

# An Outsider By Choice

by Elaine Chen Persson

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I believe my childhood can be split into two phases: pre-sixth grade and post-sixth grade. Before sixth grade, I lived in confusion and loneliness, and after sixth grade, I found a sense of belonging. What made the difference? For that, I must talk about my childhood experiences from the lens of a TCK.

At the age of two, my family moved from Taiwan (where I was born) to the US. I have no memory of Taiwan before we moved to the States, so I feel that my life began in the U.S.. Of course, those were the pre-school years and I lived my carefree life playing with mom and dad, and my other toddler friends. I remember church and Sunday School. I remember not understanding English and I remember understanding English. I remember going to preschool. When I turned four, we moved back to Taiwan.

From age four to eight, we lived in Taiwan. Those were also the years I began my formal education. I was definitely not a well-adjusted child or student in Taiwan. I did not flourish, I survived. I remember always being confused at why my teachers were always angry with me, and why I was always getting punished. I'm not sure if my confusion was due to being TCK (was I already a TCK by then?) or merely from my personality? But whatever it was, I remember confusion and I remember isolation, especially in school.

When I was eight, our family moved back to the States once again. I had forgotten all my English by then, and I was placed in ESL for two years. We moved to Thousand Oaks, California, a city that was at that time predominately caucasian. There were very few Third Culture Kids there. Those who were TCKs like me were ashamed and tried our best to acculturate. But no matter how good our English became, we knew that we were different. I was so desperate to fit in that I told some girls about a boy I had a crush on. After that, I was utterly embarrassed. I had forced myself to do something that was very "American," but that was totally outside of my Chinese culture. After I attempted such a brave act to belong to "them," I felt even more isolated. How can anyone ever truly belong when the actions they do, to be part of the group, betray who they really are? I knew I was a fake, even though I was only in fourth and fifth grade. I felt trapped. Will I always feel like an outsider? I wondered.

Then came sixth grade. We moved once again. This time, we moved to Pasadena, California, and my world changed. I moved from a mostly non-immigrant city to a city where only two people in my class were caucasian. There I met my two best friends, Patricia and Maria. Both were Mexican Americans. Both were TCKs. What was different about them was that they spoke Spanish constantly, not only to their parents who couldn't speak English, but sometimes they would choose to speak Spanish instead of English to each other! They actually liked the "Mexican" part of their Mexican American heritage. That was an eye-opener for me. I was trying to erase the "Chinese" part of me, when all along, I needed to first understand that I am not Chinese and I am definitely not American, I am Chinese American. A third kind of culture.

Because so many of us in Pasadena, California were this third kind of culture, we huddled together, and we found community with one another. We belonged to each other. Without being conscious of it, after we moved to Pasadena, my friends became exclusively other TCKs. Kids are drawn to make friends with whom they get along with, and not surprisingly, I was drawn to other TCKs because it was only with them that I felt a true sense of belonging. I was keenly aware when I would leave my third culture environment, because alienation always resulted; no matter if it was with other Chinese people (as we moved back to Taiwan once again when I turned 14,) or when I chose to join a non-third culture Christian fellowship in college. I think I was lucky to have grown up among other TCKs. Instead of being lost and trying desperately to fit into the culture of residence, I actually had my own community, which not many TCKs find outside of large immigration populations like Los Angeles. We would go to school dances and football games AND we would drink boba milk and eat gluttonous rice with sweetened red beans. We were definitely our own culture.

My life changed drastically when I decided to move away from Los Angeles and to go into full-time missions. On January 1998, I traveled to Scotland to do a Discipleship Training School with Youth With a Mission. Even though I lived in Los Angeles and had been exposed to many different cultures, my worldview was very Chinese / Asian mixed with mainstream west coast

American culture. But moving to Scotland exposed me to the European cultures. Not just that, I was exposed to the European Christian culture, which was very different from Chinese American Christian culture. I loved it, because I experienced the bigger picture of what God's people and God's character are like. It was wonderful. I continue to serve with Youth With A Mission today.

I met my husband in the fall of 1998. He was also serving full-time and we met during a training school. He moved from Sweden to the U.S. at the age of 20. We were classmates, then friends, and a year and half later, we were married. I have only good things to say about cross-cultural marriages. Just as individuals are imperfect, every culture has godly parts but also has its shortcomings. Being married to a person of a different culture prevents us from becoming blinded to the shortcomings of our own culture. It brings to light both the good and the bad. As everything is brought into the light, we can examine and discuss the differences and expose the godly as well as the ungodly. I truly believe that we have become more Kingdom-like as a result. God puts a little imprint of His character in every culture. Being married to someone who is neither Asian nor American has helped me to see more of God's character. I also believe that our daughter will benefit the most from this cross-cultural marriage, because she will be raised up in two cultures and will receive the benefit of both. Hopefully, she will see our loving God from both an Asian perspective and from a Scandinavian perspective. That is wonderful. We all need to know our loving God more.

As a married adult, I am once again living outside of my familiar Chinese American community. However, this time, it's my choice, and I'm following a "higher calling." My husband is Swedish and our daughter, who is four, will grow up speaking not only English, but Swedish and Chinese as well. I don't know what her childhood will be like, but she will most likely grow up as a TCK since we expect to live overseas (not America) in the future. I think what I need to realize as a parent is that TCKs can never feel a sense of belonging except with other TCKs. At the same time, I must allow my children to participate in the decision-making process of moving overseas. If they also own that "higher calling," they will be better able to deal with the isolation. They will know that God called them and that God has a purpose for them living overseas.