

## **Cultural Diversity and the Ideal of Progress**

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It is a great honor to be invited to speak as a Dai Ho Chun lecturer. I commend the selection committee's boldness in extending the invitation to me, an eighty-two year old, who in his second childhood has the freedom of a child and so no longer feels an obligation to defer to political or any other kind of correctness. I hope that what I have to say will not upset anyone, for that cannot be further from my intention. What, then, is my intention? It is to put forward certain ideas which, though they now appear idealistic and quite impractical, may in time break the logjam of current pieties and lead us to new ways of addressing issues of cultural diversity, social justice, and individual human aspiration.

### **“It's A Small World”**

Let me begin with an anecdote. In 1995, I visited Disneyland with a group of Americanists and architects, the purpose of which was to see the extent that Walt Disney's creations had influenced contemporary architecture. Of the many attractions at Disneyland, a favorite is called “It's a small world.” Originally designed for New York's World Fair, its popularity was such that when the World Fair closed it was taken to Disneyland where it remains well attended to this day. So here we were at the entrance to “It's a small world.” We stepped into a boat, which took us into a dark cavern. Inside it, we were treated to a catchy tune, sang by 300 animated dolls from 100 countries, all dressed in their distinctive costumes. At first, the costumes were brightly colored, but as we went deeper and deeper into the cavern, they began to lose their color so that toward the end of the trip they were all white. The Americanist in our group then made a comment that I found remarkably perceptive. She said: “This ride is clearly from an earlier time when society emphasized what we human beings have in common rather than how we differ. The vivid colors of the costumes accentuated the difference only to fade toward the end of the ride to underline the opposite ideal of commonality.” She went on to say that “It's a small world” can

nevertheless be made relevant to our time by reversing the trip: start with the dolls all dressed in white and end with the dolls in colorful costumes. “Start with commonality, end with diversity” is today’s trend and ideal.

I have lived long enough to witness this reversal of values. Right after the horrors of World War II, people yearned for peace, and to guarantee peace they stressed that we are not different, hence potential antagonists, but are much alike, all members of one human family. In the last quarter of the twentieth century, this point of view lost favor in consequence of an increasing awareness that the one-world mentality is not as innocent as it sounds, that it has hegemonic leanings, and that, moreover, not only imperialism but modernization can have a pronounced leveling effect, making places and cultures more and more alike. Understandably, our mood has swung in the other direction. We now emphasize difference rather than commonality, cultural diversity rather than progress and modernization.

### **Progress and Cultural Diversity**

An uneasy tension exists between the two, which may explain why they are seldom bracketed together. People who speak well of cultural diversity, as many liberals do, are suspicious of progress, associating it darkly with cultural imperialism and economic globalization. By contrast, people who strongly push for progress and modernization are suspicious of cultural diversity, seeing it as nostalgia for an older time and, worse, as dividing people, making them seem more different than they in fact are.

I should make my own position clear. I am in the camp of progress and modernization. I am there for a wide range of reasons, some more important than others. For the purpose of this talk, however, I need to mention just one at this point. It is this. Contrary to common belief, modernization has produced more, not less, cultural diversity in people’s day-to-day life. True, we see uniformity when we take a sweeping view of cityscapes and find shopping malls and skyscrapers in all parts of the world. On the other hand, should we visit the core of a bustling city, even one of modest size, we may well encounter extraordinary diversity. Take Madison, Wisconsin. Strolling in the downtown area, I run into a dizzying succession of cultures, a Starbucks, a Sushi bar, an Irish pub, a museum of contemporary art, an Episcopal church, a cinema advertising a forthcoming Bollywood romance, a shop that sells Hindu paraphernalia, and rooms used for yoga, Buddhist meditation, karate, and acupuncture. Madison, as the site of a state capitol and a major university, may be expected to show a smorgasbord of cultures, but this richness is far from unique.

Any city with cosmopolitan aspiration, including the thousands of smallish college towns in the world, would have it.

Note that the cultural diversity I have described is not the sort brought about by isolation such that each region produces buildings and landscapes of a particular character. Rather it is brought about by an accelerated exchange of goods, tastes and ideas, made possible by new technologies of communication and transportation. What is the difference? The difference is this. Diversity produced by isolation, common in the past, was coarse-grained. One got to know different cultures traveling from one region to the next in a train or boat. Diversity produced by rapidity of exchange and movement is fine-grained. One can experience it on foot. It is this accessibility that justifies my saying that people are far more likely to know cultural diversity now, as a part of their daily life, than even a few decades ago.

