

Chinese-Americans taken at face value

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For American-born Chinese, it really doesn't matter how white their heart is and how much they have adopted Western values – when they deal with their "motherland," China, their yellow skin always defines them.

In an era when China is becoming such an important global force, this can be a big advantage, but there are also some downsides.

For the positives, you just have to see how US Secretary of Commerce Gary Locke and US Secretary of Energy Steven Chu, both ethnic Chinese born in the US, have been treated on recent trips to China. When they were in China together in July, they were treated like rock stars. There is a lot of pride among Chinese to see two of their own at the top of the administration of the superpower.

They didn't give them a completely free pass. Chu's speech at Tsinghua University was considered too scientific and not much fun. And Locke has been described as too serious and not interested in "small talk." There is also disappointment that neither can speak much Chinese.

Indeed, in some ways their being Chinese opens them up more to such "family" criticism.

But it didn't stop Locke from wrapping up a highly successful second trip to China in late October that resulted in both countries vowing to loosen restrictions on importing – a pretty big deal at a time when the rest of the world worries about some kind of trade war breaking out.

Caucasian politicians who speak fluent Chinese, such as Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd or US Ambassador to China Jon Huntsman, may get a lot of respect as friendly guests, but they can never quite be embraced in the way that Chu and Locke are.

Of course, in the US it has often been a struggle for American-born Chinese.

Both Chu and Locke have publicly stated their pride in being ethnic Chinese. But if they are reflective of the average American-born Chinese, the pride may not have been there in the early stages of their life because bearing a Chinese face could at times be a burden.

It may be politically incorrect to base judgments and preferences on facial characters in the US, but this doesn't mean it doesn't frequently happen.

When kids are teased or trashed by peers only due to the way they look, when they are told to "go back to their own country" while the US is their country, and when they are forced to study a second language and culture at weekends while other kids play games, it's understandable that the Asian country they may never have visited seems more like a source of bitterness. This was even more the case when China was close to the bottom of the world's social pyramid.

While the US domestic environment hasn't changed much in the past few decades, China has rapidly moved to the center of the world. And that has struck a chord with Americanborn Chinese. They seem to be more willing to be associated with China than ever. I've even met young people who refer to China as "my country" despite their American nationality.

David Henry Hwang, the playwright who is best known for his award-winning Broadway show *M. Butterfly*, once told me he hated being called Chinese when he was a kid. But now he quite enjoys it. "Now I fly to China once or twice a year to learn more about it. I like the fact they think I am Chinese. I am overseas Chinese but I am still Chinese. I think it's me getting older and China has changed a lot," Hwang said.

Still, American-born Chinese and the Chinese in China can sometimes be as different as chalk and cheese.

The former may not understand why boycotting the French supermarket chain Carrefour because of French support for Tibetan independence is considered patriotic. And the latter may be hard pressed to take comedian Rosie O'Donnell's mimicking of Chinese talk in the phrase "Ching Chong" as offensive.

The former may never be tired of searching for their identities, and the latter is without confusion and therefore may not have much interest in the topic. And, although all are called Chinese, nobody expects Locke and Chu to represent the interests of China.

But what could really cool down the newly formed sense of belonging of American-born Chinese might be the fact that sometimes their face can become a drag, even in China.

Take my friend Jason, who has recently gone for English-teaching jobs in China and been frustrated. The recruiters didn't bother to hide their disappointment when they saw his Chinese face, and those who would hire him only offered him a much smaller salary than his Caucasian coworkers. The fact that Jason was born in New York and holds a bachelor's degree in English didn't seem to matter.

The face may not reflect values or talents, but, for many, it's still the first way they're judged.

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