

Growing Up Asian American: Krispy Kreme? Or Kimchi?

By Albert Chang-Yoo

Recently, Mom, Dad, and I went down to Southern California for our annual family Christmas celebration. There are two families we have to see during Christmas: the Chang side of the family, and the Yoo side. At the extended family gathering, I sat at a table with my Grand-Aunt Cindy. It was almost lunchtime, and I was craving a Krispy Kreme donut. As I dreamt of donuts, Aunt Cindy interrupted my thoughts and started a conversation.

First she asked me if I had decided my college yet (I'm in 9th grade), then she asked in broken English:

“What do you want to major in for college?”

“Oh, well I happen to be interested in writing. So, I guess something humanities-oriented,” I replied proudly.

She gazed disapprovingly at me through her glasses. “What about being a doctor? What about lawyer? Your parents are getting old. Only a doctor or lawyer can take care of your parents,” she stated.

My parents are in their early 50s. I nodded and said I would think about it.

All of my older relatives are immigrants from Korea. I haven't been to Korea, but I know that it has already left an impact on me and my future. I have heard many stories about my 83-year old Grandpa, Frank Sung Kung Yoo, who as a teenager survived the Korean War. My Grandpa had a large family in Korea, but when wartime came they had little food to survive upon. Grandpa had a dog that was also part the family, but as food became scarce, his older brother ate the pooch. The first time I heard this, I was stunned, my mouth hung agape for a good minute.

Grandpa had ten siblings, all older than him. Some siblings went missing during the war, some joined the North Koreans. Grandpa was the only one of his siblings to come to America. I've never heard my Grandpa talk about those family member that perished and those he left behind.. This is his life now. His life is his wife and three daughters--my mom and my two aunties. Even though the stories are far away, I want to connect with my heritage through these stories.

As a budding writer, I want the stories about my grandpa to be heard by future generations so they can learn from them.

Back at our Christmas family gathering, it was lunchtime. I walked over to the table full of Korean delicacies, but as I ignored the tray of kimchi, another relative asked:

“Do you not like kimchi?”

I shook my head and responded: “No, but I do love donuts!”

So as to answer the question to would I rather have some Krispy Kreme, or a plate of my mom's homemade kimchi? The answer is simple: satisfy both with a kimchi donut. So maybe someday the sweet taste of America, and the comforting flavor of my family's unique past can combine and make something wonderful. Something that lasts for generations to come.