, the information from the surveys provided a general sense that a majority of Asian-Americans within the social media sample shared similar experiences, which coincided with results from the interviews that will be analyzed later in this chapter.

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge that by the end of collecting data during both steps, it appeared that more Chinese-Americans participated on both sides compared to other groups. According to the Pew Research Center, 24% of Asian-Americans were of Chinese origin, which is the largest reported single origin group, with Indian-Americans following, making up 20% of the national Asian population (Lopez et al.) Although other groups were still represented within each sample, this could provide a possible reason for why a majority of the samples were from Chinese-Americans (for both interviews and surveys). Moreover, the statistics from the social media surveys revealed varying findings within the community regarding culture and family. Age range must also be considered when analyzing the concluding results, as 60% of those that took part in the survey were 18-24 years old, along with 25% (15 people) that ranged from 25-34 years old, 12% within the 35-44 age range, and 3% ranging from 45-54 years old:

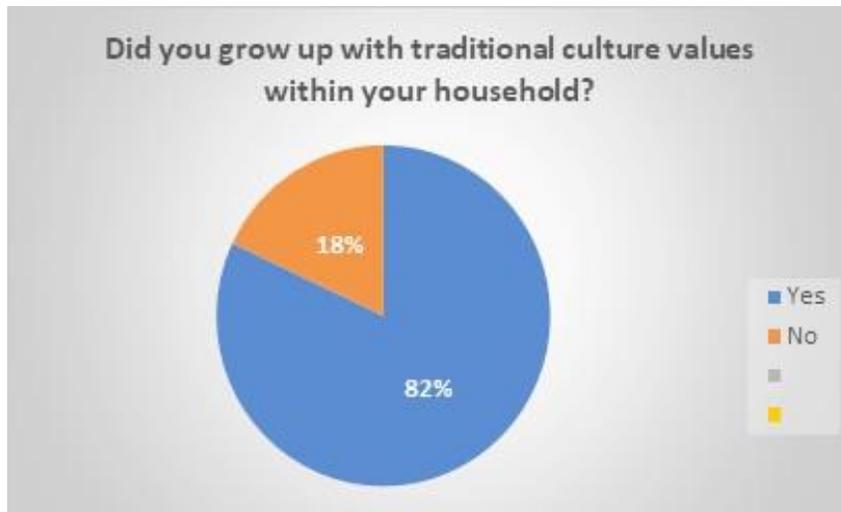


This might show a correlation with intergenerational conflict that has been found to be reported among Asian-American children within their households (as mentioned in Chapter Two), but may also be attributed to the younger age group social media typically attracts. Since intergenerational issues are prominent in the cultural negotiation and divide between our dueling identities along within our families, this might also be the reason why a majority of 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> generation participants decided to take the survey. In addition, in terms of gender, 56% of participants identified as female and 44% identified as male:

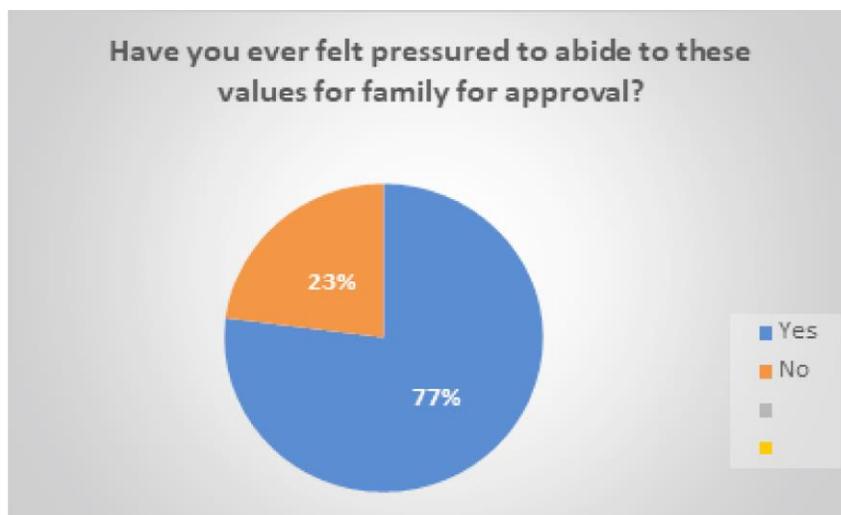


Although the proportion of males to females in the participant pool did not drastically differ, this difference may be due to the differences in expectations, pressure and standards that Asian

women experience compared to men. With more females choosing to be involved in the survey, this might imply that their own cognitive flexibility in the sense that they have also acknowledged the cultural divide and negotiation as Asian-America. Furthermore, when asked whether they grew up with what would be considered as traditional cultural values, 82% of participants answered “yes”:

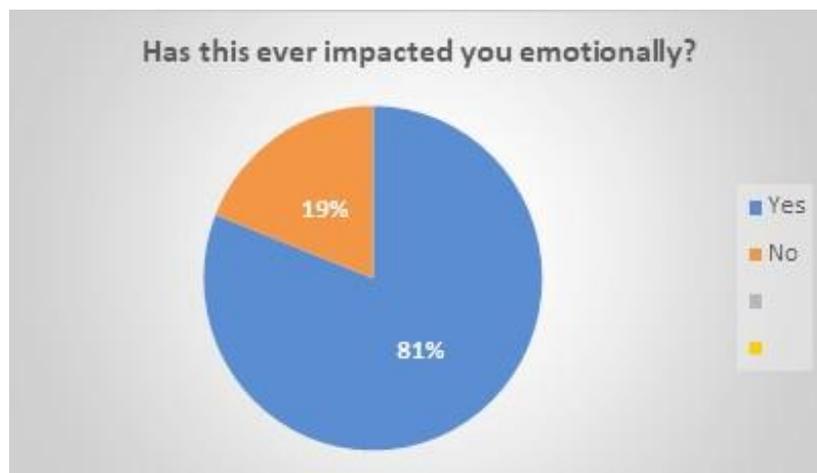


In addition, 77% of participants answered “yes” to having felt pressure to abide to cultural expectations and familial standards:

