

## CHAPTER FIVE



## Performing Fortune Cookie

*An Autoethnographic Performance on Diasporic Hybridity*

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SEVERAL YEARS AGO, MY UNCLE TOOK MY PARENTS, SIBLINGS, AND me to a Chinese restaurant in a suburb east of Los Angeles. After we ate our delicious Chinese meal, a waiter came over and dropped off some cookies that were strange but intriguing at the same time. Prior to coming to the US to visit my uncle and his family in the early 1990s, I had never seen these cookies before. As I reached over to get one of the light brown Pac-Man shaped cookies wrapped in plastic, I asked my uncle what it was.

He said, "Oh, these are fortune cookies."

"What are fortune cookies?" I asked with my curious 12-year-old voice.

My uncle smiled and replied, "Well, these are cookies with little messages inside that tell you some good things." As I pondered more questions, my uncle, who was seemingly frustrated, just wanted to end the conversation: "Ai-yah ... it doesn't matter. Just eat it. It's something *they* eat out here."

From that point on, I always wondered who "they" are, those who eat these fortune cookies. Was my uncle referring to US Americans in general, the Chinese who reside in the US, or both? No matter who the fortune cookie caters to, I got the impression from my uncle that these cookies are an American construction of Chineseness.

According to Lee (2008a), about 3 billion fortune cookies are made each year, almost all in the United States. In addition, fortune cookies are served in Chinese restaurants in other countries, such as Britain, Mexico, Italy, France, and India, but not in China or in my point of origin as a person of Chinese heritage growing up—the Philippines. The fortune cookie's present

form known in Chinese restaurants in the US was contested in China for its authentic Chineseness when it was introduced there in 1993 (Burke, 2002). Richard Leung, vice president of the Wonton Food Company, says, "It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it just didn't pan out. Fortune cookies are too American of a concept" (Burke, 2002, para. 5).

As an ethnic Chinese who was born and raised in the Philippines and has lived in the US for almost two decades, my diasporic experiences have shaped who I am culturally. While diaspora is often discussed in different literature as a yearning to return to a homeland or being in another location, I see diaspora the way Gilroy (1995) talks about it—as a process of *becoming* rather than *being*. And, because my hybrid identity as a Chinese Filipino is constantly located, situated, shaped, and negotiated in different cultural contexts, I consider myself a diasporic hybrid, or metaphorically speaking, a fortune cookie. Instead of using metaphors like Oreo (black outside/white inside), coconut (brown outside/white inside), and banana (yellow outside/white inside), I use fortune cookie as a metaphor, because it does not simplify the constructions of identity to fixed physical, social, and cultural variables. While using fortune cookie inevitably leads me to discuss identity and authenticity at the same time, it allows me to examine our historicities as a point of contention to question and challenge the notion of authenticity. Because the fortune cookie does not have a clear point of origin given its different versions of history, I believe that using it to represent my diasporic hybridity reinforces the point that identity is a process that shapes who we are in various locations and times.

Through everyday performances of my diasporic hybridity, I illustrate in this autoethnographic piece how my performing as "fortune cookie" has shaped my understanding of self in relationship to cultural and linguistic practices in different contexts. It is imperative for me to first provide an overview of the fortune cookie's multiple historicities. Next, I discuss how I came to understand my diasporic hybridity, specifically examining the intersectionality of racial, ethnic, national, and class identities, through my lived experiences in my birthplace—the Philippines—as well as visiting China and living in the US. Finally, I explain the tensions and possibilities I face as a fortune cookie.

