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The Americanization of a Filipina U.S. Navy Wife

Joseph Ryan Wee

Abstract: *This essay places a biography in the context of history. It describes the life of a Filipina immigrant to the United States during the Civil Rights Movement and the Cold War in the context of U.S.-Philippine international relations and the boom of the aerospace industry.*

My aunt, Sharon Baker¹ (whose real name is not used to preserve her privacy), is a first generation Filipina immigrant who had never in her childhood years imagined coming to the United States. Mrs. Baker was born in 1952 to a Chinese-Filipino family in the Philippines. While working at Subic Naval Base, located along the Manila Bay, she met her husband, Mitchell Baker, a U.S. Navy officer, whom she married in 1977. Shortly after, she migrated to the United States and began a decades-long process of Americanization, or cultural assimilation: the process by which she learned and adopted the cultures and traditions of the United States. Her Americanization occurred economically and socioculturally. Her integration into the American workforce as well as its customs occurred during her employment with General Dynamics, a defense contractor, while her social and cultural assimilation occurred largely with the help of her husband, her in-laws, and later, her friends. Mrs. Baker discusses her overwhelmingly positive experience in the sociocultural aspect of her Americanization, providing a stark contrast to her experience of career stagnation and possible discrimination in the workplace. The positive and negative aspects

of her life, especially with respect to her Americanization, can be traced to, compared to, and analyzed in the context of the U.S. colonization of the Philippines, the Cold War, and American society.

To fully understand the context of my aunt's immigration to the United States and her subsequent cultural assimilation, one must understand the history of the Philippines with respect to U.S. colonization. In her dissertation *Gender, Family Labor, and the United States Navy: The Post-World War II San Diego Filipina/o-American Immigrant Navy Community*, Jocelyn Agustin Pacleb discusses how the Spanish American War of 1898 ended Spanish colonialism in the Philippines and began an era of U.S. colonialism. For the next several decades, the U.S. military became a powerful presence in Asia, especially in the Philippines, engaging in military campaigns and benevolent assimilation efforts.² In 1946, after a lengthy delay due to World War II, the Philippines was granted independence from the United States, but still maintained "strong economic and military ties" with the United States.³ A year later, in 1947, the United States and the Philippines signed the Military Bases Agreements Act. This act allowed the United States to establish military bases in the Philippines, such as Subic Naval Base, where my aunt later met her future husband.

My aunt was born in 1952, less than a decade after the Military Bases Agreement Act was signed. Before she was ever introduced to the United States Navy, she grew up in a strict and slightly impoverished Chinese-Filipino family. With a Chinese father and Filipina mother, Mrs. Baker became accustomed to reconciling multiple distinct cultures early in her life. She reflected on the fact that she attended both Buddhist temples and Catholic churches. Her dual Filipina-Chinese identity made her feel somewhat isolated, but she soon associated much more with her Chinese side than her Filipina side, due to what she perceived as "more compassion" coming from the Chinese community. With the help of a Chinese charity association, she was able to attend Chinese school and graduated at the age of 17 in 1969. She went to work at Subic Naval Base in Manila Bay that same year. Eight years later, she met her husband, Mitchell Baker.

My aunt went to Subic Naval Base for a simple reason: she became the family breadwinner, and had to work to support her family. Mr. Baker, her future husband, was there on different terms. The U.S. military bases in the Philippines served as military launching grounds during the Vietnam War and throughout the Cold War.⁴ As Pacleb, citing Schirmer and Shalom, writes, "U.S. naval and air force bases in the Philippines enabled the U.S. to keep a close eye on communist activities in neighboring countries such as China, Korea, and other parts of Southeast Asia, as well as Russia."⁵ As a U.S. Navy officer, Mr. Baker was stationed in Subic Naval Base in 1977, where he met my aunt. Thus, my aunt and uncle were brought together from opposite ends of the world by a global ideological conflict between the capitalist nations, led by the U.S., and the socialist nations, led by the USSR. U.S. colonialism in the Philippines and the economic and military ties that the United States developed with the Philippines made Mr. and Mrs. Baker's meeting, marriage, and life together possible.

After she married Mr. Baker, my aunt began her immigration to the United States. Her immigration process was significantly influenced by changes in U.S. immigration laws over a decade before. While the United States hoped to present itself as a nation of equality and liberty to improve the image of American democracy during the Cold War⁶, the Civil Rights

Movement gained strength in the 1950s and 1960s, and much attention was directed at the discriminatory nature of U.S. immigration policies.⁷ Ronald Takaki writes that the Civil Rights Movement had begun to “awaken the moral conscience of America, condemning racism in all of its forms, including immigration policies.”⁸ In response, the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed, thus eliminating national-origins quotas, increasing the annual admission thresholds from all parts of the world, and exempting family members, spouses, minor children, and the parents of U.S. citizens from any quotas.⁹

