

WHY CHINESE AMERICANS SHOULD CARE ABOUT US-CHINA RELATIONS

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LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, LOOKING ACROSS THIS AUDIENCE TONIGHT, OCA HAS CERTAINLY COME A LONG WAY. I STILL REMEMBER THE EARLY DAYS, WHEN WE USED TO MEET AROUND KITCHEN TABLES. HOW MANY OF YOU GO BACK TO 1973, WHEN OCA WAS FOUNDED? HOW MANY OF YOU STILL REMEMBER THE BATTLE OVER THE PEKIN "CHINKS" OF ILLINOIS?

WELL, I GO BACK A LONG WAY WITH OCA, AND IT IS AN HONOR FOR ME TO RETURN, TO RECEIVE OCA GREATER DC CHAPTER'S PIONEER AWARD. OCA, WE HAVE BEEN PIONEERS TOGETHER. WHILE WE SHOULD ALL BE PROUD OF WHAT WE HAVE ACCOMPLISHED, WE ALL KNOW MUCH STILL REMAINS TO BE DONE.

LET ME BEGIN BY ASKING EVERYONE A QUESTION, "FROM HIGH TECH TO MUSIC, FROM THE FOODS WE EAT TO THE CLOTHES WE WEAR, TO THE HOUSES WE LIVE IN, ASIANS ARE HAVING AN APPRECIABLE IMPACT ON AMERICA. YET, WHY IS IT THAT WHERE POLITICS AND FOREIGN POLICY ARE CONCERNED, WE ARE IMPOTENT, ALMOST IRRELEVANT?"

HERE'S WHAT I THINK. THE REASONS ARE LARGELY CULTURAL. THOSE WHO ARE FIRST-GENERATION AMERICANS OFTEN RETAIN OLD-COUNTRY SUSPICIONS ABOUT POLITICS. THOSE WHO ARE IMMIGRANTS OFTEN COME FROM COUNTRIES, WHERE CONTACT WITH GOVERNMENT MEANT ONLY TROUBLE. THOSE WHO ARE AMERICAN BORN HAVE TOO OFTEN OPTED FOR MORE SECURE JOBS IN THE SCIENCES AND BUSINESS, PERCEIVING POLITICS, LET ALONE FOREIGN POLICY, AS NOT PART OF THEIR LIVES.

MORE IMPORTANT, ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS ARE NOT A COMMUNITY. EFFORTS TO FIND COMMON GROUND AMONG THE DIFFERENT APA GROUPS HAVE ENCOUNTERED INDIFFERENCE, IF NOT RESISTANCE. THE COMMUNITY MIRRORS ASIA, WHERE PEOPLE IDENTIFY WITH THEIR NATIONALITY, ETHNIC GROUP, CLAN AND FAMILY, AND GENERALLY FIND THE IDEA OF A PAN-ASIAN IDENTITY UNAPPEALING.

EVEN CHINESE AMERICANS ARE NOT A COMMUNITY. THERE ARE MANDARIN, CANTONESE AND SHANGHAINESE SPEAKERS, DIVIDED BETWEEN NORTHERNERS AND SOUTHERNERS. THERE ARE FOBS AND ABCS, BANANAS AND TWINKIES. CHINESE AMERICANS, WHILE GENERALLY STAYING OUT OF POLITICS, ALSO VARY WIDELY IN POLITICAL ORIENTATION -- SOME SUPPORT TAIWAN AND OTHERS SUPPORT THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA, WITH MOST ABCS BEING APATHETIC TO US CHINA POLICY. CHINESE AMERICANS, THEREFORE, HAVE NOT BEEN A FACTOR IN U.S. ETHNIC FOREIGN POLICY IN CONTRAST TO OTHER ETHNIC GROUPS.

INSTEAD, CHINESE AMERICANS HAVE SUCCESSFULLY PURSUED THE MODEL MINORITY DREAM – EDUCATIONAL EXCELLENCE, RESPECTABLE PROFESSIONS, AND GOOD SALARIES TO RAISE A FAMILY PREFERABLY IN DETACHED HOUSES IN SAFE NEIGHBORHOODS. LIKE THE NANYANG CHINESE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA, CHINESE AMERICANS HAVE TRADED ECONOMIC SECURITY FOR POLITICAL IRRELEVANCE. AND LIKE THE NANYANG CHINESE, WE ARE FINDING THAT THERE CAN BE NO PERSONAL AND ECONOMIC SECURITY WITHOUT POLITICAL CLOUT.

