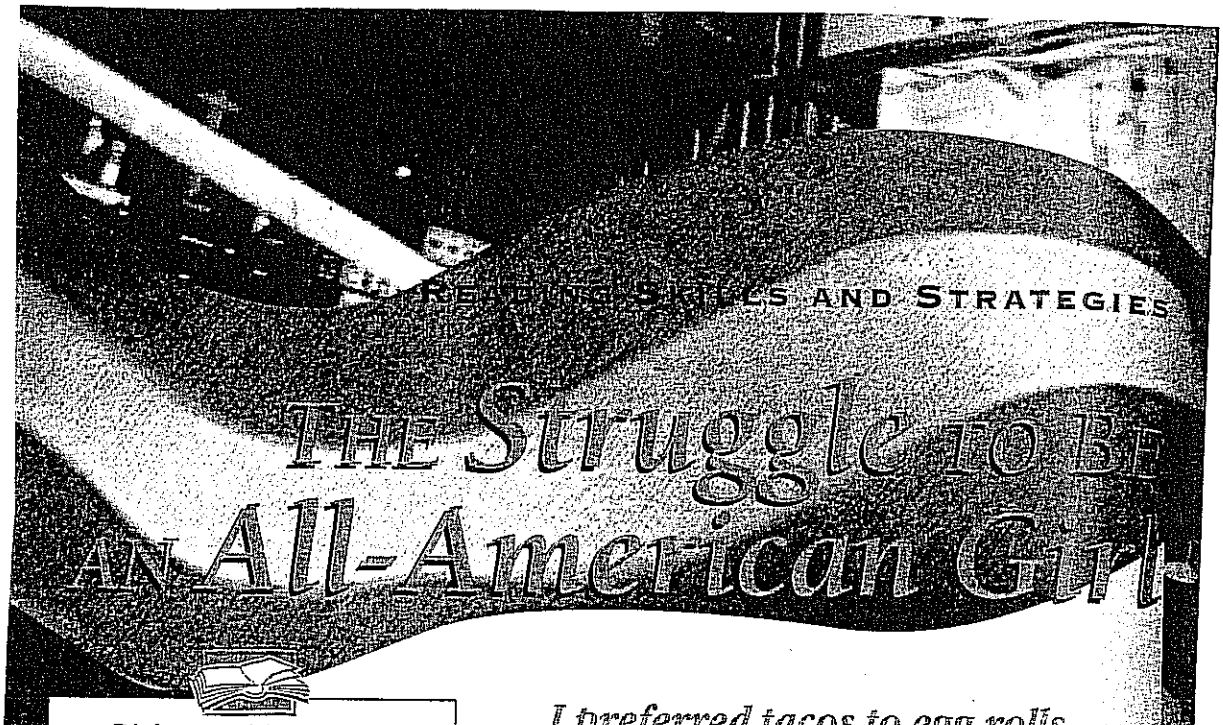


READING SKILLS AND STRATEGIES

The Struggle to Be an All-American Girl

I preferred tacos to egg rolls.

Elizabeth Wong

It's still there, the Chinese school on Yale Street where my brother and I used to go. Despite the new coat of paint and the high wire fence, the school I knew ten years ago remains remarkably, stoically[1] the same.

Every day at 5 P.M., instead of playing with our fourth- and fifth-grade friends or sneaking out to the empty lot to hunt ghosts and animal bones, my brother and I had to go to Chinese school. No amount of kicking, screaming, or pleading could dissuade my mother, who was solidly determined to have us learn the language of our heritage.

Forcibly, she walked us the seven long, hilly blocks from our home to school, depositing our defiant, tearful faces before the stern principal. My only memory of him is that he swayed on his heels like a palm tree, and he always clasped his impatient, twitching hands behind his back. I recognized him as a repressed maniacal child killer and knew that if we ever saw his hands we'd be in big trouble.

We all sat in little chairs in an empty auditorium. The room

1. **stoically** (stō'ik·lē): indifferently; calmly.

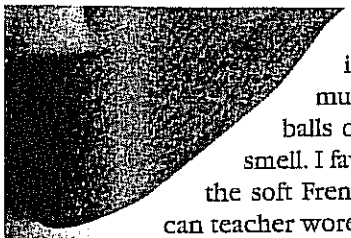
Dialogue with the Text

The notes that follow show the thoughts of one reader as she read this memoir for the first time. When you read the selection yourself for the first time, cover her responses. Track your own responses on a separate piece of paper, and then compare your responses with Janelle's.

Why did they have to go to school instead of playing with the other children?

