



Life as a Japanese-American Engineer in the Water Industry

Ron Tamada

Engineering has been an important part of my life for the past 37 years. These days it involves managing the efforts of engineering consultants for the Trinity River Authority of Texas. Before going to work at the authority I spent about 29 years consulting for water and wastewater clients and a couple of years in the nuclear power industry, with three years mixed in to attend seminary. I am a third-generation (sansei) Japanese American, and I guess I grew up in a typical Japanese-American home, if there is such a thing. By their third generation here the Japanese who immigrated to the United States in the late 1800s/early 1900s were pretty much immersed in the culture of their new homeland—equally comfortable with sushi or burgers, steamed rice or French fries.

It was members of my parents' generation—the second generation (nisei)—who struggled to bridge the cultural and language gap between our ancestral homeland and the United States. My dad grew up on a farm in California, served in the Military Intelligence Service as an interpreter during World War II, earned a business administration degree on the GI Bill, and settled in Chicago after getting married. My mom grew up in New Mexico and Colorado and moved to Chicago to study at the Cook County School of Nursing. She was one of the first Japanese Americans to graduate from the school and was the first Japanese-American head nurse at Cook County Hospital (where the television show *ER* was filmed). She gave up her nursing career

when I arrived on the scene. My parents never talked much about their lives, which is typical for Japanese. My sister and I had to pry information out of them.

Becoming US citizens and being good Americans were very important to Japanese immigrants. The niseis' military service during the Second World War was their way of showing love for and allegiance to their country, even as their family members were moved into "relocation camps" back in the states. Dad believed that science and engineering were keys to the United States prevailing in the Cold War with the former Soviet Union. He strongly encouraged both me and my sister toward engineering. For me it was an easy fit—for my sister, not so much. Today she owns a graphic design firm and is obviously the right-brain-dominant member of the family.

I attended Lane Technical High School in Chicago and graduated from the University of Illinois at Chicago with a bachelor's degree in environmental engineering. Being a child of the 1960s and a Christian, environmental engineering was a way I could be a good steward and give back to Mother Earth. After spending a couple of years working on environmental impact statements for nuclear power stations, I moved to Fort Worth, Texas, in 1976 to attend Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. (I found that there is a fairly significant difference in climate between Chicago and Fort Worth in January.) After my seminary studies, I went to work for a regional consulting firm here in Texas and

began working on water and wastewater projects, primarily treatment plant work. I loved the work and the variety of tasks it presented.

During my years of working with four consulting firms in Texas I have not encountered many Japanese Americans in the water industry. I'm pretty sure this would not have been the case on the West Coast or in Hawaii, but in Texas we're few and far between. I believe race has not been an issue that has affected my career opportunities. After my dad died, I was talking with a Buddhist priest about him and about how he worked so hard for his family but never talked much about what he did. The priest said that was very Japanese—showing love by doing. I've tried to approach my work in a similar way—striving to do things rather than talk about doing them. Just as the nisei did not make a big deal about their service in the war, I think many Japanese Americans in our business do their best without making a fuss, whether it be in engineering, water operations, administration, laboratory services, customer service, or whatever needs to be done.

In recent years I have noticed more Asians entering the water industry, especially through engineering. Many have emigrated from other countries, particularly China. As engineering enrollment in US universities has decreased over the past decade or more, China has filled that void. Today China trains a significant number of the world's engineers. As they find their way here and into water-related fields, I believe many will stay and become naturalized citizens. The growth of Asian-American participation in providing safe water will continue in the years to come.

As the chair of the Diversity Committee for the Texas Section of AWWA I have had the privilege to work with a richly diverse and dedicated committee. The variety of origins, backgrounds, interests, and aspirations of our committee members reflects the membership of the Texas Section. Our committee sees that diversity comes in many forms, including racial, ethnic, gender, generational, occupational, and geographical. Texas is a pretty big state. The committee and the section encourage and need representation from all areas of the state. "Texans" vary from the Rio Grande Valley to east Texas and from the Gulf Coast to the Panhandle, just as water-related issues and concerns vary from region to region. The committee's mission is to increase awareness of and provide training and information to promote diversity in our section. The Texas Section, indeed all of AWWA, is better because of the differences and diversity its members bring to the table.

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Tamada included this personal note with his article: Congress recently awarded a Congressional Gold Medal, the highest civilian honor Congress can bestow, to members of three Japanese-American military units that served in World War II. One of those units is the Military Intelligence Service, my dad's unit. Next year I plan to attend the award ceremony in Washington, D.C., when the medal is conferred on these veterans' groups.

