

Did You Eat Cheese in Taiwan?

By Linda Feldman

Linda grew up as a missionary kid in Taipei, Taiwan. She worked for a time as an occupational therapist, but currently homeschools her 3 sons and has a small, home-based sewing pattern company. Linda and Matt Feldman with their 3 children reside in Texas.

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I decided early on to not get offended by these questions, “Did you eat cheese in Taiwan?” After all, people were unknowingly exposing themselves, making themselves vulnerable by showing their own ignorance. Be kind, I told myself, but sometimes, I found it really, really hard.

I grew up in Taipei, Taiwan. My dad was a missionary pastor and my mom was a missionary wife. “Wo mama shr mei gwo ren, baba shr chung gwo ren” (My mother is American and my dad is Chinese). I would often use these words when out in public with my friends. The street vendor that I was buying a watch from or the woman who made my shaved-ice milk dessert would ask without hesitation, “Are you American?” It never bothered me. In one glance, Chinese people can tell that I’m not completely Chinese. Sometimes they can’t see the Chinese at all. This always baffles white Americans who can seemingly only see the Chinese side of me. I later learned in a sociology class that there is a term for this phenomenon: the rule of hypo descent, that if a person is part minority, then they will be seen as part of the minority group, even if they are equally part of the majority.

I am exactly one half Chinese and one half white, yet when I was going to college in largely white West Michigan, dorm dinner conversations would often turn to my overseas upbringing. “Did you eat

cheese in Taiwan?” I did notice that my white missionary kid friends were not inundated with these questions. Why? White Americans around the world eat cheese, of course. It doesn't matter where they live. I decided early on to not get offended by these questions. After all, people were unknowingly exposing themselves, making themselves vulnerable by showing their own ignorance. Be kind, I told myself, but sometimes, I found it really, really hard. My husband tells me I have a knack for making other people uncomfortable. He calls it my gift It's hard to control your gift, you know. Try, I do, but sometimes my “gift” gets the better of my friends and I...

“You remind me of someone,” Brooke said. “I couldn't put my finger on who it was until just now! Do you know Lucy Lui from Ally McBeal?”

I actually knew whom she was talking about. There were only three or four recognizable Asian-American actresses on the scene at that time Lucy Lui being one of them. She's beautiful, but have I ever thought I looked remotely like her? No.

“You're just saying that 'cuz I'm Asian, aren't you?” I said, laughing. Her smile fading, a look discomfort came across her face, and she went pale. Oops. “I'm just kidding. Isn't she in that movie Charlie's Angels?” The conversation, thankfully, moved on.

Matt and I got engaged when I was in graduate school. He was in graduate school a hundred miles away, so many of my classmates had never met him. The first question I got when I told them we were engaged was, “Is he Chinese?” This caught me off guard. There was no response to be had, although I often wondered if my black friends were asked similar questions. I doubt it. There seems to be a special sensitivity sometimes bordering on nervousness given to Blacks by Whites in America. A sensitivity that is much more lax toward Asians. It doesn't bother me, as long as I can use these situations as a tool to show people their biases with my gift. After some thought, I came up with a response that I was able to use several times: “No,” I'd say, “He's White, like you.”

Accent

I have been told that I have a Chinese accent, although English is my first language and I do NOT have an accent. Of course, I take advantage of some people... I convinced several people that I was a martial arts expert, without having ever taken lessons. Another time, at Calvin, there was a bulletin board up in one of the dorms that had pictures of starving children in 3rd world countries. I told the friend that I was with, “No way. I can't believe they put my cousin's picture up here!” Sadly, he believed me and never trusted me again.

I found out when I was a teen that my Uncle Bill tried to keep my mom from marrying my dad. He was a pastor at the time, a graduate of Bob Jones University. One of his arguments would be why my parents should get married? He said that it was unnatural, that the children would be deformed. Well, here I am, Uncle Bill! I AM deformed! I have this gift – the gift of making people uncomfortable.