### *Fortune Cookie: Multiple Historicities*

The history of the fortune cookie continues to remain a mystery, but there are multiple historical interpretations of where, why, and how the cookie became ubiquitous in Chinese American restaurants. The inventor of the cookie has been commonly considered to be David Jung, a Chinese immigrant and founder of the Hong Kong Noodle Company in Los Angeles, before World War I (Brunner, 2005). The lore states that David Jung invented fortune

cookies as an appetizer, not a dessert (Lee, 2008b). According to Jung's son, George Cheng, his father got the idea of fortune cookies from "an ancient game played among the upper classes in China. Individuals would be given pen, paper, and a twisted cake that contained a scrap of paper with a subject written on it ..." (p. 145). The players were expected to write wisdom in a narrative. Another theory is that Jung invented the fortune cookie "to cheer up downtrodden men on the streets of Los Angeles and that a minister had written the messages inside" (p. 146). On the other hand, a Japanese American, Makoto Hagiwara, in California claimed credit for introducing or popularizing the fortune cookie (Harvey, 2008). Hagiwara said that he made and served fortune cookies to visitors of the Golden Gate Park's Japanese Tea Garden in the 1890s until 1942, when he and his family were sent to an internment camp in Topaz, Utah (Lee, 2008b).

By the 1930s, Umeya, owned by the Hamano family in Los Angeles, was "one of the earliest mass producers of fortune cookies" where they distributed "to more than 120 Japanese-owned restaurants throughout central and southern California" (Lee, 2008b, p. 144). Since there was not a lot of demand for sushi at the time, many Japanese Americans opened Chinese restaurants to earn income. However, when Japanese Americans were sent to internment camps during World War II, they had to leave the equipment they used to bake the fortune cookies. By the time Japanese Americans were released from internment camps, numerous Chinese American fortune cookie makers had begun to overtake the fortune cookie market. By the 1940s, fortune cookies were widely available in California, especially in San Francisco, where soldiers and sailors frequented Chinese restaurants. The cookies soon caught on in other major cities in the US, where they were sold on supermarket shelves and customized to announce engagements and promote businesses.

Despite fortune cookies' historical presence in the US, their origin may actually be Japanese. Yasuko Nakamachi, a Japanese researcher, discovered that "many confectionery stores had offered candies that came with little fortunes inside them" during the Showa period in Japan (Lee, 2008b, p. 263). To confirm her findings, Nakamachi reviewed Edo- and Meiji-era documents that referenced *tsujiura senbei* in Japan during the nineteenth century and described them as "brittle cookies that contained a fortune in a fictional work by Tamenaga Shunsui, a humorist who lived between 1790 and 1843" (p. 261). Nakamachi also found a book that featured an 1878 print of a man grilling *tsujiura senbei*.

While reading a Japanese book on confectioneries, Nakamachi stumbled upon Japanese cookies folded around little pieces of paper as a regional snack in Ishikawa being made locally during New Year festivities (Lee, 2008b). In Kyoto, Nakamachi also saw several small family Japanese bakeries that sold a version of fortune cookies similar to those in the US. The bakers called

them *omikiji senbei* ("fortune crackers"), *tsujiura suzu* ("bells with fortunes"), or *tsujiura senbei*. The Japanese fortune cookies are flavored with miso and sesame, and they are bigger, darker, and shinier than their US counterparts. Additionally, the slips of paper are placed between the cookies' outer folds in Japan rather than inside the cookies as they are in the US.

### *Performing Diasporic Chinese in the Philippines*

Both of my parents are Chinese Filipina/o, so it is fitting that they raised my siblings and me in a household composed of both Chinese and Filipina/o cultures. When we used to live in the Philippines, my family and I would frequent Manila's Chinatown as a way to maintain our Chineseness. Every time my family and I walked down Ongpin Street, I could smell the aroma of *sho pao* (sweet pork bun), *sho mai* (dumplings), and *ma chang* (sticky pork rice) that seemed so familiar yet nostalgic at the same time. I remember eating a handful of these and other Chinese delicacies that my family and I enjoyed at our favorite dim sum restaurant. After dim sum, we typically walked down the long strip to visit familiar stores that carried artifacts, clothes, paintings, calligraphies, among other things, that represented our Chineseness.

