



## HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

### **“Heritage”**

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“HERITAGE” IS THE FIRST WORD IN my family dictionary, a noun and adverb, for who we are and how we live. My parents taught me that my heritage defines my identity. Through honorific speech towards my elders and adherence to traditional values, I accepted Korean customs as part of the duality that defines my life in America.

Yet, a turbulent disunity stormed under that surface of peaceful co-existence. Though I outwardly represented the model Korean-American son, I loathed fitting this stereotypical mold. My shell was so well-constructed, however, that others mistook me for a successful immigrant. I felt as if I were ripped from the very fabric of my American birthplace, and plunged into a vacuum between my ancestral home and the world I lived in. I felt that my heritage was a short anchor against the relentlessly rising tide: I had to break free—or go under.



While struggling with this chain, however, I came to appreciate what my heritage offered. As a martial arts instructor, I supported students in building discipline and character. As a bilingual tutor, I helped immigrant children adapt to life in America. Soon, I realized that my heritage was an instrument for harmonizing personal development with service to others.

When I was selected to serve in the HOBY World Leadership Congress, my family's financial circumstances did not cover the \$1,350 required fee. By infusing my American entrepreneurial energy with Asian medicine, I covered the cost by selling herbal products at my martial arts studio. Though the novelty of my venture brought me to the verge of bankruptcy, I persisted. By researching products, competitors and clientele, I streamlined my inventory to best serve my customers.

Eventually, I created a business aimed at offering others a healthy lifestyle. Sweaty students gulped green tea and chocolate-flavored snacks, dropping dollars for the cause that lay within my cardboard cashbox. Supported by outside donations, I became Greater L.A.'s ambassador in Washington D.C. Infused with new inspiration, I returned with a project grant to spread the martial arts lifestyle of discipline, confidence, and respect.

As my heritage anchored itself to the bedrock of my battles, I integrated Korean tradition with my American identity. Fusing service with civic duty, I entered the L.A. County Sheriff's Explorer Academy. Through the grueling training, I learned to work as part of a team. Appointed as Drill Instructor a year later, I took command of training the older recruits. Through a relationship of mutual respect, I prepared my platoon to dutifully serve the community. Leading this racially mixed group, I empathized beyond the duality of my own identity. I soon discovered that my heritage must transcend my personal struggles to truly embrace diversity.

Heritage is not a mere ethnic label—it is the honor and humanity that I am inspired to uphold. Today, I am grateful to my parents for endowing me with a spirit of dedication and determination. They bestowed a philosophy that speaks through my actions. This inheritance forms the base of my integrity as an individual, and defines my dedication to strengthening the society that I live in.