

Back to the OVAL

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Reply

From: Willa Zhen

Submitted: 1/18/2017 9:41 AM EST

Email:

Phone:

Address: Rhinebeck, New York 12574 (Valid)

Message: Dear President Obama,

I am writing to you in what are your final hours in office. It took me some time to write this letter because of all the emotions I've been feeling about your departure from office, and what you've meant to me as both president and fellow human. I am grateful that you have been our leader for the past eight years.

Let me tell you a little about what you mean to me. When you first announced your intentions for the presidency, I was ecstatic. There were so many parts of your story that sound like my story. Your mother was an anthropologist. I was a young doctoral student in anthropology. You spent years living abroad, growing up among people who are not like you. You had to learn how to navigate their customs and cultures; to make friends with people who are different. I was living in the UK at that time, figuring out why the Brits still have a separate hot and cold water tap instead of a combined faucet. (You can never get warm water there!) You spent a lot of time in Asia. I am an Asian-American. And the list goes on. I was sold right away. You were my candidate.

Fast forward to November 2008. I was just starting my fieldwork in China and I was watching the election returns from my cold studio apartment on my tiny laptop screen. I was nervous. I was scared. I had an invitation in my hand to the US consulate's election party, but I couldn't stand to be around that many people....just in case. I was scared. Were my countrymen ready for a different president? After all, some of the ugliest parts of the country had reared its head in the not-so-distant past after 9/11, when we saw a huge rise in Islamophobia and a rise in hate crimes. My president has a name that, to those who are quick to judge and slower to think, sounded suspiciously like "those people" that we are "supposed" to hate.

But you did it. When the returns became clear that you were going to make it past the finish line, I hopped in a cab to get across town to the party. I arrived and walked through the hotel ballroom door just as the emcee announced that you were our next president. I had my Democrats Abroad for Obama shirt on. It was written in English and Chinese. I was crying buckets. Some of the Chinese guests were asking me if I was okay. I'd never been better. I felt like I was being seen, because you were being seen. There were tears of joy that whole day.

Thank you for your service. Thank you for being my president. Thank you for giving us hope.