My family and I also participated in festivities and celebrations on Ongpin Street. In particular, during Lunar New Year, we would walk around Ongpin Street and find a spot to stand and watch the fireworks display and lion and dragon dances. The street was crowded with people—young and old, Chinese and Filipina/o—who were all anticipating the public spectacle associated with Lunar New Year. Year after year, it is a tradition to see ritualistic performances of lion and dragon dances, in which a few people go under an elaborately decorated lion and dragon red/gold train and parade around Chinatown. One person holds the gigantic head, and the others carry the stretched body, using long sticks, which they carry in their hands. Each lion or dragon visits the stores along the strip to eat up the *hong bao*—red envelope with money—that is tied up in front of the store as a symbol of a prosperous new year. As these dances are going on, the booming sounds of firework displays occur simultaneously with enthusiastic spectators looking on, smiling, and clapping at these ritualized performances. Ongpin Street was a place of confirmation—a confirmation that my family and I were part of the Chinese diaspora in this Filipina/o town.

As a Chinese Filipina/o family, my parents also made sure that certain Filipina/o cultural practices become ingrained in our daily lives. For instance, we had a family ritual of performing *noche buena*, which is Spanish for "good night," on Christmas Eve. My family and I would normally go to a late night mass at a nearby Catholic church. After the mass, we would have a big feast at home that normally consisted of traditional Filipina/o and

Chinese Filipina/o foods: *queso de bola* (gigantic cheese ball), *lechon* (roast pig), *pancit* (noodles), fried chicken, *lumpia* (egg rolls), rice, *adobo* (sautéed pork or chicken), *halo-halo* (dessert drink), rice cakes, and other pastries. After eating this diasporic hybrid meal, my family and I would stay up until early in the morning to share stories with each other. Celebrating the Lunar New Year and *noche buena* are just two of many examples of ways my family and I celebrated our diasporic hybridity while living in the Philippines.

However, issues of authenticity also posed challenges to my Chinese Filipino identity. In order for one's identity to be authentic, there is an assumption that it has to be "coherent, unified, [and] fixed" (Sarup, 1996, p. 14). As an ethnic Chinese in the Philippines, I was Chinese before I could claim my Filipino identity. Even though I was born and raised in the Philippines and know how to speak Tagalog fluently, many Filipina/os couldn't see past my Chinese-appearing body as a marker of Chineseness, which made it difficult for me to identify culturally as Filipino. Despite generations of the Chinese presence in the Philippines, they are the ethnic minority in the country (See, 1997). While growing up in the Philippines, I encountered some Filipina/os who believed that Chinese Filipina/os should go back to China, even though most of us were born and raised in the Philippines. I am a third-generation Chinese Filipino, given that my grandparents (except for my paternal grandmother) were born and raised in the Philippines. In every sense of my being, I consider myself Filipino, too, since the Philippines was the only place I knew. I had never been to China until my family and I went to Guangzhou for a vacation when I was ten years old.

My experience as a diasporic hybrid in my birthplace shows how the notion of authenticity affected my sense of being, specifically how the particularity of cultural and ethnic expectations forced me in some cases to identify as Chinese as opposed to Chinese Filipino. Hall (1994) points out that diasporic individuals have the desire to return to their lost identities. In my case, I always wonder if my diasporic hybridity prevents me from claiming Filipino identity. I was sometimes forced to pick an identity—Chinese or Filipino—in order to fit in with a particular community. Even though my family and I are Filipina/o by nationality and ethnicity, our Chinese ancestry has greatly influenced much of our cultural identity. For instance, like most Chinese in the Philippines, my siblings and I attended a Chinese Filipina/o private school that emphasized the importance of Chinese history and language in addition to Filipina/o history and English language classes. In so many ways, I was privileged enough to attend a Chinese Filipina/o school that allowed me to learn about my Chinese culture and identity, but such an opportunity was also strategic to being Chinese. Most, if not all, Chinese Filipina/os I knew growing up attended Chinese Filipina/o schools at the elementary and secondary levels as a way to perform and maintain their Chinese cultural membership. Oftentimes, Chinese Filipina/os who

choose to attend local Filipina/o public schools because of economic and/or assimilation reasons are considered not "Chinese" enough. My schooling experience is one example of how I was socialized to understand that, in the eyes of my parents and others, I am Chinese. In a way, my diasporic hybridity makes it difficult for me to achieve "wholeness," as I constantly have to negotiate my identities to seek recognition from others (Bhabha, 1994, p. 10).

