



## ***STILL THE “OTHER?” : PUBLIC ATTITUDES TOWARD CHINESE AND ASIAN AMERICANS***

### **SURVEY KEY FINDINGS**

The Committee of 100’s survey—conducted among both the U.S. general population and Chinese Americans from January 5-30, 2009—reveals the current status of Chinese and Asian Americans in the U.S. On one hand, the general population largely holds favorable views of both Chinese and Asian Americans and is positive about the increase in the size of the Asian American population. The majority of Chinese Americans are also optimistic about their opportunities in the U.S. On the other hand, a portion of the general population still holds stereotypes and misperceptions about Chinese and Asian Americans. There is also a significant disparity in perceptions between the general population and Chinese Americans on race relations and on equal rights in government, education, and the workplace. In addition, the perceptions reported by the general population are affected by a lack of knowledge about Chinese and Asian Americans.

### ***Lack of Knowledge about Chinese and Asian Americans***

- **Asian Americans vs. Chinese Americans:** By using the split sample, the survey shows the majority of the general population cannot make meaningful distinctions between Chinese Americans and Asian Americans in general. This “lumping effect” is the same result as in the 2001 survey. Asian Americans are still seen as one generic ethnic group.<sup>1</sup>
- **Overestimating the Number of Asian Americans:** A substantial majority of the general population believe there are far more Asians in the U.S. than in reality: Seventy-four percent say Asians constitute more than 8 percent of the U.S. population, with 40% saying Asians are 16% or more of all Americans; only 1% of respondents say they are not sure. (Asian Americans are about 5% of the U.S. population.)
- **Underestimating the Number of Native-Born Asian Americans:** A majority of the general population (51%) incorrectly believe less than 25% Asians in the U.S. were born in the country. The actual percentage of native-born Asian Americans is about 30%.
- **Low Interaction with Chinese and Asian Americans:** More than a third of the general population say that rarely or never interact with Chinese Americans at work, in the community, or socially, with at least 28% of the general population saying that they rarely or never interact with Asian Americans.

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<sup>1</sup> For a few survey questions, 609 non-Asian respondents among the general population were asked their opinions about “Chinese Americans” and 598 non-Asian respondents among the general population were asked about “Asian Americans.” The results are nearly identical. The similar approach was used for the 2001 C-100 survey.

## Attitude Changes from 2001

In comparison to the 2001 C-100 survey on the same topic, the general population now holds a more favorable opinion of Chinese and Asian Americans.<sup>2</sup>

- **Asian American as President:** In 2001, 23% of the general population said they would feel uncomfortable voting for an Asian American as President of the United States. In 2009, that number has reduced to 9%. When electing a mayor, a majority of the general population (74%) believe the people they know would vote for an Asian American male if he was more qualified than the white male candidate.<sup>3</sup>
- **Asian American as Spouse:** In 2001, 24% of the general population disapproved of a family member marrying an Asian American; but in 2009, that number has reduced to 11%.
- **Asian Population Increase:** Seventy percent of the general population believe the increase in Asian immigrants over the past ten years has been good for America, up from 49% in 2001.
- **Asian American Contribution:** In 2001, 56% of the general population believed that Chinese Americans have contributed much to the American culture; the number has now risen to 73% in 2009.
- **Asian American Loyalty:** However, there are increasing suspicions about the loyalty of Asian Americans. Among the general population, 45% believe Asian Americans are more loyal to their countries of ancestry than to the U.S., up from 37% in the 2001 survey.

## Stereotypes Persist

While the survey shows improvement in the image of Chinese and Asian Americans in the country, it finds some stereotypes have not changed since 2001.

- **Perceived Asian American Achievements:**
  - Fifty-seven percent of the general population feel Asian Americans often or always achieve a higher degree of overall success than other Americans. A majority of Chinese Americans (56%) also share this view.
  - At the mention of Chinese or Asian Americans, the general population thinks of them as being educated, having strong family values, hardworking, intellectually bright, and committing less crime than other ethnic groups. These images have not changed since 2001.

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<sup>2</sup> The 2001 survey was conducted in March 2001 after the Bush administration indicated a shift in U.S. relations with China from “strategic partner” to “strategic competitor.” The 2009 survey was conducted in January 2009 shortly after Barack Obama was elected the first African American president of the U.S. The different political surroundings might partly contribute to the improved attitudes.

