

EDUCATION, EXPECTATIONS, WORK

Cultural Anchors

Laura Jung

Laura Jung, a Korean American, was born and raised in California and is the sister of Daniel Jung.

The strongest part of my culture is what my parents taught me—that a person should be honest, be proud of who you are, and strive for success. Make my dreams come true, find the job I want, make money, support myself, and have a family. I think that's what's expected. I'm proud of people like my parents who work hard and don't care about the superficial things.

I speak fluent Korean, and I have a good relationship with my mom, and I think our relationship got better when I went to college. But my relationship with my dad has been the same since I was a child. I don't really know him. I think it has a lot to do with culture and how he was raised and how Korean men are supposed to be. They're supposed to be unemotional and stoic and they aren't supposed to communicate their thoughts and feelings, and my dad never communicated with me. It was either do this or do that. So basically that was it; there was never any communication where he asked me my opinions or anything like that. We never have conversations. I guess my expectations are a little different because I was raised in the American culture. I see my friends and they have really good relationships with their fathers and they do things with their fathers, so it is different.

I definitely think my mom is my hero. She works so hard. I feel

like nothing ever gets her down. She doesn't really speak the language yet, she's successful at her business. They own a business together. It's a market. Market/liquor store. I just feel like she's really optimistic all the time, but she does house chores and runs the business. I feel that she cares about other people and is willing to listen to them; that's why she's my hero.

Education and Expectations: My parents view education as very important. I think because my parents never had that opportunity they pushed us to achieve as much as we can. They have this idea that without education we won't be able to succeed and do what we want here. Sometimes I feel I have a responsibility to them because they've done all of this for me to get here, so I can't really let them down, so there is some sort of pressure.

I'm at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in the risk and prevention program. Eventually I want to go into counseling psychology. I want to work with Asian American and immigrant adolescents, because I think there's such a stigma against mental health assistance and I think Asian adolescents do need it. They encounter so much stuff academically and just the pressure to succeed—they have all these stresses. I was reading up on Asian American immigrant mental health statistics and the suicide rate is ranked number five or something for suicide rates and I was really astonished by that because you don't see a lot of Asians complaining that "I'm so stressed I can't handle it." I think a lot of people internalize a lot of these things. Another problem is fitting in. Especially for the immigrants, assimilation and acculturation are very hard.

Being of the second generation, there is sometimes the stress—hardship—of immigrant parents. It stems from kids who have to take over that parental role like helping their parents with English, paying the bills. I think we have that duty toward our parents because they gave up so much to come here for us. So we can't leave them. I'm going to live my own life. You say that, but it's not really like that. I feel they sort of have that pull on me. The unsaid expectations

are to help them out financially, and to take care of them. I think finance has a lot to do with it. Asians look at that a lot because it's also how they measure success—by how much you make in the year.

Being the oldest, I think that also plays another role in Asian families; there's a lot more responsibility placed on the oldest child. Growing up, my parents put a lot more pressure on me academically than my brother. I got straight A's. Up until mid-high school and after that it became difficult. I was more upset with myself because I thought I was letting them down. They said, "It's okay, you still have good grades," but I felt that pressure. It was almost a silent pressure. I knew they had wanted that for me but I couldn't do it, so it was kind of a letdown for me.

I think I put that pressure to succeed on myself now. In high school it was, I need to get good grades so I can get into college. If I don't get into college then I'm going to be a failure and I'm not going to get a job. Now I think if I don't get good grades I'm not going to get into a good Ph.D. program. It just continues. It's like the grades sort of measure what my success will be in my future. In general I think Asians feel the need to succeed.

I was in journalism in high school and I really liked writing, working for the newspaper. I wanted to be an anchorwoman on television, do reporting and be on the scene. It just sounded really exciting, traveling to a lot of different places and reporting from there. I went to NYU as a communications major, figured I would get hooked up with an internship and start my way up.

In college I changed my mind. I interned at a PR firm that dealt with a lot of people in the entertainment industry and I just didn't want to be in that kind of environment where everyone was there and selfish for their own reasons. I wanted to be in a place where people cared about other people and were willing to help others. I wanted to get more involved with community service and volunteerism and that's how I ended up with my current major.

Speaking Up: Outside of the Korean culture, I think there are stereotypes too—like being an Asian woman—that we're supposed to be passive and submissive and very quiet. Sometimes I fit that role but sometimes I don't. Because I'm an Asian woman, people think I'm that way all the time, but I have a lot of personality and characteristics that are part of me. In films they're portrayed as this fiery, exotic, sexy woman or this demure, quiet type. But that's not how all Asian women are. And I feel pressure to break that idea that people have even though I don't know why I do.

Sometimes I think it's hard for me to talk about it because I was kind of taught that we don't speak up. That's what my father ingrained into me. We're taught to not really have a voice. I'm just supposed to follow what he says; I'm not supposed to have an opinion. I think it's something I've struggled with, especially in class, because there's a lot of participation and discussion.

I think that's why it's hard for someone who's growing up in this culture. We were taught not to speak up at home because our parents were always right. So when you go to school it's the total opposite; you're confused, you don't know what to do. It's two separate values being thrown at you, so I think children get confused.

