

# Astronaut Monsters – An Exploration of My Familial Relationships and Identity

ASIX 300A: HONG KONG DIASPORA IN CANADA

*These days all I think about is where I'm going to go. My past has created me, taught me so many things, but it has not defined me in quite a while.*

## Astronaut Monsters

We never lived in a monster home  
We only had monsters living at home  
Blending in seamlessly  
Nothing stirred the surface  
Nothing out of place.

We were the monsters living at home, my brother and I  
Mature, highly adaptable  
Monsters that penetrated whatever society introduced to –  
Wreaking havoc on no one but ourselves.

I loved my mother, father, and brother  
I love my mother, father, and brother

People say the real astronaut was my dad,  
For every 7 days he's back –  
He's a stranger for 3, an acquaintance for 2, a friend for 1 and then finally  
Finally  
He feels like family for 1  
But then he is gone.  
Gone for another three  
Three weeks  
And then it repeats, repeats, repeats, and repeats.  
A familiar stranger.

I can no longer recall the anger and frustration I had  
All I know is the love we share and how he is my dad  
And no one can take that away from me.

My mom, my mother, my mommy,

媽媽，媽，老媽

So traditionally Chinese,

Yet,

Her love for her family trumps it all

Seeing all the damage accumulated, she guided us to help

Bringing us personally

Changing, evolving, bending

She never gave up,

Changing environments, people, foods

Home wasn't anything but Her

And my brother?

We were the same same same yet different.

Saw and tasted the same things –

Yet it manifested and festered drastically different.

His experience is not mine to tell.

We were all astronauts.

*Survivors, thrivers*

*Drifters, grifters.*

Tethered, untethered

Lost, finding our way

A mish mash of skills and personalities

Sent here and there.

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Before I delve into the reflection and an explanation behind my words, here's a brief foreword of the state I approached this assignment in.

*In present time, I think I might view the labelling of who I am ethnically or culturally with a lot less seriousness and gravity than my peers. To me, that sort of labelling isn't something super informative. I'm more concerned about a person's passions, character, and interests when I get to know someone right now.*

*As I took this course, it forced me to contemplate and reflect a lot of the past that I no longer worry about and the things I made amends with. To be honest, I kind of forgot a lot of the internal strife and cognitive dissonance that I associated with my identity and my past. Or rather, I realized throughout this course I struggled (and still do) with my identity growing up but never in the way of "am I Asian enough, I'm Chinese Canadian, I'm Canadian Chinese, self-hatred for my heritage". It was always more of a "I have no idea what I want, I'm not good enough, less than a whole person, what am I doing" sort of way. My family's constant migration every three years to a new place (Canada, America, Taiwan) played a part in this struggle, but at the same time I realized that my relationship with my family always provided a reassurance and about what I consider the more black and white part of my identity. I am Taiwanese Canadian; the order of those words does not matter, and I get to pick and choose the best of both worlds.*

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When I watched the documentary, "One Way", I felt a multitude of emotions. What stood out to me was a sort of sadness and pain. The story of Fiona and Ah Man brought images of my own parents to the forefront of my mind. Fiona and Ah Man's story depicts the struggle behind migration and the strength required to build a life in a new place (Wei and Ma, 2022). I think about my parents leaving Taiwan, the place they spent their whole lives, trying to give their young children a better life. When Fiona and Ah Man were struggling with English, finding housing, jobs coupled with childcare, I only saw my parents (Wei and Ma, 2022). I cognitively knew immigration was a hard venture, but the well filmed documentary acutely draws on pathos. I could clearly see the love they had for their children. It gave me respect for Fiona and Ah Man that extends towards all migrants.

These emotions are primarily what drove me to write this poem/ prose about my own family. I have a reasonably good relationship with all members of my family, and I felt there was a lot of unspoken feelings and understandings I had about each member that I wanted to record and expel from my body. For the sake of ease, I am going to do my best to delve into my poem chronologically and explain the inspirations behind the things I wrote and included.

*“We never lived in a monster home / We only had monsters living at home...”*

My parents’ decision to choose a quaint, non-assuming house as our home in Vancouver could be explained by timing or monetary factors, but knowing their personalities and values, I know different. I never heard of the term “monster homes” before this class. The term “monster homes” was coined when white neighbors thought that Chinese immigrants “mutilate the areas they choose to settle in ...They have no right to devastate the residential areas”, in regard to Chinese immigrants building new home (Madokoro, 2011). As I learned about historical context and attitudes towards monster homes, it clicked in my head as to why my parents chose the home we lived in. My parents never wanted to stand out, they wanted a peaceful, inconspicuous life for us. If they moved here only to expose us to hate and racism, the mission for a better life for us would be nulled. By choosing to live in a monster home would only fuel the animosity and clash (perceived or not) between us immigrants and the existing Canadian population.

