

# Asian-American Culture Is Often Misunderstood

by Joe Yamamoto, M.D.

*Which I wish to remark*

*And my language is plain,*

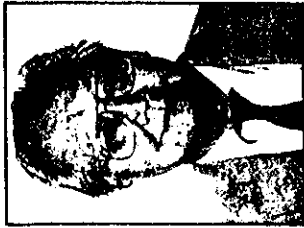
*That for ways that are dark*

*And for tricks that are vain,*

*The heathen Chinese is peculiar...*

—Bret Harte

For a number of Americans, Asians are a mysterious lot. Lack of information and experience have often colored the stereotypical response of the average person. This article



addresses such questions as: Are Asians different in sexual practices from other Americans? Are they more passive? Are Asians more closed; do they relate well within their own ethnic groups? Do Asians have psychiatric disorders more often than other Americans? Are the cultures of Asia "peculiar" compared to the culture of America? What role does the family play in Asian culture?

The number of Asians in America has increased significantly in the last decade. For example, there were 3.5 million Asians and Pacific Islanders in the United States in the 1980 census. It is estimated that 6.5 million will be enumerated in the 1990 census. The increase has been greatest in the western part of the United States, especially

in Los Angeles and the Southern California area, which has become the Ellis Island for these immigrants.

## Confucian Philosophy

China, Japan, Korea, and other southeast Asia nations continue to be influenced by the philosophical teachings of Confucius and Lao Tsu. Confucius thought that one should have filial piety and that there should be harmony in the home and peace in the world. His vision of society and family was quite traditional, representing values that were prevalent in the Orient over 2,000 years ago. These values advocate proper-hierarchical and reciprocal relationships. Confucius' teachings, presented in every school in China, Korea, and Japan, include the following: loyalty between lord and subject, order between senior and junior, propriety between husband and wife, intimacy between father and son, and trust between friends. In this traditional view of society and family the structure is hierarchical, with males dominant and females subservient. The family is the center of interactions, the individual a part of the family.

Asians have often been described as passive and less socially active than non-Asian-Americans because of their tendency to value harmony and interdependence. A study comparing the interaction of American middle-class

mothers and their infants with Japanese middle-class mothers and their infants found that while the American mothers were not within sight of their infants as often as the Japanese mothers, when they were together, they interacted more with the babies, talking to them and encouraging them to vocalize, and to be active and happy. In contrast, the Japanese mothers were almost always with their infants, carrying, rocking, and comforting them. Their goals, however, were to have quiet and contented babies. A good child is a quiet child in Japan, and these traits are carried into adulthood.

## Stereotypes Exist

America was founded by Europeans, and the usual stereotype of an American has been that of a European-American. Indeed, Israel Zangwill wrote: "America is God's crucible, the great

Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and reforming!... The real American has not yet arrived. He is only in the crucible, I tell you—he will be the fusion of all races, the common superman." The all-American boy or girl has been described as blond with a pale complexion, blue eyes, a patrician nose, long legs, and a short torso. Asian-Americans, however, tend to have black hair, slanted brown eyes; a flat, broad nose; high cheekbones; and a tan complexion. Their legs are often shorter than their trunks. Fortunately for Asian-Americans and other minority groups, the current perspective of the United States is changing to that of a multicultural society.

Nonetheless, Asian-Americans continue to suffer from prejudices and discriminatory actions. During World War II, Japanese-Americans were placed in "relocation centers" in remote

areas of the United States. This was a demoralizing experience and had long-lasting physical and emotional effects on most of those incarcerated.

Southeast Asian refugees also have suffered, since they are a reminder of the first modern war that America has lost. In addition, their non-European faces and the inability of many to speak English well has labeled them as "foreigners" to many.

### *Education Emphasized*

Many refugees have countered this prejudice with success, for example, in the Air Force or in colleges and universities, especially in mathematics and the sciences. A review of the psychometric performance of Asians compared to Europeans has suggested that Asians develop more slowly during the first eight years and then are, perhaps, a half standard deviation better than Europeans on psychological intelligence tests. Some maintain that this suggests an innate genetic superiority of Asians, but the dedication of Asian parents, especially mothers, toward the superior education of their children should also be taken into account. This type of dedication is also found among some American mothers, but not as consistently or with the same fervor that is seen among Asian mothers. In Japan, for example, there is a phrase to describe the average mother as an "education mother"—so dedicated that every sacrifice is made for the education of the children.

Thus, it is not surprising that Asians and Asian-Americans do well in mathematics and science since they are inspired by a culture that highly values education. Confucius, after all, was the first Chinese to advocate for the education of the laity. Subsequently, an educational system was established for those who assisted the royalty in the courts that included an annual examination to determine who should be accepted for further education. This system still exists in China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan, where centers of educational excellence admit only students

with the highest scholastic achievements. All of this suggests that perhaps the psychological test-score superiority of Asians may be more a function of the diligence and persistence of the "education mothers" and of their children's hard work toward academic achievement rather than of genetics.

### *Marriage and Sexuality*

For years, marriages were arranged in the Orient. In the developing nations in Asia this is less true, but the parents still hope to have a say over the marital partners selected by their sons and daughters. Because of this tradition, it was less necessary for these young people to be assertive or capable of social interactions. The family carefully selected a go-between who would evaluate the background, heritage, and status of the proposed marital pair. Careful investigations were made, especially if there were questions of hereditary illnesses or anything that might stain the family honor. Marriages were viewed more as a coming together of two families than as the beginning of a new life for only the bride and groom. The family orientation emphasized the importance of a proper background, physical and emotional health, and lack of conditions that may bring shame on the family.

One might ask how that affected Asian sexuality. This is an exceedingly difficult area to research. For example, a study done in Shanghai with the National Institute of Mental Health Diagnostic Interview Schedule revealed that most of the subjects questioned indicated they could have "gotten along without" their sex lives. Among the Chinese it is accepted and expected that a serious person is not concerned with sex. On the other hand, in America the subjects who responded in this manner were mostly female and many of those had Briquet's syndrome (now called somatization disorder).

The Chinese and most Asians are educated not to reveal family problems, personal conflicts, or sexual tendencies. In Korea, a study done among medical

## Asian-Americans

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cohesiveness and interdependence serve as social supports and cushions against psychiatric disorders, or if they are reluctant to use mental health services because of the stigma of mental illness. Although definitive information is not available about psychiatric epidemiology among Asian-Americans, it is known that southeast Asian refugees are at risk for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depression. Indeed, among Cambodian refugees, the prevalence of PTSD is estimated at 20 percent, which is comparable to the prevalence rate among American veterans wounded in combat.

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