

## FEATURE

# The Chinese American Bull Dog in American Politics

by Daphne Kwok

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"A bull dog" "A junk yard dog"  
Are those references to real dogs?  
Are those references to a person?

"Liberal" "Rabble rouser"  
"Trouble maker"  
Who could that be describing?

"The White House Rose Garden with  
President Clinton listening to a speech."  
What does this scenario have to do with  
anything?

The NBC Today Show and CNN Crossfire  
What about these two major TV shows?

Does anyone know what binds all these examples together? What does this have to do with Chinese Americans and assimilation?

You are probably saying that none of the above examples have anything to do with Chinese Americans! Just doesn't fit into the "Model Minority" definition for Chinese Americans! Because we all know that Chinese Americans are demure, shy, obedient, respectful of authority and elders, don't air dirty laundry in public, passive, incapable of being a leader, not interested in being a leader, don't rock the boat, not instigators, have no political clout, not political... on and on and on. And for Chinese American women! We are definitely all the above as well as all of the sexual, exotic connotations associated with us as well!

Well, let me say that all these scenarios describe ME! Yes, ME! Who is Daphne Kwok?

Who really, is Daphne Kwok? I was born 41 years ago in Philadelphia but have really lived my entire life "Inside the Beltway". That's the Washington, DC "Beltway". Born to parents who are both immigrants from China more than 50 years ago. Raised in a Chinese American household where Chinese values were strongly imparted, Chinese customs were taught, yet we were not too, too traditional. I understand Shanghainese. Went to college and learned Mandarin. Around the family dining table, the conversation always revolved around school and music - yes we were the traditional Chinese family learning violin and piano! While we lived in the DC area, we never spoke about politics or current events. In all my schooling, my brothers and I were the few Asian Americans and part of only a handful of students of color. We were always the "good" students - never questioning the teacher, obeying the teacher, respecting the teacher, and well behaved.

My upbringing is perhaps very similar to many of yours, or your kids. You must be thinking

"Where did she go wrong?"  
"I'm glad she's not my daughter!"  
"Her parents must be so ashamed!"

What happened? I believe one of the primary reasons I am who I am today, is because my parents are actually very progressive Chinese Americans, and one of the reasons is because they have been involved in the community. And that's not the Chinese American or the Asian Pacific American community. That was the Washington, DC suburbs, which at the time we were young

children, was predominantly a white community. My brothers and I participated at a very young age in volunteerism. My parents were Presidents and board members of our schools and of our youth orchestras. We learned at a very early age the art of collating paper, stapling, and doing bulk mailings for nonprofits! That was before all the fancy Xerox machines!

The other reason I am who I am is because my parents allowed me to pursue my interests.

Thank goodness they didn't push me into their professions of physics and engineering! I guess when I had to repeat geometry, they knew that was a bad omen for a career in math and sciences! They also know I'm stubborn and if I don't want to do something, I won't do it! And somewhere along the way, I became very opinionated! My goodness, imagine a Chinese American woman being stubborn and opinionated! Now, that's an image that certainly shatters the "Model Minority" stereotype!

Getting back to my examples. Let's go over them one by one and let me talk about their significance and what this all has to do with Chinese Americans and assimilation.

"A bull dog"

"A junk yard dog"

These are descriptions of Daphne Kwok spoken endearingly by a U.S. Congressman and a Cabinet Secretary! Yes, I was just as shocked as you are to hear those words describing ME! I don't think I've even told my parents about this. They'd be shocked!

After listening to why I was described this way, I felt pretty good about myself! Funny thing is that I don't even like dogs! But what they were saying was that I, a Chinese American, was constantly fighting on issues that were of concern to the Chinese American and Asian Pacific American community. That I don't let go of an issue simply because it is difficult or nearly impossible to attain. That I am persistent and not

afraid of pursuing what I believe is right and just for our community.

Chinese American/Asian Pacific American (APA) bull dogs and junk yard dogs are a rarity in Washington, DC. Today, while we have a few more people fighting the fight for Asian Pacific Americans, we can still count them on 3 hands! It's not easy being a bull dog or junk yard dog. Believe me, it can be a very lonely position, especially when your own community doesn't appreciate or understand that the work you are doing to improve the livelihood of Americans who are of Asian ancestry.

We need to build up whole armies of APA bull dogs and junk yard dogs! When the dog catcher has to come out to control us, that will be a sign that we have arrived politically!

"Liberal"

"Rabble Rouser"

"Trouble Maker"

Those descriptions surely are the opposite of the Chinese value of not "rocking the boat"! Instead, these descriptions are typhoons that are causing the boats to capsize!

It was just a week ago when some acquaintances said those exact words to me as they greeted me. I must confess, I was taken a bit aback by these comments. But then I realized how important it is to have Chinese American liberal rabble rousers stirring up trouble! My reply to them was that we need more rabble rousers and trouble makers! If we don't, then we are saying that we are content with our lives, and that there is no need to try to remove the inequities that still exist in American society against people of color, and that includes Asians.

I'm proud to be called a liberal, a rabble rouser, and a trouble maker. My parents are probably mortified. But I know that with the situations I'm in, if I don't speak up for our community, we won't have the opportunity to air our voice to the policymakers! We become the "silent minority".

## The White House

The President of the most powerful nation in the world.

The President of the United States. He's the ultimate leader of this nation. Respecting the leader is a Chinese value. But no. Daphne Kwok used an extremely rare opportunity to press a top priority issue of the Chinese American community with the President of the United States!

Picture this.

May 2000 Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, The Rose Garden

Daphne Kwok at a podium with the presidential seal on the podium.

