

## **Asian American Awareness Month Essay Competition 2000**

### **Topic: Describe the impact of Asian Americans on U.S. culture**

#### **Runner-Up: Robert Chung**

#### **“The Eyes Have It”**

Children can be brutally honest. Pre-kindergarten children exist in and are conscious of the world as we know it for only a few years. For this reason, their observations and actions are fairly unadulterated and possibly reflect innate reactions to the world around them. When thrust into kindergarten, a crude and beginners form of society, most youngsters react in a natural manner, unaware of the available shield of political correctness that the grownups use as an effective buffer. My presence in kindergarten elicited one common reaction from a handful of students. Every day at recess from kindergarten through first grade, my ears rang with the sing-song chant, “you got a flat face, you got Chinese eyes...you got a flat face, you got Chinese eyes.” Though born and raised in the U.S. and not having said a word to my peers, my Asian American anatomical features seemed to catalyze the strongest response from this microcosm of U.S. society called elementary school.

Looking at me, one sees thick, wiry black hair, a rounded face, denounced nasal bridge and overbite untouched by the hands of an orthodontist, and, oh yes, those eyes. Epicanthic folds, as western scientists have classified them, create the almond shaped eyes that have become the hallmark of Asian American stereotypes. “Chinese eyes” separated Japanese Americans from German and Italian Americans, driving enough of the society to feel it necessary to send them to live in concentration camps during World War II. The Asian American face is appearing in areas previously unpopulated by such with higher frequency, inevitably impacting U.S. culture in a manner that society should be ready for, having made the transition from the painful segregation era of the early part of this century to a new millennium of colorblind corporations and rainbow coalitions. The corresponding reactions today, however, seem to include the inability to see a fellow American behind “Chinese eyes” and concerted efforts to bind stereotypes tighter to Asian Americans.

While drawing conclusions about U.S. culture from personal experience, we obtain more encompassing depictions of U.S. culture through the books, television, newspapers, and movies that make up the juggernaut known as the media. The media provides fairly accurate representations of U.S. culture today, including the interaction between Asian Americans and modern society. From Margaret Cho to Russell Wong, Asian Americans have broken through the entertainment ranks, but have yet to break free from the stereotypes that make us feel so safe. Margaret Cho’s comedy routine, including self-deprecating humor riddled with Asian clichés, was enthusiastically received by the public. Her ABC sitcom, however, *All American Girl*, an attempt at an Asian Cosby Show type of formula, lasted about as long as a bloody seal in a pool of starved sharks. We, including Asian Americans, find it hard to believe that a family of Asians could be “All American.” On the other hand, the comedy show *Mad-TV*, airing on Fox, includes a popular recurring skit involving an “Asian” woman, played by a Caucasian, whose character is extremely rude, shrill and annoying, and whose ability to understand English is broken at best. This would be an Asian homologue to the blackface routines of old. Asian action stars, such as

Jackie Chan and Chow Yun-Fat, have invaded theatres and continue to play the role of the street-fighter who can handle eight men at a time with an acrobatic assault of martial arts; but never seem to get the girl or even engage in any type of on-screen romantic interests, because that would make them “The Man” and we can’t have that. While these stars are from Hong-Kong, “perfect-English” speaking Asian Americans seem to be relinquished to peripheral roles playing, what else, non-English speaking Laundromat workers, owners of Chinese restaurants, and members of Asian gangs. When Jackie presented an award at the Oscars, the Academy chose, of all people, the seven-foot-two Kareem Abdul-Jabbar to co-present, making the five-ten Chan seem, well, tiny. Asian Americans are also encroaching to previously uncharted depths of the sporting arena, particularly major league baseball and ladies professional golf. When Harry Caray, an icon of Chicago Cubs baseball whose statue stands immortalized in front of Wrigley Field, addressed this issue after the Cubs were handily defeated by an Asian pitcher, he mentioned that the pitcher might carve a successful career for himself even if he had “slanty eyes.”

Unlike the sports world, where Asian Americans are few and far between, academia and the corresponding white-collar job market seem to be over-represented by Asian Americans when compared to the actual percentage of society populated by them. This situation has made, and will continue to make, the greatest impact on U.S. culture and will most likely elicit the strongest reactions. The academic powers that be have determined quotas that allow for various adjustments to admission standards to allow for appropriate representations of society. This system might allow for looser standards for an under represented minority or tighter standards for an over-represented minority. An article in the Chicago Tribune described how minority leaders were not only upset at low numbers of Hispanic, African and Native American students at IMSA, the Illinois Math and Science Academy, but also put off by the light numbers of Asian Americans. This issue, illustrating how some minorities have become increasingly hostile towards Asian Americans and their apparent success in the “system,” is an idea first touched upon by Spike Lee in the movie *Do the Right Thing* and brought to life during the recent L.A. riots, where a majority of businesses looted were owned by Korean Americans. Actor Al Franken said it best upon returning from a Harvard graduation ceremony where he was a bit taken aback by the unusually high numbers of Asian students. “They’ve gotta stop admitting these people based on merit,” he concluded cynically. The subjective world of politics, however, is a realm of society relatively unblemished by Asian Americans, or any other minority for that matter, because politics are, well, too political. The only mainstream representations of Asian Americans in politics has been that of Johnny Chung and his capricious, unethical contributions given to political parties in efforts to meet his selfish ends. Careers in science on the other hand, are based, in theory, on skill and hard work, and have become the traditional chosen path of Asian Americans, who have played an integral role as unsung heroes of technological advancement. We all use the hard work of Asian American scientists to make our lives easier, but in the mainstream media recently, the only credit given to an Asian scientist is for stealing unclear secrets from government laboratories. This story flooded TV and periodicals like no other previous exposure of an Asian scientist. The cover of *Newsweek*, which hit the newsstands before the scientist in question had even been tried, included a red background, a caption about stealing our secrets and a photo bounded by a star. The subject of the photo was nothing more than an epicanthic eyelid covering a sneaky, slanty almond shaped eye. Now the accused, Wen Ho Lee, is from China, but when looking at this fellow or an Asian American student working in

a lab at the University of Illinois, all we, and the kindergarten baby inside us, might see are those eyes and everything else we've learned to associate with them.