

Northwood Women's Salon Connecting Cultures Seminar  
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"Education and Work Life: A Chinese Immigrant's Experience"

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Good evening,

Thank you, Cathy, for your kind introduction. It is my great pleasure to serve on the panel tonight.

I was born in Taiwan 62 years ago. I came to America in 1966 and I have lived in Indianapolis since 1973. I became an American citizen in 1975. I exercise my voting rights at the presidential elections and I pay taxes just like the rest of America. However, people continue to see me as Chinese (Taiwanese), not American. I am a "marginal citizen." I call myself a Chinese-American with a hyphen between Chinese and American. I wear Chinese outfits 90 percent of the time. It gives me my ethnic identity, but it is also the kind of outfit I feel most comfortable in. I eat both Chinese and American food. So I have gained 30 pounds since I arrived in America 42 years ago.

Some people see a glass of water as half empty and others see it as half full. I have three distinct traits that I consider as my three assets and my three disadvantages.

First, I am short. My disadvantage is that I cannot reach things higher than five ft tall. However, my height is also my asset because my physicality has never presented a threat to anyone. I can immediately put people at ease when I converse with them, especially if we are standing up.

Second, I am a woman. My disadvantage is that, whether in America or in Taiwan, I may experience gender harassment or discrimination at work. However, being a woman, I am more expressive, gentle, objective, and possibly more intelligent than my male counterpart. I work hard and sometimes I use that "motherly instinct" at work. I get more things done than my male colleagues and I am able to exercise a special kind of leadership skill that encompasses vision (mothers know how to make plans), integrity (who doesn't trust mothers?) and passion (mothers are the most affectionate people on earth). (In short, this is my leadership model—the VIP model).

Third, I am Chinese. My disadvantage is that, in America, I am seen as a minority and an outsider. I have been excluded from job and scholarship opportunities. However, being Chinese in America, I can make the best use of my Chinese heritage—5,000 years of a very rich cultural heritage. If nothing else, I speak Chinese, but most Americans do not. With my cultural heritage, I see myself as a cultivated, well-educated person who practices the highest degree of filial piety with a respect for the elderly, and I keep two canons in my daily life—humanism and humility. I enrich my American students in the classrooms with Confucianism and Chinese arts. I think I have accomplished a great deal; however, I always think there is much more for me to do and to learn. My Chinese philosophy in life is that "I always think of myself less, but I never think less of myself." Service is my motto. I used to be very selfish. When I first arrived in America, I thought I would return to Taiwan someday and serve only "my people." However, Indiana transformed me. Now I want to serve not just certain people but all people. My profound sense of service starts from my engagement with ICI. I am grateful that Cathy Blitzer has provided me a chance to serve our community by allowing me to join the board of the International Center of Indianapolis. Being a board member, I am able to serve our community in various capacities, and most of all, to be able to bring our international and local communities closer together.

I am very conscious of my three traits. The day I stepped foot on American soil, I told myself: "I must turn my disadvantages into advantages and turn my weaknesses into strengths." My attitude in a foreign country is, "When in Rome do as the Romans do" I have lived in Indiana since 1973. I love it here and I speak

Hoosier English with a Chinese accent! The longer I stay in Indianapolis, the more I think “Taiwan is my mother and Indiana is my husband.” I love both dearly. I am part of them and I am part of you.

Since I was little, my parents wanted me to sail across the Pacific Ocean to see the real world. Because Taiwan is small potatoes compared to America. My father used to tell me, “We live on such a small island, just like a frog that lives in a well. You only see that much of the sky. You must jump out of the well and go to America to see the big sky country.” Sure enough, upon my graduation from college, I went to Montana for my graduate studies. I must tell you, I always enjoyed my life in Montana. Even the moon and the sun looked much bigger than what I had seen in Taiwan! I remember the saying, “You can take the boy out of the country but you cannot take the country out of the boy.” I was that “boy.” After I received my master’s degree in a year and a half, I left Montana to go to Missouri where I pursued my PhD.

I had a job interview, at what was then Indiana Central College, in 1973. By the end of the interview, President Sease made me an offer. I did not accept the offer. I negotiated. I simply said, “Although I am Asian and a woman, the fact that I have a doctoral degree and am a hard worker warrant more than your offer.” He gave me \$2,000 more. For 32 years, I have worked my tail off. I am one of the hardest workers on campus. I work an average of 10 hours a day, almost six days a week. What I would like to share with you is that hard work and education will lead you somewhere, whether you are American or Chinese. Unfortunately, a recent report indicated that Indiana ranks among the worst states in the US in the size of the gender earnings ratio. Census data showed that women employed in full-time, year-round jobs in Indiana earned only 68 percent of men’s earnings in 2003, while women in the US as a whole earned an average of 75 percent (78 percent in 2004). Worst of all, Asian women only earned 63 percent of white men’s earnings in Indiana. Gender pay inequity in Indiana is a major concern for many of us. Even if the governor appointed an Equal Pay Commission that can recommend pay equity policies for the state in both the public and private sectors, I think that the fundamental effort should be to encourage minority women to pursue higher education.

