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Campo Student Discusses Growing Up Asian

By Lou Fancher



Author Cynthia Meng Photo Lou Fancher
ethnicity.

Sweet sixteen has never looked so good. We're not talking about this year's basketball tournament, we're talking about Cynthia Meng. The Campolindo High School junior and author of a new book, *Outstanding: Growing Up Asian*, is proud, articulate, given to quick smiles and startling honesty.

"My mother and I have always had a turbulent relationship," Meng begins, "I want to be independent and she really knows what she wants for me." The quintessential parent/teenager turmoil quickly gains a layer of intrigue; especially when she goes on to say, "She knows me so well-I mean, she could pick out clothes for me!" Now, we're on to something: a 16-year old, bursting to break free, but hanging on dearly to her family for familiarity and security.

Last summer, Susan Wang decided her daughter should write a book to boost Meng's chance of gaining admission to one of the Ivy League schools in her sites. Inspired by *Getting Into Yale*, a spicy account of another student's efforts to get into the college of his choice, by Josh Beregin, Wang put the pressure on her daughter. At first, Meng was doubtful, then resentful, a point made candid in her book. Filled with loathing and love, the resulting journal rides the storm of summer piano camp, SAT study courses, volunteer work at the Chinatown Children's Community Center, and Meng's wavering self-confidence. "In Asian culture," she says, "you're always compared to others." The competitive lifestyle is meant to push kids down just enough to make them want to rise up; a tricky approach when dealing with teenagers.

Flowing between the strands of conflict in Meng's search for independence, there is thoughtful appreciation. Moraga, which she prefaces most often with the word, "sheltered," is also the place she credits with the area's strong sense of community. "The area-it makes you friendlier because it's nurturing," she says. Poetry and music also provide pleasure. "What's interesting about both is how the phrases are built," she says, "there's tension and release." The same could be said about her relationship with her parents and her

Working in Chinatown, she became aware of her ambiguous connection to her ethnic background. "We [she and a fellow worker] were both teenagers, both children of immigrants, but we were just so different because of where we grew up." There's a slight discomfort in her tone, as if her authenticity or her allegiance to her Chinese heritage is lessened by virtue of her surroundings.

Like all teens and many good storytellers, Meng recovers quickly. Dreams of college somewhere on the East Coast fill her with enthusiasm. "I want to get out, be on my own," she begins. Her future plans form a worthy list: college, law degree, successful career, family, stay-at-home mom. Asked what she wants parents and people in general to know about her generation, she says, "I can't speak for all teenagers, but there are different levels of excellence. There's smart like book smart, but there's also street or creative smart: there are different aspects that are outstanding."

Outstanding: Growing Up Asian, is available at

The Storyteller bookstore in Lafayette, the Lafayette Bookstore,

Canetti's Bookshop in Orinda, and Amazon.com.

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