

NO LONGER A FOREIGNER

MY EXOTIC LOOKS

FINALLY BLEND IN Day's Lee



I was born and educated in Montreal, but while I was growing up, and for many years thereafter, people asked me where I was from, no matter how well I spoke English and French. Experience taught me that exotic looks in this country meant one was a foreigner.

Times have changed. I was at a social event with a number of strangers when someone asked, "Where are you from?" I was about to reply when I realized the question wasn't directed at me; it was aimed at a friend who was standing beside me, Jane, a woman with a peaches-and-cream complexion, brown eyes and short, wavy hair. At a glance, nothing about her screams "foreigner." However, when she speaks, her British accent rings out strong and clear. New acquaintances immediately take note, and Jane's origins quickly become the topic of conversation. It's a situation I find amusing, especially when I'm standing next to her. My oriental looks don't pique their interest. Have I finally achieved Canadian nirvana?

When I was a young girl, I was often complimented on my mastery of the English language. Even though I didn't have a Chinese accent, people assumed I was a recent immigrant. I imagine they took their cue from my parents, who emigrated from China in the first half of the 1900s. My father had taught himself English and my mother barely spoke it at all. If I spoke French, people were certain I was Vietnamese. It was the only possible explanation.

Occasionally, I met people whose knowledge of Chinese history and culture exceeded mine. They spoke of the Ming Dynasty or the Tang Dynasty as if I, too, were a student of Ancient China. I listened in silence, too embarrassed to admit the only dynasty I knew of starred Joan Collins and Linda Evans.

Curious glances often turned into polite inquiries. Questions about my birthplace were a common occurrence. I wondered why I had to explain it at all. So, I decided to turn the tables on my inquisitors and asked about their own background. I was surprised and pleased to learn that most of them came from elsewhere. We often fell into pleasant conversations about the food we ate, the sound of our language and traditions. Being different, I discovered, is interesting.

Jane has been in Canada for almost 20 years now. She doesn't mind if people are curious about her birthplace, but there have been times when she wished she wasn't asked as soon as she said "Hello."

Another friend, Cathy, who arrived from England about 25 years ago, gets a bit mischievous with people who are charmed by her speech. She switches her northern inflection into a Cockney accent, and peppers the conversation with British expressions.

"People love it," Cathy says, about the feedback to her use of colourful jargon. Even though people respond positive-

ly to her accent, she swears she's lost most of it. Whenever she goes back to England for a visit, her family and friends tell her she sounds Canadian.

It's been years since simply being Chinese elicited curious glances from strangers. The road to get to where my ethnicity is overlooked was a long one. Decades ago, before it was politically incorrect, people openly voiced their objections to the influx of "yellow foreigners." Back then, every so often, kids and even some adults would fling open the door to my family's restaurant and yell, "Go back home to China!" and then run off. My parents patiently shook their heads at such behaviour. As a child, I thought such cries were ridiculous. I had never even been to China, so how could it be my home?

On the other hand, years later when I travelled to the Orient as an adult, I stood out as foreign as, well, a Canadian. Once, I was wandering one of the busy shopping districts of Hong Kong and attempted to communicate with the locals. We always started off trying to figure out what dialect we each spoke, but it didn't matter as I always ended up asking if they spoke English.

The day has finally arrived where I blend in with the general population, and that may in part be due to the fact that the general population has changed. The Chinese are now the largest visible minority group in Canada. Living in a metropoli-

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tan city like Montreal, with its large Asian population, makes being Chinese less of a phenomenon.

Over the years, though, the question itself has changed, and so has its tone. It's no longer one of whether or not I belong here. Instead of assuming I immigrated to Canada, people now ask what nationality I am. It's a question I'm happy to answer, and ask in return. Taken in the right light, it's a question that acknowledges the many ethnic groups that make up Canada's population. In a country populated by immigrants, looking different is now the norm.