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## Power of Ethnic Instincts

For me, moving to America from China represented inevitable change. I attempted to abandon the past and accept a different culture, yet my thoughts always led me back to the same Chinese beliefs. In a slow but reverse assimilation process, I returned to my collectivist roots and came to view America as a land sadly infused with an individualistic materialism.

I entered America, at the end of 2000, as a Chinese middle school student with no English beyond “hello,” “goodbye,” and “thank you.” I was perplexed by everything around me and had never felt so humiliated by my own ignorance. I became determined to fit into the new society by mastering Americanism, a seemingly cult-like behavior. I clothed myself in jeans, spoke slang, and ate fast food. Most appropriate to America, I ignored my parents’ anger toward my new behaviors. Reinforced by my ESL peers, I became not an immigrant from a third-world nation but a member of American society, surfing the waves of the “American Dream.”

Many of my newly immigrated Chinese and other Asian friends describe the American Dream as a unique tree: when shaken, money immediately falls down. An old Chinese proverb characterizes the American Dream as “Gold Mountain” where the amount of treasure is boundless as long as one puts in the effort. However, I eventually feared that the “American Dream” seemed to provide wealth at the expense of social integrity. In America, communities

seemingly are only bags of colorful marbles, a mixture of ethnicities involuntarily tossed together that boasts “diversity.” All Americans seem to have the same purpose in mind: the expansion of personal wealth and power. People unwillingly tolerate relationships with others and even family ties just so they can have the social connections to obtain power and wealth for themselves in the future. A Chinese proverb describes such a focus on personal benefit as “looking toward money at all times” and French thinker Alexis de Tocqueville summed it up as “rugged individualism.” In business, individual ambitions can lead to a focus on increasing profit through the use of inexpensive, low-quality raw materials, wage slavery of working class, and high consumer prices. Living in a “low-wage and high-price” world, workers, victimized by such empowered corporate greediness, are herded by their own vulnerability into impoverished shantytowns. Jeans, slang, and fast-food, the origin of my Americanism, are developed or popularized in the shantytowns. Living in a low-income area after arriving in the U.S., I grew to know residents who had neither the wealth nor the sophistication nor the capability to understand any other culture. The sustainability of their lives depended on the blind and innocent hope for the “American Dream,” constantly wishing for the poverty to end.

Today, I am a Chinese living in the U.S. but not a Chinese American. I know that to survive in the United States I need to learn the essential skills of social interactions, leadership, and business management. That is why I focused on school clubs such as Chess Club, worked in the local library and hospital, and supervised the school-sponsored Tutoring Program. But when I compare Chinese and American values, I frequently cite a time in my hometown when a resident of my apartment building was diagnosed with cancer. Every single resident of the building donated whatever he or she could from meager salaries or savings. The sharing, tightening the bonds of friendship between even strangers and earning trust in times of emergency, reinforces for me the most famous Chinese proverb of all time: “close neighbors are better than distant relatives.” Group efforts, not individual obsession with wealth and power, are the essence of a flourishing civilization.

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