### *Finding Chineseness in the Mainland*

In 1990, my family and I went to Guangzhou, China, for a vacation. We went to a street market full of vendors that sold clothes, artifacts, toys, and other things that normally attract tourists and locals alike. As my family and I walked around the market, it was a bizarre feeling. It was like having a reunion with long lost relatives. My Chinese-looking body blended in with the rest of the crowd. I felt I was one of the Chinese citizens at the market.

There was so much to see at the street market. To cover as much ground as possible, my family walked faster than usual. I followed them, but took my time to look at all the goods around me. As I walked past tables and tables of goods, a display of slippers caught my eye. I picked up the green fluffy slippers and touched them to get the feel of how soft they were. The Chinese vendor, a petite woman in her 60s or 70s, smiled at me and asked me a question in Cantonese. I believe she asked, "Do you like it?" Or, it could have been "Do you need help?" Or, maybe she was telling me how much the slippers were. Her question overwhelmed me, so I was speechless. I wanted to respond, but I could not speak Cantonese. All of a sudden, I was "caught up at the intersection of multiple, sometimes, conflicting, subject positions, and [did] not feel at home anywhere" (Shi, 2005, p. 55). I thought I was finally "home" at the market, yet I was not. I realized that not only did I have to look like them, but I had to speak like them, too, in order to be one of them.

I did not and still do not know what the Chinese vendor said. She continued to smile waiting for my response, and I smiled back and nodded my head pretending I understood what she said, just like most tourists. All of a sudden, her smile turned to an annoyed look, and I could sense she was suspicious of my Chineseness. In that moment, similar to Alexander's (2006) experience as a tourist in China, I felt that the "issue of authenticity [was] not about what [was] real as much as what [was] known" (p. 19). My Chinese body allowed me to pass as one of them, but my inability to speak the language made it apparent that I was not one of them. For the first time, I felt I was not Chinese. I learned in that experience that as a tourist "the struggle to find authenticity is also the struggle to avoid one's own sense of familiarity, and authenticity's pleasure is really its absence" (Alexander,

2006, p. 31). I wanted to be one of them, yet the Chinese vendor saw me as Other—the Westernized Chinese Filipino who had left his mother tongue behind. I felt like another tourist trying to get to know the culture and language I did not know. In a sense, I was in what Bhabha (1994) calls “in-between spaces’ ... that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation” (pp. 1–2).

When I was in China, I thought I had found my home, where I could reconnect with my roots. Unfortunately, the street market turned out to be, what Chawla (2003) calls, just another “roof over the head. Dislocation [as] a way of being” (p. 273). The street market was a place where I fit in physically, but was dislocated for speaking like a foreigner. I did not feel at home anymore. So, where is “home”?

Home—the place where my ancestors came from?

Home—the city where my birth certificate was printed?

Home—the country of my permanent residency?

Home—the state where my family lives?

Home—the college town where I lived for four years?

Home—the country where I could vote?

Home—the city where I currently live and work?

Home—the place where personal and cultural connections are made?

Home—where is home? (see Hao, 2012)

### *Diasporic Hybridity in the U.S.*

As a fortune cookie now living in the US, I continue to struggle in performing my diasporic hybridity. I thought coming to the culturally diverse United States would make it easier for me to perform my multicultural identities. To my surprise, many people from mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan in particular that I met or interacted with saw/see me as “American-Born Chinese” or “ABC” for short, even though I was not born in the US. Is it because I am an ethnic Chinese who speaks English with somewhat an undetectable Chinese accent? Is it because I speak more English than Chinese? Is it because I watch more US TV shows than Chinese ones? Is it because I can’t tell how “authentic Chinese” food is supposed to taste?

