



A Chinaman's Chance: One Family's Journey and the Chinese American Dream

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From Tony Hsieh to Amy Chua to Jeremy Lin, Chinese Americans are now arriving at the highest levels of American business, civic life, and culture. But what makes this story of immigrant ascent unique is that Chinese Americans are emerging at just the same moment when China has emerged - and indeed may displace America - at the center of the global scene. What does it mean to be Chinese American in this moment? And how does exploring that question alter our notions of just what an American is and will be?

In many ways, Chinese Americans today are exemplars of the American Dream: during a crowded century and a half, this community has gone from indentured servitude, second-class status and outright exclusion to economic and social integration and achievement. But this narrative obscures too much: the Chinese Americans still left behind, the erosion of the American Dream in general, the emergence--perhaps--of a Chinese Dream, and how other Americans will look at their countrymen of Chinese descent if China and America ever become adversaries. As Chinese Americans reconcile competing beliefs about what constitutes success, virtue, power, and purpose, they hold a mirror up to their country in a time of deep flux.

In searching, often personal essays that range from the meaning of Confucius to the role of Chinese Americans in shaping how we read the Constitution to why he hates the hyphen in "Chinese-American," Eric Liu pieces together a sense of the Chinese American identity in these auspicious years for both countries. He considers his own public career in American media and government; his daughter's efforts to hold and release aspects of her Chinese inheritance; and the still-recent history that made anyone Chinese in America seem foreign and disloyal until proven otherwise. Provocative, often playful but always thoughtful, Liu breaks down his vast subject into bite-sized chunks, along the way providing insights into universal matters: identity, nationalism, family, and more.

A Chinaman's Chance: One Family's Journey and the Chinese American Dream **Details**

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American Dream Eric Liu

From Reader Review A Chinaman's Chance: One Family's Journey and the Chinese American Dream for online ebook

Alton says

If I had to make a list of the top five most influential books in my life right now, Liu's most recent book would probably vie for the top spot. I read this on Kindle, and never have I found myself highlighting sentence after sentence on almost every other page of sentiments that I've experienced or agreed with. He really does deftly capture the Chinese-American experience (through his lens) and blends in thinking and work from other scholars that, at the end of reading this book, has made me better understand myself. And I'm not exaggerating at all. I even wrote a review—I never do this.

Albert W Tu says

The book charmed me early on when the author mentions how as a child he unconsciously saw the world through a Chinese filter – hearing the Abbott and Costello routine as “Hu’s on first”. I remembered how for years I thought Johnny Rivers was singing about a Secret Asian Man, though one who retained all those super spy traits – “a song about me!” I thought.

Eric Liu has written a multifaceted take on the standard reflection of the Chinese American experience. Along with the stories of career paths of uncles, relationships with parents, and raising a daughter that range over the meaning of assimilation there are unexpected pleasures that arise from his legal and political background (Harvard and Clinton Administration).

In highlighting some forgotten moments in the long history of Chinese in America, I was startled to learn the part a Chinese man figured in establishing *jus soli* (being born on American soil grants you US citizenship) in *US vs Wong Kim Ark* in 1898. Reviewing the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, several legal and immigration stories from the mid-20th Century and the eventual exoneration of Wen Ho Lee was also gratifying.

I liked the resonance he finds in Confucian thought and Scottish Enlightenment thinkers including Francis Hutcheson and Adam Smith – particularly in his Theory of Moral Sentiments – that were formative to the America’s moral vision. In TMS we are reminded of the necessity of “trust, cooperation, mutuality, reciprocity and the social virtues”. And from Hutcheson, “The instinct for benevolence, not the abstraction of a social contract, gives rise to justice. This view, of human nature and human rights, begins with society, not with an atomized individual.” Liu goes further,

“This is what excites me about China’s rise and the public emergence of Chinese Americans: it will give all Americans occasion to revisit our assumptions about who we are. A time is approaching when we will be able to lay the Declaration of Independence atop The Analects and end up with a revelation of interdependence.”