Oh, it was to learn Chinese.

A *She probably saw him in this manner because she was frightened.*



smelled like Chinese medicine, an imported faraway mustiness. Like ancient mothballs or dirty closets. I hated that smell. I favored crisp new scents. Like the soft French perfume that my American teacher wore in public school.

There was a stage far to the right, flanked by an American flag and the flag of the Nationalist Republic of China,[2] which was also red, white, and blue but not as pretty.

Although the emphasis at the school was mainly language—speaking, reading, writing—the lessons always began with an exercise in politeness. With the entrance of the teacher, the best student would tap a bell and everyone would get up, kowtow,[3] and chant, "Sing san ho," the phonetic for "How are you, teacher?"

Being ten years old, I had better things to learn than ideographs[4] copied painstakingly in lines that ran right to left from the tip of a *moc but,* a real ink pen that had to be held in an awkward way if blotches were to be avoided. After all, I could do the multiplication tables, name the satellites of Mars, and write reports on *Little Women* and *Black Beauty.* Nancy Drew, my favorite book heroine, never spoke Chinese.

The language was a source of embarrassment. More times than not, I had tried to disassociate myself from the nagging loud voice that followed me wherever I wandered in the nearby American supermarket outside Chinatown. The voice belonged to my grandmother, a fragile woman in her seventies who could outshout the best of the street vendors. Her humor was raunchy, her Chinese rhythmless, patternless. It was quick, it was loud, it was unbeautiful. It was not like the quiet, lilting romance of French or the gentle refinement of the American South. Chinese sounded pedestrian. Public.

2. **Nationalist Republic of China:** Republic of China, consisting mainly of Taiwan.
3. **kowtow** (kou'tou'): show respect by kneeling and touching the ground with the forehead.
4. **ideographs** (id'ē·ō·grafs'): written symbols representing objects or ideas. Chinese is written in ideographs.

Dialogue with the Text

It sounds like she would rather try to fit in and be an "All-American" girl rather than a Chinese American girl.

In this culture the elders and parents are treated with great respect and politeness.

She compares everything Chinese with American. American seems to be outweighing Chinese so far.

Her grandmother appears to be overprotective, following her around.

Dialogue with the Text

She really wants to fit in in America, but everything is holding her back.

She has a lot of potential in the real world, but she is locked up in her own Chinatown world.

This is the complete opposite of what usually happens. Mothers usually correct their children in their English.

Everyone tries to find a scapegoat when they make a mistake.

She fits in now, mostly, but she is still Chinese. She should be proud of the fact that she has a unique heritage.

Janelle Jones

—Janelle Jones
Southeast High School
Bradenton, Florida

In Chinatown, the comings and goings of hundreds of Chinese on their daily tasks sounded chaotic[5] and frenzied. I did not want to be thought of as mad, as talking gibberish. When I spoke English, people nodded at me, smiled sweetly, said encouraging words. Even the people in my culture would cluck and say that I'd do well in life. "My, doesn't she move her lips fast," they would say, meaning that I'd be able to keep up with the world outside Chinatown.

My brother was even more fanatical than I about speaking English. He was especially hard on my mother, criticizing her, often cruelly, for her pidgin speech—smatterings of Chinese scattered like chop suey in her conversation. "It's not 'what it is,' Mom," he'd say in exasperation. "It's 'What *is* it, what *is* it, what *is* it!'" Sometimes Mom might leave out an occasional "the" or "a," or perhaps a verb of being. He would stop her in midsentence: "Say it again, Mom. Say it right." When he tripped over his own tongue, he'd blame it on her: "See, Mom, it's all your fault. You set a bad example."

What infuriated my mother most was when my brother cornered her on her consonants, especially "r." My father had played a cruel joke on Mom by assigning her an American name that her tongue wouldn't allow her to say. No matter how hard she tried, "Ruth" always ended up "Luth" or "Roof."

After two years of writing with a *moc but* and reciting words with multiples of meanings, I finally was granted a cultural divorce. I was permitted to stop Chinese school.

I thought of myself as multicultural. I preferred tacos to egg rolls; I enjoyed Cinco de Mayo[6] more than Chinese New Year.

At last, I was one of you; I wasn't one of them.
Sadly, I still am.

5. **chaotic** (kā·ät′ik): completely confused; in total disorder.
6. **Cinco de Mayo** (siŋ′kō de mä′yō): holiday celebrated by Mexicans and Mexican Americans in honor of a Mexican military victory in 1862. *Cinco de Mayo* is Spanish for "May 5."