

The Struggle of Identity: Paul Li's Experience Living as an Asian-American in the United States

On June 25, 2015, the world came crashing down. That day, Paul Li was working overseas in China when he received disastrous news: his son was dead. Killed in a drunk driving accident, Calvin Li was the complete opposite of a model Asian-American; his grades in math and science were less than spectacular, but his athleticism was incredible. He had just been accepted into the University of Maryland and had a bright future ahead of him. Sadly, Calvin had gone to a party with alcohol and after the party, he got into a car with a drunk driver. The driver crashed the car with four other people inside; Calvin and another teenager Alex died, but the driver and the other passenger survived. Paul Li expressed many regrets about this incident; he not only lost his son but left a conflict unresolved forever. Just like any other family, they had arguments, especially about their Chinese heritage. Calvin rejected his culture; he wanted to fit in with everyone else in his community and be the stereotypical American: good at sports and bad at school. In this aspect of just wanting to be like everybody else, Paul Li can empathize with his son. As a first-generation Asian-American, Paul Li knows that "a lot of [Asian Americans] just wish [they] looked the same as other people. So [they] can just be like everybody else. In the early nineties when walking into the room, everybody would look at [Paul Li] like 'who is this guy?' because everybody else was white." He himself wanted to fit in at his own school, Cornell University.

In 1991, Paul Li was the only Chinese person in his classes at Cornell University. He had just arrived in the US from China and felt isolated from everyone else, purely because he was one of the only Asians. Today, there are Asians everywhere on college campuses, but it was a lot different back then. The hardest part for Paul Li was the cultural shock. He had no relatives and no friends in the United States. It was an "incredible, painful [first] nine months" and "on top of [the culture barrier] it was the language barrier." In school, he couldn't understand what his professors were teaching, so he used a cassette tape recorder. During class, he would bring the tape recorder and record the entire class. Afterward, he would play it back to understand it, as his professors talked too fast for him to comprehend. He overcame the listening barrier roughly one year after arriving in the United States. However, it took a lot longer for Paul Li to feel comfortable speaking English publicly. He describes speaking as "difficult to translate what [he has] inside of [himself] to what [he] can communicate to other people." Being Asian-American wasn't all bad though. He earned an education and became fluent in a new language. He explained his experience as similar to being an outsider and going through challenges. Being Asian-American is "very difficult, but life is like that. [He] still remember[s] that when [he] was in China when [he] moved to a new city, [he] got picked on because [he was] an outsider. There are challenges living in every society. Perhaps the challenges here (America) are greater. [He] would encourage everybody to look at it a different way. To transform the challenges into opportunities, because that's the pressure they're (the challenges) putting on you and that pressure is good for our growth, our personal growth. Without pressure, we wouldn't grow. If we are so comfortable, we get so habituated in our own comfort zone, we wouldn't be able to grow.

So I would encourage all of us to view our challenges as an opportunity to learn, to be a better self, and to grow. So I would say that there are a lot of downsides, but you can turn that downside into upsides. You can turn that downside into opportunity.”

Paul Li describes that when growing up in a mix of Asian culture and American culture, the hardest part for second-generation Asian-Americans is that they “always want to be somebody else...It’s challenging [their] own identity.” “Psychologically, that’s the biggest downside.” From this, many questions arise: Who do they want to be? Why are they confused about who they are? How can parents help these troubled children? In order to answer these questions, he donated roughly 1 million dollars to the study of second-generation Asian-Americans at the University of Maryland. One issue he recognizes is that “often [first generation Asian-American parents] work so hard to put bread on the table, we forget about emotional needs of our children.” Another issue is that most questions about Asian-Americans are answered and supported by research; the main issues are distributing that research to be widely available to the general public, translating it into a community impact to positively benefit the Asian-American community, and using it to help parents communicate with their children. Communication has been cited by Paul Li as one of the major reasons that he didn’t understand and wasn’t able to support his son before the accident. He understands that “the issue [he] had was that [he] never had an open discussion with [his] children about the alcohol drinking. Only after the [accident], I started to talk to my daughter about going to parties: what you should do, what you can do, and how you can be careful about your own safety.

After his son’s death, Paul Li decided to work towards changing alcohol laws in Maryland to give legal responsibility in the form of jail time to adults who distributed alcohol illegally to minors at parties. The man who provided alcohol at the party was only fined 5,000 dollars, 2,500 for each teenager killed in the crash. This was a small slap on the wrist for indirectly killing two people. Paul Li didn’t want any other parent to experience the same pain that he went through, so he decided to advocate for stronger punishment. The bill he introduced would have a 5,000 dollar fine and possibly one year of jail time for the first offense. For the second offense, there would be a 7,500 dollar fine and up to two years in jail. At the time, Maryland legislators had worries about giving this legal responsibility in the form of jail time, as many teenagers’ parents would be considered criminals, especially because these alcoholic parties are very common. However, the bill (Alex and Calvin’s law) was passed by the Maryland General Assembly and is now an official law. At parties, some people, especially Asian-Americans, may be pressured to drink, simply to fit in and be “normal.” Underage drinking is a regular occurrence for these teens. In these situations, Paul Li’s advice is “don’t be afraid to be different.”

“We are different. People perceive us as different. Sometimes they even perceive us as foreign.

Even you guys who were born here sometimes people treat you like foreigners. I know how frustrating that is because I can certainly see that frustration in my son and in my daughter. But life, such is life. People have biases, implicit and explicit, and it’s difficult all of a sudden to

change everyone's mind. You can do what you can do is feel proud of being yourself. Feel proud of being different and feel proud of your own cultural identity and your own cultural heritage.

Because the Asian culture is quite unique and is quite complementary to the Western culture. And we do have something unique to offer. So if we look at it that way instead of shying away from our own culture and heritage and trying to integrate, trying to be like someone else, trying to so-called assimilate, why not just embrace your own culture, embrace your uniqueness embrace your difference so you can bring something different to the table, you can contribute something unique.” —Paul Li