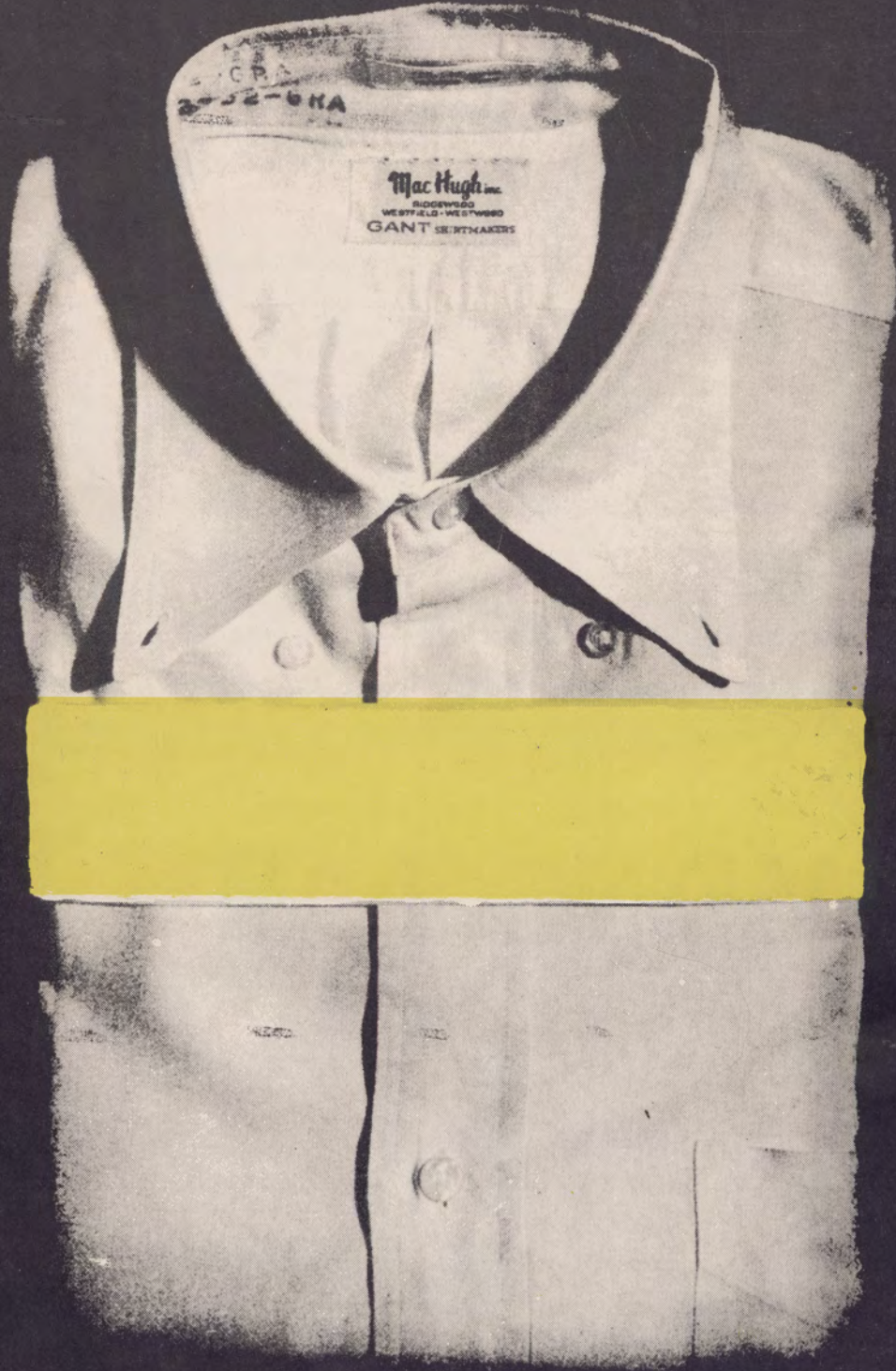


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YELLOW IDENTITY
WHITE WASHED?

EDITORIAL

AN AMERICAN IN DISGUISE

by Frank Ching

When a second-generation Japanese-American was a student at Princeton, he was asked to give a talk on "Princeton as Asians see it." He declined, saying he wasn't qualified. "I'm not really an Asian," he explained, "just an American in disguise."

