Culture: Respect the Memories

People who move to a foreign and drastically different society often find themselves struggling to maintain their original cultural identity when they immigrate from their home country. **So how does one retain this (cultural) identity when in a new country?** Authors Wayson Choy and Alex Deng are both sons of Asian immigrants in North America. Their cultural identity is an integral part of who they are as Westerners. Using their personal experiences as inspirations, Wayson and Deng created the short story “The Jade Peony” and the slam poem “What Kind of AsianAre You*”* respectively. “Jade Peony” follows the exploits of a Chinese-Canadian family in Vancouver as they navigate between the traditional Chinese values of the grandmother and the Western ideas of the children. Alex Deng recounts the difficulties of being a Vietnamese immigrant in the USA because of the stereotypes and the expectations from Americans. **Despite their differences in formatting and expression, the two pieces of literature managed to convey the same message. The writings tell of the difficulty of keeping a clear cultural identity under the prejudice and pressure of their society. Ultimately, they also show how individuals new to our country can overcome this challenge if they retain their precious memories and respect their culture regardless of adversity.**

Despite the similarities in their themes, the two sources are formatted and expressed in unique manners. “What Kind of Asian are you*”* is a slam poem meant to give a strong, clear and emotional message in a shorter timeframe through concise choice of words. Alex accomplished this by using sensory details, powerful words and most importantly, allusions. The references made in the poem range from historical to cultural; from the mention of the Meiji era, to talks of Asian portrayal in pop culture these allusions instantly creates relatability and grabs attention. Overall, the poem made its message clearly. “The Jade Peony*”*, however, lacks the fast-paced assertiveness of the poem; instead, the short story is told in a realistic, descriptive and immersive manner with fleshed out characters. The story’s theme is woven into the plot with seamless subtlety. The story shows the theme, not tell. The messages are conveyed indirectly through the character’s experiences, such as how grandma cherished her culture because of her love story; this fact about grandma was never blatantly said, but can be inferred upon repeated readings. This intricacy separate the two writings beside their difference in formatting. Neither methods is necessarily for better or worse, yet it can be concluded that the two are different despite their similar themes.

Even though they are presented in unique ways, the writings both expressed the difficulty to hold onto one’s cultural identity if the society is intolerant of who they are. Alex listed many Asian stereotypes such as “chink”, “jook” and “zipperhead” to demonstrate how his ethnicity is being ridiculed. Even if one ignores these derogatory terms, the misrepresentation and ignorance of the society concerning Asian culture is still frustrating to Deng. This is evident when he says, “Let me tell you about being so marginalized / it's to the point of ‘I really can’t believe that’s Asian,’” (Deng, 33-34). These experiences is obviously why frustration and confusion can build up in someone regarding their identity. If the society does nothing against someone other than mockery and jeers, said person will doubtlessly lose self-confidence. *The Jade Peony* conveyed similar message. The short story used the two older siblings to symbolize people who have turned away from their culture as a result of society’s rejection. It is not directly stated in the story that the siblings have been discriminated, but upon closer inspections this conclusion can be reached. The siblings, despite being raised in a Chinese household repeatedly complains of their study of Mandarin. When they are questioned, “’And you do not complain about Latin, French or German in your English school?’ brother Kiam responds, ‘…those languages are scientific…We are now in a scientific, logical world,’” (Choy, 39). One has to wonder, why does a child think the language spoken by their parents to be inherently illogical? The answer is that the child has been living in a society that dismiss his culture and encourage him to choose the “superior” western tongue. These are the ways the two writings show the challenge of clinging to one’s culture in a society that denies it.

Societal pressure is clearly suppressive towards one’s expression, but in both novels it is implied that if one feels strongly of their culture, they can hold on to it against opposition. Alex Deng repeated by the end that he still has pride for his culture because Asians have great achievements throughout history such as the Chinese success in building: “…train tracks for / this country to be connected” (Deng, 53-54) and “the heat and pious dedication” (Deng, 68) of the Vietnamese Buddhist monk on June 11th 1963. This is why Alex “…still feel[s] pride” (Deng, 88) as a Chinese-Vietnamese living in America. In the short story, a similar message is represented by grandma. The old lady have weird habits she brought from China such as making wind chimes out of glass junk and exploring back alleys for hidden “treasures”. Her children and neighbors all think she is somewhat crazy, but she continues on anyway. Grandma is able to stay true to herself because her culture reminds her of the tragic and bittersweet love story she experienced in China. Every time she makes her wind chime, practice her tricks or look at her peony it fills her with nostalgia and fondness; therefore, it is understandable that she is still proud of her identity. From this evidence, it is quite apparent that if one has strong feelings and memories of their culture, it will not be difficult to remain who they are.

In conclusion, despite the difference in formatting and devices, “What Kind of Asian are You” and “The Jade Peony” both echo the hardship of staying true to oneself when surrounded by societal pressure. It is clear that a strong respect of a culture coupled with cherished memories help one remain themselves. Still, it seems unfitting that one has to put in extra effort to be who they are. The society should be supportive of someone’s culture, not reject it and force people to yield to the social norm. This is what everyone in our society should learn to do to help new immigrants thrive in our country.