

Dear Asian tourists of MIT,

Most students know you as a herd. Most students know you as the clot which arrests traffic in the infinite hallway, as the slow-moving, gawking blockade marked by yellow tour flags. The institute's rush hours are timed with the arrivals of your long tour buses, and when you spill out onto the sidewalk like a stain, that's our signal to walk through the tunnels or ascend to the second floor hallway, anywhere you won't be. But you are inescapable. You are as familiar as the staircases and the curling posters on the walls; the sound of your chattering voices is woven permanently between the molecules of air. We have seen a thousand times over the cameras hung from your necks and wrists, the selfie sticks extended and swaying from your outstretched hands, the backpacks and purses clinging to your shoulders, the graphic tees with Harvard or MIT or nonsensical English written in big letters, the blouses and collared polo shirts and khaki pants and long skirts paired with sneakers.

There are other tourists, but you're different. You're the *Asian* tourists, which means you are oblivious to the way you block the hallway or crowd the bathrooms, and you take the same selfies like clockwork: in front of Lobby 7, in Killian Court, and underneath the Alchemist statue by the student center. You also come in smaller clumps, in pairs, and then you are Chinese, Japanese, Korean, in line with that semantic trickery where Americans equate Asian with anyone who looks East Asian. Your largest groups, the ones which look the same and commit the highest offenses, are most often Chinese. When I hear your loud Mandarin on my way to class in the morning, I also hear in my head the snide remarks my peers make, the ones I know you by: "A creepy Asian tourist kept looking in on lecture," "I'm going to be late for class because of them," "Why do they all have to visit a school on their vacation? It's weird."

When those friends make their complaints, I know to roll my eyes in sympathy. This is the correct response, expected in the same way a body should shiver in the cold. I understand their annoyance; you inconvenience me, too. More than that, though, you are a source of deep shame for me.

We look the same. I look like I could be one of you. When my peers refer to you as Asian tourists, I know they are more often than not referring to Chinese tourists, and I can't help but wonder if they walk down the infinite and see some essential part of you in me. Our hair is the same kind of black and straight, our noses the same kind of flat. Your language is my first language, the one I forgot in American preschool to make room for English. For many of my peers, English is the only language they've ever known. Many of them will never have their place in this country questioned, will never be asked, "Where are you *really* from?" Those kinds of peers and I sit in the same classrooms, eat the same pizzas at midnight, wear the same brands of jeans. I learned how to carry myself as they do, as if I, too, have never been asked where I'm *really* from. I learned how to roll my eyes at you. I do so out of fear, to demonstrate I am not one of you, because how can I be your same kind if I look down on you with everyone else?

My peers and I, along with most people in this country, are familiar with different categories of Asian, by which we most likely mean East Asian. There are the piano-violin-Rubik's-cube prodigies, the math-science-pre-med nerds, the quiet students with Tiger Parents and bulging backpacks, all the usual model minority myth fare. I will not ignore the privileged position that comes with this myth of success, but that is an issue for another letter. The matter that has to do with you, Asian tourists, is an issue of belonging. You, with cameras permanently installed in your hands, are the FOB kind of Asian, fresh off the boat, smacking of foreignness, and obnoxiously oblivious to the students trying to walk behind you.

You were not raised in this country as I was. You did not watch PBS Kids after school or use forks and spoons and chopsticks in equal proportion. You have not lived in this country for 30 years as my parents have; you have not lived on their shoestring budget and clawed your way through job after job without the language to protest when anyone chose to kick you down.

Yet, we look the same, which gives a red-haired man at the bus stop permission to approach me in Mandarin and ask me where my parents are from. It gives my seventh grade substitute history teacher permission to say my last name in a way he thinks is right, wink, and then announce that he knows the way *you people* say Yang. In the moment, such mistakes feel simple and inevitable, sparked by the visual links between us that can never be severed. If we can't help looking the same, the only thing left for me to do is to roll my eyes with my complaining friends, to stride past your tour groups and hope you won't embarrass me. I want nothing to do with you, so I can signal that the United States is my home, and not wherever you are from. However, because we look the same, you seek me out to ask for directions. I point one way or another, avoiding my Mandarin, holding you at arm's length.

