

Chinese New Year

By Michelle Wilson

Chinese New Year is a special time of year at my house. It's one of my favorite holidays. I decorate with the current year's animal and invite my kids over. Then we share a bowl of homemade Tuk Mandu Guk which is a soup with dumplings and rice cakes. Since my daughter is a vegetarian, we've adapted the recipe to have vegetable dumplings now, but the soup is still filled with rice cake discs shaped like coins for prosperity. I decorate a table with a giant bag of rice and surround it with fresh fruits. While it's not a Korean tradition, I try to get a pomegranate as well. It, like the rice, is a symbol of abundance for the year ahead. Finally, I try to find some honey filled Korean crescent moon shaped rice cakes from the local Asian store, but they are hard to find fresh unless I travel to a city. From what I understand, the Chinese like the full moon shaped treats, while Koreans like the crescent moon because there is still room for growth.

I love this holiday but am a little uncomfortable writing about it because I'm not Asian. I grew up in Korea as a white person with white American missionary parents. I'm third culture which simply means I spent a significant part of my developmental years growing up in another culture. So, multiple cultures created the person I am today, but none of them fully belong to me. Another way to describe it is, my identity, behavior, and the way I relate to society was created by a blend of cultures and I don't really fit anywhere. I don't have a place I call home.

Growing up, I had people ask me if I was half Korean. With my white skin and features, I don't look Asian in any way. However, my mannerisms had developed in a way that caused people to ask the question. At this point I'm 48 years old and I've adapted to US culture. Those who know me well understand that like a foreign exchange student, I still have a lot of gaps in cultural knowledge. But for the most part, I blend in.

I still enjoy lunar holidays like Chinese New Year but in many cases, I've blended the holidays I grew up with, with other celebrations. CheSeuk celebrates the brightest moon in the fall and the harvest in Korea. I follow the moon cycles and always watch for the moon with all the halos and sit out and enjoy it. Around that time, I also cook or attend a harvest meal with friends and family around the Autumnal Equinox. While I celebrate these holidays, I still feel uncomfortable writing about them when the holiday is specifically Asian.

In our current era of awareness of cultural appropriation, it is good that we are more aware of these issues. However, there is a fine line when you grow up third culture, between cultural appropriation and celebrating your own traditions. As a person who does not celebrate many US holidays because they don't feel authentic, if I was unable to celebrate Korean holidays, then what would I celebrate? Does my whiteness define my options? In my view, as the globalization of the workforce continues and more children grow up in communities outside of their parent's culture, the definition of diversity should include these outliers.

As we attend workshops and trainings on DEI, it's important not to pigeonhole people in one category or another. When we consider intersectionality, we are all unique individuals contributing to a diverse society. These are some important thoughts to consider in our effort to be affirming and respectful to diverse families and communities, while also allowing people to be true to themselves.