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Shopping in an Ao Dai

My mom was shopping at Target in an Ao Dai. The bright, lively colors of the traditional Vietnamese dress seemed to clash with the westernized modern look of the store. The fluorescent lights up above made the once beautiful colors seem garish. I wandered away from her, hoping to get away from the attention we drew from nearby customers. Above all, I prayed that she would finish her shopping soon, so we could head home earlier. It was Lunar New Year, a time of cheer and new beginnings for my family. They decorated the front of our house with breathtaking yellow chrysanthemums that gleamed in the sunlight. They exchanged red envelopes with the old and the young. My father brought out an intricate tea set; flowers blossomed over its surface with silvery petals, ready to host anyone who graced our house during the holiday. But for most, it was just another day grocery shopping.

For a time, I was ashamed to openly celebrate my culture. I used to complain about going to temples. I refused to wear an Ao Dai, claiming that the dress was uncomfortable to move in. I was afraid that these traditions set me apart from others in a negative way. Most of all, I was ashamed that I was ashamed of my culture. My fear of judgment from others overwhelmed my ability to have a good time with my family.

As I grew older, I began to meet people like me. When I looked at their online posts during Lunar New Year, I saw them celebrating in their radiant Ao Dais, showing off all of their red envelopes. Their confidence comforted me. On more public platforms, I saw videos of strangers experiencing my culture for the first time. They complimented our food, and basked in the beauty of our clothing. For any person who disagreed, ten more people were in the comments ready to fight on our behalf. A warm sensation bloomed in my chest: pride.

From social media, I learned that the differences between me and other people didn't make me an outcast, but rather were something to be celebrated and appreciated. I started to own my culture, seeing it as something to be treasured instead of hidden. A lot of people rightfully criticize the harmful effects of social media, but we must not forget the positivity it spreads as well.