



ASIAN CULTURE IS THRIVING IN AMERICA

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by Jennie S. Bev

In today's mainstream society, Americans illustrate a greater acceptance of Asian influences, values, and culture. Asian pop culture is thriving. From suburban noodle houses to Zen-style spas, Ayurvedic restaurants, Shiatsu massage, *kanji* tattoos, Yugi-Oh, Ichiro Suzuki baseball cards, Thai diners, and anime and manga comics to. The list goes on.

Asian cultural influences seem more naturally accepted in today's America, which is encouraging. Joseph Nye, a Harvard professor and former dean of John F. Kennedy School of Government, coined term "soft power," which refers to cultural elements making meaningful changes in society. Professor Nye is an ambassador for bridging cultures to bring meaningful coexistence and understanding to people with various backgrounds.

How does the world see us (USA), and how do we see ourselves, as we become more and more influenced by Asian culture? Do we see ourselves excelling or downgrading? Does it matter that Barack Obama is the first African-American with Asian relatives? Will we eventually see the world from an Asian perspective?

First things first, these Asian influences are multicultural, and no two Asian cultures are identical, despite the mythical stereotypes. Historically, in 1750, the Filipinos were the first Asian settlers in Louisiana, and in 1848, the Chinese were the first settlers in the California Gold Rush.

Helen Zia, the author of *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001) grew up in the 1950s and 1960s. At that time, there were barely half a half-million Asian Americans, and only 150,000 were of her ethnicity: Chinese Americans. While this was merely forty-some years ago, the interracial landscape was poles apart. Zia found herself an alien in her own birth country. She looked foreign and un-American whenever she stepped out of Chinatown. In addition, as one who did not reside in Chinatown, she went through daily emotional and psychological whippings.

In 1982, Detroit was the city where 27-year old Vincent Chin became a symbol of what it meant to be an Asian American. Chin, a Chinese-American draftsman and weekend waiter, was killed one week before his wedding as the result of a hate crime. The American automobile industry had suffered a steep downturn because of the growing Japanese car industry. Chin was a victim of collective rage against an unfortunate economic circumstance that had nothing to do with him.

On April 15, 1983, a new pan-Asian American Organization, American Citizens for Justice, drafted its statement of principles in the wake of Chin's death.

Ten years after Chin's tragic death, nine Korean grocers were killed in the City of Angels. Fifteen more were killed in a series of racial riots that same year.

Today, one rarely hears of tragedy like that gloomy day in Detroit or those overcast days in Los Angeles. Regardless of a number of states with low

Asian populations, Asian influences are everywhere, and we have TV shows inundated with Asian characters that are not merely stereotypes.

Lucy Liu, in TV's "Cashmere Mafia" for instance, plays an international-oriented woman that could be portrayed by any ethnicity. Masi Oka played Hiro Nakamura in the TV series "Heroes," and had the role of a science-fiction character that could have fit a multitude of ethnicities as well. That series included several Asian characters, which gave it a "United Nations feeling." Moreover, while it might seem like an oversimplification, Americans are getting used to seeing Asian faces.

Having an "Asian look" may be considered exotic, but we have come a long way in appreciating external differences, particularly when it comes to racial features and skin colors. Perhaps exposure to multiculturalism has produced some favorable fruits, but we should not allow ourselves to stagnate.

The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 raised the collective spiritual consciousness, in a good and a not-so-good way for all things foreign, Middle Eastern, or Islamic. The warp-speed globalization of goods and services has bombarded Americans with the need for an awareness of product origin. A simple visit to a Starbucks coffee shop at Market Street in San Francisco is now a reflection of the journey of one single coffee bean has traveled from a remote island in Indonesia.

Double minority Elaine L. Chao, a Chinese-American of Shanghai descent, is the 24th Secretary of Labor and the first Asian-American woman appointed to a president's cabinet in the US history. We have come to an age where gender and ethnicity are not likely to be killers of one's career, but are more likely to be challenges to overcome.

Generation Y, or the millennial, those who were born between 1980 and 1994, are still in high school, entering the work force or attending college.

This generation has had a greater exposure to multiculturalism, religious pluralism, differing sexual orientation, and single and partner parenting than previous generations. Most have friends from different regions, countries, and ethnicities and they travel to those places themselves.

Generation Y is the most high-tech savvy generation we have because CDs, iPods, plasma TVs, and laptops were on the market since they were toddlers. They are digitally literate and often carry their personalities over to their mobile phones, virtual avatars, and blogs. They play video, computer, and Internet games and feel entitled to what the world has to offer. According to *Generation Me* author, Jean M. Twenge, this generation was taught that they are special by their parents and teachers, and they can be anything they want to be. Their self-esteem is sky high. They are our most optimistic (if not narcissistic) generation.

It will be interesting to see how Generation Y shapes or re-shapes the future political arena. The 2009 presidential election campaigns considered them when they reached out through their favorite Web sites. With continued exposure to foreign and domestic cultures, a multicultural America could be just around the corner, if not attained already.

The idea of America—a country built upon notions of equality and the brotherhood of humankind—is what makes us strong. Cultures are treasures and assets. Having a president whose family members are as ethnically diverse as the United Nations is good news. Having a touch of Asian in America only justifies our founding fathers' dreams of what constitutes the United States of America.[]

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