### **The Path Not Taken**

I have praised progress and modernization, at least to the extent of saying that it does not destroy cultural diversity. So let's turn to this much touted ideal. Do I like cultural diversity? Of course I do, but with only one part of my mind. With another part, I have my doubts. My dissatisfaction lies in culture itself, its tendency to become a fetish and yet, despite its supposed potency, fetishized culture cannot defend a people against marginalization. When a people is denigrated, treated as backward and marginal, by a powerful, technologically advanced neighbor, their instinctive response is to retreat deeper into their culture, a procedure that can lead to delusion if only because the culture into which they retreat is less their own than they think, being almost certainly affected by the ideas and products of their powerful neighbor. And if they search their past for authentic details and try to rebuild their identity — their culture—from them? Well, unless the search is done in an unimpassioned manner, what they come up with is likely to be more myth than history.

But, you will ask, what is wrong with myth—with history colored by imagination and even fantasy? Nothing, I say. Using imagination to produce myth or any work of art is highly commendable. However, using it under political pressure to come up with a cultural product, such as a festive holiday, is something else. At this point, I feel obliged to emerge from the cover of abstraction and provide you with a specific example, even though doing so may well land me in misunderstanding, if not contumely.

So here is my example—Kwanzaa, a holiday that was created in 1966 to empower African-Americans. Are the celebrations drawn from genuine African

belief and practice, brought to light after much research, or are they an ad hoc construction, put together in answer to the political demands and opportunities of the time? Surely it is more the latter. Kwanzaa has nonetheless caught on. In North America, millions of African-Americans now celebrate it. Kwanzaa's success is not surprising, for we all enjoy a party, we all like to mix with people like ourselves, our kinship proudly displayed in the way we speak, dress, eat, and make music. But will Kwanzaa promote genuine self-confidence, one that reaches beyond the occasion to color enduringly a people's mood and aspiration? I rather doubt it. Self-confidence is self-deception unless it is built on something real. And that something real cannot be a mere difference—a different flavor of food, a different beat in music, a different set of exhortations. It has to be an action or a product that can inspire not only its own people but other people as well. What might that action or product be in the African-American past?

For answer, I offer a scenario of what could have happened but didn't. In other words, I ask you to indulge me in an exercise of "what if" history. Suppose, after the Civil War, black leaders decided to make education the primary method for uplifting their people. Suppose they so chose because they recognized "heroic reading"—that is to say, reading and learning despite severe discouragement from plantation owners—to be a truly inspiring event of their past. Of course, if black leaders had devoted their resources to education, the political and economic paths to success would have suffered, with the result that Congress today would have few black representatives and no black caucus, and the business world today few, if any, black tycoons. On the other hand, isn't it possible that, by embracing education in the last one hundred and fifty years, the best students in schools and universities, the best scholars and scientists, would now be disproportionately black? And isn't it also possible that occupying the peak of the educational pyramid, even more than occupying other pyramidal peaks, would give blacks a prestige in society that they do not at present enjoy for all the advances they have made on the political and economic fronts?

### **On Being at the Center**

If history makes us wiser, it may well be that it allows us to ponder over not only the paths taken but also the paths not taken; in other words, the lessons of "what if." History offers other lessons as well. For example, one might ask of it: Was there a time when a people, now deemed ethnic and marginal, enjoyed a high degree of self-confidence because they thought they were located at the center of the cosmos?

The answer is yes. A mere century ago, there existed many small, isolated human groups over the face of the Earth. Each group believed in its own centrality in the cosmos until the ground for such belief was undermined by confrontation with the West.

Consider the Aivilik Eskimos. They lived on Southampton Island in Hudson Bay, Canada. They were hunters and fishermen. They saw their island as located at the world's geographical center. Not only that, they also saw it as located at the world's population and cultural center. Experience led them to these conclusions. They could see that as they moved away from their settlement, they met with fewer and fewer people until they reached empty land. They could also see that although they occasionally had visitors from the outside world, these were few in number. As for the belief that they lived at the world's cultural center, it was based on the fact that the explorers and ethnographers who came to them were invariably keen to know their customs and traditions, their methods of coping with a difficult environment, in a word—their wisdom.