THE WEN HO LEE CASE SHOULD HAVE BEEN A WAKE UP CALL FOR ALL CHINESE AMERICANS – WHETHER FIRST OR FIFTH GENERATION, MANDARIN OR CANTONESE SPEAKER, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST OR PHYSICIST. WHAT HAPPENED TO WEN HO LEE DIRECTLY CHALLENGES THE PRESUMPTION OF SAFETY UPON WHICH SO MANY MIDDLE-CLASS CHINESE AMERICANS HAD BUILT THEIR LIVES. IT IS A REMINDER THAT NO MATTER HOW WELL EDUCATED, HOW WEALTHY, OR HOW AMERICANIZED, AS LONG AS THE STEREOTYPE OF "PERPETUAL FOREIGNERS" PERSISTS, CHINESE AMERICANS WILL ALWAYS BE SUBJECTS OF SUSPICION. EVEN IN AMERICA, WE ARE NOT SAFE FROM ETHNIC PERSECUTION AND WRONGFUL IMPRISONMENT.

THE WEN HO LEE CASE FINALLY SHOCKED CHINESE AMERICANS OUT OF OUR USUAL COMPLACENCY AND CULTURAL RELUCTANCE TO MAKE WAVES. WEN HO LEE FINALLY BROUGHT CHINESE AMERICANS TOGETHER TO SUCCESSFULLY SEEK HIS FREEDOM WHILE KEEPING THE ISSUE OF RACIAL PROFILING ALIVE OUTSIDE THE COURTROOM. CHINESE AMERICANS FINALLY GOT THE THE MESSAGE -- WOULD JUSTICE DEPARTMENT HAVE DARED TO DO TO A BLACK AMERICAN, OR A HISPANIC AMERICAN, OR A JEWISH AMERICAN WHAT THEY DID TO A CHINESE AMERICAN?

LET ME NOW ASK ANOTHER QUESTION – WHEN THE CIVIL RIGHTS OF ARAB AMERICANS ARE NOW VIOLATED BECAUSE OF SEPTEMBER 11, DO WE TURN THE OTHER CHEEK AND SAY IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH US? LET’S BRING IT CLOSER TO HOME. DO YOU STILL REMEMBER MUSLIM ARMY CHAPLAIN JAMES YEE, WHO ALSO JUST HAPPENS TO BE A CHINESE AMERICAN? LIKE WEN HO LEE, HE WAS BRANDED AS A SPY AND TRAITOR TO HIS COUNTRY, TRIED AND CONVICTED IN THE MEDIA BEFORE THERE WERE EVEN CHARGES BROUGHT AGAINST HIM. ANOTHER CAREER AND LIFE RUINED BECAUSE OF GUILT BY RELIGIOUS AFFILIATION AND ETHNICITY – THIS TIME PERPETRATED BY THE UNITED STATES ARMY.

WHERE CAN CHINESE AMERICANS FIND REFUGE FROM THE AMERICAN PARANOIA OF ASIANS AS ENEMY ALIENS? ONLY WITH POLITICAL PARTICIPATION, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, CAN WE, CHINESE AMERICANS, OVERCOME OUR ETHNIC STIGMATIZATION AND POLITICAL WEAKNESS. AND ONLY WITH THE COURAGE OF OUR CONVICTIONS CAN WE OVERCOME OUR HELPLESSNESS IN THE FACE OF RACIAL POLITICS, WHICH ARE EMBEDDED FOR CHINESE AMERICANS IN THE POLITICS OF US-CHINA RELATIONS.

TO COUNT IN AMERICAN POLITICS, YOU NEED VOTES, MONEY, AND ORGANIZATION. THE 2000 CENSUS DATA SHOW APA POPULATIONS ACROSS AMERICA HAVING GROWN BY A STAGGERING 45.9 PERCENT (10.8 MILLION-NOW 12 MILLION), BUT WE ARE STILL LESS THAN 4 PERCENT OF THE TOTAL POPULATION AND TOO MANY ARE NOT REGISTERED VOTERS. WHAT OCA IS DOING IN VOTER REGISTRATION IS RIGHT ON.

ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS, HOWEVER, HAVE THE MONEY, MAKING SUBSTANTIAL POLITICAL CONTRIBUTIONS -- AN ESTIMATED \$10 MILLION IN EACH OF THE LAST FEW PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS -- ALL LEGAL. BUT ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS HAVE NEVER FOUND A SUSTAINING ISSUE THAT CAN GALVANIZE US INTO A COMMUNITY, WHERE THE INTERESTS OF THE GROUP TRANSCEND THOSE OF THE INDIVIDUAL OR FAMILY.