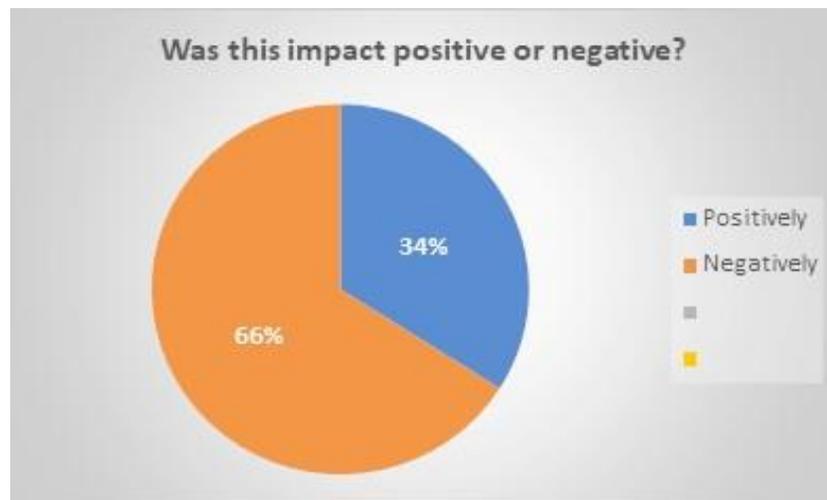


Although 77% is the majority of participants, the 23% of those that said they did not feel this pressure might reflect more cognitive flexibility being practiced today with families that are more open to American culture. Other factors such as location, ease of assimilation for Asian families and assimilation into American culture can also be an influence.

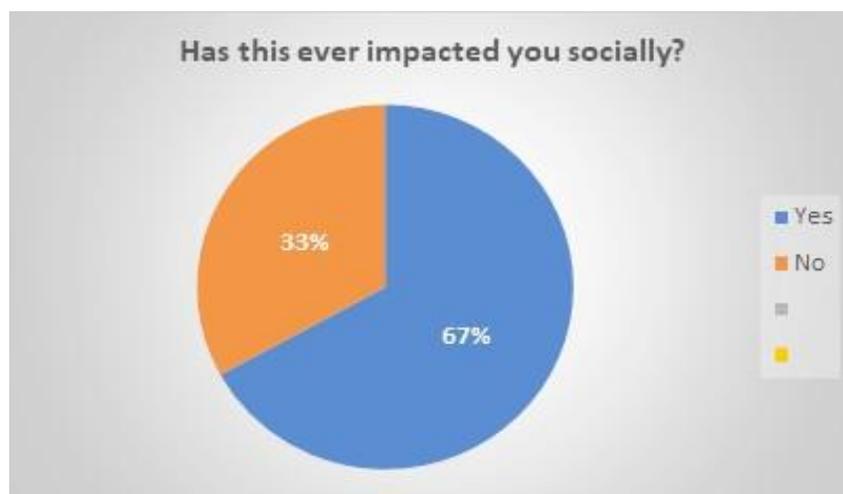
With questions regarding whether or not they were impacted emotionally by these pressures, 80% responded with “yes”:



Although my own experience reflects this data, I was surprised as to how many individuals decided to report this in the survey due to stigma about mental health within Asian culture. This might indicate a change in the overall outlook on how some Asian-Americans are now becoming more honest with their own feelings and how the negotiation between cultures has impacted them. It might also indicate an increase in expression of their American identities, as the environments I immerse myself in such as work and school often provide resources for mental health such as counseling. Responses regarding emotional impact from this were also not as negative for some others as suspected, though 66% still reported that this impacted them negatively:



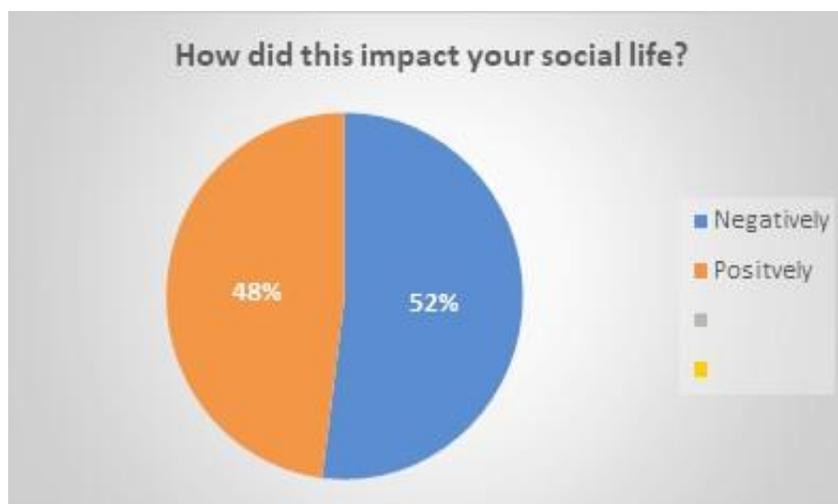
In terms of whether the pressure to follow traditional values had an influence on the participants' social lives, results showed that 67% answered with "yes":



