ACAM 320B – Statement for the Project

The storyline of this project drew from my own childhood experience. Like many other immigrant families, my parents decided to emigrate from Taiwan out of security concerns based on cross-strait political tensions. At that time, I downright refused to board the airplane because I didn't understand why I needed to leave my school, my friends, and my extended families behind. When we settled in Vancouver, I was twelve years old. It is well-documented that children differ greatly in their acculturation process depending on their age, English proficiency and available social network upon arrival (Cheung, 2023b). In the most formative years of their development, immigrant children must grapple with acculturative stressors while effortfully explore and balance between their ethnic minority identity and their new culture's identity (Cheung, 2023a). In my case: like a plant dug out of soil and forced to relocate, I struggled to adjust to the drastic environmental changes.

My experience was not unique. Immigrant youth typically faced more developmental challenges in comparison to their non-immigrant peers. Approximately 25-33% Asian Canadian immigrant youth reported dealing with ethnic/race-based peer discrimination and microaggression at least once in the month prior to completing the study survey (Oxman-Martinez et al, 20120). In particular, first-generation Chinese immigrant students were more likely to be targeted if they are overheard speaking Chinese or if their accent is too obvious (Qin, Way, & Rana, 2008). It was also possible to experience targeted discrimination from more assimilated co-ethnic others, who engaged in intraethnic defensive othering by deflecting stigma and negative association to more ethnically identified peers (Cheung, 2023d). I worked tirelessly to learn the English language from scratch and correct my accent, effectively exiting the ESL program in a span of two years. Looking back, I recognized that my learning achievements stem from internalized oppression: constantly trying to disidentify myself from the "FOB" label ('fresh off the boat') and become accepted as a part of the mainstream culture (Cheung, 2023d). My constant anxiety in social interactions and anticipatory fear of discriminatory events lead to a lot of unnecessary stress. Indeed, Huynh (2012)'s study found that the frequency of ethnic microaggression consistently predicted more depressive and somatic symptoms among Asian American adolescents, demonstrating the detrimental health effects of racism. Like

the character Ruolee in the story, I stayed home from school frequently due to volatile health conditions, which barred me from forming meaningful friendships and resulted in further isolation.

I wasn't doing well at home, either. This section of my life was only briefly represented on the fourth page of my storybook; however, if I were to write a sequel it would be all about familial conflict. As Sluzki (1979) observed: *intergenerational discrepancy* between immigrant parents and their children's acculturation level often leads to painful intergenerational conflicts. In particular, Chan and Leong (1994) point out that immigrant children must learn to navigate drastic changes in established familial roles and power dynamics. With my more proficient English abilities, I became the "translator kid" and was tasked to be the "representative" to the outside world. I hated the landline ringtone, because every time it rang, I knew that I need to be the one to pick it up. I also needed to physically accompany my parents to medical appointments, government agencies, and banking institutions for routine administrative tasks. If I were to refuse, I would be scolded for lacking in familism – a common principle in collectivistic cultures that emphasize acting in prescribed family roles, providing immediate mutual support, and prioritizing family obligations (Bardis, 1959). Chan and Leong (1994) correctly identified that the disruption in power relations contributes to decreases in parental self-confidence, which often lead to attempts in regaining control through "shame" and "guilt" tactics to manipulate the child's decisions and behaviours. A common manifestation is the constant "reminder" of how they sacrificed everything for immigration, pressuring children to work hard and "repay" parents through attaining high academic achievements in school. The constant conflict between collectivistic values and individualistic expression, emotional manipulation in relationship dynamics, and helicoptering pressure for high performance make the home an ultra-stressful environment, leading to poorer physical health and worse depressive symptomatology in the long run (Cheung, 2023f; Ying and Han, 2007).

In addition to the multitude of challenges, racialized immigrant groups often found healthcare services inaccessible in comparison to the rest of the population (Cheung, 2023e). Some of the most frequently reported barriers were 1) language differences, 2) lack of information on how to navigate services, 3) cultural incompatibility with practitioner, and 4) long wait lists/queues (Cheung, 2023e; Kalich,

Heinemann, & Ghahari, 2016). On a social level, these factors lead to reduced access to health care and lower rates of service utilization amongst immigrant communities. On a personal level, these factors lead to continued deterioration in mental and/or physical health, prolonged emotional suffering, as well as long-term negative education and career consequences (Ravichandiran, Matthews, & Ryan, 2022). In the story book, these systematic healthcare barriers were represented by Ruolee's navigation of the grey maze structure on page five. Her feelings of disorientation and exhaustion reflected my personal experiences figuring out the pathways to finding an affordable therapist and a psychiatrist for mental health treatment. Her feeling of hopelessness also echoed my mom's long battle with rheumatoid arthritis, where long wait times and the lack of culturally sensitive care prompt her intense desire in returning to Taiwanese healthcare system. She firmly believed that language and cultural familiarity would allow her to build better doctor-patient relationship and potentially have better treatment outcomes. Growing up, it was the constant tug-of-war between feeling guilty for my parents' pre-immigration sacrifices, self-blaming for my mom's current illness, coping with the anxiety of my family's ultimate separation, all the while trying to deal with my own mental health.