President Clinton and Secretary of Commerce Norman Mineta sitting behind.

150 of President Clinton's Asian Pacific American appointees in the audience.

As Chair of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, I presented President Clinton an award from the APA community. I had a once in a lifetime opportunity to make a speech and presentation to the President of the United States. And I wasn't about to let my opportunity slip away with just pleasantries! I slipped into my speech how we wanted to return to the Rose Garden next time to celebrate the appointment of Bill Lann Lee as Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights. After a bit of silence, the President broke into laughter. The audience dropped their mouths aghast in total bewilderment that I made such a political statement to the President of the United States, while we're all in his backyard! Nobody ever expected sweet, quiet, respectful, nice Daphne Kwok to have made such a political statement. Not even Bill Lann Lee, who nearly fell off his seat when he heard my statement! But it had to be done. We couldn't have missed an opportunity to once again state what our top priority was which was impacted by the President's actions or non-actions. But my speech surely did not fall into the "Model Minority" description of Chinese Americans being guests of the President of the United States at his home!

## NBC The Today Show

### CNN Crossfire

When I was at the Organization of Chinese Americans, one of the main issues we took on was the racist cover of the National Review in March of 1997. The cover depicted President Clinton, Mrs. Clinton and Vice President Gore in Buddhist robes, slanted eyes and buck teeth, in reference to the campaign fund-raising controversies of 1996.

Yes, I was on two of this nation's top shows vigorously debating with the editor of the National Review why the cover was so offensive to the APA community. The National Review would never have done the same thing to the African American community. So why should they think they could get away debasing the APA community? Now, no rice, demure, well raised Chinese American woman would dare speak out on national TV tackling on a major media establishment! If she failed, it would have brought shame to the Chinese American community! But somebody had to speak out! How often does the APA community get opportunities to be in front of tens of millions of mainstream viewers, to reach out and educate the mass TV audiences about the racist attitudes still prevalent in this society! We could not have passed up such an opportunity!

I say all of this not to boost my ego, not to brag, but to illustrate how critical it is for Chinese Americans to be an integral part of American society, specifically the American political landscape. How vital it is for us to speak up and out! We need to shed so many of the Chinese characteristics that hold us back. And at the same time, we need to retain the positive Chinese values. I am very proud to be a Chinese American, who has integrated, what I believe, are the best of both cultures. I must also let you know that in all these instances that I have described, I have been pushed well beyond my personal comfort zone.

Chinese Americans need to be integral parts of the American political fabric. We cannot

afford to remain separate strands. If we don't speak up and defend our rights, who will? 99.99% of all decision-making tables do not have a face that looks like mine. And that means our concerns are not being addressed.

To wrap up my speech, one of the points I would like to emphasize is that it is so critical for Chinese Americans and Asian Pacific Americans to get involved in their communities whether at the local, state and/or national level. Get involved in whatever you are passionate about! I would love to see you involved politically or in the APA community, but if that's not your cup of jasmine tea, then find some thing else!

I hope that in the very near future, no, that is too long. That in the immediate future, we will have more Chinese American junk yard dogs and bull dogs inundating the hallways and corridors of the White House, the Congress and all 50 State Houses! And I hope that today, I have created and energized 50 St. Louis junk yard dogs! Thank you so much.



### **Daphne Kwok**

*In April 2001, Daphne Kwok became the Executive Director of the Asian Pacific American Institute for Congressional Studies. Ms. Kwok brings exceptional leadership and organizational skills, political and community contacts, and knowledge of front-burner issues to APAICS. For 11 years, she was the Executive Director of the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), a non-profit, civil rights organization with more than 10,000 members. She coordinated programs and services for 45 chapters and 37 college affiliates and monitored issues pertaining to the Asian American community, such as hate crimes, campaign finance reform, immigration reform. Census 2000, English-only, and affirmative action. During the Wen Ho Lee investigation, Ms. Kwok testified before the Congressional*

*Asian Pacific Caucus on the impact of federal counter-intelligence and security investigations on Asian Pacific Americans at the Department of Energy. She was subsequently appointed to the Secretary of Energy's Advisory Council.*

*Empowerment of all APAs has long been one of Ms. Kwok's core values. From November 1997 until April 2001, Ms. Kwok was the first elected Chair of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, a network of national APA organizations. She coordinated a national voter registration campaign involving 19 Asian Pacific American organizations in 1996. This unprecedented campaign registered more than 70,000 voters. A 1984 graduate of Wesleyan University, Ms. Kwok became the first Asian American member of its Board of Trustees. She continues to serve on the Washington, DC Wesleyan Alumni Council as well as is a member of the Wesleyan Annual Fund. She has a B.A. in East Asian Studies and Music. She received a Masters in Public Administration from New York's Baruch City College.*

*Ms. Kwok currently serves on the board of a wide range of APA groups including the Organization of Chinese Americans - Northern Virginia Chapter, Southeast Asia Resource Action Center, National Coalition of Asian Pacific American Community Development, and the Asian Pacific American Caucus of the American Political Science Association. She is also one of the individuals who have been working to form the Asian Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund. Her views have been featured on national radio and TV programs as well as in major newspapers and magazines.*

*Honors include The Women at the Top of the Game Award in 2001, being named one of A Magazine's One Hundred Most Influential Asian Americans of the Past Decade, World Journal's Top 100 North American Chinese, a member of the 1999 American Swiss Foundation's Young Leaders Conference in Vevey, Switzerland, one of 10 delegates selected for the 1997 National Women's Leadership Group to travel to Israel hosted by the American Jewish Committee, and the Presidential Classroom's 25th Anniversary Outstanding Alumni Award.*