When opening up the discussion about "social lives", this involves relationships with family and friends, connections in the workplace, school, and in other social settings. As well as an Asian-American who has abided by traditional cultural expectations, I have not experienced a profound social impact from the cultural and familial conflict in regard to my own relationships. In addition to the influence of culture and tradition on social lives, intra-cultural dating is a common expectation for many Asian-Americans, but recent studies show that within the Asian dating pool, the chance of a dating partner being White was 54%, which is even higher compared to a

35% chance of an individual of Asian descent having an Asian partner (Cohen 264). This leads to question whether cognitive flexibility is demonstrated among families in that they are shifting towards acceptance of American culture or if there is a change in the way Asian-Americans are handling these pressures from their families. Despite this, the percentage of interracial dating and marriages vary among each sub-group, as Filipino and Japanese individuals are more likely to marry a White counterpart. Japanese people are also shown to be more likely to date Black and Hispanic individuals out of the other Asian subgroups, showing that these cultural pressures and traditions might vary between each group (Le).

In terms of whether this impact was negative or positive, 52% of participants stated that it impacted their social lives negatively, with 48% answering that it was positive:



This fairly even split might further show Asian-Americans becoming more flexible and adaptable with their dueling identities. In addition to this, as a 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Asian-American, I noticed that those within my age group (from 18-24 years old) seemed to be more easily impacted by conflict possibly due to differences in generational thinking paired with cultural differences, while expressing some of the same feelings and opinions that I have concluded from my own story. From personal experience, I am more immersed in American culture compared to

my older Asian-American counterparts (such as in the idea of moving out and being independent after college, which was the decision that marked my “American” identity according to my family).

Furthermore, there were parallels in the ways in which the 50 participants valued food, with 93% reporting that food had played a role in their personal and family experiences:



This did not come to a surprise as growing up in an Asian household, food was at the intersection of family, cultural values, and identity that was further enforced by my own family. As a member of the Facebook group, I also observed that almost half of the posts made are about food and restaurant recommendations, recipes, and pictures (in fact, the rice, dumpling, and bubble tea/boba jokes on the page are endless and seem to get the most amount of engagement). When asked to rate how important food has been to them on a scale of 1-10, 86% scored this importance as 8 and above:



Results of the survey demonstrated that a majority of Asian-Americans in this group experienced personal difficulties and challenges due to dual cultural identities and family conflict. It also revealed how significant food truly is to them for their families along with themselves. Further, these findings move towards analyzing the possibilities of the role of food in shaping ourselves and our identity, while possibly using it as a tool to create reform and a bridge between the cultural conflict that has been reported.

### *Interview Results and Analysis*

For the interviews, I selected five individuals, three who are categorized as “industry professionals”, and two college students. Given that traditional cultural values and pressures associated with Asian culture often lie in career and education, I decided to choose the interviewees from these two groups to get more reflective results and data that showcased the cultural conflicts that have been presented. My decisions were based on ensuring that I chose a group of individuals who had varying educations, careers, backgrounds, and experiences. They were also all individuals that I had a personal connection with and spoke to this issue about before. In addition, we already had a relationship through school or work and partly formed our connection over our common backgrounds. Among these individuals, three out of the five are

above the age of 30 years old (categorized under “industry professionals”). This includes A Chinese-American male who is pastry instructor and chef at a vocational high school in New York City, and a Chinese-American woman who is an ESL teacher at the same school. The third industry professional is a Chinese-American woman who is freelance photographer and identifies as a Chinese-American while also being an immigrant from China. The last two participants are grouped under 2<sup>nd</sup> generation millennials, which include two college students with non-traditional majors. One student who identifies as a Chinese-American male majors in political science at New York University, and the second student (Indian-American) majors in pastry and food service management at Johnson & Wales University.

After interviewing each participant, it became clear that what defined “traditional cultural values” resonated with all backgrounds, regardless of culture and career. Each Asian-American expressed that traditional cultural values within their household translated to “respecting your elders”, as one participant stated in an interview, following the path that their parents chose for them, as well as holding themselves to high standards and expectations. Both teachers from the high school also emphasized that these were the values that were engrained in the Chinese culture. As both are a part of the public-school system in New York City, which differed from the traditional careers often associated with success within Asian cultures, the difference in values between Asian and American cultures became less obscure and clear to them as well. In addition, the high school is a vocational school that focuses on culinary arts, making it more non-conventional. I initially met the ESL teacher as a student during my sophomore year of high school, and later met the chef instructor at a school event as an alum. The 400-student school’s demographics consists of 49% of students being of Hispanic descent, 49% of African-American descent, and 2% of Asian descent. Due to this gap within the population at the school,

I was intrigued to learn more about the experiences and opinions of the only two Asian teachers there.

As an Asian-American within the culinary industry who has received backlash from family over choosing the food field as my career, I noticed the small number of Asians who were in kitchens. The chef instructor, when asked about traditional cultural values in his upbringing, expressed that he grew up similar to the “typical American family”, with less exposure to Chinese traditions. We both identified similarities when discussing the rigor that was placed on academic success, as we both went to school seven days per week (with Chinese school on Saturdays, and an extra course in a sport or other extra-curricular on Sundays, which was not different from other Asians I knew). The exception for him and what he described as a “typical American family” and upbringing was Chinese New Year, during which members from his father’s side of the family gathered to celebrate this important Chinese holiday. This is where cognitive flexibility is useful, as individuals such as the chef are able to peer through both cultural lenses.

