

When You'll Find Ao Dais in San Jose_Nghi Bui

By: Nghi Bui

After immigrating from Vietnam to San Jose, I realize how different they look. Maybe it's because I came from the countryside.

In memories of Hue, there's a blistering sun. It's hot. Swelteringly hot. No deodorant, air conditioning, nothing. I ran around barefoot and watched my aunties in straw hats pull out—what are they? Too ugly to be flowers...must be weeds. At the end of the day, my grandma comes home with a basket of dead fish. They reek; I hid from the stench.

San Jose is different. I shower with proper running water; I sleep on a proper mattress. When I want a sweet drink, there's a boba place around the corner. When I'm hungry, I order DoorDash pizza. Maybe tacos. Pho is good too. I haven't had curry in a while though. Doesn't matter. This city has everything.

Still, I often sit on my mom's queen sized mattress and watch Vietnamese television. Flurries of dancers twirl along with their fans; the stage lights illuminate the already vivid colors of their áo dài. I know this scene too well. My cousins and I had to learn these dances back in Vietnam. *I miss them.* Vietnam's vast farmland means plenty of room to play tag. We'd run around for miles then get some bagged milk at the convenience store. It's ok, our ancestral home is visible from a mile away. In San Jose, it's "too dangerous to go out this late", or else, "You'll get lost". But in Hue, I know the village by heart. (There are only eight places anyways) The old lady selling pho in that little stall? I know her too. In San Jose, it's always "Who are these random relatives I have to greet and pretend to know?" In our village, everyone is family.

When I begin to feel my homeland's absence, that day of the year comes around: Tết, Chinese/ Vietnamese New Years. I'll meet up with every relative I've ever heard of (and the ones I haven't). I'll play Chinese chess on the ground with random, old, Asian men before strutting into a boba shop with my friends. When I see sidewalks crowded with people wearing an áo dài, I flash back to the streams of Vietnamese students wearing their school uniforms. The glaring reds and valiant lions littered across Vietnam's culture bleed into the streets of San Jose, and suddenly, they don't look so different.

The ugly crops I called weeds and the dead fish I ran away from will eventually end up on my dinner plate, and that dinner—formed by the calloused but affectionate hands of my family—is no worse than America's endless cultural cuisines. Our house in America became proof of my mother's fight against poverty. I still get lonely here, but my family is right outside in the living room, and I still have Tết to wear my áo dài.

Neither of my worlds are perfect, but they complete each other. Fused together, like during New Years Day, creates my home.