The book alternates between this type of political examination and ruminations based on personal history. There are charming stories of language practice with his daughter Olivia, who for a time demanded to be addressed by her Chinese name Ming and thoughts on language and culture based on a wide-ranging selection of cultural history. At first this can seem discordant but eventually the practice yields benefits as a rhythm forms and harmonies emerge.

Throughout, the importance of consciously examining what it means to be an active participant in American life, a citizen, and also Chinese American is evident. America's advantage has always been its ready adaptability to new and diverse thought. In this historical moment of China's parity and potential eclipse of America, Liu wants to tie the success of Chinese Americans to the success of America, indeed at the vanguard.

Jess says

This book is a memoir, but it's also a meditation on what it means to be American and a non-white American from the lens of a Chinese American. I enjoyed how Liu wove elements of his family's history and his observations raising a daughter with history, political documents, and wry trivia about Chinese Americans.

Juliana says

This book isn't the straight forward memoir I was expecting. Instead I was delighted to find a set of essays and ponderings by a master wordsmith on his family, his history, language and what it means to be American.

Patty Anker says

When you walk around in the West with an Asian face, the questions "What are you?" or "Where are you from?" are ones you get used to answering. "Where are you from?" was always the easier one – I could answer "Columbia, Missouri" because it was where I was born, or "Scarborough" when I was growing up in Ontario, or "the Bronx" when we lived there – all true. But then I'd have to deal with the followup question "Where are you really from?" So my standard answer became "My parents were born in China, I was born in the States, I live in [insert place]." As for "What are you?" I usually squelch the urge to say "human" and answer simply "Chinese American."

But what does that mean? Do you speak Chinese? Do you spend time in China? Are you teaching your kids Chinese? Do you use chopsticks? Are you mostly Chinese but live in America? Or are you really American, a Twinkie, yellow on the outside but white on the inside? The questions of identity never stop coming, and so self assessments go on all the time. How Chinese am I? How American? And what does it mean?

One of the most pointed, nuanced and elegant takes on this question I've ever encountered is in Eric Liu's thought provoking book, *A Chinaman's Chance*. Liu brings his deep appreciation of what it means to be American (he is the CEO and founder of Citizen University which teaches the art of good citizenship) with his love of language (he was a former speechwriter for President Bill Clinton) to the topic of labels in a country where every American has a different story of who he or she is. Whimsically, Liu suggests we can telegraph our story with a comma, a slash, a space. "Chinese-American" is not the same as "Chinese American" he says. Making "American" the noun is the truer description for him. The book, which spans history, politics, arts, memoir and popular culture, is essential reading for all Americans. I am honored to run an excerpt at my blog – please read and then let me know: What are you? Where are you from? How would you punctuate that? And where would you like to go? <http://pattychanganker.com/eric-liu-d...>

Kylie Sparks says

This is a beautifully written, thoughtful, nuanced and eloquent exploration of what it means to be American, to be Chinese-American. The eloquence is not surprising--Eric Liu was a speech writer for Bill Clinton. This book is a memoir about his family, but it goes far beyond that, covering history, cultural heritage, assumptions, language, privilege, and racism...I found it really moving and thought provoking. Nonfiction book clubs--this would be a great choice.

David Kinchen says

BOOK REVIEW: 'A Chinaman's Chance: One Family's Journey and the Chinese American Dream': What It Means to be a Chinese American Today

To put it simply: America makes Chinese Americans, but China doesn't make American Chinese -- Eric Liu, in the epilogue (Page 209) of "A Chinaman's Chance"

That formulation in Eric Liu's "A Chinaman's Chance: One Family's Journey and the Chinese American Dream" (PublicAffairs, 240 pages, bibliography, index, \$25.99) is vital to grasp Liu's view of what it means to be a Chinese American -- and by extension, any kind of American.

He backs up his assertion in a relatively short book (I didn't want it to end!) that combines a family memoir with essays on the ultimate inclusiveness of the U.S. -- despite a despicable history of prejudice and exploitation of Chinese in the nation that led to the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act forbidding their admittance.

