

Chinese... AMERICAN!!!

by Lee Duong

Wait you can't be an American! You are not tall enough, blonde enough, nor do you have blue eyes. Where are you from... China? Let's set the record straight. Yes I am Chinese, but I am not from China. In my one and a half years in Japan I have encountered enough wide eyed, open mouth Japanese people upon disclosing that I am from America, to contemplate their response. For some reason, while the rest of the world considers America to be a "salad bowl" of different cultures, races, and styles, Japan still thinks of the stereotypical American.

I guess to some extent its not so surprising that a largely homogenous society would expect others to be the same. Good or bad, Japan has a relatively small percentage of Foreigners in its country. On the whole, I think that the Japanese "image" is very homogenous. Its indisputable that Japanese people have very similar physical characteristics. In general, most people have black hair, dark eyes, and are often medium height. Most people do not tend to alter their physical appearances drastically. It is only recently that the new generation has begun to stray away. Even then, the extremes all look similar. All those girls with bleach blonde hair, 12 cm platforms, dark skin, white eyes and super short mini skirts all resemble each other, whether they think so or not.

Please don't misunderstand me. I love living in Japan, or I wouldn't have stayed here for so long. I am not trying to judge Japan in anyway, nor do I want them to judge me. My motive is to merely broaden their perspectives on Foreigners. It is true that Japan is an island nation. It was and is not as easy as other countries to immigrate to. America, on the other hand, is known as an immigrant nation. "Americans" pride themselves on this very fact. As a result, America is very multicultural and diverse in many way.

Actually, this aspect of Japanese culture was very interesting to me. Coming from America, I have encountered many different cultures, subcultures, and styles everyday. I think that people in America strive very hard to express themselves and their personalities. In fact, individuality is stressed from early childhood. Therefore, the stereotypical group that the Japanese refer to as "Americans," are actually fading out. There isn't one particular American culture, life style, personality or image.

Therefore it is at times disappointing and discouraging when people are upset because I do not fit their ideal of an American person. I did not come to Japan to reinforce the Japanese or any stereotypes of an American. I came to Japan for the opportunity to teach English, the truth about the diversity of my country and also about myself. I can view my situation in Japan as either good or bad. I can answer the endless "what is THE most popular...in America" question (dishonestly) or I can truly do my job as an educator. I choose to view this as an excellent opportunity for me to educate them on this very important fact, the true diversity of my country.

Therefore, it is in fact more important that I am here as a non-white American.

On the JET program, we were told that we were not only assistant language teachers, but also cultural ambassadors for our countries. At first I didn't think that I was actually teaching them anything but English. Rarely am I asked to talk freely about my country. I am usually asked just the basic questions about "the ONE most popular sport, food, movie star etc..." However, after thinking about people's initial reaction to me as an American and how I choose to deal with it, I feel as if I am actually a cultural ambassador for my country. I am broadening their perspectives of Americans just by being in Japan.

I know that it can be very difficult to break the stereotypes that we hold about other people and countries, especially ones that we have grown up with all of our lives. I also had many stereotypes of Japan and Japanese people before I came to Japan. However, I have learned to leave that all behind and have become more open minded. I knew that if I truly wanted to learn about Japan, I would have to do so with a "clean slate." I couldn't allow other preconceived ideas and thoughts to clutter the truth. It isn't always easy because you can easily find people whom fit your stereotypes. However, because I don't want people to judge me through others, I have learned not to do the same. People are individuals. We can not look at an entire country and make blanket statements about everyone. It's not realistic. One person's actions do not accurately reflect the opinions and beliefs of a whole country. We must think about this and about our own opinions about people. Even though I have grown up in America, it doesn't necessarily mean that I am one way or the other. It definitely does not mean that I have blonde hair and blue eyes! Every individual is a product of their unique experiences and how they choose to deal with them. So, yes I am an American, but more importantly I am an individual.