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Dear Colleague:

Does my sense of identity and self-worth depend on how well I know my own past? Can a people have self-confidence without an awareness of their own cultural attainments and heritage? Without hesitation, we would say "yes" to the first question and "no" to the second. But what grounds do we have for thinking thus? I have never seen reasons offered, not even at great American universities where our *raison-d'être* is to think.

The example of China offers food for thought. China, a large and complex civilization, was periodically overrun by nomads, who, far from wanting to impose their own customs and values on the conquered, were quite willing to give up their own culture in favor of those of the people they subdued. The Hsien-pei (a Turko-Mongol people) were exceptional in this regard. Their leaders, in 494, issued sweeping orders for Sinicization. They asked their people--the Hsien-pei--to give up their own language and tribal rituals, and even their own surnames, in favor of Chinese language, Chinese surnames, and Confucian-Buddhist observances.

Why should this seem surprising? If the Hsien-pei, as conquerors, feel free to take over the Chinese land and resources, why shouldn't they consider it perfectly reasonable to take over Chinese cultural treasures as well, including their language and customs? And does anyone seriously believe that the Hsien-pei, in these acts of acquisition, have somehow lost their self-confidence?

It seems to me common sense that confidence grows out of conquest. Chinese-Americans gain confidence by taking over computer science; they hope to take over democracy too. Neither is of Chinese invention. So what? As conquerors, Chinese-Americans take what they like, and their appetite will grow with more and more conquests. On the other hand, if they persist in counting the family chopsticks for reassurance, well, they may indeed get a measure of reassurance, but it will be a pale thing compared with the exhilaration of surveying the world with an eye to plunder.

White scholars and scientists have waxed rich and confident by spreading their interest all over the world. Asian literature, even today, is an intellectual jewel cultivated in the United States mostly by white scholars: it is still their proud acquisition. At the same time, white scholars and politicians tell us minorities that the only way we can gain self-esteem is by turning to our own folklore. And we--we minorities--are naive enough to believe them!

Best wishes,

