

Americans First... Or Asians Always?

By David Liu



Growing up in a Chinese American community, I was taught that an "American" was white; I was Chinese. Despite the fact that I was born in North Carolina, I was constantly asked by Chinese adults when I would "return" to China. I was told that it was a shame that I couldn't even write my "mother" tongue: Chinese.

These ideas represent those held by many Chinese Americans in my youth—and, unfortunately, by many Asian Americans today. As a result, Asian Americans have earned a reputation for being concerned only with the welfare of their individual ethnic communities. The time has come for this reputation to change.

As Asian Americans, we must realize that we are as American as whites and blacks, and that we are entitled to all the privileges and responsibilities that come with the label "American."

Asian immigrants first came to America as shipbuilders for the Spanish in the 16th century, and our history in the New World is as distinguished as that of most European groups.

We are part of the American society. Thus, as Asian Americans, we too possess America as our birthright; as Americans, we too owe the greater American community our service.

We are also uniquely situated to significantly benefit American society. Of the institutionalized ethnic groups in America, Asians are the most highly educated, and Asian households are the most prosperous.

In addition to education and relative wealth, Asian Americans also retain a unique culture. In this age of increasing crime, lagging work ethic and social fragmentation, the emphasis on family, personal duty, and community cohesiveness found in many Asian cultures provides us an uncommon perspective from which to examine — and perhaps solve — many societal ills. As Asian Americans, we can make the difference.

Finally, serving the greater national interest serves the Asian American interest. Through political involvement, we can fight unfair quotas, glass ceilings and other forms of discrimination. Through cultural programs, we can spread aspects of Asian culture to the benefit of all ethnicities. Most importantly, serving the non-Asian community allows for personal contact and personal friendships, which are the most effective weapons in the battle to break down the barriers of misunderstanding that separate us all.

The traditional exclusivity of Asian Americans stems from a desire of Asian Americans to preserve their cultures, and from a desire of Caucasian Americans to prevent the adulteration of the "all-American" culture. However, today's America has finally thrown off its myopically Eurocentric orientation, and the time has come for Asian Americans to take a more active role in American society.

In this new United States, we are all "American." Although this may not be our only nation, it is our foremost nation, for in the long run, our interests lie in American interests. Thus, the time has come for Asian Americans to fulfill our duty to America, and, by doing so, to fulfill our duty to themselves.

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By Ching-Hua Chen



It's hard to pinpoint exactly what is or isn't Chinese, but there are certain things that, as a Chinese, you simply cannot imagine another Chinese doing or saying.

I never realized how alike Chinese families are until I was helping a Chinese-American suitemate of mine type out an English paper one night. When I came across the words, "'Goodnight, sweetheart,' my dad said," I was rather stunned. The phrase may have sounded innocent to most ears, but to my own Chinese ears, it just didn't sound...typical. A lot of Chinese fathers are rarely more affectionate than a quick hug. As it turns out, my suitemate had just added the 'sweetheart' in for effect.

That night was a small incident, but it managed to tune me in to the distinctiveness of the Chinese culture, still inherent within the Chinese family, despite the tests of distance and time from our homeland, China.

It doesn't matter how many years, lifetimes or generations you may have spent in America, because as long as you're Chinese, and as long as you come from a Chinese home, you'll never be completely American. As Chinese-Americans, although many of us may have never set foot on our 'homeland,' there remains a powerful bond between all overseas Chinese and their Chinese heritage: the Chinese family. It is because of the

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Chinese family that traditional Chinese values endure, regardless of where we might live.

The Chinese "tradition" that I refer to is what some people might term "Asian reserve." Asian reserve is the idea that Asians tend to be relatively conservative in their speech, affections and behavior in social situations. Of course, there will al-

ways be exceptions to the rule, but there is no denying the persistence of that certain, intangible Asian element that unites us all.

"Modesty is virtue," and this is especially so in Asian culture. Consider Gandhi, Confucius or Muhammad. All three were wise and respected, but more importantly, they were men of few words. There is an old Chinese proverb that goes, "He who talks little, knows much. He who talks much, knows little." This proverb is a good reflection of the traditional Asian attitude towards verbosity. Thus, over the years, the value of modesty has been ingrained within the Asian family, passed down from generation to generation in the general form of restraint.

Its all about respect, about having "face." When you lose self-control or self-restraint, you are revealing a weakness -- you are losing face. And I cannot stress strongly enough how utterly important the value of having face is to the Chinese. Even as we become more and more Americanized, I'm sure that we can all take pride in Chinese attitudes, especially through interaction with our older relatives. You might recall them saying things like, "Behave, or else you will look bad and people will look unfavorably upon you," or "Remember to greet her as 'grand auntie' or else she will think you disrespectful and ill-disciplined." In the end, almost everything comes down to the fear of losing face.

As aware of my cultural differences as I am, I sometimes feel the pressure to disregard my Chinese values in order to assimilate comfortably into American society. After all, I now live in America and have American friends and interests. But I suppose acceptance is the key to be able to live with and be proud of my heritage.