

## FEATURE

# How to Join the American Mainstream?

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If you are an English-speaking immigrant of western culture, joining the American mainstream simply means being in the United States. This is because the United States is an English-speaking country based on western culture. Hence, any immigrant with the same language and culture will always be recognized as a rightful member of that society with all rights and privileges therein.

On the other hand, if English is not your mother tongue and you are not of western culture, you are likely to be recognized as a foreigner even if you are a legal immigrant. The perception of a foreigner is not based on the legal papers, but on your social behavior and cultural traits. This is true even for Chinese immigrants who have lived in the United States for a while and are going home for a vacation. I have lived in the U.S. for over 50 years, and have gone back to Taiwan and mainland China about 10 times. Change of personal mannerism did not surface in the first three trips. However, in later trips, the realization of not being able to fully follow Chinese traditions set in simply from comments by people at home. I realized this distinctively when I went home, and was told that I had somehow forgotten my own culture, not entirely but substantially. This proves one point, in time I have acquired the language and culture of the United States.

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People with different life experience will result in a various degree of cultural assimilation or isolation. Cultural isolation in itself needs not be a problem for daily living, if you reside in an ethnic-concentrated community, such as Chinatown (old and new). However, a modern society like the United States demands a certain amount of mutual understanding to achieve peaceful co-existence among various ethnic groups, especially between the majority and minority. Otherwise, everything else being equal, cultural misunderstanding, or worse distortion, always results in discrimination against the minority under the best of circumstances, and under the worst circumstances threatens the very survival for the minority.

We don't have to go back far in history to find proof of this conclusion. Remember the Chinese

Exclusion Acts during the 1880s in the U.S.? No matter how hard Chinese laborers worked, and how much they contributed to the building of the transcontinental railroad, a key development in opening the western U.S. frontiers, Chinese laborers were not recognized at the completion ceremony of these railroads and/or in the history books. Not only that, Chinese laborers were forbidden to become U.S. citizens and were stripped of human rights in a country which declares inalienable rights for everyone! Even though these laws have been repealed since 1943,

discriminatory social attitude has remained nevertheless even today. The fact is: you don't look for prejudice, it will find you! The question is: are you willing to live with social prejudice? Or are you going to do something about it so that you will have the respect that you deserve? If you are going to fight against social prejudice, the next question is how?

Prejudice applies to the whole ethnic group. So, if one Chinese American is involved in an incident, for example, the Wen Ho Lee Spy Case (see related story on page 36), then all Chinese Americans are implicated at least as potential spies. This is "presumed guilty until proven innocent" which is exactly opposite to the U.S. Founding principle, "presumed innocent until proven guilty." Prejudice doesn't care about differences within the ethnic group, Chinese is Chinese is Chinese. The only way to fight against prejudice is for all members of that ethnic group to stand together shoulder to shoulder. This is how African Americans won their civil rights in the 1960s. There was only one Martin Luther King and he spoke for all African Americans regardless of an immigrant's origin and social status.

There is no easy solution, not even a book solution which says that if you do such and such, then you will be guaranteed social respect. However, that is not the reason to quit trying. It should make you more determined to find a way or ways to achieve your goal. If you are willing to think objectively, you will likely reach this conclusion: "Prejudice is often born out of ignorance, greed and fear." There is enough blame to go around for both perpetrators and victims. Most of all, we need to recognize the root causes that help create prejudice in the first place.

One way to fight against social prejudice is to join the mainstream. Hence, "How to Join the American Mainstream?"

Based on my personal observations, I like to suggest the following:

1. Recognize reality and plan a strategy to cope with it. Please do not rely on second-hand or false information or wishful thinking or what it should be. Reality is what it is, no more and no less. Above all, be rational, and definitely not emotional. This world is both good and bad. People are both good and bad. Remember the American saying: "you always prepare for the worst, and hope for the best."

Many Chinese immigrants have an over-expectation of American society. American democracy may be better than most other political systems in the world. But it is far from being perfect. The justice system works for a majority of people, but not always for everyone. Yet this is not the reason for not trying. American society is built on competition, and is not always just. The American government is built on the promise, just a promise, mind you, that everyone deserves a fair chance, not necessarily an equal chance, to succeed. The main responsibility of the government is to make sure that this promise is kept to as many people as possible. Again, you notice that no individual guarantees are given. The final word on this subject comes from Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese strategist (535-483 BCE), "Know the enemy and know yourself, and you can fight 100 battles with no danger of defeat."

2. You must have "Personal Initiative", i.e. "Stand up on your own and do something." Most people are intelligent enough to figure out reality. However, somebody needs to start some action for things to happen. Yes, you should be cautious so as not to cause any undue harm to yourself and others you care about. Nevertheless, somebody has to make the first move. And if you are disadvantaged by social prejudice, then you are the one to make that first move.