I don't know if I ever got over that; it's still in the back of my mind and it's something I still struggle with because it's part of my identity. Even now I have a lot of difficulty participating in class. It's definitely hard. I have opinions, not that they're not worthy to be shared. I think it's the way I'm trained. I actually had this conversation with a student who was a minority—she wasn't Asian, she was Hispanic—and she said, "Like in my culture, I'm taught not to speak up. My parents are right and my dad is a chauvinistic guy." And I was like, Maybe that's the way we are. Yeah, because she has opinions but has a lot of trouble participating in class too.

Dating: If I dated a Caucasian guy that would be okay. But if I brought home a black guy or a Hispanic guy, my parents would kill me. I think a Korean guy would be the ideal because my par-

ents would want to communicate with him and there wouldn't be the language barrier, but I think other Asians are fine too. I think they just want me to get married. In terms of whom I'm attracted to, I'm definitely attracted to Caucasians and Asians.

Growing Up: We didn't really grow up in the city; we were sort of outside Los Angeles in the suburbs in the San Fernando Valley. My parents moved to L.A. as we had family there. I guess in our neighborhood there weren't many Asians around. It was a pretty white neighborhood. I think my brother and I grew up with a lot of diversity. There were a lot of Hispanics next door so we got to learn about other people and experience other cultures.

I think when I got into middle school is when I started thinking about the whole Asian thing, wondering about my culture and things like that. In elementary school I never questioned that I was different than my peers; they were just my friends.

Along with the whole adolescent awkward stage there was also the fact that I didn't really fit in with the Asians. So I kind of hung out with the mixed group. I guess I had my biases against them. They seemed superficial—what kind of car does your mom drive, and the latest Calvin Klein shirt—and I wasn't really into that. I just didn't really feel comfortable around them.

I started noticing that the Koreans hung out with each other, the Chinese hung out with each other, the Vietnamese hung out with each other. It was like there was even segregation among the Asians; it wasn't like a bunch of Asians hanging out. I think even among Asian groups there are biases among other Asians and stereotypes as well and I think those come into play.

I consider myself Korean American. I guess I think that to generalize as an Asian American is sort of wrong, but to specify and say Chinese American or Korean American, that's perfectly fine. I had a lot of trouble making friends in Korean school. I was always the girl in the corner reading my book. Everybody else had friends because I think they also went to church and I think for Koreans that's where all their social activities take place on Sunday—they

have church and church groups and meetings, and my family never got involved, so I didn't know them in that way.

On Being Asian: Is it an advantage or disadvantage? It depends. I think Asians are coming up in my field, but there aren't many Asian Americans or Asians in general in psychology and there aren't many researchers that are Asian doing Asian research. So I think I have an advantage that way.

I guess in education people see the Asians at the top, so it doesn't really apply there but I guess it does in the corporate world.

I think if I went into the corporate world it might be a disadvantage, because my parents talked about it. When I was younger my parents used this example of my aunt when she went to a hospital to become a nurse. She was up against this Caucasian woman and the Caucasian woman got the job. They're always talking about how it's harder for us because we're a minority so we have to work extra hard. I think because they said it when I was younger it was sort of engraved in my head. I don't know if I necessarily feel it when I'm in job interviews, but it does come up sometimes.

I don't really think I've had a negative experience as a Korean. I guess that it was in high school that people realized I didn't really hang out with Asians and that was when I actually encountered racism from Koreans themselves; they called me Twinkie and things like that because I didn't hang out with them.

About cultural expectations: among Koreans, if you don't love everything about our culture you're not Korean. I'll give you an example. I was talking to a lady who was very involved with the Korean culture group, and they watch Korean videos and listen to Korean music and know everything about Korean pop culture. I said, "I don't listen to Korean music but I watch dramas every once in a while," and she was like, "Wow, you're so not Korean." I speak the language, I eat the food, I am part of that culture, but I'm not necessarily into everything, and she assumes that is being not Korean.

North Korea: I feel bad for the North Koreans. I sort of see it

as a different culture; they're not really part of my culture so I don't really see it as affecting me. It's scary to think about what they're doing, but I don't really relate it back to me. When people ask, "Oh, are your parents from North Korea," it angers me. I don't know why, we're all from Korea. But there's that North Korea, South Korea divide. No Caucasians. And people come in asking, Oh, did you hear about what happened in North Korea? Are you from North Korea? And I'm like, Wow, you should really educate yourself. North Koreans can't get out of their country and come to America. I don't know why there's that anger when people ask if I'm from North Korea. They're sort of seeing us as the enemy, like we're somehow involved.

I don't worry that what happened to the Japanese during World War II might happen to Koreans. I feel like America has progressed, hopefully. And they wouldn't characterize all Koreans to be enemies like they did during that time with the Japanese, and put them into camps.

If I see an Asian in a film, and they're portrayed realistically, I'm like "Wow, that's cool they're including an Asian," but if they're portrayed in a stereotypical way, it angers me. Even in regular TV shows you see it; they portray Asians as the model minority—they're always doing well in school, especially in math and science, the nerd, or it's the other extreme.