YOUR GALA'S THEME THIS YEAR, "BUILDING BRIDGES THROUGH COLLABORATION," THEREFORE, COULD NOT HAVE BEEN BETTER CHOSEN. IT IS ABOUT TIME THAT WE BUILT A UNIFIED COMMUNITY AND FOUND OUR POLITICAL VOICE. MAY I SUGGEST THAT WE LOOK TO THE 2001 COMMITTEE OF 100 SURVEY ON AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD CHINESE AND ASIAN AMERICANS FOR AN ISSUE TO UNITE US?

WHAT DID THE SURVEY FIND -- BUT A DECISIVE CORRELATION BETWEEN THE AMERICAN PUBLIC'S NEGATIVE ATTITUDES TOWARD CHINA AND THEIR PERCEPTIONS AND STEREOTYPES OF CHINESE AMERICANS. IN SHORT, THE STATE OF US-CHINA RELATIONS HAS A DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON AMERICAN ATTITUDES TOWARD CHINESE AMERICANS.

THE SURVEY FOUND THAT A MAJORITY OF AMERICANS -- 68 PERCENT OF THOSE POLLED -- SEE CHINA AS A FUTURE THREAT, AND 61 PERCENT HAVE AN UNFAVORABLE IMPRESSION OF THE CHINESE GOVERNMENT. ONE IN THREE OR 32 PERCENT BELIEVE THAT CHINESE AMERICANS ARE MORE LOYAL TO CHINA THAN TO THE US, AND ALMOST HALF, AN ASTOUNDING 46 PERCENT, BELIEVE CHINESE AMERICANS PASSING SECRETS TO CHINA IS A PROBLEM.

DOES THIS NOT EXPLAIN WHY THE *NEW YORK TIMES* WAS SO EAGER TO SINGLE OUT WEN HO LEE AND DRIVE THE STORY THAT PUT LEE BEHIND BARS, RUINED A MAN'S REPUTATION AND HIS LIFE -- WITHOUT A SHRED OF REMORSE? SURE, ESPIONAGE IS A SEXY STORY, BUT WAS IT NOT EQUAL PARTS BECAUSE THE NEW YORK TIMES ALSO VIEWED CHINA AS A HOSTILE POWER?

COINCIDING WITH THE ATTACKS AGAINST LEE WAS A WAVE OF NEWS STORIES ABOUT A MASSIVE CHINESE NUCLEAR ESPIONAGE EFFORT, FUELED BY THE COX REPORT, WHICH SUBSEQUENTLY HAS BEEN RIDICULED FOR BEING LONG ON CONSPIRACY THEORY AND SHORT ON FACTS. NOT TO BE OUTDONE BY THE NEW YORK TIMES, OUR OWN *WASHINGTON POST* REPORTED IN A MARCH 21, 1999 ARTICLE THAT THE CHINESE HAD BEEN PERFECTING THEIR TECHNIQUE OF "TASKING THOUSANDS OF CHINESE ABROAD TO BRING SECRETS HOME ONE AT A TIME LIKE ANTS CARRYING GRAINS OF SAND" SINCE "AT LEAST THE FOURTH CENTURY B.C., WHEN THE MILITARY PHILOSOPHER SUN TZU NOTED THE VALUE OF ESPIONAGE IN HIS CLASSIC WORK, *THE ART OF WAR*."

IF CHINESE AMERICANS DON'T TAKE AN INTEREST IN US-CHINA RELATIONS, WE LEAVE OURSELVES OPEN TO GUILT BY ETHNICITY WHEN THE RELATIONSHIP TURNS SOUR, AS WHEN A US SPY PLANE WENT DOWN ON HAINAN ISLAND. HOW CAN WE FORGET THE RADIO COMMENTATORS WHO CALLED FOR CHINESE AMERICAN INTERNMENT, OR THE BOYCOTTING OF CHINESE RESTAURANTS, OR WHEN PULITZER PRIZE WINNING CARTOONIST PAT OLIPHANT USED RACIAL CARICATURE TO MAKE FUN OF THE CHINESE, OR WHEN THE POPULAR WASHINGTON TROUPE CAPITOL STEPS ENTERTAINED THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS BY FEATURING A WHITE MAN DRESSED IN BLACK WIG AND THICK GLASSES IMPERSONATING A

CHINESE OFFICIAL CHANTING, "CHING, CHING, CHONG, CHONG." GUESS WHAT – EVERYONE LAUGHED.