<sup>3</sup> In the scenario provided by the survey question, only Asian American male and White American male were compared.

- **Loyalty of Asian Americans:**

- Among the general population, 45% believe Asian Americans are more loyal to their countries of ancestry than to the U.S., up from 37% in the 2001 survey.
- Approximately three in four Chinese Americans say Chinese Americans would support the U.S. in military or economic conflicts, but only approximately 56% of the general population believe Chinese Americans would support the U.S. in such conflicts.
- Among the general population, 44% believe Asian Americans should think in more American ways, and 20% believe Asian Americans do not care what happens to anyone but their own kind.
- Forty-two percent of the general population believe it is likely that the FBI would arrest an Asian American for spying for a foreign country without sufficient evidence. Forty-seven of the general population believe this may happen to an Arab American. Chinese Americans believe Asian Americans (54%) are as likely as Arab Americans (54%) to be arrested for spying without proper due process.

### **Diverging Perceptions between Chinese Americans and the General Population?**

The survey reveals significant gaps in opinions between Chinese Americans and the general population on a range of issues.

- **Favorability:** Chinese Americans perceive the general population to be less favorable toward their race than the general population's actual reported favorability. The general population has a mean favorability score of 80 toward Chinese Americans (on a scale of 0-100), while the Chinese Americans' estimate is only 64. Twenty-two percent of 18-34 year old Chinese Americans feel the general population's favorability toward their race is less than 50.
- **Racial Discrimination:** Of the general population, 63% feel Asian Americans face a lot or some discrimination, while slightly more Chinese Americans (69%) feel that Asian Americans encounter a lot or some prejudice.
- **Fit into U.S. Culture:** A large majority of the general population (87%) perceive Asian Americans as fitting well into mainstream U.S. culture. This contrasts with 79% of the Chinese Americans who hold the same opinion.
- **Political Influence:** While 36% of the general population think that Asian Americans have about the right amount of power and influence in Washington, only 15% of Chinese Americans believe this to be true. 47% of the general population think that Asian Americans have too little power in Washington, while 82% of Chinese Americans hold this view.
- **Equality in Higher Education:** Sixty-five percent of the general population believe Asian American students are adequately represented on college campuses. In contrast, only 45% of Chinese Americans agree and 36% say they are underrepresented.

- **Equality in the Workplace:** Forty-six percent of the general population believe Asian Americans are promoted at the same pace as White Americans; only 29% of Chinese Americans agree. Similarly, 50% of the general population believe Asian Americans are adequately represented on corporate boards, while only 23% of Chinese Americans feel the same way.

### *Views on Immigration and Diversity*

Attitudes of the general population and Chinese Americans on Asian immigration, success, and diversity are very similar and generally positive, though Chinese Americans show significantly more tolerance on some issues.

- **Number of Asian Immigrants:** There is a general consensus among the general population (61%) and Chinese Americans (57%) that the number of Asian immigrants entering the U.S. each year is about right.
- **Success of Asian Immigrants:** Seventy-two percent of the general population disagree that Asian immigrants are taking away too many jobs from other Americans. A similar proportion (73%) says it does not bother them if they see some Asian immigrants succeeding more than native-born Americans.
- **Immigration Criteria:** Both the general population and Chinese Americans believe various factors should be considered in determining which immigrants are allowed into the U.S., including family reunification, specialized skills, and willingness to work in unattractive occupations. Chinese Americans feel more strongly along the same lines.
- **Diversity:** There is a strong agreement among the general population and Chinese Americans that one of the most important goals for a college in forming an entering class is a racially diverse student body.
- **Gay Marriage:** Sixty-three percent of Chinese Americans compared to 51% of the general population disagree with the statement “Gay couples should not be allowed to be legally married.”

### *Chinese American Outlook*

A few questions were exclusively asked of the Chinese American over-sample.