The exclusion act, which had bipartisan support in Congress, marked the first time in the history of the U.S. that a "group by race from entering our territory, let alone from ever becoming citizens," he writes (Page 109). The exclusion act wasn't repealed until 1940! Considering the woeful state of history instruction in our schools, I'm guessing that very few Americans are aware of the Chinese Exclusion Act. I don't recall reading about it in my high school history classes in Illinois in the 1950s.

One part of the book that particularly intrigued me was the anti-Chinese racism of San Francisco Irish American Dennis Kearny (Pages 111-116). Liu describes how Kearny refused to debate a Chinese American citizen on the Chinese Exclusion Act. Liu mentions a 1995 book by Noel Ignatiev that I've heard of -- but not read -- "How the Irish Became White". Here's an essay on the subject:

<http://www.pitt.edu/~hirtle/uujec/whi....>

Ignatiev writes that Irish immigrants became "white" by showing "the WASP power structure in word and deed that they, too, were willing to trample blacks," Liu writes. "The same story, substituting yellow for black, obtained in California. The Irish made themselves insiders by leading the stigmatization of the most

marginal of the outsiders." (Page 112).

What jumped off the pages of "A Chinaman's Chance" to me was the success story of his father and his five uncles in their quest for education and employment in America.

Liu's father rose to the middle ranks of management at IBM, while his uncles achieved success in businesses and academia in the U.S. Most of them eventually returned to Taiwan, where they didn't experience the glass ceiling they faced in the U.S.

One uncle -- "Uncle No. 5" -- even became the prime minister of Taiwan. Liu's grandfather, Liu Kuo-yun, born in 1908, was a legendary Chinese general, fighting the Japanese and the Communist Chinese; the general's widow-- Eric Liu's beloved "nei nei" -- Wan Fang Liu-- is still alive at 101 and lives in Taiwan.

Eric Liu himself is a success story for first generation Chinese Americans: He was a White House speechwriter and policy adviser for President Bill Clinton. He's an author of best-selling books like "The Accidental Asian" and the book under review. He's a contributor to The Atlantic magazine and a correspondent for CNN.com.

While the book is serious, it's also full of humor, as he tells how his mixed-race teen-age daughter Olivia joshes him about his Tiger Father tendencies. The book's title came from his father, who died at the young age of 61. Liu says his father used the politically incorrect phrase -- which originated in racist 19th Century California and which means "no chance at all" -- to describe a variety of situations, including getting to the store on time before it closed.

Liu discusses Amy Chua's best-selling "The Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" as well as "The Triple Package" by Chua and her husband Jed Rubenfeld, published earlier this year. Liu says culture is a "coarse and deceptive filter. If it were true that Chineseness alone conferred this 'triple package' advantage, then all Chinese Americans would be thriving. That's how it may seem in the popular imagination. But it's just not true. There are hundreds of thousands of Chinese Americans, and not just in Chinatowns, stuck in poverty or struggling to get a fair shot in life."

It's the other side of the "Model Minority" coin, he writes, noting that the poverty rate for Chinese Americans is higher than that of other Asian Americans -- and higher than that of whites. And while majority white America insists that merit alone should govern the admission of high school students to selective universities, the argument blows up in their faces when Chinese Americans and other Asians end up with a disproportionate share of students at universities like UCLA.

I was delighted to find that, like me, Liu loves counterfactual fiction, including Philip Roth's "The Plot Against America" which deals with the persecution of American Jews when Charles Lindbergh is elected president. (Liu says it was 1932, but it actually was 1940 when Roth writes that Lindbergh defeated FDR-- who was seeking a third term).

(for my Nov. 15, 2004 review of "The Plot Against America": <http://archives.huntingtonnews.net/ev...>)

The discussion of Roth's novel leads to the often made comparison of Chinese Americans with the success of American Jews. He discusses this on pages 159-160, saying that the Jewish immigrants who created what Neal Gabler called in his book "An Empire of Their Own" -- the motion picture industry -- did so because there was little or no competition.

