

Michael Pothering
ENGR 408
October 5, 2009
Alien Culture Paper

Growing up for myself in a small town called Llewellyn, which is outside of a slightly larger town called Pottsville, in Pennsylvania I've had a fairly isolated cultural experience. The high school I attended was relatively small compared to the larger schools such as Allentown or even State College High. The size of my graduating class was an impressive ninety seven students. All though throughout school my ability to befriend people of all the different cliques and groups of students, from the "Jocks" which I played football with to the "Nerds" which I've played online dungeon and dragon style games with, I've never really had any type of hands of experience with another race or culture. The closest thing I came to any type of diversity was the occasional foreign exchange student or the one African American boy who played on my freshman football team for half a season then moved.

Once high school was over and I moved onto college the experience only changed until my third year of school here at University Park. Surly out of the 40,000 students I would be friend a person who would pose some type of cultural learning experience for me. I've met several Chinese, Japanese, Indian, and African American people alike but I've never had the chance to experience their lively hood or daily culture outside the class room. During the middle of last semester I met a neighbor of mine who is Chinese his name is Chen. Although we are not very close friends I talk to him occasionally when he is outside or our paths cross returning from the bus stop. We talked about this particular alien culture project one day and I asked if he had any upcoming parties or events I could par take in for the project. Chen invited me and a friend to come observe and play Mahjong with his friends Friday night. I gratefully accepted the invitation and made the plans. Unknowingly at the time I had no idea what the game Mahjong even required. I briefly looked up the game online and saw it looked like some type of domino tile game. I did not do much reading on the game in order to fully take in this unknown gaming experience.

My experience with Chinese culture and people in general was very limited. I've always had my preconceived thoughts about the Chinese believing that most are extremely dedicated to their schooling and quiet. These students around campus always seem to be in a hurry to get where ever they are going. I always think they are either late to where ever they are going because they are usually in a speed walk mode weaving in and out of traffic or they are uncomfortable being around crowds of unknown people. I also associated them to be polite, holding doors for people even if they are 15 feet away from the door, most other students would see this distance and let the door shut behind them. I also had a different view of their people because of my girlfriend who is a waitress. She sometimes would tell me horror stories how groups of Asian students would come to the restaurant and ash & outten their cigarettes on the table, be rude when asking for service and not leaving any tip what so ever. Knowing my girlfriend's ability as a waitress and overall personality I knew it was not her being judgmental or racist. On a more positive note I also know the Chinese people take great pride in honoring their ancestry and culture. I myself can relate to these traits because I take great pride in my family and hold them dearly to the heart. I knew that there must be some common ground with our two cultures and looked forward to finding this while meeting with Chen and his friends.

Friday night arrived quickly and I was excited yet nervous about this opportunity. This encounter could go extremely well or could be a complete waste of time, I felt like there was no middle ground. Chen informed me that they would begin playing Mahjong around 6:00 P.M., which I thought was very early to start playing a game and hanging out with friends. My usual weekend activities do not start until after 9 P.M. I got ready in my normal fashion and headed to his house with a note pad and a six pack of beer. Why a six pack of beer you might ask? In my group of friends it's seen as a common courtesy to come to someone's house with at least a six pack so you're not mooching all their beer. I had only intentions of having a casual beer while observing this game assuming that they would be doing the same while playing. Once I arrived Chen welcomed me and introduced me to his three friends Wei, Jin, and William. They were fairly surprised to see a six pack of beer in my hand because they were drinking diet coke. They laughed and asked if I typically drink this early. I answered saying I was not trying to be rude or

impose and that I was just trying to be courteous. Those first five minutes were somewhat awkward because I felt like I already had 1 of my 3 strikes for that night and I just got there.

The house was very plain with few decorations and furniture. They had a small TV on an end table with one couch while their kitchen table was just a fold out table with four chairs around it. This was the complete opposite of my house where I have three couches and a big entertainment center consisting of a 52" TV, XBOX 360, and a DVD player with full surround sound. I felt like his house was only used as a place for him to sleep and eat while he was not on campus. It was very surprising to not find extravagant oriental ornament on the walls and much more basic furniture. Once my quick visual inspection of the apartment was over I asked Chen about Mahjong and if he could give me a quick overview of the game. He gladly took me over and showed me the game set consisting of 144 tiles. Chen and his three friends had no problem trying to explain what each tile does and how to match and pair them. I was instantly confused and overwhelmed by the game. Although they tried and were very patient with explaining how the game is set up and briefly played I kindly asked if they could play and allow me to watch. They placed all the tiles face down on the table then shuffled around. Once they are shuffled they stack them 2 high and then line them up in 4 walls. Then dealer rolls 3 dice to determine where to divide up his wall then the tiles are distributed clockwise until each player has 13 tiles. They did all of this in the matter of 3 minutes and I was instantly lost once again. I compared this to teaching a child to play poker who never used cards before. They explained it kindly and took great interest in having me understand what was being done showing their pride in the culture of the game. It was as if they saw this as an opportunity for themselves to not only teach me their game but a learning experience for them as well. As they began again arranging their tiles in "suits" and pairs then exchanging their tiles all while speaking Chinese and playing at a very fast pace. I often had to ask what it was they were saying while swapping tiles and how they determined which tiles to get rid of. It was almost like I was being a pest in my eyes because of the constant questions and delaying of their game. I watched them play a few games and even asked to be someone's partner during a round. After I felt I gained all I could from this night I thanked each of them for their kindness and patience explaining the game to me.

The mixed views of the Asian culture I had at the start of this experience were clarified. I learned that a lot of things were just preconceived stereotypes but I was right about them taking great pride in their culture. The ability for Chen and his friends to openly welcome me to their game showed me that they are not the private closed off group of people I was led to believe.

This experience definitely opened my eyes to another culture that was unfamiliar to me. Although I am no expert on the Chinese culture and have much to learn I can see myself being much more willing to learn much more. If I were invited to come play Mahjong again with Chen and his friends I would gladly take the opportunity and even try and teach them one of the card games I've played growing up. Even though it's no where near as complicated as Mahjong I believe they would be very willing to experience something new much like I did with their game and culture.