

October 1, 1989 (Vol. 5, no. 3)

Dear Colleague:

My brothers and I went to an Australian school in Sydney, Australia, in the early 'forties. We were then ten, eleven, and twelve years old, undernourished children from war-ravished China, who hardly knew a word of English. Australia was then a racist state, White Australia being its official policy. Our school had never known non-white students before. Predictably, we had a rough time of it at the start. Schoolboys, naturally inclined to taunt whatever was different, used their fingers to slant their eyes, pretended to pull our nonexistent pigtails, and shouted in singsong fashion, "Chin, Chiang, Chinaman, Him very bad...etc." This happened almost every day, which caused us great distress. But, curiously, we were not demoralized. If anything, taunting by our schoolmates reinforced our sense of superiority, for it proved beyond doubt that we were an island of civilization in a sea of barbarians. Moreover, subconsciously, we probably concluded that if those louts were our competitors for academic laurels, we had nothing to fear.

My brothers and I, even as children, were protected by our deep-seated ethnocentrism or chauvinism. Now I wonder, how was it inculcated? Were we taught the superiority of Chinese culture in elementary school? I believe the answer to be no. Nothing so direct was tried. True, we read stories of Chinese heroes and patriots: patriotism was big when I was a young boy if only because China was fighting for survival against its Japanese invaders. But the lesson of patriotism was also learned through the example of Joan of Arc. In addition, the scientific spirit was driven home to us through inspiring accounts of Benjamin Franklin and Louis Pasteur. Many stories were, predictably, moral fables, lessons in filial piety. But even here the Chinese educators did not confine themselves to Chinese sources. The lesson of compassion was taught to Chinese children through--believe it or not--Oscar Wilde's "The Happy Prince."

Chinese chauvinism presupposed universalism. It presumed that values were eternal (given by nature) and universal, not merely the products of a particular place and time. A Chinese child could be a Louis Pasteur any time, because scientific inventiveness was not a French trait, it was a human trait; and no great human quality--in the eyes of the Chinese chauvinist--could be alien to his own tradition.

Chinese chauvinism, for all its peculiarity, was not essentially different from other people's chauvinism worldwide. Until modern times, just about every people known to ethnography and history believed themselves to be at the center of the world in all senses of the word: they were not ethnic but human. The Navahos were not Navahos to themselves, but the dineh, which meant simply "the people." The Eskimos, the Greeks, the Chinese, the British, the French, and the

Americans all thought of themselves in that grandiose way. Their presuppositions were all universalist. Greenland Eskimos presumed that European explorers came to pick up human wisdom--not just Eskimo folkways, and the proud French believed that they had a mission civilisatrice, not merely a mission to spread French bureaucracy and cooking.

Unselfconscious pride was at the heart of ethnocentrism, and this pride rested on the feeling of centrality, of being uniquely human--human in the best sense. Pride is overweening or arrogant. Excess is inherent to its meaning; modest pride or even rational pride is, in my view, oxymoronic. Now, consider the ideal of ethnic pride, which is so much in the air. On campus, almost every week, we have conferences, dicussions, and lectures on the importance of ethnic pride. We all want to promote it. But how? The past is no help, because when we look at the past we shall find mostly examples of ethnocentrism, with its universalist pretensions. Contemporary ethnic pride is radically different from old ethnocentricism, because it is self-designated ethnic--that is, right at the start it claims to be only a part, a group, a particular people, and hence apart from other parts and groups. Contemporary ethnic pride is pride in a distinctive way of living, a custom, a manner of speech, and even a skin color, rather than, as with the Navahos, pride in being the people, or as with the Zuni and the French, pride in being "cooked" or civilized.

I wonder whether as a Chinese child in a white Australian school that had its full quota of bullies, I would have been able to stand up to the racist slurs if my moral armor had been solely ethnic pride--pride in having straight hair or of using chopsticks--rather than also the pride (mistaken, of course) of being an enlightened member of the cosmopolis, clearly superior to the bigots and ignoramuses whom I could even as a child afford to disdain because their world seemed so dark and small.

Best wishes,

