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Dear Colleague:

In my days as a student at Berkeley, forty years ago, cultural diffusion was the big idea. We all worked on it. The thesis was that only a few primary centers of innovation existed, and that from such centers cultural traits spread to the rest of the world. Underlying values in diffusion theory, which I had not known at the time, were: (1) Boundaries between cultural areas could be fuzzy and were likely to grow fuzzier over time; (2) The people at the centers of innovation enjoyed special prestige. The farther their innovations spread and were accepted by others, the greater the prestige. (3) The people at the center no doubt took pride in their achievements, but the people at the receiving end did not necessarily feel humiliation. If accepting the works of another entails humiliation, then trade itself--a universal phenomenon--would have been impossible, for trade presupposes a proclivity to appreciate the exotic--what is not made by or practiced in one's own culture area.

Since my school years, two major changes have occurred--one good, the other, doubtfully good and psychologically unsound. The good change is the acknowledgment that there were and are many centers of innovation, not just a few--that just as I, a Chinese, wear a Western coat, so an Euro-American occasionally wrestles with chopsticks to eat Chinese food. The other change, for which I feel ambivalence, reverses certain beliefs held earlier. It appears to argue that cultural products and values gain prestige insofar as they are kept within a people and its territorial boundary. Boundaries should therefore be sharply drawn, the people and their cultural areas kept distinct and apart: Native Americans will insist on living in wigwams, and Euro-American baseball teams must on no account call themselves Braves; I'll stop wearing a coat and you'll forswear chopsticks. Instead of taking pride in your adopting my innovations and values (chopsticks or Braves, as the case may be), I think you are only making fun of me. I proudly claim, "Yellow is beautiful," yet if you, a white person, try to look like a Yellow person by straightening your hair, I will almost certainly call you a racist. The psychological puzzle is: How can a people believe that pride resides in possessing cultural products and values that no one else will wish to have or imitate? And why should imitation (say, the Indian dance at the high-school game) be considered an insult rather than a compliment?

Best wishes,

*Y. Fu*