Then came the shock—a sudden shift of scenario during World War II when the American army sent men to Southampton Island to build an air strip. The Aivilik were astonished to see so many strangers, and astonished by their competence. The strangers, using their heavy machinery, transformed the environment with ease and saw no need to seek the help of the local residents. Overnight, the locals—the Aivilik—became small players in a large and complex world. They came to realize that they were just one people among many, that they were, in the eyes of the larger world, ethnics—a proper object of study by ethnographers. Ethnics can still be proud of their tradition and customs, but something fundamental is missing in that pride, namely, their conviction of geographical and cultural centrality.

### **Who Regrets the Loss of Cultural Diversity?**

As the number of isolated peoples declined, so declined, too, the number of distinctive cultures. The world's palette, once so rich in color, has paled and lost its exotic appeal. I now come to a crucial question, which is, who deplores this loss? Not the small isolated group, such as the Aivilik, for each recognizes only its own world. It may see itself threatened by powerful outsiders, but it can hardly see such threat to cultures that are unknown to them. So I repeat, who deplores the loss? My answer is: the elite and in that category I include well-educated people like you in the audience. Being well-educated, you can see the large picture and appreciate the many life styles. You urge that they be preserved. But have you seriously wondered why?

One reason, I suggest, is that you may have accepted unthinkingly a false analogy between cultural diversity and bio-diversity. As students in school, you learn that the Earth is rich in plants and animals, and that this bio-diversity is good—good from the viewpoint of evolutionary potency and good from the viewpoint that a rich biological community can provide as yet unsuspected resources to human beings. The mistake is to attribute analogous merits to cultural diversity. That a rich variety of cultures constitutes a resource is indisputable, but resource for whom? Not for the natives who created the culture and are confined to it, but rather for the cosmopolitan elite who are in the position to survey all the cultures spread before them and decide on what is and is not useful. In other words, seeing biological and cultural diversity as analogous runs the risk of treating native humans and their products as though they were animals and their body parts. Both, then, become economic and entertainment resources for the elite.

At the back of this distinction between cultural and bio-diversity is one that is more basic and obvious, namely, plants and animals are works of nature whereas culture is a human creation. The one is stable in that a species remains the same over many generations. The other is much less stable: cultures can change and as they change so do the humans who have made them. Whereas tigers do not turn into lions, hunter-gatherers *can* turn into cultivators, assume a different way of life and even a different personality. Cultivators may decide to go a step further, abandon tilling the soil in favor of taking up a profession and live in the city, drawn to its glitter, material wealth, and the opportunity to broaden their mental horizon. Should this happen, hunter-gatherers turn into cosmopolites. And it is as cosmopolites that they are in the position to appreciate the world's cultural and bio-diversity.

I have speeded up the film recklessly. Of course, change from one culture to another is difficult and may take generations rather than within a lifetime. Still, change even within a lifetime is possible. I now turn another type of change, one that rises from indigence to affluence, from ignorance to knowledge, in the same broad culture or civilization. This, too, is difficult. A circumstance that favors success is strong and consistent support from family. But family may not give the support or lack the resources. It is then up to communal and national leaders to do their part. No doubt many try. However, they labor under certain constraints of which they themselves may not be fully aware, or are aware but do not see the contradiction, with the result that their support lacks fervor and constancy. Take communal leaders. Even as they assist their people, they may know, if only subconsciously, that should they succeed in raising their people's standard of living beyond what the community can offer, the political hold that they have over their people will diminish. As for

national leaders, those of a liberal bent used to be the strongest advocates of progress. In recent decades, however, they have grown suspicious of the very idea. Why? Because they realize that progress implies levels of development, the existence of which makes value judgment inevitable, and with value judgment the introduction of the rather odious concept of an elite. So, to both local and national leaders of liberal persuasion, it is better to see the world as carpeted by different cultures, all more or less equal, a flat mosaic rather than a pyramid.