My assumed ABC-ness apparently came through when my family and I ate at a local Chinese restaurant close to where my parents live in suburban Los Angeles. That Sunday afternoon, I suggested to my dad that I would like to practice my Mandarin by ordering one dish from the menu. My dad smiled and gladly accepted my request. After having taken a few Mandarin courses in high school and college, I did not think it would be that difficult to order one dish in Mandarin. So, I picked up the menu, opened it, and flipped through the pages, which had Chinese characters on the left side

and English translations on the right. My first stop: the pork section. Sure enough, one of my favorites, sweet and sour pork, was on the menu. I attempted to read the menu silently. For some reason, I could only read one Chinese character. To save myself from embarrassment with the Chinese waiter, who was staring at me, I kept looking through the menu to see what other dish I could say in Mandarin so that I could order it. My dad asked me if I was ready to order. I looked at him, signaling that I needed more time. Some more minutes passed, and I could not stall any longer. I had to order something—anything—so that the impatient waiter could be on his way to wherever he was supposed to go. I continued to look down at the menu. I felt helpless and confused. As I was attempting to order other dishes, I was once again blinded by all of these Chinese characters. So, I went back to try to read sweet and sour pork—in Mandarin—this time, out loud. Um ... Um ... *Rou* (meat). Because I could only read one of the Chinese characters, all I could do was use my index finger to point to the menu to let the waiter know what I wanted to order. “This one, please,” I told the waiter while lowering my face to mask my embarrassment. The waiter impatiently took my order and shook his head before leaving the table.

About twenty minutes later, four courses of food (seafood fried rice, green beans in black bean sauce, curry chicken, and sweet and sour pork) that my family and I ordered had arrived. I picked up the off-white plastic chopsticks on the table. So, here I was attempting to pick up the green bean from the plate at the center of the table. For some reason, I could not hold the chopsticks properly. After many tries, I gave up and decided to raise my hand hesitantly to signal the same waiter that I needed my spoon and fork. The waiter approached me, and I told him what I needed in English without looking him directly in the eye. I was hesitant to leave the chopsticks on the table for fear of being perceived as an inauthentic Chinese—again. However, at the same time, I grew up in the Philippines accustomed to eating with a spoon and fork. Should I be ashamed for abandoning my chopsticks? Does that make me less Chinese? When the waiter came back with my fork and spoon, he looked at me and seemed to be questioning my Chineseness. A real Chinese would know how to use chopsticks, his suspicious eyes seemed to say. I became suspect, presumably posing as “Chinese” in this Chinese American restaurant.

Reflecting on my embarrassing experience at a restaurant, I think about how I continue to perform and negotiate my racial, ethnic, national, and class identities in the US. While living in Los Angeles, I did not have to think much about my racial identity, since I was surrounded by Asian Americans in my daily interactions at school and other public contexts. At home, I communicated with my family primarily in Taglish (a combination of Tagalog and English) and Chinese (Hokkien dialect). In addition to maintaining the languages we grew up with, my family and I continued to

celebrate some of the cultural traditions and practices as Chinese Filipina/os, such as the Lunar New Year and Mooncake Festival, even though they became less elaborate than the way we celebrated these traditions in the Philippines. Both Chinese and Filipina/o foods and supermarkets are easily accessible in different L.A. suburban neighborhoods we have lived in. I also attended a predominantly Asian American high school where my body blended in with those of my peers, most of whom also came from immigrant families. If anything changed dramatically for my family, it was my family's socioeconomic status. While in the Philippines, my parents owned their own business, but in the US, despite my father's business degree from the Philippines, he continues to this day working as a gas station attendant. My mother stays at home to take care of the family. My family's change in socioeconomic status made me realize that as Asian immigrants in the US, our lives turned out to be different from what I had envisioned it meant to be "American." Despite my family's economic situation, eating comfort foods, being surrounded by my family, and living in predominantly Asian American neighborhoods allowed me to celebrate and appreciate my Asianness, and, more specifically, my Chinese and Filipino identities.

When I moved to Carbondale, Illinois, for graduate school, I could not find a lot of people who looked like me. I felt isolated and missed what I had taken for granted when I lived in Los Angeles. For the first time since living in the US, I started to yearn to know more about myself. While I had the luxury of being able to celebrate my Chinese Filipino identity in L.A., the very small presence of Asian Americans in general in this small college town changed my perspective on my identities. I no longer looked for the specificity of my identity as a Chinese Filipino, rather it was more pressing for me to (re)claim my Asian identity. While in Carbondale, where there was only one "international grocery" and decent Chinese restaurant, I was hungry to take Asian American history and culture courses, which had been readily available in the universities I attended in L.A. However, when I was in L.A., I did not take advantage of the limitless opportunities to take courses in Asian American history and culture. Perhaps a part of me believed that in the midst of other Asian American bodies in L.A., I did not need to "know" who I was racially; I already knew what it was like—my body is first and foremost marked as Asian.