Given my family's problematic situation, I always wondered what my life would be like if I never left Taiwan or if I had a different settlement experience. Ruolee's character development is what I would've wanted to happen if I could magically "redo" my childhood. In a similar way, her story started by being forced to confront two separate cultural identities. She was heartbroken when she was subjected to bullying at school, greatly disappointed from all the hopes and aspirations she had before her arrival She sank into an even deeper despair after realizing that the plant seed, symbolizing her connection to her heritage roots, would not grow in Canada. Through Mr. Shujin's efforts in introducing Ruolee to community recreation programs, Ruolee not only learned botany knowledge but also forms invaluable friendships overtime. Her experience highlighted how finding belonginess to a community and establishing membership in local social groups play important roles in identity formation (Cheung, 2023a). Furthermore, her eventual courage to return to school and sharing her culture knowledge signified a newfound readiness in confronting her previous bullies. Indeed, for those who were still gaining confidence in a new cultural environment,

stronger perceived support from ethnic community can buffer negative emotional response to cultural shock and discrimination (Cheung, 2023c). Finally, Ruolee's open invitation to take care of the class plant together represented an attempt at breaking down cultural barriers. A smaller detail at the receiving culture's budding acceptance occurred when Ruolee's classmates managed to slowly pronounce her name correctly instead of derogative name calling (e.g., "rice girl," "nerd") or carelessly reading the syllables. Furthermore, the different decorations on the flowerpot showed a combination of two cultures' elements; with the successful new sprout, the image symbolized early signs of successful integration in the acculturation process.

This story is by no means complete; in fact, due to my primitive drawing skills and consideration for time, I had to simplify portions of my story into a presentable class project. Even though this is just a condensed prototype of my thoughts and creative expansion on the contents I learned from this class, I gained new insights on my life through the process of careful reflection. Thank you for reading my story, and I look forward to writing more.

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Story line

Ruolee is moving across the ocean to a place named Canada. On the last sunny day, her wise and old Ah-ma gave her an olive-shaped seed.

“My child, you must take care of this new life,” Ah-ma said slowly. “I trust you to grow it into a strong and beautiful tree.”

Ruolee takes the seed and frowns, “what kind of a plant does it grow?”

“Well, that is for you to find out,” says Ah-ma with a gentle smile.

“Let’s go! We will be late for the plane!” Dad and Mom shouts from outside the hospital room.

Ruolee wants to cry. She doesn’t understand why she needs to leave. “What if I never see you again?”

Ah-ma holds her hands: they feel like soft ivy vines, grounding her little heart in a warm and safe embrace.

“You will make new friends, you will find new hobbies, and you will taste new foods!” Ah-ma tries to encourage her. “Chin up, smile, and be brave.”

On her first day at the new school, Ruolee stumbles to introduce herself because she didn’t know the right words in English.

On her second day of school, her classmates laughs and calls her “rice girl” for brining bento at lunch time.

On her third day of school, she couldn’t join any group activities and was pushed off the playground.

Ruolee can’t smile, and she doesn’t want to be brave. She wants to crawl up in the safety of her blanket. She closed her windows and draws her curtains, shutting out the sharp sunlight and freezing foreign air.

At her house, she tries to plant the seed. Nothing happens.

“Maybe there is something wrong with the soil,” Mom says.

“Maybe there is something wrong with the water,” Dad says.

Ruolee tries everything.

“Maybe the seed just doesn’t want to grow in Canada,” she whispers. “Maybe it misses home.”

On day, the seed goes missing from the window sill. Ruolee looks around in a panic.

“Oh, that? I saw a bird took it,” Dad said as he flipped his newspaper, sipping tea.

“Stop being so sentimental and go to school.”

Ruolee puts on her shoes for the first time in a week and goes out of the door.

She wades through the white and grey pebbles on the street. She waves at everyone she meets and asks for help.

“Can I put you on hold?”

“Can you find a translator?”

“Can I refer you to someone else?”

Finally, someone who understand her stops on the sidewall, “I can help you, but my next available appointment is in 4 weeks.”

Ruolee is so tired. She lies down on the dried wood chips in the middle of nowhere, thinking about her life anywhere but here.

Suddenly, she notices a stray orange cat on the grass field, chasing a blob of bird.

Ruolee follows the dash of ginger, running along a trail of flowers.

She stumbles into a big glass house, surrounded by curly vines and twisty branches. She almost falls into a pond in the middle, covered by round lily pads.

Clear water ripples as frogs trot along the edge. Purple flowers glitter underneath the dapple sunlight above.

“Do you need help” a man’s voice interrupts her thoughts.

“Yes! Please help me catch the bird and take the seed from it!” Ruolee answers without hesitation.

“Weird request. But okay.”

Mr. Shujin is a bot-a-nist – a new word Ruolee learns to mean ‘a person that takes care of plants and flowers’.

“Almost everything in my greenhouse comes from this small tropical island in the Pacific Ocean,” he points on a map in his office.

“That’s where I am from, too!” she smiles brightly. “And also this seed – but I don’t know why it doesn’t want to grow.”

Mr. Shujin looks into his big book of en-cy-clo-pe-dia, crawling with words, charts, and graphs to examine the seed. Ruolee takes notes in her tiny notebook on the temperature, sunlight, and soil nutrient needed for the seed to grow.

“If you want to learn more stories about plants and flowers, you should come to the city Nture Walk with your parents! I lead a group every week,” Mr. Shujin says.

“Maybe you will get to meet more friends there, too,” he adds.

On her class’s Show-and-Tell day, Ruolee returns to school without fear. She talks about all the vi-brant flowers and unique bio-di-ver-si-ty in her homeland.

Her classmates listen in awe. They come up to her with excited wide eyes and curious faces, eagerly asking questions.

“Rulee, can you tell me more about this flower?”

“Rolli, why can’t I find this in the park nearby?”

“Ruolee, where can I see one of the plants?”

She smiles, and she takes out her olive-shaped seed.

“I have a special plant right here! We can plant this as a class, together!”

The class works together to decorate the flower pot.

“We need a goose, for protection!”

“We need some hearts, to show our love!”

“We need a maple leaf,” Ruolee says finally, “because it is her new home.”

Everyone agrees. And everyone draws a small piece.

Ruolee holds the seed, like how Ah-ma held her hands.

“I know it will grow now. It certainly will.”

The end