I have given three reasons for favoring cultural diversity: analogy with biodiversity, desire on the part of communal leaders to retain power, and the elite's egalitarianism. Now, there is a fourth reason, which, unlike the third one of egalitarianism, is less admirable. It is the elite's habit of regarding cultures as somehow *their* wealth. Like museum directors, they keep a hawk's eye on their collection and would regret any loss, even of items that have little artistic merit. Besides museum directors, anthropologists and linguists, too, are inclined to treat the cultures and languages of distant peoples as their possession—their wealth. If they urge preservation, it is surely in part because their research, upon which their reputations are made, depends on the continued existence of exotic ways of life. Lastly and importantly, cultural diversity is favored by deep-pocket tourists from rich countries. It is clearly in their interest that the largest possible variety of native huts, costumes, and dances be preserved for them to gawk at as they embark on expensive cruises.

### **Cultural Diversity in the University**

Tourism, which is a multi-billion dollar industry, is understandably eager to preserve cultural diversity in the world. Now, why would an altogether different institution—the university—with its traditional mission to seek the abstract and the general, be similarly committed? One answer might be that the university has its own museum directors and curators, eager to maximize their collection, proud of the fact that it ranges from Paleolithic arrowheads to Korean chamber pots of the eighth century; and it is also the home of anthropologists and linguists, eager to preserve their objects of study which, until recently, were isolated human groups and their distinctive cultures. Another answer is the belief that democracy and social justice demand proportional representation of minority cultures and students in the university, irrespective of the value of the culture and the preparedness of the students. Political ideology thus makes its way into the university and muddies its own priorities. The infiltration is not only admissible but commendable, if minority

students benefit by exposure to the university's ambience. Maybe they do. I will not argue the case, for another case can be made for more minorities that is in line with one of the university's historic priorities, namely, the generation of new insights and ideas. Such an outcome, it is said, can happen when students of different backgrounds and ethnicities live side by side. It can indeed happen, but only if students are willing to step out of their enclaves to engage one another as adults, free from the fear of inadvertently treading on overwrought sensibilities. Students and, for that matter, faculty are far from attaining this ideal. But should they come close, the result will be a breaking down of barriers and an intermingling of cultures that can only dilute their individual distinctiveness. Cultural diversity will suffer, but far from being a reason for regret, it is what educators have historically striven to achieve. In the heated political atmosphere of our time, so infatuated are educators with diversity that they have lost their true aim, which is not to produce ethnics, cozily ensconced in their culture, but cosmopolites open to the world, happy to confront the new and the strange while retaining all that is best in their own culture.

### **Appreciation of Language**

Outside the university campus are peoples variously labeled native, ethnic, or minority. Their cultures have been invaded by the fashions and products of modern life. No doubt they sense the loss, perhaps most keenly their language. We can all understand why a people would sense the loss. Moreover, we assume that before the loss there was appreciation. But what does it mean to appreciate one's own language? Can one do so without evaluation and comparison? Let me explain with the help of an example. In a cattle-herding tribe of East Africa, the mother says of her newborn infant, "Oh, my umbilical cord!" When I first encountered this expression of maternal tenderness, I was struck by its originality, it being so much more imaginative, in my view, than an American mother's "Oh, my lamb!" I would be sorry if East African mothers no longer say, "Oh, my umbilical cord." On the other hand, I could see the originality of the East African expression only because I am also acquainted with the American one: I can compare and contrast. The African mother cannot compare and contrast if she is confined to her own culture and language. What to me is poetic is to her the accepted usage of her people and therefore something that she simply takes for granted.

## **Culture as Familiar Home**

Culture is like home, something we take for granted. We don't appraise home the way we appraise other places; and we don't appraise our own culture the way we appraise other cultures. The merits and defects of what we have always had are dulled by familiarity. To an Englishman returning home after a long stay overseas, the most ordinary objects in English life—for example, a tea cozy—can seem extraordinary; and to a repatriated African mother the most common idiom of her language—for example, “Oh, my umbilical cord”—can seem a marvel of poetic inventiveness. Foreign travel thus not only opens our eyes to the world but also to the virtues of the local and the familiar.

