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Freshman Essay Contest Results

1st Place: Ruth Truitt
2nd Place: P.J. Bentley
3rd Place: Molly Merz

1st Place Winning Essay

Asian American Assimilation and the American Dream

by Ruth Truitt

Have you ever seen something so beautiful that you were afraid to look again? You bowed down to the possibility that somehow, in the instant you turned away, your ideal would be shattered and that beauty would be lost. America reigns in that beauty, and for this reason, more than one group of people chooses to live in fear of losing their place in it. Traditionally, “white” Americans ignore the positive distinction of colors that accent and give vibrancy to the picture. While minorities often choose to dull and disregard natural attributes to become more harmonious, in fact, these transformations only cause the picture to endure the mediocrity of a dreary, cloudy ocean view. Asian Americans Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, Sui Sin Far, and John Wu confront these transformations and attempt to explain their roles, experiences, and struggles in American society through their writing. Being an Asian immigrant encompasses more than just learning and following a new set of rules; it also includes conquering a self-imposed and societal image that in time can be either destructive or empowering.

Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston chooses to convey the ability to empower through acceptance. In her speech, she discusses the struggles of immigrants and challenges the reader to recognize the obvious: America has always been diverse. Houston suggests that common bonds such as freedom, equality, generosity, and love should be the focus of how we as Americans run our society, instead of focusing on the differences that are the root of many problems. She has experienced the effects of prejudice, and she chooses to see the growth and recognition of individuality as the outcome. Though she does not discuss the lasting personal and emotional effects on the younger generation, she optimistically alludes to the idea that they, too, will survive through strength, knowledge, and pride in their ethnicity. With this optimism, she also points out the responsibility of America and its generations to be an example for other less democratic and multiculturally aware countries. She reports an exchange with a Japanese leader, in the urbanizing movement, as he describes America’s role as the example of democracy and multiculturalism in the following: “The world is watching America deal with its diversity . . . we need your country to lead us in human rights and values” (Houston 139). The price of assimilation, in her view, is the willingness to overcome obstacles, the strength to have satisfaction and pride in differences, and the heart and selflessness to act as an example to others.

Though many contemporary immigrants are able to find optimism and empowerment through their struggles, many early Asian Americans, just as quickly, discovered the strict laws that make America’s freedom and liberty possible. In “In the Land of the Free,” Sui Sin Far recounts the fictional tale of a Chinese family torn apart by immigration regulations and a government that overlooked them. As the main character, Lae Choo, waits for the boat to dock signaling the end of the journey to America, she relates her joy to her young son,

Little One, promising, "It is very beautiful and thou wilt be very happy there" (Far 172). Lae has surrounded herself with a blissful dream of returning to her husband, Hom Hing, and raising her son in the land where they will become successful and prosperous. This hope is quickly splintered when, upon arrival, immigration officers take her child away due to incomplete paperwork. Yet, during this trial, Lae Choo still holds onto the possibility that her dream will be realized. She waits and hangs onto the words of Hom Hing, believing that "there cannot be any law that would keep a child from its mother!" (Far 175). Ten months later, after enduring the grief of expectancy and longing for her son, she finally is granted guardianship. However, the cruel fact arises that, though no law on paper can take away her son, the absence of her presence has done just that. Although through time the wounds may heal, the impression of abandonment has left its mark. Little One now clings with loyalty and trust to an American. He may one day attain the American Dream that his mother had wished for, but through this struggle, Lae Choo loses her reason for the dream.

One may wonder what path Little One's life took after returning to his mother. In John Wu's "Making and Unmaking the 'Model Minority,'" readers are introduced to the lives and conflicts surrounding second-generation Asian Americans. Wu attempts to dissect the "Model Minority" label in light of both its positive and negative connotations; he does so predominantly to draw attention to the double burden it places on Asian American youth. This label generates encouraging images of Asian Americans, whose hard work has kept the American dream alive. It is also seen as a constrictive prison that binds them to certain academic and career fields, while using their prosperity as a scapegoat for America's lack of minority accomplishments and awareness. Throughout this confusion is the underlying voice of Asian youth, whose lives are tailored by this model and by the dreams of their parents. Wu explains that "knowing the sacrifices of the immigrant parents, second-generation Asian Americans feel obligated to work hard to meet the expectations and, in a way, repay the first generation. These are the same expectations as those of the society on Asian Americans in general as a model minority" (290). Through loss of individuality or extreme rebellion, Asian youth are crushed by this heavy weight of expectation. This is the cost of their assimilation.

Though Houston's account stirs the need to invoke change and create a more positive self-image, and Far's tale pulls at the heart, Wu's summary of the burden of constant expectation is the most helpful in understanding the position of Asian Americans as they assimilate into American culture. He explains how the liability to country and family shapes the people themselves, as they are caught up in an external game that affects them on the most internal level. As players in this game, they strategize to hide their true colors for a winning outcome. By doing this, they blend in and slip through unnoticed. As more of the younger generation begins a bold new plan to be noticed and to take risks, their revitalizing perspectives and ideas put them in a position to be knocked down. However, to take Houston's more positive outlook, it more likely puts them in a position to shine and to add to the tapestry of colors that still makes America a land of hopes and dreams.

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