

## Sasha Tan

Everyone adored Saturdays. I loathed them. Unlike my peers, my weekend wouldn't start until Sunday.

For over 8 years, 7 hours of my Saturdays were spent in a small classroom at a Japanese school. I learned multiplication tables through a Japanese song and worked on perfecting my shuji brush strokes. Around 4th grade, the classes became harder to keep up with, especially balancing them with regular school. I dreaded Saturdays, and my mother only heard complaints. "I don't even want to speak Japanese; I won't live there anyway; what's the point?" Even just looking at my Japanese textbooks filled me with contempt.

One summer, I attended a Buddhist camp surrounded by Japanese Americans who were unable to speak their mother tongue. They were in awe of my effortless Japanese proficiency. It struck me that they were unable to communicate with their family back in Japan. None of them had the privilege to be immersed in their grandparents' childhood stories or watch Japanese comedies with their aunt snuggled up under the kotatsu. I felt foolish. My mother wanted to bridge the communication gap between us and give me a sense of pride in my culture. While this seems pretty clear now, as a child, I figured my mother just wanted me to suffer.

Upon returning from camp, I began to appreciate Saturdays that I once viewed as monotonous. I felt eager to absorb all the information I was taught and pushed myself to perform well on arduous exams. Soon, my mother—unable to ignore my gradual improvement—asked what had changed. Dumbfounded, I was unable to give a concrete answer at that moment. Later, I realized I was fueled by my subconscious gratitude. Somewhere within all of my indignation, I knew that giving up my precious Saturdays was a requisite to adeptly communicate with my extended family.

Visiting Japan this spring further strengthened my ties to my heritage. Pinching delicate dumpling skin while conversing with my aunt and picnicking under blossoming sakura. I visited the Isshinji temple to offer prayers and to honor my Ojichan and Obachan. My mother taught me the proper way to light incense and place offerings on the altar. I felt more connected with my grandparents and to engage in such a sacred cultural practice.

Although I may have missed numerous birthday parties and school events, I gained a priceless education. Bilingualism has provided me with a means to have deeper connections and more nuanced conversations with my family. My ability to speak both Japanese and English has opened up endless possibilities, which have been defined by different cultures and histories. I have continued to immerse myself in Japanese culture, especially by taking on the role of president of a volunteer club at my temple. I successfully led and fundraised for Japanese ceremonial events and continue to care for the elderly temple members. Even today, I find myself humming the Japanese multiplication song in my head when I am solving equations. For this, I am perpetually arigatai.