When asked about traditional Asian values, he described them as “being the best person that you can be. That means getting good grades, being good in sports and music, getting a well-paying job and just being an upstanding citizen and member of society”. Despite his self-defined “typical American upbringing”, the values he described resonated with what I, along with many others from the first survey, view as traditional cultural values that were ingrained into our identity through our families. These values can also be seen as social mores within society, such as achieving success through high-paying jobs, excelling in school and extra-curricular activities, and generally, fulfilling our moral duties as members of our community.

Later in the interview, we traversed the topic of how the pressure that was placed on us to follow these values impacted us. Throughout his childhood, the chef stated that his parents had expectations for him. When he did not meet their standards, he said that, “it crushed my self-esteem and confidence. It took me a long time to discover myself and my self-worth.”. He continued by discussing his time in college, when he said that it was most likely his toughest time due to the uncertainty in direction that his career was going. The Chef went onto counseling, which is when he realized this: “I needed to chase after the things that interested me, and to not let other people’s expectations direct me in life.” In this sense, while looking through the lens of cognitive flexibility as a tool for change, having the ability to adapt and recognize one’s own feelings and thoughts when it comes to being immersed in two different elements at the same time can be the key to a potential solution.

The third participant, the male college student, also emphasized this. As childhood friends who have gone through major life events with one another, we have also gone through experiences together that helped us to define our narratives as Asian-Americans. We initially met in kindergarten, when both of our mothers became best friends. Since he came from a Chinese-Korean background, I saw how each culture shared mostly similar values, though his mother came from Taiwan when she was only two years old, whereas his father came to the United States for college from Korea. With his father holding more traditional Asian values, which could be due to both generational factors and his older age upon arriving to America, the interviewee’s relationship with him was surrounded by conflict due to career and school-related pressures and expectations. Now, as a political science major in his junior year at New York University, the conflict with his own father has calmed. This was when he opened up about

Asian parents having their best interest with the conflict they create. He reported that it was alleviated with his father as he continued to get older, stating,

“It was because I came out and told him what I think I wanted to do. And he helped me and he agreed to help me do it. . . And now he's starting to realize when people start to do what they want to do, they're happier. They get to succeed more. That's what I think a lot of Asian parents. It's difficult for them to understand”

A key concept in the ability to be cognitively flexible is to be adaptable and open to change when it comes to thoughts and beliefs while switching back and forth between two different concepts and thought processes. This individual's positively evolved relationship with his father might hint towards the possibility that cognitive flexibility can not only help us see through a clearer lens, but can also be applied to our families to understand and be more accepting of cultural compromise. The interviewee and I both agreed that it is the strict mold that our families create for us and the way they attempt to shape us into it is what imparts conflict. Thus, this change he experienced with his father shows that Asian families today might also be harnessing the ability to be flexible compared to generations ago. Moreover, we acknowledged that we respect and appreciate many of the values that were engrained into us as it builds character and integrity, echoing the chef's sentiments.

Similarly, the participant who identifies as a Chinese-American while being an immigrant from China stated that she faced challenges when it came to identity. I first met her through my Strategic Management course, when we first bonded over the fact that we both spoke Chinese. From there, we gradually shared our cultural experiences as Chinese-Americans, along with the issue we face of being ostracized as Asians in America, while not being “Asian” enough for those from other countries that fully align with traditional values. She recounted instances of

individuals telling her that she did not belong in this country because she was Chinese, while also not being able to identify with those Chinese individuals in China. As a single mother now to two children who works as a freelance photographer and accountant, she was initially raised mainly by her grandmother (who received part of her education in Europe). As she continued, I noticed a repeated pattern in regard to what each interviewee thus far defined as traditional Asian values as, and what these values taught us. Specifically, this individual expressed this in this statement; “One thing that I felt that what she brought me up with a lot of high moral standards”. This notion was always something I prioritized within my own belief system, but never correlated with my traditional cultural upbringing. Her relationship with her mother was also unstable, and the interviewee eventually dissented from her mother’s expectations of familial obligations at a young age. Furthermore, being born during the era of the Cultural Revolution in China, she detailed the difficult life and the challenges associated with it due to the political climate and state of the country during this time. Despite this, a major lesson she learned from her own grandmother was resilience, as she stated that “We’re the type of people that are bamboos that bend but we don't break. So, it's a matter of how you can always bounce back”.

After analyzing the origins of traditional cultural values in Asian culture back in Chapter 1, there appears to be fine line between whether this type of mentality is solely a cultural value for Asians, or is encapsulated as a belief and value within the immigrant experience due to the hardships they faced. Thus, they are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but intermingle with one another. Upon coming to America, she reported feeling as though she had instantly fit in while taking pride in her Asian-American identity, so coming to America actually helped her in finding herself as an Asian person. Growing up, she stated, she learned to not please her own mother since she never felt as though she had to, like the college student eventually felt and expressed to

his own father. Both of these cases demonstrate the ability to be cognitively flexible to an extent, where it has helped both individuals in either conflict resolution, or finding their own identity in America.

This interviewee also told a story of an individual she knew personally who was from Taiwan that dropped out of Stanford to become a Jazz musician. Doing so created a major rift between her and her family. Based on the data collected thus far, there are a number of Asians that are continuing to lean away from “pleasing” and abiding by familial and cultural expectations. This finding was extremely relevant to my own experience during my sophomore year of college when I decided to pursue what made me happy rather than trying to live up to an expectation with no real resolve but to please my own family. I originally met the ESL teacher, the fourth participant, when I was a student in one of her senior high school English classes that she was assisting in. During this time, I vividly remember how she continued to connect me with my own roots as a Chinese-American through introducing me to Asian-American literature (such as “My Year of Meats” by Ruth Ozeki, which also addresses the conflict of dueling identities in the Japanese-American culture). She grew up with immigrant parents; her father’s families were refugees of communist China who escaped to Hong Kong. This is where he met her mother, who was born and raised in Hong Kong. By her parents’ early 20’s, they immigrated to New York City (which is where they met), and moved to what she called the “very white suburbs of Philadelphia...” She defined her experience growing up as an Asian-American as:

“ knowing that your mother and father and every auntie and uncle was watching you and waiting to rat you out for a deathly lecture or a whack to the body if you stretched the rubber band that bound your family to these cultural and traditional values too hard.”