Nobody thought much of the early 20th Century nickelodeons and their crude films, which allowed immigrant Jews and their sons to create the "empire." Today, he writes, the fragmentation of our civic and aesthetic life pretty much precludes any single immigrant group from dominating an industry the way Jews did in Hollywood.

But Liu undercuts his own argument by citing fashion industry icons of Chinese origin like designers Alexander Wang and Jason Wu and editor Eva Wang. (One Wang he didn't mention was Vera Wang, the one I'm most familiar with). But then again, he's got a point: No single ethnic group dominates fashion, although Jews like Donna Karan, Calvin Klein and Ralph Lauren are among the 48 pages of "Jewish fashion designers" listed in Wikipedia. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category...>). Forty-eight pages sounds like an empire to me, with people like Kenneth Cole, Isaac Mizrahi, Marc Jacobs, Anne Klein, Arnold Scaasi, Diane von Furstenberg and many others populating the "empire".

I was aware, dimly, of many of the topics in "A Chinaman's Chance," but not of the details of the exclusion act. This is an eye-opening book that should be read by everyone. To top it off, it's entertaining.

Linda says

The content is as powerful as the writing. It's no surprise, though, Liu is a successful political writer and comes from an impressive family line of people who have contributed a great deal to society.

I picked this book up thanks to my library, who had a display of books for Asian-Pacific-American Heritage month. Around that time I also happened to be pondering analyses that the Democratic Party's message is fragmented, if it exists at all. I wondered where the message might come from and suspected the answer lay with our non-white neighbors. With this book, I both got an education on the Chinese immigrant experience and the life that Chinese Americans live but also ideas on how to shape our notion of community and citizenship.

Still, the best part of this to me was the writing. It started like the tinkle of one hand on a piano as Liu explains his early years and introduces ideas about identity, etc.. As it goes on, he brings in progressively heavier, harder-for-white-people-to-digest ideas about exclusion and white supremacy. By the end it had crescendoed to a full orchestra, in my mind, as he touched on bigger and bigger questions of American society and the role of Asians in general but Chinese Americans specifically. It's really, conceptually, a wonderful read. The educational aspect is just bonus. Looking forward to reading his other titles.

Elizabeth K. says

This was decent, Eric Liu (who I mostly remember as a speechwriter for the Clinton White House, and I guess he's also a political commentator) ruminates on various aspects of his family's immigration experience and his identity as a Chinese American. He's a terrific writer and his insights are very clear and thoughtful. He doesn't really delve too deeply into any one theme, although he includes a lot of references to other works, so if you were particularly interested it would be easy to figure out where to find more on the topic.

Jane says

This is a book written by Eric Liu, the former speech writer for President Clinton, and a second generation Chinese American. My feeling after reading this book is very complex, I can not use one word to summarize it, rather, the book is many things all at the same time.

At the center this book is a memoir. It tells the story of the Liu family in China, Taiwan as well as in the U.S., starting from his grandfather, a preeminent and high-ranking nationalist general, whose tomb had the carved inscription written by Chiangmai Kai-shek, to his parents and his high-achieving uncles, to himself, and in the end, to his daughter. We follow the footsteps of each generation, and there was this eloquent comparison to John Adam's paragraph – “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy, geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain”, “it's a nice parallel, a cross-cultural statement of obligation, ever oriented toward making a better life for the sons.” Although he was also shrewd and candid in pointing out that, although he worked hard all his life, he “began my American life with a nice allotment of opportunity. And I haven't blown it”.

It is a book in search of the answer to the age-old question of “heritage and identity”, especially for individuals of “non-white” ethnicity, since the white is the presumed default group in America. And it is fascinating to read the different meanings implied by the slightly different arrangements of words, such as Chinese-American; Chinese/American; Chinese, American; Chinese (American); (Chinese) American; Chinese American. Each embodies a subtle, yet distinctly different identity. And I have never realized that the commonly employed term of “ABC (America-Born Chinese)” was actually quite insensitive.

