

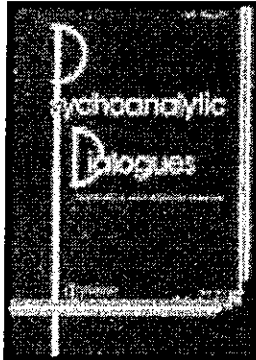
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The Influence of Culture on the Self and Selfobject Relationships An Asian–North American Comparison

Alan Roland, Ph.D.

This essay first situates the development of self psychology within the culture of North American individualism, then delves into its relevance for understanding Asians, and comes full circle in reassessing what is universal or culturally variable in the current formulation of self psychology. The Asian self is compared with the North American one, and Asian familial hierarchical relationships with American egalitarian ones, resulting in a different cultural structuring of selfobject relationships, including the psychoanalytic one. A comparative psychology of idealizing selfobject relationships is then developed. Intercultural encounters between Asians and North Americans in the United States reveal problems in the interface because of the different culturally influenced selfobject relationships.

Self Psychology from a Cross-Civilizational Perspective

ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT NEW PARADIGMS IN PSYCHOANALYSIS over the last 25 years is self psychology, with its cogent delineation of the centrality of self-esteem and a cohesive self through selfobject relationships with parental and other figures from earliest childhood throughout life. In situating the very need for the development of self psychology within the culture of North American individualism (where it was initially formulated) and exploring its important application for understanding Asians, I assess what is truly

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universal in the current formulation of self psychology from what is culturally variable.

From a cross-civilizational¹ perspective, the very formulation of self-object relationships (the individual's needs throughout life for others to be empathically attuned, to be idealizable, and to share in the camaraderie of attaining skills for the maintenance and enhancement of self-esteem and a cohesive self) is a trenchant critique of the Northern European and North American culture of individualism that so stresses the self-contained, self-reliant individual. In contrast to traditional psychoanalysis, which Mitchell (1988) refers to as a one-body psychology and Stolorow and Atwood (1992) call the myth of the isolated individual mind, self psychology delineates essential dependencies on and interdependencies with others throughout life.

It is possibly no accident that Kohut (1971, 1977, 1984) formulated self psychology—with its central emphasis on selfobject relationships and its psychopathology resulting from deficiencies in these relationships—in the Midwest region of the United States, where the sociocultural patterns of individualism are at their strongest. America is noted by many commentators to have the most radical individualism of Western societies, with unusual physical and social mobility, an extreme emphasis on self-directedness and self-reliance, and a resultant fragility of relationships. Confronting a number of patients with strong deficits in self-esteem and with self-fragmentation resulting from deficient selfobject relationships, Kohut gradually conceptualized a new psychology of the self amid considerable opposition from traditional psychoanalysts.

One can posit that when a different kind of psychopathology becomes salient in patients in a given society and historical era, a need arises to formulate new psychological processes and a new view of the relationship of normality to psychopathology. Thus, particular kinds of disfunction call for another conceptualization, not only describing the

¹I am using a civilizational perspective as Singer (1972, pp. 39–80, 250–259) delineated it in his synthesis of the formulations of Kroeber and Redfield. From their historical-anthropological viewpoint, civilization is conceptualized as distinctive, enduring overall patterns or styles of social and cultural structures and elements that have remained consistent even with the borrowing and incorporating of foreign elements. In other words, there are recognizable organizing principles to the social and cultural patterns of any given civilization, as well as a shared cultural consciousness.

psychodynamics of the psychopathology, but equally important, highlighting aspects and processes of normality that have been taken for granted.

As much as self psychology critiques North American radical individualism, it also delineates processes necessary to function psychologically in a culture of individualism that so stresses the development and social actualization of individual potential and of individuality itself. Kohut, like a number of psychoanalysts before him, has not been immune from taking basic cultural assumptions for granted, which then enter unreflectedly into his theory. Thus, Kohut delineated the importance of individuals' developing a center of initiative and agency in fulfilling socially an intrinsic design of the self through a tension arc of ambitions deriving from early maternal mirroring selfobject relationships, to the ideals and goals of later idealizing relationships, and implemented by skills developed through alter ego relationships. This process is essential to functioning well in a culture of individualism; otherwise, deficiencies in these selfobject relationships can render individuals dysfunctional in a culture where they are so much on their own.

What happens when we journey into the self of persons from other civilizations, such as India and Japan, and delve into the nature of their selfobject relationships? Three significant discoveries emerge in a dialectic that comes full circle. First, although the psychology of the self and selfobject relationships was originally formulated in America, it nevertheless becomes highly fruitful for understanding much of the subtle complexities of Asian psychology. To be sure, there have been important psychoanalytic contributions and formulations of the psychology of Japanese and Indians (see Doi, 1973, 1986; Kakar, 1978); but major areas are missing in their work because of their not being grounded in self psychology.