After the Immigration Act of 1965 was passed, marriage to U.S. citizens, especially military members, became a popular path of immigration to the United States.¹⁰ Before she met Mr. Baker, my aunt never planned to immigrate to the United States. Prior to arriving in the United States my aunt perceived the U.S. as a , powerful nation incapable of possessing major faults. She believed that the United States was an unreachable place that produced the best of everything and stood for everything good in the world. Historically speaking, her positive views on the United States can be attributed to the extensive involvement of the U.S. in Filipino society in the late 19th century and most of the 20th century through militarization projects, modernization programs and the establishment of U.S.-modeled schools,, which promised economic and social upward mobility consistent with the American dream.¹¹

Following her marriage to Mr. Baker, she entered the United States as the spouse of a U.S. Navy officer. After arriving in the United States, many of her initial perceptions had changed. Though she still viewed the United States in a positive light, she noticed several significant differences from the Philippines. She remembered thinking that “in the Philippines everyone knows everybody, but here, it seems like people don’t have time to stop and say hello. Everyone was going different ways. I feel like people don’t have time to relax. I mean they’re always going places.” Prior to immigrating, she had also thought that “everyone [in the U.S.] was good looking.” Upon arriving however, she was disappointed to see that not everyone in the United States was as flawless and gorgeous as Hollywood had portrayed them to be. She commented: “you watch the movies and every time the Americans were winning, sports, everything.” Furthermore, much to her disappointment, she had realized that the United States was not the only country in the world that produced high-quality products. She arrived to find everything from “telephones, to cars, to electronics, [and] televisions” made in Japan. When I asked her why she heard so much about the United States, she said that “America was very popular in the Philippines. Even at school, you study about their history.” Her perceptions of the United States not only reflect the power of the United States military in affecting Filipino culture, but also the strength of the globalizing U.S. influence on Filipino views regarding the “ideal” United States.

My aunt spent her first six months in the United States living with Mr. Baker’s parents, who contributed significantly to her cultural assimilation. “I learned how to cook,” she mentioned, from her in-laws, who were “family oriented people.” Still, her Americanization was a slow and sometimes painful process. “It’s very, very lonely. I get homesick,” she mentions. She added: “I cried. I did, I cried almost every night because my husband left because, being in the military, he had to go back on the ship and go on deployment.” Certain common aspects of American family life were foreign to her: “Something that I was not used to is to have a dog. You know, Asians are not... accustomed to having dogs in the house as part of the family.” When he was not deployed, Mr. Baker also helped my aunt to Americanize.

He taught her how to drive and to be independent, which she views as the most important factor in her Americanization. Mrs. Baker's being able to drive gave her a greater sense of independence, as she was able to go where she wanted when she wanted, rather than being bound at home. During the Cold war, especially between 1950 and 1986, the aerospace and defense industries had grown rapidly.¹² By the time Mr. and Mrs. Baker had moved into their new home in Chula Vista in 1978, my aunt had already begun working as a file clerk for the defense contractor General Dynamics. "I got promoted as a data entri-er," she later mentioned. Her experience at General Dynamics introduced her to the American labor force, but the Americanization she experienced there was purely professional: "I did have one friend, but she was an acquaintance more than a friend." Despite the minimal social interaction, she was initially content with her work at General Dynamics. "It's not hard work," she says. "You just sit and enter data. [It is] better than being a waitress in the Philippines."

Her job was far from ideal, however. She felt that people looked at her differently because she was Asian, "especially if your co-workers are mostly white." Furthermore, she was never promoted beyond the position of a data entry assistant. When I asked why, she responded: "Even if you do the work, they cannot promote you because you don't have the degree. I got discriminated against because I didn't have a college degree." Despite this, she continued to train new employees, who were promoted and later surpassed her, since they held college degrees. She considers her treatment discrimination because of the fact that she was fully capable of doing the work and training others to do the work, but could never get promoted herself. To her, the lack of a college degree was the only important factor in the stagnation of her career. "They thought I was incompetent sometimes; maybe because I was Asian," she says, but maintains that she did not believe any racial discrimination took place.

In *Glass Ceilings and Asian Americans*, Deborah Woo explores the artificial barriers, or "glass ceilings" that prevented Asian Americans from upward career mobility, especially in the aerospace, defense, and technology industries.¹³ Woo observed an aerospace/defense company, much like General Dynamics, and noted several examples of a "glass ceiling." Though Asian Americans were viewed as a "model minority," they still faced obstacles in upward mobility.¹⁴ Research conducted in 1979 suggested that Asian Americans, including those who were well-educated, were mostly in jobs that were segregated by "racial prejudice, lower salary schedules, and restricted upward mobility." In addition, though education generally leads to upward mobility, evidence suggests that education brought lower returns to Asian Americans than for other groups.¹⁵ Also, European Americans who had English-language difficulties were viewed more favorably than Asian Americans with similarly imperfect English skills.¹⁶