Home is the local and the familiar—place at its most intimate. Neighborhood, village, and small town, too, can have that degree of familiarity and intimacy. Nurturing and desirable as these places are, they can be suffocating, for we are creatures of both place and space, hearth and cosmos. To live solely in intimate place is to live weighed down by routines and tight human bonds. To live in space—that is to say, in various places and never putting down roots—is to live abstractly and suffer from what Milan Kundera calls “the unbearable lightness of being.” To live fully therefore requires us to have both stability and motion, tradition and new horizons. What is the proper mix?

## **Ethnicity, Diversity, Difference**

This is a question that applies to all of us, but perhaps most keenly to minority students at the university. For them, the path to new horizons, especially those of science, can seem steep. To ease the climb and to feel comfortable in an alien environment, they demand multicultural centers—homes away from home—and an ethnic studies program that gives them and their cultures visibility and prestige. University administrators complied with these demands and have more broadly taken up the cause of minority students under the banner of diversity. Diversity is now a major university goal, so much so that in advertising brochures it is given more prominence than such old standbys as “truth” and “light.” However, when the word “diversity” is used without qualification, it hides the fact that the university's aim is not diversity in the student body as a whole but rather that certain targeted minorities be represented in greater numbers. For this reason, international students are not counted in the calculation. It may be that the value they place on education makes them too similar to white middle-class Americans. Poor whites are not counted either,

even though the culture of poverty differs from middle-class culture, and the reason may be that the difference is insufficient and is, moreover, one of social class and so is not of the kind that eases the university's—and the larger society's—feeling of racial guilt.

Burdened by racial guilt, American universities are beset by contradictions. They are conservative, willing to draw protective boundaries in regard to minority students and cultures, but progressive, willing to erase boundaries in regard to white students and mainstream learning. Ethnic students are in a special bind, eager to remain loyal to their culture but urged to accept abstract, universal systems and values. Officials at the university themselves seem torn, although in public pronouncements they are happier promoting ethnic culture. Why? Well, for one thing, promoting and preserving a culture is more easily done. For another, it is politically correct. Incorrect is to urge that ethnic students participate fully in the explosion of knowledge that has taken place in the last fifty years, for to do so implies that the culture they acquired at their grandmother's knee has severe limitations and that these limitations hinder them from developing their innate talents to the full.

### **Cultural Improvements**

A problem with ethnic culture is that it is often talked about as though it doesn't change. But cultures do change and they can even be progressive, an outstanding example being what happened in Europe during the eighteenth century. In that period, later known as the Age of Enlightenment, not only material culture but new ways of thinking, new moral demands such as gender-equality and human rights, emerged. That which began in Europe, spread eventually to other parts of the world. China, under Enlightenment's influence, gave up the centuries-old, brutally painful practice of female foot-binding. India gave up its caste system, a system that had been a center piece of Indian civilization for millennia. Other more common barbarisms, such as eating human flesh and slavery, were outlawed in the name of enlightened humanism.

When China discarded foot-binding and India the caste system, neither country felt that its culture's integrity was compromised. To the contrary, China and India felt rejuvenated, their people able at last to show their better selves. A reason for this is that these large complex cultures or civilizations can always find something in their own tradition that justifies the change. They can pretend that they have not so much submitted to foreign influence as have seen fit to develop an insight of their own that has hitherto been neglected. Smaller and simpler cultures, by contrast, have greater difficulty accepting modern ways and still be themselves because they have fewer

components and these are, moreover, tightly interwoven. Any change could threaten the integrity of the whole. The new, when accepted, could seem incongruously added on, a striking example being the gambling casino on Indian reservations.

Advocates of culture, especially ethnic culture, write about it not only as if it doesn't change, but also as if it is always benign. This is misleading to say the least, for all cultures have moral failings. What is to be done about them? They should be documented and remembered if only to provide lessons in humility. Virtues, too, can be forgotten. In China, for example, the current rush for wealth and power has cast into the shadows the traditional virtues of friendship and quiet leisure, the one furthering deep personal affection, the other a contemplative and reflective state of mind. Once the virtues have faded, can they be revived? This takes us to the larger question, which is how much of the past can be recovered? When we dread the loss of traditional arts and virtues, it is from the belief that what are rudely displaced or have simply slipped into the past are forever gone. This is of course true, but not the whole truth, for it fails to do justice to human imagination and ingenuity.

