

Documents

My parents got married on a sunny day in May in Bali, Indonesia. Growing up, my sister and I would pore over the hundreds of pictures from their wedding, obsessing over what their lives were like before we existed. One of my favorites is of my mom in her shimmering sleeveless gown wrapped in my dad's arms during their first dance as a married couple.

Their wedding license—their union—was what made me and my sister Taiwanese. Or at least that is what we believed because not only is our mom Taiwanese, but it was where we visited every summer to attend Chinese camp. I spoke with the high-pitched melodic Mandarin unique to Taiwan, favored Taiwanese beef noodle soup and boba over all other Chinese cuisines, and knew the streets of Taiwan better than any other place in the world.

I guess to the Taiwanese consulate, though, this, and the fact that my *mother* is Taiwanese meant nothing. They refused to grant me and my sister citizenship. Apparently, we were “illegitimate children” because the consulate didn't accept my parent's Indonesian marriage certificate, no matter how real those wedding pictures were to me. It wasn't fair. You see, if it were my dad who was Taiwanese, simply by him being my father, he could pass down his last name, and I would be granted citizenship. However, because my mom is a woman in the Taiwanese patriarchy, her family line ended with her—along with any hopes of a Taiwanese passport for me.

Because of the consulate, I had to always stand in the long “foreigners” line at immigration, drowned in the sea of people who looked nothing like me. Because of the consulate, I was banned from stepping foot on Taiwanese soil for over three years during the COVID-19 era. Because of the consulate, I could not label myself “Taiwanese-American,” and whenever people asked what type of “Chinese” I was, I would mumble “Shanghainese,” tethering myself to a place I couldn't even recall visiting. It baffled me how a single, flimsy certificate could determine my identity, and it wasn't even my own document.

The marriage license that kept my parents together was the same one that forced me and Taiwan apart. I lost my ability to speak the native language after years of trying to bury that part of myself. Eventually, when I did go back to Taiwan, I didn't even

try to fit in anymore because no matter what I did, I would always feel like a foreigner. And all because of a single document.

As I have grown up and moved from country to country, I've realized that home and citizenship are not synonymous. I do not need a Taiwanese passport to be able to identify with its culture. So, I will go on eating my beef noodle soup and speaking in accented Mandarin and telling people that I *am* Taiwanese because I refuse to let a document, or a lack thereof, determine who I can and can't be.