Due to their social isolation, Asian Americans also did not have the same networking opportunities with management and thus did not have access to the "old boy network."¹⁷ Without access to the "old boy network," Asian Americans were not as able to stand out in the eyes of management, and were thus often overlooked for promotion.¹⁸ This lack of social connections also deprived Asian Americans of mentorship opportunities that could have helped them advance. Perhaps most importantly, however, is the fact that regardless of the qualifications of Asian Americans, they would not be promoted if the company's manage-

ment did not want them to be promoted. Woo writes that "the rationales ran the gamut, from one's lacking management training or certain degree requirements, to the appropriateness of one's age."¹⁹

Examining the larger picture, as described in Woo's book, provides multiple examples of racism in the defense industry, which my aunt claims that she did not experience. Despite the larger context of racial discrimination described by Woo, my aunt's belief still holds firm. Thus, what is true in general for society as a whole may not apply strongly to a single individual. There are multiple possible explanations for my aunt's view. First, my aunt was undergoing a process of cultural Americanization with her husband and her husband's family, which makes it incredibly likely that she believed strongly in the "American Dream." As Woo writes, "the concept of artificial barriers is significant because it strikes directly at the heart of the powerful ideological view that the American Dream is available to all who would simply 'work hard.'"²⁰ Second, Asian Americans who were frustrated with career stagnation often attributed their stagnation to personal deficits and personal failures, rather than to external problems imposed by a prejudiced corporate management team.²¹ This attribution of career stagnation to personal problems is exhibited by my aunt's firm belief that her lack of a college degree was the only factor preventing her from receiving a promotion. Third, Asian Americans are generally less aggressive and less self-promoting, contrary to what is favored by corporate culture. Corporate culture strongly favored those who were "willing to step on each other's toes, be selfish, and disparage others' ideas to promote their own in order to stand out,"²² which contradicted Asian cultural values of modesty, exhibited by my aunt. Her modesty may have prevented her from even considering the fact that she did not fit management culture due to a lack of arrogance. Finally, she never had the chance to actually experience overt racism in the workplace or at home before, which means that she would not have been able to easily recognize it in the first place. Because she did not have a college degree, management did not need any other excuse to withhold a promotion from her. Woo mentions that in other companies, management would provide a series of rationales to avoid promoting Asian Americans.²³ However, if the only justification used against Mrs. Baker was her lack of a college degree, then it is perfectly reasonable that she does not consider racial discrimination a factor because it would seem irrelevant to her situation, at least on the surface. My aunt's life with her Caucasian husband and his in-laws may have also played a significant role in her minimal perception to racism. She mentioned that she felt "blessed" with her in-laws because they were very accommodating and accepting of her. Since she had spent so much time with such accepting Caucasians, she may have been influenced to believe that racism was rare or a nonissue in the United States and thus, inapplicable to her situation.

In 1986, Mr. and Mrs. Baker moved to Rancho Peñasquitos, in northern San Diego, where Mrs. Baker was finally able to meet friends and complete her sociocultural Americanization. She "started meeting friends in church and through the tennis club" and got in touch with "friends from the Philippines who got married to American military men and came to San Diego." My aunt met a wide variety of people from various ethnic and cultural backgrounds. "We learned from each other the differences between [our] customs and our ways," she said. "I learned to accept their culture and respect their culture, in the same way that they respect my culture and values." She maintains many of these friendships today, as

part of a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural network of fellow tennis players and churchgoers.

I asked Mrs. Baker what she believed was the most important factor in helping her adapt to the United States. She believes it was all about being independent: "Being independent, you have to be strong, you have to be able to make up your own decisions, [and] you have to be able to do things for yourself. It was about being independent, being able to adapt a lot of American culture, which is different from my culture. I learned to adapt the American culture even though it was different from my own." Despite her Americanization, however, she still continues to retain her Chinese-Filipina-American identity. She does so by passing Filipino customs and values on to the "younger generation:" her son, her nieces, and her nephews. "You know, traditions like respect for your elders and things like that, I always remind you guys," she said. While she retains her Chinese-Filipina identity, she ultimately sees herself as a "part of the American way" because of her marriage to an American and her extensive exposure to and absorption of American culture. Mrs. Baker does not feel like her Americanization has diluted her Filipina identity in any way. In fact, Mrs. Baker claims that her Americanization added to who she was, because she is now able to "see between the two customs, which made [her] life that much better."

The story of my aunt's life is intertwined with international historical events, many of which occurred before she was even born. Her life cannot be fully understood without the context of U.S. colonialism in the Philippines, continued U.S. military involvement in the Philippines during the Cold War, the globalization of the U.S. economy and entertainment industry, changes in U.S. immigration laws, and the boom of the aerospace and defense industry during the Cold War. Yet her life is not fully defined by history alone. Like an individual brush stroke on an impressionist painting, she is both defined by, and contributes to, the broader historical and social context around her. She ultimately succeeded in her journey of Americanization, and in doing so was shaped by history and has shaped history itself.

Notes

1. I want to thank my aunt for the constant love and support she has shown me throughout my life. She taught me the independence, self-confidence, and interpersonal skills that make me who I am today. I would also like to thank her for her patience and support during the interview process. Without her, this work would never have been possible.
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