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Dirty streets, the foul stench of rotten fish. Murky sea water being poured down the curb of every block. In about every few blocks of this Chinese neighborhood in Brooklyn, you can find an elderly Chinese lady selling what looks like imperfect rice balls from her grocery cart. They're called fish balls (鱼丸, yu wan), and you guessed it. It's made of fish. Very often stuffed with ground pork and green onions, packed with savory juices flavored by soy sauce. What's great about this food is that nothing goes to waste. The fishy outer layer is made of both crushed fish bones and fish meat which makes it a great source of protein and calcium. For a meathead like me, it's a great post workout meal; however, the most important characteristic of this food is its history. It's the signature food of my people, not American, not Chinese, not Chinese-American, Fuzhounese. Not just my country, not just my state, it comes from the very village my parents were born in. It was the food of my grandparents and their parents. Eating these foods is what keeps me in touch with my roots. Especially when those roots are losing their grip on the soil.

Growing up as a Chinese-American, many can relate to the struggle of racism against Asian-Americans. In America, there is a ranking. At least among Asians. The most attractive and acceptable Asians are Korean and Japanese, being Chinese always had some negative stigma. Korea has k-pop, Japan has anime. Those are all influences they have to show the outside world, "hey, we are cool, we make cool stuff." For China,

people think of Mao Zedong, history's most evil dictator that starved tens of millions of Chinese farmers because "there were too many mouths to feed," Communist, cheap labor, dog eaters, dirty, and maybe sometimes martial arts. Heck even we admit Chinese people are much dirtier than Korean or Japanese people. It is a running joke that if you go to an Asian restaurant that you don't know which country the staff is from, just ask to use the bathroom, if the bathroom is dirty, it's Chinese, if it's clean, it's Korean and Japanese. In my experience, this rule has never failed. I know, a lot of self-racism, but this isn't even the tip of the iceberg.

My ethnicity is Chinese, but China is huge. Being the second largest country in the world, it has 34 provinces. Even among the provinces, there's a ranking system. Yup, we Asians sure love ranking things. The Chinese were after all the first to invent the test and exams system we use today. The provinces are ranked in 3 categories. Tier 1, tier 2 and tier 3. Tier 1 cities are famous cities like Shanghai and Beijing. Tier 2 cities are cities that you probably heard less about like Xiamen and Xi' An. And you guessed it, my province's city is at the very bottom, tier 3, Fuzhou. So among the East Asian, Chinese people are viewed as the lowest ranking. Among the Chinese, Fuzhouese people are also ranked the lowest. How do other Chinese people view Fuzhouese people? Loud, rude, unhygienic and the dialect we speak sounds very unpleasant. I remember very vividly lining up for lunch when I was in 8th grade with my rich Shanghainese classmate that just emigrated to America. He asked me in English, "Hey, what part of China are you from?" I replied, "Fuzhou, why?"

And out of nowhere, he just said, “Oh, did you know that you guys are the least respected region, you guys are like lower class citizens and Shanghai is at the top.” I didn’t care about his out of pocket comment, because I already knew everything he told me. The fact that I can’t speak my dialect is a testament of my own self-racism. When I was around five, I decided to not speak Fuzhounese anymore because it sounded way too crude and unpleasant. My classmates that were also Fuzhounese started to only talk in English and I soon copied him as that was what I deemed, “cool.”

But David, why are you talking about all this self-racism crap, wasn’t this assignment about food?

Yes, and this is where I will get to the part of how fish balls made me hate myself less. Maybe.

I can’t go on and tell others about how eating fish balls makes me feel Fuzhounese and somehow that makes me love the culture/people. What I believe breaks all barriers is food. The language of food is universal. Good food is what breaks down the barriers and distance among individuals. Quoting the late Anthony Bourdain, “Food is everything we are. It’s an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It’s inseparable from those from the get-go.” When I went back to the motherland a few years ago, it was the first time in over a decade I saw my grandmother. Her kitchen was dark, dirty, and the floor filled with only stone. Walls were painted with grease stains and the stench of animal feces linger in the air. A few days before I left to head back to America, for dinner, the menu was fish balls. I didn’t love it in particular, but it was a filling meal. My grandma made it

from scratch and when I had my first bite, it was quite good. I don't know if it was the spring water they use, or it's the different type of fish, I had three bowls. My grandma looked pleased when I was eating so much of her food. When I decided to ask her to teach her how to make them. She giggled and proudly said, "you won't be able to make them in America, these are made with animals from my own farm." Bonding with my grandma through Fuzhounese food was a fond and memorable moment, but what I got out of her food was how I came to embrace the ghetto and dirty environment. The fish balls were not from a fancy ceramic tiled and spotless restaurant, but such delicious food was still made in my grandma's kitchen. For me, food was not something my internal racism was able to hate. If it was delicious, that was all that mattered. That day, maybe I was a little more proud of where I came from.