



THE PLAIN DEALER

Ancient culture, modern progress: Chinese Americans bring talents to Northeast Ohio

Tuesday, September 19, 2006

For Johnny K. Wu, a second-generation Chinese American, cross-cultural understanding can be a straightforward proposition. "If you want to know about people's cultures, don't be afraid to ask them questions," he says. "Talking to someone and learning about their culture is the key to understanding and appreciation. It shouldn't be taboo to ask a person about their nationality and customs."

Noting that most cultural misunderstanding stems from a lack of knowledge, Wu explains, "If you make the effort to learn about people from other countries, you may be surprised to find out that you like things about the culture that you didn't know you'd like."

As president of the Greater Cleveland chapter of the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA), Wu is focused on promoting Chinese cultural heritage and ensuring fair treatment for Americans of Chinese and Asian/Pacific Islander descent. "We basically want to educate people about our background and culture," he says. "And we also want to present a better image of Asian Americans in the U.S. whenever there's discrimination or a lack of knowledge about us."

Wu says Northeast Ohio's growing Chinese American community estimated at between 15,000 and 20,000 people occasionally encounters cultural barriers, including negative stereotypes and workplace inequities. "The OCA serves as the voice of Asian Americans and makes sure they have the same rights as other people," he says. "For example, when we learned that a radio disk jockey in Toledo was making fun of Asians on the air, we stood up and made some noise."

Wu, a filmmaker, is also "making noise" in the independent film arena. Working mainly in the sci-fi/action genre, Wu has produced several award-winning films through his video production and editing firm, Media Design Imaging (MDI). His most recent project, "The Rapture," a feature film he co-produced with Monarch Ltd., is scheduled for release in November. As a film auteur, Wu says he's interested in experimenting with visual imaging. However, he notes that his movies are also influenced by his Chinese heritage. "Some people think it's crazy that characters in our movies can fly," he notes. "But that's a part of the ancient Chinese culture. It's our legend."

The son of a Taiwanese diplomat, Wu, 39, has traveled the world. In Northeast Ohio, he has found an ideal environment for his filmmaking career. "Cleveland is the best," he says. "Here, I have tranquility when I need it, and I have craziness when I need it."

Cleveland's first Chinese immigrants arrived in the mid-1800s, seeking jobs and economic prosperity. Now, 150 years later, Northeast Ohio businesses are looking to China as marketplace that holds vast potential.

The Far East, especially China, holds strong promise for regional businesses that are interested in trading and investment partnerships, says Anthony Yen, a Cleveland-based international trade consultant.

Yen notes there is already a growing trade volume between Northeast Ohio firms and China. "But we're mainly suppliers of components to the companies who manufacture the aircrafts, cars and other products that go to China," he adds. "For example, this region supplies landing gears, hydraulic systems, tires and other aircraft materials to Boeing. So the record of export volume is credited to Seattle (where Boeing is headquartered) and not Ohio."

As the global marketplace continues to evolve, Northeast Ohio's future economic growth will likely come from international trade, says Yen, explaining, "In coming years, we need to develop a strong import/export market, whether we're talking about computers or clothes or nearly any other product."

Yen says that China's trade officials are looking to Greater Cleveland firms as potential suppliers, customers and investors. In June, the World Trade Center Cleveland hosted a visit by a Chinese delegation that included representatives from nine business fields that ranged from arts and crafts to industrial power plants to asset management and real estate development.

The delegation members shared information about opportunities in China with an audience of about 80 Northeast Ohio businesspeople. A delegation member explained that the group chose to include Cleveland on its two-week U.S. visit because of its significance as a manufacturing center.

While Yen, a native of Shanghai, says that opportunities in China are plentiful for far-sighted businesspeople, he offers the following caveats: "You need to develop a trust relationship with the Chinese before they will ever do business with you. You're dealing with people who have a culture that goes back 5,000 years, so it takes time to cultivate a relationship and show them that you're honorable. It's also important to have a Chinese connection to help you gain entrée to the China market."