- **Future Outlook:** A large majority (85%) of Chinese Americans are optimistic about the opportunities for themselves in the U.S.
- **Unfair Treatment:** Almost three in five (58%) Chinese Americans report they have been discriminated against because of their Chinese descent. Most of them experience verbal harassment (39%) or disrespect/poor service (27%).
- **Media Portrayal:** Chinese Americans believe the portrayal of themselves (60%) in the U.S. media is much more positive than the coverage of the people of China (35%).

- **Education about China:** There is an overall agreement (66%) that U.S. schools today are not sufficiently educating students on China and Chinese society and culture.
- **Chinese American Identity:** Chinese Americans tend to think of themselves as either equally Chinese and American (48%) or more American than Chinese (39%). Only 12% consider themselves more Chinese than American.

### *Predictors of Negative Attitudes*

- **Demographic Characteristics:** The index analysis conducted of the survey shows that age, education, and income correlate to attitudes toward Chinese and Asian Americans. Among the general population, individuals who are older, less educated, and with lower household incomes display, on average, higher levels of prejudice toward Chinese and Asian Americans.
- **Interaction:** The survey indicates that those who interact less frequently with Chinese and Asian Americans are more likely to be more prejudiced.
- **General Level of Intolerance:** The survey shows that intolerance breeds further intolerance. Therefore, if a person is intolerant toward gays, equal rights, freedom of speech, and Asian immigrants' success, then he or she is much more likely to be more prejudiced toward Chinese and Asian Americans. In addition, prejudice toward Asian Americans is a subset of overall prejudice toward minorities. Those who feel negatively about Asian Americans are also more likely to have the same sentiments about Hispanic and African Americans.
- **China:** Both the 2001 and 2009 surveys reveal that negative attitudes toward China are a contributing factor to anti-Asian sentiment. Those with a high degree of prejudice towards Chinese Americans are also those who: (1) are more likely to perceive China as a high future threat to the U.S., (2) had a less favorable impression of China after Beijing hosted the Olympics, (3) hold a less favorable opinion about Chinese people, and (4) have never traveled to China, Hong Kong, or Taiwan.
- **Economic Distress:** The survey was conducted during a particularly difficult period in U.S. economic history. Over a third of the general population say they are worried that someone in their households might lose their jobs because of the economic situation. This is up from 14% in 2001. Nevertheless, the analysis did not find economic distress as a direct factor affecting attitudes toward Chinese and Asian Americans.

### *Conclusion and Recommendations*

Asian Americans have made notable progress in gaining acceptance as Americans, but in some important arenas, the general population still views Americans of Asian ancestry as the "Other." The survey helps identify the areas in which there is a disparity of perceptions between Chinese Americans and the general population. All communities should work together to encourage further understanding of and contributions by Asian Americans in American society.

- The survey reveals that the general population has a significant lack of knowledge about the Chinese American and Asian American population. As Americans of Chinese and Asian

descent continue to grow in numbers and impact on society, policymakers and the general population need to increase their awareness of this population in order to make sound decisions that affect all Americans. This may be accomplished through greater and improved access to information in the educational system as well as through other forms of media available to the general population and policymakers.

- The survey shows a lack of education and cultural exposure is a key underlying factor for prejudicial views. However, 66% Chinese Americans believe U.S. schools are not sufficiently teaching Chinese culture; in addition, only 14% of the general population have ever visited Asia. Therefore, ensuring universal access to education and creating more educational programs on Asian Americans, Asia, and Asian culture will be helpful in improving perceptions.
- The survey finds more interactions with diverse communities improve public attitudes. However, more than a quarter of the general population report they never or rarely interact with Asian Americans. The most effective way for Asian Americans to combat the perception of being “less patriotic” and “clannish” and “sticking together” is to increase their profile in American society by increasing their civic engagement, including actively participating in political and community activities, increasing philanthropy, and enhancing visibility in government.
- The survey reveals that negative attitudes toward Asian Americans correlate with negative attitudes toward other racial groups, such as African Americans and Hispanic Americans. Therefore, it is important for Asian Americans to engage in bridge building efforts with other minority communities. The pursuit of equity should include people of all racial backgrounds.

By encouraging more informed awareness of Asian Americans, as well as more education and research about the distinct backgrounds, experiences and contributions these important American populations bring to the U.S., all Americans stand to benefit from better public policies and community relationships, and can build a stronger nation together based on the shared ideals of a diverse democracy. ■