Now living in Denver, I am beginning to reclaim my Asianness because of some visible presence of Asian American cultures in various areas around the city. I see Asian supermarkets again in the city and surrounding Denver suburbs, which allows me to feel at home to some extent. However, Chinese and Filipina/o communities here are small compared with what I was used to in L.A., so I always find myself longing for Chinese and Filipina/o foods, cultures, and traditions. When I go back to L.A. to see family and friends, I always make a checklist of the familiar restaurants by my parents'

neighborhood and the surrounding suburbs where I can eat my favorite Chinese and Filipina/o foods.

However, living in Denver has provided me an opportunity to appreciate my Asian racialized body further. While living here since 2009, I have been involved in an Asian Pacific American community as a mentor in the Emerging Leaders Program (ELP), which is designed to help Asian Pacific American students get involved in a community outreach project that would benefit the local Asian Pacific American community. My involvement in the Asian Pacific American community in Denver has instilled in me the significance of mentoring and how that shapes my understanding of my Asianness in relationship to other mentors and mentees in ELP. From my own experience in ELP, I believe that Asian Pacific Americans in Denver are more conscious of their racialized and ethnic identities, because there are not a lot of us here compared to other major cities, such as L.A., Chicago, and New York, so there seems to be a solidarity that needs to be preserved and maintained to make our presence known. While Denver is not the same as L.A., I have gained a different appreciation of my Asianness here, specifically from a racial identity perspective.

### *Rediscovering Fortune Cookie: Tensions and Possibilities*

Several years ago, I got to eat my very first fortune cookie. During that same time, I found out from my uncle that Chinese people do not eat fortune cookies. However, after I scanned side to side, front, and back of the restaurant, most of those people eating where my family and I were dining that day were Chinese; they just happened to live in the US. The history behind the fortune cookie's identity still leaves us with many questions. The modern-day fortune cookie we know in the US was not produced in China, but a recent discovery tells us that it could actually be Japanese. At the same time, both Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans claim the invention. No matter how we look at it, the fortune cookie that we know today has different variations, flavors, and influences.

Due to the restrictions that go along with the notion of authenticity, fortune cookies—literally and metaphorically speaking—usually face multiple tensions. Therefore, it is not a surprise that fortune cookies did not fare well in China when they were marketed there many years ago. To legitimize their Chineseness, many fortune cookies today offer Mandarin Chinese lessons to those who eat them. In 1993, the Wonton Food Company began printing "Learn Chinese" features on the back of the fortune slips (Burke, 2002). Common phrases in English, such as "I am an American," precede their Chinese phonetic translation: "Wo shi Meiguoren." It is interesting to see how the fortune cookie's identity is performed and negotiated through these texts. To me, the fortune cookie is used as a medium to teach Mandarin

lessons to those who want to get (re)acquainted with their Chineseness while trying to maintain a US American identity. For other US Americans, the fortune cookie can be used to start learning basic Chinese words and phrases, but it primarily serves as part of the expected Chinese dining experience—to discover “fortunes” (through “Chinese wisdom” and “lucky numbers”) that are printed on the fortune cookie inserts.

The fortune cookie’s linguistic performances remind me of the Mandarin classes I used to take in high school and college as a way to perform my Chinese identity. Even though I speak Chinese (Hokkien dialect, to be exact), I felt a need to become fluent in Mandarin. For some reason, I perceived Mandarin to be an “authentic Chinese” dialect, because it is China’s official language and it is used widely in the US. I enrolled in Mandarin classes the last two years of high school and during my sophomore year of college. I learned how to read, write, and speak basic words, phrases, and sentences.