Yen adds that governmental and nonprofit trade organizations such as the U.S. Department of Commerce and World Trade Center Cleveland can be important resources in cracking the China market.

In the early 1900s, Cleveland's Chinese immigrants formed a small Chinatown on Rockwell Avenue near East 21st Street. They typically opened restaurants, laundries, grocery stores, and other small service businesses, primarily to serve other Chinese.

Later generations of entrepreneurial Chinese Americans established businesses to serve the broader community. Judy Ho, who migrated from Taiwan in 1982, has become a leading supplier of bean sprouts and alfalfa to grocery stores throughout Northeast Ohio. Each week, Ho produces about 8 tons of bean sprouts a staple food in Asia for thousands of years in specially designed growing rooms at her firm, Cleveland Bean.

Ho also owns China Merchandise, a gift shop that offers traditional Chinese jewelry, clothing and Buddhist articles. Located on Superior Avenue in an area of Cleveland that has a high concentration of Chinese and other Asians, Ho says 90 percent of her customers are non-Asian. "Cleveland is a good market for me," she says. "Many Chinese businesspeople realize they have good opportunities here."

Henry Luu, a Strongsville-based insurance professional, agrees that that this area has been generally conducive to Chinese businesspeople. "I've met a lot of Chinese who have moved to Cleveland from New York, California and Texas because there is too much competition there," Luu says. "In New York, for example, there are lots of Chinese restaurants, but here they can find opportunities to grow and open businesses."

In fact, says Luu, Cleveland's growing number of Chinese restaurants and grocery stores draw Chinese Americans from throughout Ohio. "By opening businesses that attract people to Cleveland, the Chinese here are helping the economy," he notes.

Despite the steady growth of Northeast Ohio's Chinese community, Luu says that many younger Chinese Americans move away from this area after graduating from college. "Their reasons for leaving are mostly job-related," says Luu, who is of Cantonese ancestry. He explains that the drain of educated young Chinese Americans is detrimental economically, socially and culturally. As an example, he notes that the younger Chinese are typically bilingual, so their absence is missed by older Chinese who don't speak English and need translation and interpretation assistance.

To retain and attract young Chinese, this region will need to create more jobs, says Margaret Wong, a Cleveland attorney who specializes in immigration law. Noting that salary levels may matter less than the challenges and opportunities that are offered, Wong explains, "As long as we can convince the younger people that we do not have glass ceilings and they can advance in their careers, then we have a chance of keeping them in Cleveland."

In Wong's view, some responsibility for retaining educated Chinese workers must fall on the human

resources professionals at area firms. "They need to focus their efforts on recruiting Chinese people for employment opportunities," she says. "They need to remember us when they are looking for talented people."

Like many Chinese Americans, Wong lived outside of mainland China before migrating to this country. Born in Hong Kong, she came to the U.S. in the 1960s. "Most people don't know that the Chinese population in this country is very diverse," she says. "Chinese immigrants have come from all over the world, including the Philippines, Vietnam, Cambodia, India and Thailand. So it's important that people don't assume that all the Chinese in America are the same. Our cultures and our dialects are all different, so we shouldn't all be lumped together. "

For Ying Pu, a native of Shanghai who came here in 1991, the diversity of Chinese cultures is an important resource, just as Northeast Ohio's multiculturalism is an asset. "I learn so much from other cultures," she explains. "Every culture has unique things and different ideas. You think one way; I think another way. But we learn from each other."

A Twinsburg resident, Pu is publisher of the Erie Chinese Journal, a biweekly newspaper that serves the Chinese American communities of Cleveland, Columbus and Pittsburgh. Pu founded her newspaper in 2002, primarily to serve the burgeoning Chinese business community.

This area's Chinese American population will continue to grow, says Pu, explaining, "Cleveland is a good city for people from other countries. The housing is affordable and the people here are helpful and friendly to immigrants. I feel like this is now my hometown."

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