The individual further expressed that Asian culture and tradition translated into eating dinner together as a family, greeting your relatives properly, and “always following the path that your parents choose for you as a child and then making sure you pay your parents back when you’re an adult”. When she became a public-school teacher, her family’s attitudes towards this was mixed: in which she stated, “My father thinks I do volunteer work. My mother is less traditional, so she is fine with it. My great uncle thinks that me being an English teacher is the best way to sock it to the white man”. The interviewee also stressed the idea of money as a necessity, and that her parents came “here for a reason”. This sentiment reiterates the idea that traditional Asian values may overlap with and stem from the overall immigrant experience as well (hard work and financial success in America is paramount due to the scarcities they faced within their home countries and the belief that America is the “land of opportunity”). Like the other individuals, pressure from her family came to a halt in one way or another. For her, it was when she showed them that she could support herself and be independent. Compared to the previous interviews, this might indicate that her own parents were harnessing the ability to be cognitively flexible, though she also said that now her younger brother is facing most of the pressure.

Identity formation seemed to play another major role in this, as she said “Once I got past my mid 20s, the negotiations stopped. You realize, no one cares who you are as long as you are happy with whoever you are”. This establishes a connection between age in identity theory, and how one might handle this difficult negotiation between two different sides of oneself (in this case, it was the Asian versus American identity). My own experience with her and the lessons and literature she exposed me to in high school that made me want to celebrate my own roots is juxtaposed to her own dissent from traditional Chinese values, which strengthens the

idea that the ability to be cognitively flexible might be more common among Asian-Americans today.

The Indian-American echoed what other individuals in this study also expressed in regard to cultural values and the conflict. While primarily meeting through lab classes within Johnson & Wales University, our friendship initially started over our love of pastry, and the familiarity we felt when talking about the conflict we faced with our families due to the careers we decided to pursue within the food industry. She views traditional values the same way as the four other participants, which consists of family obligation and loyalty, respect for elders, and achieving great heights in ideal careers and education. Her mother and father are immigrants from India, but her mother deviates from traditional cultural expectations and standards in that she divorced her husband (and neither the participant nor her mother are in contact with her father today). This ultimately caused a major rift between her mother, herself, and her sister on one side, and her family in India on the other side. The act of “divorcing” is strictly looked down upon in Asian cultures, which even more so stressed and emphasized in Indian families. Despite this veering away from tradition, her mother still upheld traditional cultural expectations of the interviewee with the surprising exception that she was supportive of her decision to enter the culinary industry, which showed cognitive flexibility. When asked about familial pressure, the research subject stated that the expectations based around respect often turn into control and found this especially difficult to deal with upon entering college when she felt that her life did not feel as though it was her own anymore. Her mother has played a significant role in her life (highlighting her respect for the traditional value of filial piety), and the participant expressed empathy and regret to an extent for not having listened to her despite knowing that what her mother wanted for her was not truly what she wanted. She accompanied this by saying “at some

point or the other that kind of shifted in my brain. I guess that's where the American and the Indian overlap. I want to know, and I want to do right by my mother but at the same time I realized that this is my life and my choices.” Lastly, this individual said that she actually pursued her career within the industry *because* of her mother, as she watched her cook while growing up and needed to take over for her in the kitchen by default. With this overlap of both of her cultures that both she and other Asian-Americans such as myself have experienced, is the divergence between both cultures that profound? In contrast, can this provide a new outlook on this cultural and familial conflict that were experienced by all five participants, along with other Asian-Americans that partook in the survey?

Poor self-esteem, lack of confidence, and internal conflict were reported from some of the participants due to cultural pressures and expectations. This representation of dueling identities solidifies the internal and external conflict of not knowing where one belongs, leading to seeking ways in which we can find our place in society. Although the fundamentals behind traditional Asian cultures and the impact they experienced revealed similarities among the participants, the role of food in each interviewee’s lives were also varied. Regardless of career, all the participants began to express the importance of food during the interview when talking about conflict resolution whether it was resolving conflict with their families, or within themselves. Each individual expressed the critical role that food played in their lives as it connected them to their culture, while helping them use it to convey how they felt about being Asian-American in the United States. Food was found to be deeply ingrained within family, cultural values, and identity. Referring back to duality of Spam as part of a cultural identity as well as a commodity within Asian cuisine, food itself resonated in the same sense for the chef who was interviewed. He stated that “Everything about working in the kitchen just

encapsulated ‘class’ ”, thereby confirming (this may be too strong of a word) that food makes an imprint not only what and how we eat, but on our own outlook on status that can go as far as indicating social and economic aspects of different groups.

In terms of the younger generation, both college students stated that they initially developed their relationship with food through their families. The political science major detailed the story of his grandfather initially being a chef, and some of his earliest memories are of gathering around the food at his grandparent’s house eating/enjoying/partaking in the meals his grandfather had prepared. Moreover, the Indian-American interviewee also discussed food and her connection to it through her family back in India, along with memories of her grandmother cooking. As a part of traditional familial expectations, gender roles in food were stressed when I interviewed the ESL teacher, as she initially connected food through a different angle by talking about the traditional gender roles and expectations, such as women being expected to stay at home to cook, and men being the breadwinners. In addition, the Chinese immigrant immediately expressed her pride in both her Chinese and American identity through cooking fusion food, as she said that her repertoire consists of Asian flavors with twists from all different cultures.