HOW FAR IS THE DISTANCE BETWEEN RADIO HIGH JINKS, POLITICAL CARTOONS, RACIAL SATIRE AND A CLIMATE OF WITCH-HUNTS AND MCCARTHYISM, IRRATIONAL CHINA BASHING, AND CHINESE-AMERICAN PERSECUTION?

UNFORTUNATELY, TOO MANY AMERICANS TODAY, AS THE C-100 SURVEY FOUND, STILL VIEW CHINESE AMERICANS AS FOREIGNERS IN AMERICA. THEY SEE CHINESE AMERICANS AS SOMEHOW TIED TO THE GOVERNMENT OF CHINA. CHINESE AMERICANS, MORE SO THAN OTHER MINORITIES, HAVE BEEN SADDLED WITH THE BURDEN OF HAVING TO PROVE OUR LOYALTY TO THIS COUNTRY. WE ARE THE ONLY MINORITY WHOSE LEGITIMATE PRIDE IN OUR ETHNICITY CAN BE TURNED INTO A MARK OF TREASON.

WHAT DISCRIMINATION I HAVE ENCOUNTERED AS A CHINESE AMERICAN ALL CENTER ON THE VIEW THAT I AM A FOREIGNER, THAT I AM NOT PART OF THIS COUNTRY, EVEN THOUGH I GREW UP IN SAN FRANCISCO, ATTENDED COLLEGE AT BERKELEY AND HARVARD, AND SPENT PRACTICALLY MY ENTIRE PROFESSIONAL LIFE IN SERVICE TO THE US GOVERNMENT.

YET, I HAVE BEEN TOLD COUNTLESS TIMES THAT I SPEAK "GOOD" ENGLISH AND ASKED AD NAUSEUM WHICH COUNTRY DID I REPRESENT AS AMBASSADOR. I OFTEN THINK IT'S A GOOD THING THAT I ALMOST NEVER TAKE PICTURES, OR ELSE, I NO DOUBT WOULD HAVE BEEN MISTAKEN FOR A TOURIST FROM ASIA IF I WALKED AROUND DOWNTOWN D.C. WITH A CAMERA.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, I BELIEVE THE MOST IMPORTANT ISSUE OF OUR LIFETIME – AND OUR CHILDRENS' AND GRANDCHILDRENS' LIFETIME – IS HOW THE US AND CHINA WILL GET ALONG IN THE 21ST CENTURY. I, FOR ONE, HAVE PUT MY MONEY WHERE MY MOUTH IS. SINCE 1998, I HAVE TAKEN AMERICA TO THE PREMIER HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CHINA. I HAVE HAD A PERSONAL OPPORTUNITY TO RELEARN MY MOTHER TONGUE, EXPAND MY KNOWLEDGE OF CHINESE CULTURE AND DEEPEN MY UNDERSTANDING OF MY ETHNIC HERITAGE. IN EXCHANGE, I HAVE TRIED TO HELP THE STUDENTS OF PEKING AND FUDAN UNIVERSITIES, THE FUTURE LEADERS OF CHINA, BETTER UNDERSTAND AMERICAN SOCIETY, CULTURE AND POLITICS. TODAY, MY PERSONAL EFFORTS HAVE BECOME THE US-CHINA EDUCATION TRUST. OUR MISSION IS TO BRIDGE THE VAST CULTURAL GAP THAT SEPARATES THE US AND CHINA AND, HOPEFULLY, BRING ABOUT A MORE STABLE BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP, WITHOUT WHICH THERE CAN BE NO PEACE OR PROSPERITY IN OUR FUTURE.

LET ME CONCLUDE BY CALLING ON OCA TO TAKE A STAND AND CHALLENGE THE LAST FRONTIER IN DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS. HELP DO AWAY ONCE AND FOR ALL WITH THE PERPETUAL FOREIGNER TAG THAT ATTACHES TO EVERY ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICAN. MAKE A DIFFERENCE IN US CHINA RELATIONS. WORK FOR THE DAY WHEN AMERICA WILL TRULY BE A COUNTRY WHERE ASIAN PACIFIC AMERICANS ARE EQUALLY ENTITLED TO CALL OURSELVES AMERICANS. LET THERE BE NO MORE WEN HO LEES OR JAMES YEEES.