After studying Mandarin for a couple of years, I started to feel more Chinese, yet at the same time I felt like a fraud. If I was really Chinese, why did I have to learn how to become Chinese? While attending Mandarin classes, I continued to make what Shimakawa (2002) calls “a movement between visibility and invisibility, foreignness and domestication/assimilation” (p. 3). Now thinking back, my enrollment in the classes compromised my diasporic hybridity. In essence, I was both visible and invisible, because, while learning how to speak Mandarin could probably mark me as “authentic Chinese,” taking the classes reinforced the idea that speaking Mandarin was the only way I could be Chinese.

My in-betweenness as a fortune cookie contradicts the notion of authenticity, which is a way for people to distinguish who is culturally similar or different in order to establish solidarity (Appiah, 1996) based on “shared systems of symbols and meanings as well as norms/rules for conduct” (Collier & Thomas, 1988, p. 113). However, diasporic hybrid identities are never complete (Anthias, 2001). As Johnson (2003) states, an identity may exist as a floating signifier from one culture to another, as it is influenced by material, political, social, and cultural forces. My experiences in different countries and US locations further inform who I am based on my racial, ethnic, national, and class identities. In the Philippines, I passed as an “authentic Chinese” with flying colors; I looked, sounded, and acted the part of a socioeconomically privileged Chinese. However, I was not Filipino enough. In Guangzhou, China, I fit the look of a Chinese, but I was not considered Chinese, because I failed to speak the local dialect.

Moving to the US allowed me to think about my different identities. More specifically, in addition to my ethnic and national identities, I also began to examine my Asian body and socioeconomic status further. I never thought that my family’s Asian immigrant background could be a barrier to my family having a comfortable life in the US. Despite my family’s

financial situation, we managed to find a Chinese Filipina/o community in suburban Los Angeles for support. Having lived in different parts of the US for the last two decades has provided me with an understanding of how my identities continue to shift as I move from one place to another. It has helped me understand, for example, when to privilege my racial, ethnic, or national identities. In Los Angeles, I was able to celebrate my Asianness and Chinese Filipino identity, because I lived in predominantly Asian American neighborhoods that provided me the comfort of Chinese and Filipino traditions and foods. When I attended graduate school in Carbondale, Illinois, I privileged my racial identity because of the limited presence of Asian Americans in the area. While living in Denver is not comparable to living in Los Angeles, it allows me to reconnect with my Asianness through the local Asian Pacific American community that I could not find in Carbondale. My involvement in the community through the mentoring program has been an opportunity for me to reflect on how I could reconnect with my Asianness—not just for the purpose of finding my racialized body again in the midst of other Asian Americans, but also to make connections with other Asian Pacific Americans in the community.

Because our identities are always changing, emerging, and constantly in negotiation, I am using fortune cookie as a metaphor for my diasporic hybrid identity, since the fortune cookie as a food product does not have a fixed historicity that specifically locates where it came from or how it originated. Instead, the fortune cookie has become a food product that is composed of many cultural influences and varieties that symbolically represent how identity, as Yep (2002) notes, is “a person’s conception of self within a particular social, geographical, cultural, and political context” (p. 61). Furthermore, the function of “hybridities,” as the fortune cookie symbolizes, is that “they postulate of transgressive cultural formations which in and of themselves function to dispel the certainties of fixed location” (Anthias, 2001, p. 620). In essence, my fortune cookieness has been shaped and influenced by my life experiences in the Philippines, China, and the US, where “cultural diasporization” (Anthias, 2001, p. 620) exists as new forms of identities.

From the Philippines to China and to the US, I continue to perform and negotiate my identities in different cultural contexts. I have learned and accepted over the years that it is not easy to be a diasporic hybrid. After all, I struggled to fit in wherever I was and am, based on my physical and linguistic markers. As a result, I was not “Chinese,” “Filipino,” or “Asian” enough. Oftentimes there are people who would ask me, “What are you?” While I am compelled to say “Chinese Filipino” every time, my answer would typically lead to other questions, such as, “Is your dad Chinese and your mom Filipina?” At times, it is convenient to simply say I am “Chinese” or “Filipino.” However, by choosing “Chinese” or “Filipino,” am I



compromising my diasporic hybridity? Despite some challenges with my identity negotiation and legitimization, after all these years, I am beginning to appreciate the possibilities that come with my diasporic hybrid identity—as a fortune cookie.

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