### **What Is Important to Preserve or Restore?**

To a greater degree than we think, the past can be re-envisioned and re-enacted, in part because it lives, however diminished, in the present, but in greater part because of the fruitful labor of historians and archaeologists. Their books empower us to situate ourselves imaginatively in bygone days. True, the roar of life is gone. The cacophony of sounds, the assault of images, the very taste and feel of things are no more. But this shouldn't worry us too much. Why? Because if we just try to recall our own yesterday, what can we remember of it? Isn't it even more shadowy than a day in the life of the Roman emperor Hadrian, as captured for us by the historical novelist Marguerite Yourcenar? Historians depend on written evidence. Increasingly, new techniques enable them to reconstruct key elements of culture that could seem forever lost. Languages, for example. We dread the loss of a language. But so long as some texts remain or one speaker still lives, much of it can be reconstituted, such is the advance in modern linguistics. Other kinds of loss also prove to be not total. What, for example, did an Alpine hunter have for dinner 10,000 years ago? Surely that will remain forever unknown. Yet, so long as traces of organic matter are wedged in his teeth cavities, scientists can tell us. Not only the particulars of culture but a whole Neolithic landscape can be rebuilt, as in Denmark, for modern Danes to stroll in. Last but not least are the historical movies. We academics snobbishly dismiss them, yet directors of such movies consult eminent historians to make sure that the

fold of the toga is correct for a blockbuster movie about ancient Rome, and that actors speak Aramaic in a film about Jesus and an Irish brogue in a film about nineteenth-century Boston.

Even if we can restore more of the past than we think, the question remains, how much time and effort should be spent on it? In developed countries, the answer may well be that we should spend more time and effort on the past, its traditions, than is our habit. On the other hand, might it not be said of small, isolated communities that they are too enslaved by the past, too bound by tradition? For although tradition reassures, it also stifles. In any case, it does not protect people from feeling marginalized when confronted by the neighbor's more ostentatious achievements. Marginalization corrodes a people's sense of worth. Is this inevitable? What can be done?

The ancient Greeks suggest an answer. Even under Roman domination, they managed to retain their dignity and pride. They could do so because they had something that the Roman conquerors recognized as worthy of respect. That something was Greek thought and learning. Well, you may say, this doesn't really help, for few people have the genius and learning of the ancient Greeks. So what are marginalized peoples of our time to do? What can they offer the larger world besides and above the exotica so frequently on display in an ethnic festival? Here I'd like to make a suggestion. What they have to offer cannot be works that depend on technological prowess and need not even take material form. But why can't they be works of the spirit such as tender feelings toward nature, stories of exceptional endurance and courage, songs of lacerating sorrow and yearning, delicate ways of showing consideration and hospitality?

These moral and aesthetic achievements, even more than material objects, are deeply rooted in tradition, and, even more than material objects, they are likely to slip unnoticed into the past. Every effort should be made to ensure that this does not happen, for more than costumes, dances, and ways of cooking, and more than the encumbrances of religious ritual, they speak to humanity. And it is when a people speaks to humanity and not just to their own group that they can have genuine self-respect even in the face of political and cultural domination.

### **Cosmopolite—Who Can be One?**

Speak to humanity sounds portentous, as perhaps also when we speak of ourselves as human beings rather than as Chinese, American, or Navaho. A human being addresses other human beings, an "I," addresses other "I's," irrespective of their

skin color or cultural baggage. This is the posture of a cosmopolite, and by that word I mean not the superficial man-of-the-world, proud of his smattering of languages, his equal appreciation of sushi and bouillabaisse, but one who takes the wide world, blemishes notwithstanding, in awestruck wonder. Surprising as it may seem, we all have it in us to be such individuals; we are all naturally disposed to be cosmopolites.

But what is the evidence? The evidence lies in the extraordinarily far-reaching imagination of young children. Any parent listening to her babbling toddlers is astonished by the heterogeneity and scope of the imagined world they live in. An American parent is inducted into one of talking animals, monsters under the bed, spirits and fairies in the night sky, fluffy bears and spikey dinosaurs, wild flowers and mud pools, toy houses, trains, and computers. The heterogeneity of content is remarkable, but as remarkable is young children's geographical scope or reach. It expands as they grow older, but not steadily outward as we grown-ups might expect; rather it suddenly reaches beyond home and neighborhood to the world, skipping the local water tower in favor of the Great Wall of China.