The experience of Daniel O. Okimoto, which he recounts in his new book, *American in Disguise*, is relevant to Chinese-Americans as well—it is applicable to all Americans of Asian ancestry.

Given the dominant white ethnocentric culture of the United States, where one is either white or non-white, the Chinese are non-white and hence are handicapped from the start. The typical American boy or girl on TV commercials is almost invariably white. Blacks have become more visible only in recent years. The handful of commercials that use Orientals portray them in stereotype situations—Japanese karate experts or Oriental children in national costumes with chopsticks—characters that are not meant to be taken seriously, that are more often than not figures of ridicule.

In his search for identity, the Chinese-American is tempted to do one of two things. One is to attempt to join the dominant American society by rejecting his Chineseness. The other is to accept the rejection of American society and turn inward, seeking emotional security and personal identity in his family and his parents' ancestral homeland.

While whites and blacks may view each other antagonistically, they accept each other as American. The other kind of Americans—those of Chinese or other Asian ancestry—are seen primarily as Orientals or Asians, i.e., as non-Americans.

While this attitude is not necessarily hostile, it is a definite, if unconscious, refusal on the part of many Americans to acknowledge that Americans are a people of extremely diverse cultural and racial backgrounds, including people of Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino and other Asian ancestry.

The non-acceptance of people of Asian ancestry is a subtle form of discrimination, which makes it extremely difficult for Asian-Americans to believe that this is really their country, even though they have no other home. Patsy Mink of Hawaii, for example, has this to say:

"A third-generation American, why must I continue to be asked how I enjoy living in this country, as though it could never really be mine as it is yours? Why must I explain that my father does not own a restaurant or a laundry?"

This attitude on the part of many Americans can actually lead to tangible deprivations. A third-generation Chinese-American doctor, for example, was told at an interview that the hospital already had too many foreign doctors.

The presumption that all who have Asian features are foreign is obvious in the

questions directed at them. Many Chinese-Americans have been offended by being asked "Do you speak English?" and by such gratuitous comments as "Your English is very good" and "When are you going back to your own country?" Others often ask the place of one's birth, and when the reply is New York or Ohio or California, surprise inevitably registers on the questioner's face.

The need of white Americans to classify other groups to their own satisfaction is evidenced in the often-repeated question, "Are you Chinese or Japanese?" which is sometimes asked by total strangers. Imagine the arrogance of asking someone you've just met, "Are you Polish or German?" Yet this inevitably happens to Americans of Oriental background. Their features proclaim their ancestry, and the presumption is that they are non-American.

Although it is true that Chinese-Americans do not find easy acceptability as Americans, it is also true that part of the cause for this lies with the Chinese-Americans themselves. All too often, Chinese become Americans for the sake of convenience (so they can travel on an American passport) while withholding their allegiance to the country. Immigrant parents are often reluctant to see their children date and (horrors) marry a non-Chinese.

It is understandable that parents should want in-laws of a similar background, with similar interests and cultural values. It ought also to be borne in mind that Chinese culture is not necessarily incompatible with other elements in American culture—indeed it can modify and enrich American culture. But a preservation of cultural values should not degenerate into what amounts to racial discrimination against non-Chinese.

It is important that Chinese-Americans, especially the younger, more aware, generation, feel that they are a part of this country and work to change it in whatever way it needs changing. This is one purpose of Bridge Magazine—to bridge that gap between Chinese-Americans and Americans in general. Another purpose is to bridge the gap between various groups within the Chinese community itself.

It must be recognized that the Chinese in this country are far from being a homogeneous group. The foreign-born are alienated from the American-born and those who live in Chinatown are alienated from suburbanites and others who live "uptown." The generation gap among Chinese is so wide that it is not unusual for immigrant parents—who speak little English—not to be able to communicate with their children, who speak little or no Chinese.

It is time for all Chinese in this country, whatever their economic, cultural or political backgrounds, to make themselves heard, to fight for their rights as Americans, to have some voice in decisions that affect their lives, ranging from local issues, such as busing and schools, to national policy.