Cultural divide and internal conflict in self-identity were expressed by several of the participants in regard to Asian and American cuisine. While discussing about the possibility of food being able to balance the scales between both cultures, the ESL teacher detailed her experience of bringing noodles and tofu to lunch as a child. With this, she also carried a ham and cheese sandwich with her in hopes of stopping other classmates from criticizing her Chinese lunch in order to defend her identity that was closely linked to what could be found inside her lunchbox. Nonetheless, they went as far as labeling her ham and cheese sandwich as a “Chinese

ham and cheese sandwich”, demonstrating that she was not able to become an accepted member of either cultural group, which was emphasized through food.

Despite this variance among identities that food can allude to, it has also proved in being a strong unifier and medium for communicating incongruities and differences. Of the five participants, three of the individuals reported either changes in family conflict due to finding cooking as a unifier or mentioned the concept of “fusion food” and how they incorporate it into their own lives. The participant that is a Chinese immigrant but identifies as Chinese-American embraces fusion food through her own cooking for her children, while the Indian-American individual does this through combining flavors from both Indian and American culture (in which she used to make Indian-American pastries for her grandparents in India by combining spices such as cardamom in traditionally American desserts). The aspect of gender was also mentioned as having important relatedness when it came to cooking within the family, as all of the women opened up the discussion about the domestic expectations of females within Asian culture (stating that food shaped their familial expectations within their households). Compared to men, these expectations due to gender might make it more difficult and complex when it comes to pressure to abide to traditional values. Although this might also make them more cognitively flexible compared to men because of their ability to switch and adapt to both cultures is circumstantial under the cultural pressures they face as women. Due to their existing closeness with family compared to men in most Asian cultures across the board, these gender role expectations may factor in to their ability to be more adaptable. For instance, the college student who majors in pastry arts needed to take her mother’s place as the cook within the family, in which she said she was also expected to cook and needed by her family back in India. Growing up with a single mother, I was aware of this double standard of gender expectations

within Asian cultures, with memories of my grandmother constantly cooking in the kitchen, but never had this concern myself. Regardless of how unifying food can be in bringing individuals together through cooking, as conversation pieces at the table, or through using it as a form of communication, it also defines differences in how others are treated based on other factors of identity such as gender. Thus, it is critical to acknowledge that the narrative for Asian-American women is also influenced through the power of the divide that food can create within our culture.

Growing up, the way I learned how to initially use food as a navigation system for finding myself was by way of what my mother and grandmother cooked. The experiences of these five participants demonstrated that using food as a tool for change and expansion beyond tradition was present. The participant within the industry professionals category who identifies as a Chinese-American is also a single mother with two children; she highlighted the role of food plays by describing cooking with her children. This participant connects to her own children in the same way, describing food as “thoughtful. It is in some ways that it fits into everything of how I was always taught, when I prepare food for my children”. She also expressed that her style of cooking is “how you mark identity”, going on to describe her cooking as not necessarily Chinese, but a mix that will always be “somewhat Asian”. Fusion restaurants like “Big King” in Rhode Island were also brought up, as the interviewee said, “The food is tasty, but it's not traditionally Japanese. But that's what makes it good.”. As an Asian-American parent who incorporates both cultures together, she also indicated that this does not mean that she does not appreciate her home country of China in which she came from.

The NYU student mentioned that the activity of cooking was actually a way of bringing him and his father together, which further alleviated cultural tensions and conflict. He stated that

cooking “shows a lot of who you are, and like your personality and the way that you think and the way that you like to do things”. Cooking and food as a form of communication was also mentioned in this individual’s experience, saying that it helped his father in understanding where they both came from despite their differences.

The concept of combining different cuisines and flavor profiles was partly what jumpstarted my own passion and career within the culinary industry, which mirrored the experiences of the Indian-American participant. While conversing about our fervor for the craft in pastry arts, she recalled the times she would travel back to India to visit her family. Describing her baking as “a very equal blend between my cultures”, she will include Indian spices and other familiar ingredients and flavors that her relatives would be comfortable with when trying a new food. This sense of familiarity also creates more room for acceptance of the other culture (which, in this case is American) She continued with this statement that opens up an entirely new discussion on the power of food in resolving conflict:

“If I can prove to them and if I show them that this is something wonderful and that brings people together, and it is something that brings me and other people joy, they are my family and they do love me, so maybe they would think this is okay.”

Based on the data collected, it seems as though conflict stemming from traditional cultural values and familial expectations were included in the narratives of most of the participants. All five individuals that were interviewed all practiced cognitive flexibility to an extent, whether circumstantial, through themselves and understanding conflict with their families, or through their own family members in order to come to a resolution with them. All individuals also seem to uphold the beliefs in the cultural values and traditions they associate with their own families and upbringings, while being able to find compromise within themselves

and their dueling identities. From seeking emotional support through counseling, proving to one's family that they can be financially independent, bridging the gap through cooking, coming to America, or simply realizing what s/he truly wanted, each individual expressed that they had the ability to separate their desires and goals from those of their families while holding and appreciating traditional cultural beliefs. This is where being cognitively flexible can act as a catalyst for change, understanding, acceptance, and ultimately, compromise when applied to the content of cultural and identity negotiations. It appears to be a pattern among the interviewees and how they dealt with cultural and familial conflict. Some of the individuals also seemed to be more cognitively flexible than others, which may be due to differences in family background, the age that their parents came to America, choices of career and educational experiences. Out of the five participants, no one seemed to completely lack cognitive flexibility but rather seemed to demonstrate it to a degree to cope and adapt to their own circumstances with their families and/or with themselves and their dueling identities. Compared to before, I think that for both the participants, as well for myself, practicing cognitive flexibility is situational, and is a way for us to handle family conflict.

