



Evelyn Shi, Ivy League Prep Client
Admitted to Emory University Class of 2027
Common App Essay

I had been waiting in line for ten minutes. The wind cut and stung my face mercilessly at below-zero temperatures. With a runny nose, I stood on my tiptoes to try and eyeball the students in front of me but the smog floating up from the vendor’s cart obscured my calculations. After another five more minutes, finally, it was my turn.

“A classic, please.”

“Got it!”

Similar conversations happen every day this way.

In my hometown, Jianbing guozi is the most common and beloved breakfast since it is affordable and delicious. Every morning at precisely 7 AM, I would join the rush of hungry students and gather around all the food vendors at the school gates. This experience – punctuated by smog, sharp laughter, and mung beans – was so normal for me, but also so magical. During the freezing winter of northern China, holding a hot Jianbing guozi is the most delightful thing that I can imagine in the morning; it is the easiest happiness within reach.

However, my landscape changed drastically when my parents decided to move the family to the United States for better education and a higher quality of life. The smog and schools, they said, would not serve me. Scared and excited, I traversed six thousand miles with hopes, leaving behind the aroma of mung beans.

Although I thought I could easily adapt to the US, I failed miserably at first. Life in America felt much more complicated. And though I could stuff myself on so-called Chinese dishes – General Tso’s orange chicken, the cloying sauces and foreign tastes made it nearly intolerable. Nauseous in more ways than one, I ached for the genuine delicacies of my motherland. I couldn’t help but question my decision to move. Maybe I wasn’t ready to leave so quickly.

Such concerns afflicted me until the first time I stood in front of the stove with a wooden span in my hand. The long-term yearning over classic Chinese cuisine had, at last, compelled me to the kitchen myself. And though I got burnt countless times by the jumping drops of oil, my dishes got more delicious and traditional with every experiment. During every Chinese festival, I would bring the delicacy that I had made to share with my teachers and friends: mooncake for Mid-Autumn Festival, Zongzi for Dragon Boat Festival. As they delighted in and praised my contributions, I suddenly realized that Chinese culture was not “unacceptable” in foreign



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countries, but simply inaccessible and misunderstood. It only lacked a proper way for people to experience it. As time went on, my understanding of different cultures and the fascinating products of cultural exchange has only deepened: even orange chicken, with some context and a little less sauce, tastes pretty good nowadays. Every dish has a story, no matter where it comes from.

The mellow mung bean smell that floated through my whole childhood represents my purest passion and pride in Chinese culture. It is an imprint that is marked on my soul and will carry on inside me forever. Whenever I step out of my comfort zone to promote my culture, every time I let go of preconceptions to learn something new and beautiful, I remember the cold winds and the Jianbing Guozi that I'd hold so preciously. While I was growing up, the most significant lesson that I learned is that we lead a richer life when we are able to cultivate a wide range of tastes. My life experiences in the last several years have taught me the importance of taking initiative. After all, I learned how to be an ambassador to the things I loved – my people, my foods, my values – when I was plunged into a world where people didn't always look like me. I'm thankful that we learn to connect with different people and parts of ourselves through something as simple as a meal.