The data show that the gender pay gap is narrower at higher education levels. Providing scholarship funds to assist both minority and Asian women pursuing advanced degrees may be a starting point for us to look into. (There are many scholarships, workshops, and training for minority and female students; however, many of them are limited to US citizens, or national or permanent residents.) Also, the gender gap in compensation has been steadily decreasing in technology fields over the last 20 years. However, young women, especially immigrants, have had relatively few role models to encourage their pursuit of scientific and technological ventures. It would be a good idea to invite Women’s Salon members to meet with our international female students and to provide them role models to nourish and mentor their talents and potential for a brighter future. If you happen to be a member of the 20 professional women associations (see list), you may propose that your associations establish scholarship funds and mentorship programs for young Hoosier immigrants. Locally, the American Chinese Professional Association and the Asian American Alliance Inc. have provided scholarships for minority teenagers. I will be happy to introduce you to the committee chairs of these associations to inquire about the scholarship applicants’ selection process.

Although I am well-liked by my students, you cannot win them all. Some students who did not make good grades would put in the evaluation paper, “Oh, I don’t understand Dr. Lin.” As I have said, I speak Hoosier English with a Chinese accent. I have a hard time saying “vanilla ice cream, bureaucratization, or entrepreneurship.” Nevertheless, by and large, I am understood. In order to deal with some difficult students, I have figured out an effective method of teaching. On the first day of class, I crack a joke (dirty or not) prior to the lecture, and everybody laughs. So I say, “Hi, guys, if you are laughing now, it means you understand what I am saying. Good!” Sometimes, I even use Chinese characters to explain some sociological concepts, such as gender role. (I will be happy to illustrate it if time permits later this evening.)

I enjoy teaching. Even after 35 years of teaching, I am still full of energy and zest for every class I encounter. However, there is one thing that has bothered me very much. There are many students who address me as, “Phylis” instead of “Dr. Lin.” This is the American way! But I am still more comfortable with my Chinese way—to show great respect for your teacher! They can always call me “Phylis” upon graduation. You see, we have a little culture gap here!

Being a Chinese woman, “assertiveness” is not in my dictionary. It took me a while to learn how to present myself and to show my “muscles” “gracefully.” I remember that in 1977 I told my department chairperson, “Professor Henricks, I think it is about time for you to make a recommendation for my promotion. I have already prepared my dossier and you have witnessed my performance in the last few years. I think I can do even more for the department after promotion.” Professor Henricks did not say “yes” or “no.” I know that was his style. On a sunny day in July 1978, the provost called me in. He said, “Phylis, I would like to have you be the chairperson of the department.” I replied, “Can’t you see I am about to give birth next month?” My reply was irrelevant to my job performance, I thought later. But the provost replied, “You are Chinese; I know you can put motherhood and a career together.” Years later, he proved to be right in spite of his “positive discrimination.”

How did I do it? How did I combine motherhood and a career? I was very fortunate. I have a very supportive husband. But I have to tell you a story. In 1979, right before my in-laws visited us, my husband, an aerospace engineer, said to me, “Phylis, I will do anything for you, changing diapers and cooking dinners. But don’t you ever ask me to do these things while my parents are here. They will be shocked and sad to see their son is doing household chores!” Well, for one week, my husband played the role of the traditional Chinese male—he did nothing in helping out. However, as soon as we came home from the airport after we said good-bye to his parents, he cleaned up the house, including the toilet.

I am very blessed. For any professional woman to be able to balance work and family, the number one secret is to have a very supportive spouse. Of course, if your husband is willing to help out, you must not make him a “second class citizen at home.” You must praise him for how he has helped. You should never say, “Oh, that is not the right way to hold the bottle; the baby will choke,” or “Oh, the dish has not been rinsed thoroughly; we will all get poisoned.” Just let it be—he is helping, isn’t he?

As I had said in my opening remarks, I must turn my deficit into a surplus. I must find a niche with my cultural heritage in America. I have designed, or, more precisely, “tailored,” a course I titled *Chinese Culture and Society*. It was designed in such a way that no other colleague would be able to teach the way I taught. Now a colleague from Jordan has patterned my course outline and introduced a course called *Arabic Culture and Society*. He has been teaching this course for several years and he is happy because he has a sense of empowerment with his ethnic background. Having said that, we must also recognize that at work, “No one is indispensable.” It is not about whether or not you have ethnic ideas in teaching; it is about whether you are providing the best-quality education for your students that matters the most.

Finally, I want to point out that we live in an era of hopes and opportunities. We must constantly be aware of the changing technology and the social forces that may break the glass ceiling, the affirmative action that may provide opportunities for minority hiring and college admission, and the social movement of diversity that may open doors for minorities and women to the fields that have never had a place for them before. And most of all, in our city, we have this very special organization—the International Center of Indianapolis—to assist all international citizens to share their talents with our local community. Teamed with you, ladies of the Women’s Salon Club, we can offer our city more than we think we are able to. We will be able to bring our international resources to our city for the purposes of cultural enrichment and to entrench ourselves as global citizens.

I would love to share with you many more stories about my educational experiences and my work-life adventures, but I have to sum it up here. As an immigrant and a short woman, I think education is my best asset; family is my best anchor; work is my best identity; and most of all, my cultural heritage is my soul.

Thank you,

Phylis Lan Lin  
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