At some stage in children's growth, say, around seven, a narrowing of the horizon sets in. Partly, this is because children want to belong to their peer group, which means that the boy or girl will seek to limit words and images to those that their friends can understand. Partly, it is because grown-ups want children to adopt grown-up beliefs and customs. Such acculturation they consider necessary to children's survival and to their becoming fully mature human beings. Necessary to their survival, yes, but to their becoming fully mature human beings? I would say no, for to me maturity is not conformity to a particular cultural mode: that path can only end in stunted individuals. Rather it is their full development, drawing on the accumulated wisdom of humankind.

Acculturation differs from education in that the one is universal, the other, to the extent that it aims to develop the mind, is largely a Western ideal. Acculturation creates a common culture, and in so doing cements the group. Education does the same, but less routinely and unthinkingly, because it has for its goal, besides the group's cohesion and uplift, also the blossoming of individual talents. In other words, education in the West has an individualistic bias, with roots in Judeo-Christian religion and in Renaissance and early modern humanism. In our time, a new support for individuality and individualism comes from biology. It appears that the more complex an organism is, the more likely it is to differ from other organisms of the same species. Now, the human organism is the most complex known on Earth; hence one human being is likely to differ in important ways from another human being.

## Cultural versus Individual Diversity

Let's see how culture plays out against this notion of the unique human individual, and let's turn, for this purpose, to culture as it is understood in a university's office for diversity. Culture in that office is ethnic culture and diversity is ethnic diversity. Culture, then, is neither the great classics of literature, art, and music, nor a cohesive way of life as understood by anthropologists. Rather it is an adventitious mix of very different ways of living, put together by the university for a political purpose. Consider the term Asian-American. What can Asian-American culture mean when Asia includes such disparate units as China, India, Thailand, and—why not?—the tribes of Asiatic Russia? Hispanic, African-American, and Native American are likewise overly-broad umbrella terms that hide the cultural heterogeneity of their members.

Now, such mixes can still be justified if they empower the student. But what can empowerment mean? It cannot mean providing the student with the comfort of belonging to a larger whole if only because the larger whole, arbitrarily put together, has neither root nor tradition, and hence no nurturing warmth. Can the purpose, then, be induction into the cosmos? But how is that bold venture to be initiated when from the start the student is thrust into an ethnic category in disregard for his or her uniqueness and in denial of his or her original compact with the universe?

In this talk, I have clearly shown my ambivalence toward culture, not just ethnic culture, but culture as such. Culture in its most general sense is human, and it is unproductive to argue for or against it. Culture as a particular mold to which humans conform is something else. I have for it a love-and-hate relationship, believing that it deserves at most only two cheers, for though it is a nurturing home, it is also an emasculating prison. My other source of ambivalence toward culture—that is to say, a collective way of believing and doing—has to do with my natural inclination to identify with the human individual rather than with the clan, tribe, community, or nation. To the one, I am emotionally engaged, to the other, I am engaged for practical reasons. But when I say the human individual, I should add that I really have in mind the young person. As I increasingly feel my own mortality, I feel it also in young persons, notwithstanding all the years that lie ahead of them. This is because I see them against the backdrop of the group. Whereas the group can be nearly immortal, the individual's life span is the briefest moment in the time scale of history. To think that in that briefest moment, a youngster capable of attaining the dignity of a sage cosmopolite, inheriting the best that humankind can offer, has had that dignity curtailed, not by accident or fate, but by well-intentioned leaders and their well-

intentioned—though misguided—policy, is to me unconscionable, indeed, tragic.

### **About the Author**

Until retiring in 1998, Yi-Fu Tuan was J. K. Wright and Vilas Professor Emeritus of Geography at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is ranked among the country's most distinguished cultural geographers and has earned numerous honors, among them a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Bracken Award for landscape architecture, and an award for meritorious contribution to geography from the Association of American Geographers. He was named the Lauréat d'Honneur 2000 of the International Geographical Union. He is the author of many essays and books, including *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), which not only established the discipline of human geography, but has proven influential in such diverse fields as theater, literature, anthropology, psychology, and theology. The Dai Ho Chun lecture on Cultural Diversity, delivered at the University of Hawaii at Manoa on March 13, 2013, appears here for the first time in print.