

# UC Merced

## The Vernal Pool

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A Culture of Two Worlds

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## **A Culture Of Two Worlds**

I still remember the first time I ordered beef in front of my parents. It was one thing for me to be a non-vegetarian at all, but to gorge on a hamburger at our local BJ's was something else. Jokingly, my mother shook her head and said, "What a Brahmin you are". A Brahmin, according to Hinduism, is a member of the highest caste; they're saintly, abstaining from eating meat of any kind, with beef off limits for every Hindu. My father followed this rule; my brother and I, needless to say, did not.

I am the first member of my family to be born in the United States. My older brother of six years came here when he was an infant, but he himself was born in Hyderabad, India. But to say that either of us fully assimilated to the culture of the United States or India would be a far cry from the truth. Initially, I believed this to merely be my brother and I in a unique situation, whereas other immigrants like us were able to quickly adjust to the new culture of the United States. But time and a growing intrigue regarding literature showed me how universal being a first generation citizen was. Questions have sprouted through my mind since coming to this realization; why this happens, what bridges the gap, and what will ultimately happen when two wildly different cultures collide in the same person?

There appears to, in those who identify as first generation immigrants, be a dissonance between the culture they are raised in and that of their families. I am defining dissonance here as merely a separation from that culture, not hatred, for there is still a great feeling of respect for the culture that their families are ultimately from. I was fortunate enough to grow up in the Silicon Valley, in none other than the home of Apple itself, Cupertino. The tech world found its home in the Silicon Valley, with the nearby San Jose having a huge host of startups, big companies, and

even a tech museum that showcases a variety of devices with the aim of education regarding various subjects. The population in Cupertino has a majority of Asian residents and, at our schools, this held true. It was filled with others who, like me, were either the first or one of the first members of their family to be attending school in America. Until my junior year, I never really stopped to think about it, other than just halfheartedly saying, “Cupertino is a bubble”. We would say this because of how seemingly different our own high school and childhood experiences were from what you’d see in popular television or literature. The nerds were the cool kids, even the jocks had great GPAs and SAT scores, and almost everyone wanted to be an engineer of some sorts. But leaving Cupertino has helped put into perspective what exactly about it was a bubble; the culture that formed between the high school students there.

As a generation coming from two different countries and cultures, we are given two different perspectives on how to fit into society: that of where our families are from, and that of America. Yet it is difficult to determine which of these we identify more with, if we do identify more with either at all. The struggle of this even carries into adulthood; looking at the University, I see students grappling with their two identities to try and make something out of it. Analyzing pages like “siliconvalleyprobs” on Instagram puts this struggle on display as well, with certain memes and jokes that could only work for a first generation immigrant, like how the world of our parents is so much different from our own. It’s no wonder the page was popular among my friends in high school. The ability for it to connect to both our families and America’s culture struck a particularly sweet chord. It’s the struggle to carry your family’s torch combined with that struggle of carving your own identity out.

I gave a survey out to friends and peers regarding this question of culture, and the responses were quite telling. Out of 17 responses, every single one at least felt a little bit of a connection to the culture of their parents. On a scale of one to five, one being not connected and five being very connected, the breakdown goes at such: 23.5% marked two, 35.3% marked three, 29.4% marked four, and the remaining 11.8% marked five. Evidently, not all of the responders felt as connected to their culture as others, but their reasoning showed an interesting pattern. Though a majority felt as though they were not forced into the culture, they did note being still immersed in that culture through what their parents did. From my experience, I still identify fairly strongly with Indian culture due to the casual and fun ways my parents showed me my own culture. Through Amar Chitra Katha comics I learned about Hindu mythology, such as through the epic of the Mahabharata. Through festivals and parties I have felt the vibrant culture of India, enjoying the colorful energy of Holi and the nightly prayer of Ganesh Chaturthi both. Through Marathi being one of the languages often used in my house, I made a strong connection to what one of the many languages of India is.

Yet, there were a few responses that noted not a pressure from parents to identify with the culture, but rather peer pressure to adapt and be more American — a pressure I myself have felt as well. I believe that is one of the reasons why there's such a connection between first generation immigrants and their culture. It's connecting with both aspects of our homes, and therein giving us a larger range to connect to. But that is a double edged sword, as it isn't easy to figure out which one is really you and which you feel pressure to be.

During my junior year of high school, I had the opportunity to read Amy Tan's *Joy Luck Club* as a summer assignment for that year's literature class. It tells the tale of four different first generation immigrant families, and the relationships between the mothers and daughters of the family. While reading I had this strange feeling of connection, but it wasn't until discussing it with my classmates that I realized where that was coming from. I felt it with the duality of the tense past relationship I had with my parents at the time (Tensions were rather high thanks to college applications), compared to that striking love for them I still felt. For the daughters, their families ideals and traditions flowed through them like the blood they shared with their mothers, but comes to be at odds with the expectations that an American society has for them. It was reading this novel and seeing the acclaim it received when it really dawned on me, that this is not something unique to me, rather it's a universal trait first generation immigrants across the nation share. The drive in our families to keep their culture alive in us, combined with the natural curiosity and pressure to conform creates a fire within us which can be confusing and scary to deal with.

The ways in which I, as well as my high school peers, accepted our cultures created an interesting dissonance, where we seem to be trapped between the culture of our family and the culture we are immersed in now. But who says it can't be both? Who is to say that we have to conform to one or the other and not find a way to blend and mix them together as cultures ideally should? To create that new identity and to stand proud by what you see as your culture is incredibly significant, and an opportunity that only you can make for yourself. That uniqueness doesn't take away from being a member of this culture —it carves out your place.