One afternoon on my way out of the library, an Asian man in wireframe glasses stopped me. He was wearing a blue collared shirt, khaki pants, and a baseball cap. I thought he would speak to me in Mandarin as you do, and I felt a twinge of shame at my assumption when he said in moderately accented English, "Can you tell me where Memorial Drive is?" I directed him as he stood there apologetically. He thanked me and ran off, saying, "I'm parked there, and I don't want a ticket!" This could have been just another instance, like many others, where an Asian person asked me for directions, but he reminded me so much of my father. The khaki pants paired with Reeboks, the baseball cap, the embarrassment in his tone while asking for help. I could imagine my dad running off to save his car from parking meters.

As I walked home that day, I thought about my parents. It occurred to me that in many respects, when they first emigrated to the United States, they were very much like you. They didn't know the language and social norms of this foreign country. They were the ones who stopped others with faces like theirs, who asked people like me for directions. My parents, who were so like you, are real people to me, individuals with dreams and favorite foods and songs they sing along to. For the first time, I realized that you are real people to others in your lives.

After that walk home, I began watching you. I saw a grandmother with magenta lips and a perm usher two little giggling girls into the bathroom. I saw a student with sharp cheekbones and a red backpack staring up in awe at the window of light in Lobby 7's dome. I saw an old couple taking pictures of each other on the steps by the Mass Ave cross walk. The two were wearing the same maroon MIT pullovers, and I imagined them picking the sweatshirts out together. I saw mothers and fathers and sons and daughters and friends and partners laughing and talking and caught up in the magic of MIT's scientific achievements, ogling the same pillars that took my breath away every morning my freshman year.

The longer I watched you, the more ashamed I felt. The more I felt like I failed you, the more I saw that I not only failed you, I failed myself. I want you to know that I'm sorry for the times I was terse in my directions or heaved an impatient sigh from behind you, for every time I wished so hard that you would not embarrass me. You are not who I should be ashamed of. You are a vessel for projections of stereotype, and I played along with those biased views, to protect myself from the same treatment.

Because there are so many of you, because you inconvenience us MIT students, we label you, and we dismiss you, and you are no longer people—you are a joke and an obstacle. You are not just tourists—you are *Asian* tourists—and that modifier is everything, not least a

condemnation. I'm sorry I rolled my eyes at you, at an aspect of your identity that informs mine as well. I do to you what I would not wish on my parents, on my brother, on myself.

You and I look the same, and for you Chinese tourists, we are similar in some ways—we know how to wrap dumplings, we know how to say big and small and cold and hot and love in Mandarin, we know what street food is safe to eat. In many fundamental ways, though, we are different, and you are different from one another. The fact that we are the same in others' eyes doesn't mean I can disdain your foreignness to show I am Chinese *American*—rather, those who equate us only know what they think they see. They can't feel the biases sitting beneath their skins, just as I could not feel my own. They have not thought about what they are invoking, what they are really saying to each other, in singling you out for your Asian-ness. Blind spots were named so for a reason. I had to acknowledge that which veiled my vision before I could blink the fog from my eyes, before I could see you. The same is true for those who don't see you and me.

I am trying to make up for the time I spent pushing you away. When you ask me for directions, I speak to you in my broken Mandarin. When I wait behind you in line for the bathroom, I meet your eyes with a smile. I treat you with courtesy and approach our differences with the understanding I would want for myself, and I wonder when I started to believe that the only Asians worth accepting were the Americanized ones. Most importantly, I see you, little girl with the Mickey Mouse shoes; I see you, father with the orange messenger bag; I see you, teenage boy with the acne and the reluctant smile; I see you, and you, and you, and the next time a friend gestures in your direction, “Do you see these people?” I will ask right back, “Do *you* see them?”

对不起,

扬加雯 // Chloe