Through each of these findings, a link between family conflict due to being both Asian and American among the participants that were surveyed and interviewed was established. Differing viewpoints in the role of food in identity also arose, leading to insights on how food can be used as a possible solution to bridge the imbalance and conflicts we have faced. Thus, this leads to the question of whether the values itself the cause of conflict are, or the way in which they are applied and engrained onto us as Asian-American children are the cause instead. After analyzing both sets of data that closely parallel to one another, it is clear that the cause of conflict is due to the latter. These responses might indicate that there have been shifts in the way

that some Asian families view traditional values, while shining a light on the possibility for change.

The survey also reflected this when almost half of the participants answered that the traditional values and pressures impacted them negatively, while the other half reporting that the influence was positive. This possible difference might also be attributed to the generational status of some families, as my own mother immigrated to America at a younger age, making it easier for her to adapt to some American values (though a compromise between both cultures remains at a standstill). Yet, I have been able to be cognitively flexible within myself to accept and embrace both of my identities despite family disapproval, which has also helped me in communicating cultural differences with them. Based on these findings, cognitive flexibility might be practiced by many under their own circumstances in family conflict as well in order to learn how to cope, handle, and ultimately pursue the path that fulfills them the most.

Food has a way of fusing different cultures together in one, harmonious dish while maintaining the integrity and values behind each. Results from the data have only strengthened my outlook on food as a solution. With an overwhelming majority of the survey participants conveying the importance of food within their lives, families, and identities, the way food has helped the five interviewees resolve conflict in their own lives reveals the potential for using food as a platform to show our own families that middle ground and mutual respect exists. The solution may lie in a salient part of our identity as humans that holds relatedness through all people from varying backgrounds and walks of life. This idea and its interconnectedness with the identity and our experience, leads to the potential use of food as a gateway in bridging the gap between our families and identities in order to make room for changes in traditional thinking. Meanwhile, it can lead to a reshaping of the mold these individuals and I have long been

pressured to fit into, redefining what it truly means to be Asian in America based on our own narratives that are independent of tradition. The application of food as a possible solution to help bridge the gap can begin as easily as starting discussions and conversations about the conflicts caused by our dueling identities, as well as placing a focus on the important role food plays in our lives. More specifically, food and its power to unite and bring others together should be a topic of discussion with our families. Cooking together with our families more, as well as exposing them to the idea of fusion food by bringing ingredients, flavor profiles, and techniques from other cultures into their own cuisines, can also be done to show that harmony *can* be created with the fusing of different backgrounds. In addition, we can educate our families on how food can not only help us as Asian-Americans in finding our own place in society despite our dueling cultures where we can find a compromise that leads to happiness, but can also show them that they can also use it as a tool to find their own place as immigrants in America while living in happiness and harmony with us.

## Conclusion

Topics revolving around Asian-Americans and our dueling cultural identities have been widely discussed in a vast amount of academic research within the field of sociology and psychology. Traditional Asian cultural values have been traced back through history, becoming a social construct in Asian backgrounds across the board. These ideals also coincide with the immigrant narrative and values it has created, including hard work, filial piety, and sacrifice, which have been continuously passed onto their children. The “tiger parent” trope in modern day society acts as a way to emphasize the pressures on Asian-American children into fitting the mold of the ideal Asian, resulting in conflict. Ultimately, this comes into conflict with the “American” identity that children born in America often develop. Thus, this leads one to question how to negotiate between their dueling cultural identities with their families to find a compromise. The expectations and standards associated with the pressures have also caused cultural and intergenerational upheaval among families, leading to psychological impacts among Asian-Americans as presented in several studies. Moreover, the importance of identity formation and its role in this negotiation between families is paramount, and recognizing and applying cognitive flexibility to one’s own experiences and situations seems to be critical in how it can become a tool for change. Cognitive flexibility that consists of the ability of an individual to switch back and forth and adapt between two elements and environments may also be able to help us understand this and is evidently already being practiced among some Asian-Americans, as seen through the experiences of the interviewees, along with myself.

Despite these challenges, what has remained a constant commonality through life that brings individuals together is food, and the universal language it speaks to all humans that transcends our differences. This ultimately plays a role in how food not only shapes our society

and cultures, but our identities and its multiplicities, including gender, background, ethnicity, its role in shaping relationships, and more. The origin of food and its intersectional nature with all different cultures has left me to wonder whether different cultures share more similarities than it initially appears. Glocalization of Spam was a prime example of this, in which Filipinos made Spam, which is historically American, their own cultural commodity. They were cognitively flexible as they were put under one circumstance that ultimately united them. Could it be possible that when applying this shared experience and circumstance to the negotiation of cultural identities for Asian-Americans, that we could use this to foster cognitive flexibility in the same way in order to create coexistence between both of our cultures? Food was also used both as a form of self-expression and resistance within Punk culture, paralleling to the experiences of the interviewees. The current food literature also shows a connection to how the importance of food in all cultures can help in bridging the gap between different groups, and according to 2<sup>nd</sup> generation American Jessica Zhang, it has helped her in finding her own place in society once she encountered fusion food.

