

Asian American Awareness Month Essay Competition 2000

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

Winner: Valerie A. Garcia

Author Rudyard Kipling wrote “The Ballad of East and West” as if the two were complete opposites. In *Orientalism*, Edward Said wrote about the Orient’s contrasting image to the Wild Wild West. But as the new millennium unravels and America becomes more of a multicultural patchwork, these theories of “foreignness” are becoming as obsolete as the words themselves. The East finally meets the West – and it is a good get-together.

Along with the fact that ramen is devoured on every university campus and John Woo films are blockbuster hits at every box office, Asian Americans have made a great impact on U.S. culture through the infiltration of its own unique cultures. There is emphasis on the plural use of culture as Asian Americans are a group of subgroups from the Chinese to Laotians, from Issei generation to fifth-generation. Yet, this assigned U.S. Census classification of “Asian American”, has created a unified group of influence. In looking at Asian Americans’ influence on society at large and the home we call “University of Illinois,” we are able to see the melodious offspring of a multicultural America.

Despite the bitter racism Asian Americans experienced – when Chinese workers paved American railroads, when Japanese citizens were detained in internment camps, when Vincent Chin was beat to death – Asian Americans have risen from the xenophobic sentiments to a rank of influence on American culture. Visit the Vietnam Veterans memorial and see the signature work on Maya Lin. Everyone recognizes Hello Kitty... trademark of Japan. Throw out the frying pan and get a wok. Resort to Zen for some spiritual healing. Have you *feng shui*-ed your new home? Perhaps these are just icons of pop culture. Nevertheless, these trends signify an acceptance – almost adoration – of Asian culture.

Beyond the face value, commercial appeal of Asian culture, Asian Americans have excelled in areas of literature and politics. U.S. culture would not be the same without the inspiring works of Carlos Bulosan’s *American Is In the Heart*, Bharati Mukherjee’s *Wife*, or Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Woman Warrior*. These Asian American stories confront what it means to be “American”: feelings of displacement, immigrant hope, and success. David Henry Hwang’s Tony award winning, *M. Butterfly*, reminds us that Asian American talents and issues are widely recognized even within the cultural elite. These works are not “token” masterpieces. They have come to represent the meaning of art in its most natural sense. Asian Americans have added to the cultural diversity that is so effervescent of U.S. culture.

Politically, Asian Americans, as a group, are gaining influence in higher decision-making. Early starters like Daniel K. Inouye, Spark Matsunaga, and Patsy Mink have provided great leadership for the Asian American community and the U.S. community at large. More and more Asian American students are studying political science and law hoping to contribute to American society. Asian Americans are no longer taking the back seat to politics. The submissive images of the past are fading with the times.

Closer to home, Asian American students have shaped the multicultural community at the University of Illinois. With Asian Americans composing more than thirteen percent of the student body, their role is as valuable today as will be in the next hundred years. Asian American students are no longer classified within the stereotypical majors of engineering, computer science, or medicine. Huge influence and impact is made within the arts and the humanities. The birth and rapid growth of the Asian American Studies program suggest that Asian American issues need to be discussed in academia. These issues are as “American” as the next. Asian Americans are becoming involved in campus activities ranging from athletics, Greek system, and student government.

The Asian American experience is the American experience – belonging, struggling and succeeding. Asian American influence is not the existence of Anime cartoons nor is it Bruce Lee mania. U.S. culture is blessed with the cultures and the stories that Asian Americans bring. This is the Asian American influence.