

Does Race Matter?

**by Jo Kwong
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Introduction

The author of this article is a friend whom I have met for the first time five years ago in the US. Dr. Jo Kwong is the Vice President for Institute Relations, of Atlas Economic Research Foundation (www.atlasnetwork.org). In April 2004, Atlas, upon the recommendation of its Filipina staff, Ms. Priscilla Tacujan, gave me and another Filipina, Ms. Ellen Cain, an international fellowship. Atlas brought me and Ellen first to the Mackinac Leadership Conference in Michigan, then to the 4th Atlas Liberty Forum in Chicago, and that's where I met Jo.

Jo is not simply an official at Atlas. I personally consider her the “Superwoman” of the Asian free market movement. It was Jo who involved Atlas and its Asian friends and network, with the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) in the latter's Economic Freedom Network (EFN-Asia) conferences. Atlas held its first “Asian Resource Bank Meeting” (ARBM) in September 2004 in Hong Kong, immediately preceding the EFN Asia conference.

A year after, September 2005, Atlas again held its 2nd ARBM in Phuket, Thailand. It was a round-table colloquium where us, Asian participants, discussed for one whole day, Friedrich Hayek's classic book, “The Constitution of Liberty”. Again, this colloquium preceded the FNF's EFN Asia 2005 Conference, in the same hotel in Phuket. And a year after, Atlas held its 3rd – and last – Asian conference, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

In all those 3 involvement by Atlas for its Asian friends and network, Jo Kwong was the official in Atlas who helped work behind the scenes. She was ably supported by another hard-working Atlas staff, Ms. Colleen Dyble.

In this short paper, Jo is discussing about race. Jo is an Asian-American: fully Asian in her looks and genetics (her parents are Chinese), but she was born and grew up in

the US. Her message is simple: it's not the race, not color or gender that matters. It's simply the individual.

Bienvenido "Nonoy" Oplas
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I am amazed at how race continues to play such a ridiculous role in the US. We have a multitude of policies, from affirmative action to minority set asides (that require, for example, a certain percentage of all government contracts to be awarded to minority-owned firms). Each of these policies lead to conflict, enhanced suspicions of other races, hatred, and sadly, sometimes violence. When we finally embrace people as individuals, and simply select the "right person for the job," I believe we will live a more harmonious and prosperous world.

In this very brief article, I take a quick stab at addressing something that classical liberals understand -- that individuals matter!

(The following was written sometime in 2004)

"What are you?" is a question I became accustomed to hearing as I grew up. I came to understand at an early age that people were asking about my ethnic heritage.

As a Chinese-American, friends and strangers alike saw that I was "different," but not quite sure just how. If I was tired of that question for the day, I'd just answer "American." That, of course, was never a satisfactory answer. "But what ARE you?" would come again, perhaps louder this time. Or perhaps they would clarify, "But where are you from?" "New Jersey" was not much more of a satisfactory answer. You see, my father is from China and my mom is from Hong Kong. But I didn't always feel like explaining that.

Most of the time, people are just curious. But by the time I went to college, I was surprised to learn that my ethnicity came with certain expectations. For one, I was expected, by my fellow “Third Worlders,” to demonstrate on campus for greater financial aid and more rights for us “nonwhite” folks. We were being discriminated against. In fact, I had been discriminated against all my life, whether I knew it or not. When I argued that I believed in individual rights, not group rights, I was given a choice. I could either be part of the Third World movement, or I could sit with THEM (the “whites”) at meals in the dining hall. You could not straddle both worlds.

The experience led me to write a class essay about walking the Chinese-American tight rope. Some days, it did seem as if I teetered between two worlds. Fortunately for me, although we spoke Chinese at home and my parents hoped I’d one day marry a Chinese man, my parents, at least, understood that the choice to raise their children in America meant a new cultural heritage.

As I left college and moved on, I learned that the strange expectations continued. Now, I found I was expected to be a Democrat and a left-liberal. It is assumed that as a “nonwhite,” I’m automatically against everything the white establishment stands for. Once again, I stood out in this regard as I tried to explain that I believed in “individual rights” and not group rights, and that I believed in thinking for myself. That’s about as popular as my refusal to demonstrate with the Third Worlders at Brown University.

I knew my mother was somewhat disappointed when I married a Californian of Norwegian descent. After all, my New York Chinatown cousins married Chinese. But then, my husband began studying Chinese so he could understand the family bantering. He did this secretly so he could surprise us. Whoa! The surprise was on him. He didn’t realize we were all speaking Cantonese and he was studying Mandarin.

It didn’t help him understand the family’s chattering, but because he mastered the language to the level where he could write letters to my mother in Chinese (the spoken dialects are different but the languages share the written language), he rose to a new level in the in-law hierarchy. Sure, the “purebred” Chinese in-laws were something to brag about. But my mother’s son-in-law wrote to her in Chinese. That got the mah jong ladies’ attention.

Just yesterday, as I strolled with my daughters through the streets of Washington DC’s Adams Morgan neighborhood, one of my 14-year-old twin daughters was asked for the umpteenth time, “So what are you?” I just smiled as she replied, “Just a kid from Fairfax, Virginia.” I guess she understands my point: Kids are kids, just as people are people.