The social media survey and interviews demonstrated the importance of food on Asian-Americans' experiences with their challenges concerning dueling cultural identities. While a majority of the participants from both pools agreed with what consisted of traditional cultural values, expectations, and pressures, the experiences of the interviewees demonstrated the use of cognitive flexibility to reach middle ground within themselves, and with their families. This reflected my own experiences, making me realize that I myself have utilized cognitive flexibility to try and reach middle ground with my own mother. In my own experience, who despite not having come to a compromise as of yet, my Mom did demonstrate cognitive flexibility to an extent through fusion food, as well as cooking the cuisine of other cultures while incorporating

what she has learned with her traditional Chinese food, which is similar to some of the families of the other participants. After interviewing all the participants, they ultimately taught me more ways to practice cognitive flexibility in order to cope, understand, and utilize it as an opportunity to promote change within my own family. The ability to be cognitively flexible appears to be dependent on how assimilated their parents were as immigrants in America, as well as on generational factors, but it was clear that food was at the center of what helped either them, their families, or both to become flexible in their thought processes. From cooking with one another, to fusion food that helped one individual keep in touch with their Asian roots while expressing their pride in their American identity, to combining ingredients in our own cooking from both cultures, food has represented itself as a possibility for reform in this current cultural conflict.

For further discussions and research, the possibility of promoting change and increasing cognitive flexibility and acceptance through food among immigrant families can be done through pushing for more activities such as cooking that brings people together. Through cooking, families can be exposed to fusion food by incorporating other ingredients they might not be familiar with. If they end up enjoying that food that they made with their Asian-American children, this can result in even more power and change to show them that different cultures can coalesce with one another in harmony. Simply starting discussions with our families and educating others in our external environment can increase awareness of both the issue of dueling identities and the potential change that can be created through food. Ultimately, food's role in identity and the importance it holds in our lives, as well as its potential to be a tool for tangible change, can lead to a peaceful coexistence of our cultures along with conflict resolution between our families, and for future generations.

## Appendix A

### *Survey questions and Social Media Post*

#### *Social Media Post:*

“Hi everyone! As an Asian-American, I've been struggling with what seems like dueling identities for my entire life. I'm always told that I'm not Chinese enough at home, while being chastised and ostracized for not fitting into the mold of the ideal American (i.e. appearance). This has placed a great amount of strain on both myself and family, causing a lot of conflict (especially on my mental health). I was wondering if you guys can resonate with this?

I'm currently working on an honor's thesis that researches whether food and its role in all facets of our lives (and as Asians, we can all share an affinity for food) can help in bridging this cultural gap. With this, I've attached a survey below (for thesis/research purposes) to see what your experience is with this. Any feedback would be greatly appreciated! Most of all, it would help me in my goal (of the thesis) to provide a platform for the Asian-American collective to bring more awareness to an issue that seems all too common, but has room for growth and change.

<https://forms.gle/v5bpqkGrbtYf2cp7>

As a college senior who is pursuing a non-traditional career in pastry arts and has decided to move out in a few years (several years after graduating), the major upheaval from family has saturated all parts of my life. I have also seen others I know who have gone through similar experiences go through a downward spiral, and the challenges they faced were not uncommon.

Thank you in advance for your participation, and please feel free to reach out with any questions!”

*The post with the survey attached was then sent into review to be submitted into the private Facebook Group “Subtle Asian Traits”*

*11 questions were sent out and posted on the Facebook group “Subtle Asian Traits” through a*

*Google Surveys Forum to survey the social media population.*

1. What gender do you identify with?

- Female
- Male
- Genderqueer/Non-binary
- \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank)

2. Please specify your ethnicity below:

- \_\_\_\_\_ (Fill in the blank)

3. What is your age range?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old

4. Did you grow up with traditional culture values within your household (i.e. filial piety, certain expectations for education and career, etc . . .)?

- Yes
- No

5. Have you ever felt pressured to abide to expectations and standards from family for approval?

- Yes
- No

6. Has this ever impacted you emotionally?

- Yes
- No

7. Was this impact positive or negative?

- Positive
- Negative

8. Has this ever impacted you socially (i.e. with your family/friend relationships, in the workplace, school etc . . .)

- Yes
- No

9. Was this impact negative or positive?

- Positive
- Negative

10. Does food play a role in your family and personal experiences?

- Yes
- No

11. How important has food been to you on a scale of 1-10?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9

- 10

### ***Interview Questions***

*The following questions were the questions for the five individuals that participated. Although, due to the global health crisis, the Chef and ESL teacher provided written answers to the questions below, with all other interviews being conducted over the phone.*

#### *Cultural Values, Family, and Background*

1. Growing up as an Asian-American, can you describe what it was like growing up regarding culture and tradition?
2. What do you see as traditional Asian-American Values? Do you see that they align with yours? If not, why do you think that is?
3. Do you ever feel pressure to follow these beliefs?

#### *Dueling Cultural Identities*

4. How has being both Asian and American influenced the way you identify yourself? Have you run into conflict because of this difficult negotiation between two cultures within yourself and/or with others?
5. Have you ever felt a push and pull between what you want for yourself, and what your family wanted for you? How did you manage this? What were the challenges that you faced?

#### *Food in Identity*

6. Growing up, can you describe how food was viewed in your household? What was that like for you?
7. Do you think food has helped you and/or other Asian-Americans balance your dual cultural identities?
8. What is the connection between the challenges we have discussed that Asian-Americans face due to cultural differences and the role food has had in our lives based on your own experience?
9. What is your outlook on this common conflict faced by Asian-Americans today, and the possibility that the food we eat can aid in bridging the cultural and generational gap between us and our families?

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