It is also a book of Chinese American history, with stories of so many Chinese Americans, from the very early years till the most recent, the names including Wong Chin Foo (the first American citizen of Chinese descent, whom was indeed, a true American), Gary Locke, Wen-Ho Lee, Gish Jen, Ang Lee, Goodwin Liu, Eddie Huang, Joe Wong, and Jeremy Lin. Each has a unique story, and each was told with a somewhat different angle. It was difficult to imagine that the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was passed by the congress, and renewed multiple times. As a group, the Chinese Americans have come a long way.

It is also a book of exploration of cultural and linguistic differences between the east and the west. Liu dubbed himself a “word nerd”, so it is only natural that he showed this exquisite love for the two languages, especially the translation between the two languages. And I could not agree with him more on the point that, it is impossible to translate a poem, especially an ancient Chinese poem into English, or any other language for that matter, because the poems “shi” in themselves, reflects thousands of years of the Chinese culture boiled down to its very essence and beauty. The author used the river as a metaphor for the culture, and he noticed “the bend in the river”, “Quietly America is becoming more other-directed, more mindful of mutuality. Loudly, China is becoming more selfish, more short-term, less filial, and more self-seeking. There is no fundamental shifts in the direction of the river – ours is still a culture of individuals that holds rights above and separate from responsibilities; theirs is still a culture of collectives and of duties. But in each case the river is bending, more than a bit.” This is certainly very accurate and poignant observation.

Another interesting aspect of the book is the constant reminder that the general attitude and opinion on Chinese Americans depend a lot on the status of China. I sense the self-consciousness that all immigrants

and minorities tend to have, I think it has certain merit to it, yet it may have been overemphasized a bit in the book.

Finally, but most importantly, is the question asked and tried to be answered by the author, "what, then, does it mean to be a real American?" He astutely wrote, "is it a matter of simple longevity and familiarity and acceptance in this land? Or is it having the mindset of a perpetual immigrant, ever eager to start a second act, always willing to start over?" It is a tough question, but every American, Chinese or not, should have his or her own answer.

Overall, I think this is a very rich, poignant, yet warm book to read. It is like an elegant piece of tapestry, every thread woven for a purpose, yet when you look at it, you only see the beauty and the grandiosity. The writing certainly reflects the author's years as the speech writer for a President, clear, eloquent, and very powerful. This is the book I truly enjoyed and would highly recommend.

See my other reviews at
<http://newenglander0804.wordpress.com>

Annie Zhang says

A Chinaman's Chance helped to redefine my Chinese American dream: as a second-generation American myself who is just about to start my college career -- and thus step out of my familiar bubble -- I've realized just how inherently intertwined my "chineseness" and "americaness" are. This book is beautifully written and at times, eerily similar to my own childhood experiences, and I would highly recommend this to anyone struggling to find their own identity in America today.

Kirk Astroth says

Boring and pedantic. Chinese American or Chinese-American or Chinese/American? Really? Splitting hairs over punctuation? I struggled to finish this book and I have an adopted daughter from China.

Ewen Syme says

This was a complete disappointment. After hearing Eric Liu speak on NPR and discuss his life and writing, I eagerly anticipated reading his text. His luminous prose on air and ability to be so articulate with speech, fell utterly flat on the page. The book essentially amounted to a series somewhat disjointed posits and loose remembrances about what it means - or might mean - to be an ABC (American Born Chinese). Unless you are deeply interested in the ABC experience, I would not recommend this book.

Wei Liu says

Like it a lot. Good balance between the personal/family experience and the observations about Chinese Americans in the past and present. Strongly recommended.

Caitlin Schultz says

I read this book and Liu's 1998 memoir, "The Accidental Asian," at the same time. In "The Accidental Asian," Liu is struggling to identify with his Asian-ness (whatever that means!) and he skillfully breaks down race, culture, and ethnicity in a way that makes you better understand yourself and the world around you. In "A Chinaman's Chance," Liu has come to accept and embrace his heritage, and he delves deeper into the concepts explored in the earlier book. Both are excellent, and I highly recommend them for anyone interested in culture and identity!