*“We were the monsters living at home, my brother and I / Mature, highly adaptable / Monsters that penetrated whatever society introduced to”*

My parents especially my mom always remarked how my brother and I didn’t give her much trouble when we were growing up. This statement never meant a lot to me, it was really just a passing ego boost. But as I read the article depicting evidence for a sensitive period for acculturation in younger immigrants, gears began turning in my head. The research results highlighted how “acculturation occurs most rapidly at younger ages, a pattern that provides evidence for a sensitive period of acculturation” (Cheung, B. Y. et. Al, 2011). As I visit back and forth between Taiwan and North America, I can easily see the jarring differences in culture, values, and even scenery. Yet, I never experienced the same culture shock as I can see now moving between these continents as a kid. I was nervous moving schools and meeting new people, but the change in environment was always an adventure that I easily embraced.

*And my brother?... / Saw and tasted the same things –.../ His experience is not mine to tell.”*

As I look back now, my young age definitely attributed to my steadfast adaption as I moved, since “individuals who immigrated before approximately age 14.5, identification with Canadian culture increased significantly with time in Canada” (Cheung, B. Y. et. Al, 2011). This was true regardless of where I immigrated to Canada, America, or Taiwan. Funnily enough, the biggest culture shock I experienced was coming back to Vancouver as a UBC student when I was 17. On the other hand, my brother who is 7 years older than me struggled and grappled with the constant changing of environments. It is only now that I realized how his age played a big part in this different experience even though we were raised with almost identical family rules and values. Even now, it would be hard for me to tell his story.

Something that is also interesting is how my mother often had friends and family buy and send official Chinese educational materials from schools following each grade I was in. I was required to only speak to her in Mandarin. She taught me the curriculum herself and followed it closely. In her words, “I only had a small amount of time to learn my reading and writing before it would get harder and harder for me to learn Mandarin”. This aligns with younger immigrants acculturating better – their minds are more malleable and able to absorb information faster and easier.

*“People say the real astronaut was my dad... He’s a stranger for 3, an acquaintance for 2, a friend for 1 and then finally...He feels like family for 1 ...But then he is gone.../ All I know is the love we share and how he is my dad”*

My father by definition was an “astronaut”, he constantly left home to work in China and Taiwan while the rest of the family stayed in Vancouver or Seattle. We were lucky enough where my dad refused to go too long without seeing us, he would try and come visit at least once a month. Despite this, I still definitely felt the effects of having come and go all the time. I really resonated with how “studies of parental absence due to employment... can become a major stressor especially around routine entry and exit” (Irving, H. H. et al, 1999). My life routine would feel disrupted and discombobulated even though I was usually told beforehand that my dad was coming back; I suddenly had to account for a new physical presence in my life. Even more so, our father-daughter relationship was very dynamic – sometimes I didn’t know who he

was and sometimes I looked for him for advice and guidance. As we immigrated to Canada and America, the “geographic relocation significantly disrupt[ed] parent-child relation” (Irving, H. H. et al, 1999). It took a lot of effort and work for my dad and I to understand the dynamics, feelings, and actions of our relationship. At the end of the day though, I wouldn’t trade it for anything else.

*“媽媽，媽，老媽.../ Her love for her family trumps it all / Seeing all the damage accumulated, she guided us to help”*

I think it is almost common knowledge now that Asians have a stigma around mental illnesses. I carried a lot of internal baggage and chips in my shoulders from moving. I was jaded and tired – at the time I didn’t know I needed help or that it was something accessible for me. I guess my family and culture did align with the stigma and psychological help was never something that was mentioned or discussed. From the readings in class, it didn’t surprise me that “in Canada, ethnic Chinese groups are under-represented in Vancouver’s community mental health system” (Chen AW. et al, 2009). My mom and I are very close, and I often told her my worries and problems. She was the one that told me and connected me to professional help. She never cared about other people or the stigma, she was solely focused on helping me and wanting me to feel better. People are often surprised by my candidness about my struggle with depression, but I think my family played a big part in this. They never gave me a reason to feel lesser or ashamed of it and I am very grateful for that.

*“We were all astronauts in our own way. / Survivors, thrivers /Drifters, grifters.”*

I wrote this poem with a bittersweetness – a bit touched/ sad thinking about the past and glad I went through it all. I think immigrants are all astronauts on exploration missions. They are survivors. They have the strength to persevere and adapt to new environments and people. I view these people are thrivers, they have successfully built a life in a new place!

For me, a lot of my moving history made me feel like a drifter. I drifted between places and never settling on a specific place as home. Due to this, I also felt like a con because I was unsure of who I was or how I should present myself. At the end of it all, everyone’s journeys and adventure are different – everything is up to yourself to figure out and experience. I never want to trade these experiences for anything else.

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