The Chinese-American Engineer's Perspective: The ABCs of Being Chinese

Stephanie Sue

According to 2000 US Census bureau statistics, 22.6% of all Asian Americans are of Chinese descent and make up approximately 1% of the US population. Chinese Americans are the largest subgroup of Asian Americans in the United States. The census also estimated that of the 2,432,585 Chinese Americans in the United States, approximately 2 million speak Chinese at home (www.helium.com/items/359364-distribution-of-chinese-americans-in-the-united-states).

As a Chinese American, I admit that I'm pretty surprised by that lonely 1% figure, especially because I

don't really feel lonely at all. I'll also admit that, although I'm technically a Chinese American, I prefer to be identified as an "American-born Chinese." When I was younger, I learned this term from my half-Chinese cousins who would call me an "ABC" because they looked more "American" than me, the product of two Chinese parents.

Growing up I did not become fluent in Chinese so I belong to the 18% of Chinese Americans who don't converse in Chinese at home. Perhaps this is one of the main reasons that I consider myself more American than Chinese. My parents moved to the United States

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when they were very young. My mom arrived during her high school years. She is bilingual, and still speaks in Chinese with her parents and siblings today. My dad arrived before grade school and his family settled in Mississippi. Over time he lost much of his ability to speak Chinese. It's largely my monolingual upbringing that influences my self-identification as an ABC.

Although I didn't speak Chinese growing up, I was brought up in a very traditional Chinese household. I was raised on traditional Chinese values of piety for my parents and elders, and was instilled with reverence for hard work and education. Our family regularly shared traditional Chinese meals and practiced certain Chinese traditions.

During much of my childhood, I can remember feeling different from my friends and classmates. My family lived in several rural parts of the southeast (North Carolina, Alabama, Kentucky, and Florida). I feel that much of my childhood and adolescence were spent trying to break through the American "bubble." Through elementary and middle school, my American classmates often reminded me that I was different through lighthearted teasing about "slanted eyes," asking if I knew how to speak English, and general stereotyping. I encountered many people who had never met or associated with an Asian American and sadly, I shied away from my heritage simply so I could fit in.

I encountered much more ethnic diversity during high school, college, and graduate school. In high school, I was surrounded by students with more diverse backgrounds. But during those years, I still tried my best to fit in as an American rather than a Chinese American. What I couldn't hide was my stereotypical—but true—love of math and science, as well as a desire to keep the environment free of pollutants. This ultimately shaped my interests and led me to pursue a career in environmental engineering. My college experience was filled with friends and classmates from a variety of backgrounds, many of which were new to me. I enjoyed learning about everyone else's cultures while sharing some of my own. Although my civil and environmental engineering classes were not as diverse, I discovered that I was also another type of minority—a female engineer. Finally, in graduate school, while working toward my master's degree in environmental engineering, I gained enough maturity to be proud of my own ethnic heritage. This allowed me to comfortably share my background with others and as a result I formed more meaningful, personal connections.

Ten years later, these experiences have shaped me into the engineer that I am today. I've learned how to relate with my peers by respecting differences in all types of backgrounds. This has allowed me to build stronger bonds and work better with project team-

mates in an effective and efficient manner. My experiences have also strengthened my communication skills. I relate better with other engineering professionals and can better understand their interests, preferences, and viewpoints. Effective communication and understanding are so critical in our field, especially when you consider the growing reliance on nonverbal correspondence. Effective, professional relationships are strengthened by mutual respect and by embracing differences.

Environmental engineering has truly become a global enterprise. It's now commonplace for mergers and acquisitions of smaller companies to yield larger businesses with diverse and broader service offerings, as well as global capabilities. As these businesses merge, so do their cultures. I work for a firm that is part of this trend and I expect that I'll have more opportunities to work in other countries as well as with others from the "parent" company. When exposed to these situations, I can draw from my own experiences to be able to effectively communicate and relate—all thanks to growing up an ABC.

My advice to other engineers who wish to be successful in a diverse and ever-changing workplace is:

- Get to know people for who they are as individuals and not based on racial, ethnic, or social stereotypes. It's counterproductive to stereotype!
- Be open to learning about the backgrounds of other people, and respect their differences.
- Be willing to share your own background with others—it allows you to make a connection, learn something new, and build meaningful relationships.

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