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All Things Asian Are Becoming Us

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Rudyard Kipling's famous line "East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet" no longer applies. Today, East and West are commingled, and in this country, the East is on the rise.

Take movies. American audiences are growing more familiar with movies from China, Japan and South Korea. Quentin Tarantino is planning a kung fu movie entirely in Mandarin, and Zhang Yimou's stylized martial arts films like "Hero" and "House of Flying Daggers" are popular across the country. Hollywood is remaking Japanese blockbusters like "The Ring" and "Shall We Dance?"

What many Asian Americans once considered proprietary culture -- kung fu, acupuncture, ginseng, incense, Confucian dramas, beef noodle soup and so on -- has spilled irrevocably into the mainstream.

Three decades ago, who would have thought that sushi would become an indelible part of American cuisine? Or that Vietnamese fish sauce would be found on Aisle 3 of Safeway? Or that acupuncture would be accepted by some HMOs? That feng shui would become a household word? Or that Asian writers, especially Indian, would play a large and important role in the pantheon of American letters?

American pundits tend to look at the world through a very old prism -- they associate globalization as synonymous with Americanization: i.e., how the United States influences the world. What many tend to overlook, in the age of porous borders, is how much the world has changed the United States.

Evidence of the Easternization of America is piling up.

Japanese animation is a good example. There are more than 20 anime shows on cable channels, ranging from "Sailor Moon" to "Pokemon" to the latest teenage craze, "Kagemusha," a series about a half-human, half-demon warrior on a quest. "Spirited Away" beat out Disney movies to win the Oscar for best animation in 2003.

Sales of Japanese comic books, DVDs and videocassettes reached \$500 million in the United States last year.

Mandarin-language films like "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon," by Ang Lee, and "Hero," by Zhang Yimou, were top draws across the United States. Asian Americans have been featured as stars as in "Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle" and "Better Luck Tomorrow."

Asian stars in Hollywood include Ang Lee, Joan Chen, Justin Lin, John Woo, Jackie Chan, Jet Li, Chow Yun Fat, Michelle Yeow.

Sandip Roy, host of a San Francisco radio show called "Up Front" and a film critic, points to the "Bollywoodization" of the United States.

"Deepak Chopra has long been managing the spiritual fortunes of Hollywood's golden people," he says. "Britney Spears' new album has a Bhangra remix of one of her singles. Images from old Indian matchbooks and posters now retail as birthday cards. The vinyl seat covers of Indian rickshaws are turning into tote bags for Manhattan's chic. And yoga is now the new aerobics. "

That this country is falling under Asia's spell shouldn't be surprising. If the world is experiencing globalization, the union between East and West, where a new hybrid culture is thriving, is just part of that process.

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