This first move may require you to change your living pattern, for example, you may have to get out of your familiar social circle and get into a new environment in order to

change your disadvantaged position. It is nice to live in a comfort zone where you don't have to learn anything new. Life is easy and effortless. The problem with that proposition is that no one can guarantee you how long that comfort zone will last. And even if it lasts, chances are that your life will be strictly routine with nothing new to look forward to. When time comes (this always happens sooner or later), your easy life usually turns for the worse. Robert Kennedy once said, though not his original, "Some people look at things as they are and ask Why? I look at things that could have been, and say Why not?"

3. You must be willing to consider others' viewpoints, and if needed, adopt the alternative. It is true that the combined intelligence of many people, can and does exceed the simple sum of individual intelligence. It is called the synergistic phenomenon. Of course, you should be intelligent enough to separate hearsay from constructive criticism. In combining intelligence, only logical deduction counts. No personal relations should and can be considered.

There is a Chinese saying: "The combined intelligence of three average workers equals or exceeds that of Zhuge Liang." Zhuge Liang was the legendary strategist who single handedly established the Three-Kingdom Era (221-263) in Chinese history. Any individual, however brilliant, is always limited in his/her intellectual capacity for thinking beyond 1 or 2 alternative scenarios. In nature as well as in human events, scenarios of equal likelihood are at least 5 or 6 or more. More often than not, more scenarios can be explored by more individuals with independent perspectives. If you don't believe this, read history and count how many dictators (kings and emperors worldwide) failed ultimately in their own overblown intelligence. Although synergy doesn't always guarantee a win, it sure beats thinking alone in a fantasy land.

4. You must communicate with many people of the general public, especially members of the majority. You don't have to humble yourself or put yourself in jeopardy. But you must find out what is in other people's minds. You need to know their perspective, or where they are coming from. At the same time, you need to convey your position to other people. If you can do this without resorting to shouting

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matches, or worse, fistfights, you are communicating.

This communication can take place in a variety of ways. Most frequently is in the form of private, informal, yet meaningful personal conversation. In this regard, you need to first win the acceptance of a friend with whom you can discuss serious subjects. Many times, 2-8 people having a lunch together is very appropriate, just making sure that the conversation topic is not about food per se, or personal gossips. Most of all, you should be an active member in the conversation, not just sit quietly on the sideline. You should be able to talk about Chinese related and mainstream issues like American economy for example, and be able to present your own point of view. Finally, communication is a skill that should be practiced frequently and regularly.

5. You need to have the skill of English-speaking, not only to express, but also to articulate. This is the most important one for joining the American mainstream. Without the English-speaking proficiency, you are voiceless, and you are not likely able to correlate with people and to secure

meaningful understanding with the establishment. If you make good gestures, you run the serious risk of being misunderstood, or worse, distorted and/or taken for granted as a scapegoat. I suspect that Wen Ho Lee's poor English-speaking skill may be a factor in his case of being accused as a Chinese spy.

Let us make it very clear. The United States has been and will continue to be an English-speaking country. English is the unofficial official language for all official functions. Therefore, the majority of Americans have no inclination of learning Chinese, just to accommodate the Chinese-speaking population in the U.S. In fact, the opposite is true, the majority of Americans expect Chinese immigrants to learn English so that they can survive and function in this country. Otherwise, why are they here? Come to think of it, this is true in all countries of the world. So, for your own survival and for gaining acceptance and respect from others, there is every reason to learn English-speaking, regardless of age, social status and cultural background.

There are necessary conditions to learn English and English speaking as a living language, not as a rigid memory. Language, as a tool of transmitting thoughts, is actually a mind-set. You speak English with an English mind-set, and Chinese with a Chinese mind-set. You can not speak English, at least not fluently or even intelligently, with a Chinese mind-set. The reverse is also true.

Thus, in learning English-speaking, you have to be in an English-speaking environment where most of conversation is in English, and then practice and practice more. Only through

repetition over an extended period of time, would there be an English mind-set in your brain. Also, you must overcome the initial timidness of speaking English for fear of making laughable mistakes. You will make laughable mistakes for sure, but the solution to this problem lies not in withholding your speaking, but in boldly making mistakes and then correcting them through repeatedly learning the right way of speaking. This is really what they mean when they say: "Practice makes perfect."

To summarize, answers to the question "How to Join the American Mainstream?" are outlined in steps 1 - 5 as stated above. These are by no means the only ways. If you know a set of better guidelines, by all means use it. However, what you must do is to make a decision, take your initiative and start making things happen. Don't wait for tomorrow because tomorrow never comes. Don't wait for somebody else to do it for you, because somebody else has no intention of doing so. Above all, you want to join the American mainstream for your own benefit and for the benefit of the Chinese American community. You may not see any profit right away, but you are being benefited in an intangible way, for example, acquiring a seat at the table (of public forum).

"Joining the American Mainstream" means "Gaining acceptance and credibility." The process will take time. If you wait until you need this acceptance and credibility, it is always by then too late. Then you wonder "why me?" At that point in time, you have to answer to yourself, because there is no one else to blame. There is famous a Chinese saying: "A thousand-mile journey begins with the first step." So, let us begin here and now!

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