Second, one observes that the radically different cultures, social patterns, and child rearing of Asian societies give a significantly different shape and cast to selfobject relationships, and therefore to the nature of the self from what is present in North Americans. This in turn affects the psychoanalytic relationship and transference. Particularly relevant to Asian selfobject relationships are the three psychosocial dimensions of their family and group hierarchical relationships, which vary from one Asian society to another. Briefly stated (see Roland, 1988, for a fuller description), the first dimension is the formal hierarchy of senior-

ity and gender, with its detailed social etiquette and its built-in reciprocal expectations that subordinates will be deferent, loyal, obedient, and receptive and that superiors will be nurturant, caring, and responsible in freely giving advice and guidance in an emotionally connected relationship where the esteem of the other is central. The second dimension is that of hierarchical intimacy relationships, with their intense dependency and interdependence, strong emotional enmeshment, and sometimes extraordinary (for a North American) nonverbal, empathic communication. The third psychosocial dimension is that of hierarchy by the quality of the person, whereby those with truly superior qualities are idealized and venerated regardless of their position in the social hierarchy. Thus, servants, younger brothers, or wives may be more deeply respected than those hierarchically superior to them, although they will still have to give deference to the latter.

Third, by delineating Asians' selfobject relationships and the nature of their self, one can then evaluate how much in the current elaboration of selfobject relationships and the self is truly universal, and how much is rooted in the culture of individualism. This will give self psychology both a more expansive and a sounder grounding in its universality and variability.

Self and Selfobject Relationships in Indians and Japanese

There are significant variations in the self of Americans and Asians, resulting from different culturally patterned selfobject relationships and object relationships from earliest childhood. By way of contrast, the experiential self of most North Americans² is much more psychologically bounded than that of Asians, with more psychological space between self and other; is far more self-directed and assertive, with its center of initiative and agency; is more verbally self-expressive; and, in general, is much more of an individualistic "I-self" in its selfobject relationships with others, who are themselves individualistic "I-selves."

Although the mirroring function of the mother and other mothering figures of early childhood is central to building up a strong inner sense

²The United States is, of course, an ethnically diverse society. However, its dominant ethos derives from those from Northern Europe and its culture of individualism.

of esteem, of feeling valued, and of developing a cohesive self with its initiative and ambitions, one must also note in American child rearing that what is empathized with can vary enormously with what Japanese or other Asian mothers empathize. A video (Settlage and Okimoto, 1993) of American and Japanese mothers and their 20- to 23-month-old toddlers strongly implied that American mothers empathize with and encourage in their toddlers far more initiative and exploration of their environment. This is in contrast to Japanese mothers who empathize with and encourage the dependency needs of their toddlers, the development of their skills, and more subtle nonverbal communication. Thus, one can say that Mahler's theory of separation-individuation (on which this video research project was based) takes place within a certain kind of culturally patterned selfobject relationship that is radically different from a Japanese-style one.

In contrast to the American self, the Asian self initially develops within hierarchical intimacy relationships where there is a far more prolonged symbiotic mothering, often with multiple mothering figures in the extended family. It is a "we-self" that has far more permeable or vaguer outer ego boundaries than the individualistic I-self of North Americans, with far less psychological distance between self and other; is much more receptive and attuned to the norms, guidance, and advice of elders or seniors in the hierarchy and therefore much less self-assertive and self-directed; relies far more on different kinds of nonverbal communication that necessitate the development of highly attuned empathic abilities; is experienced much more relationally with others, the self experience varying with the relationship rather than as a relatively integrated and stable identity as with Americans; and has a much more private, even secretive self, where all kinds of thoughts, fantasies, and feelings are kept. Individuality primarily resides in this highly private self rather than being expressed in activities and social and work relationships, as is customary for North Americans.

Of course, there are significant variations in the self and selfobject relationships in persons from one Asian society to another, just as there are among different ethnic groups in the United States. But these variations are within a larger, coherent pattern.

What strikes the psychoanalytic clinician in working with Indians and the Japanese is that both mirroring and idealizing selfobject relationships are considerably more intense and pervasive than they are in

American life, where egalitarian norms predominate and are much more explicitly supported by cultural values. Empathic mirroring—*omoiyari* or concerned empathy in Japan—goes on all the time in Asian countries in nonverbal gestures in formal hierarchical relationships as superiors and subordinates in the family or group fulfill their reciprocal responsibilities and the complex social etiquette. High levels of empathic attunement to others are universally emphasized in Asian societies, if not always fulfilled, as they live in very close, longlasting family and group intimacy relationships that depend on enormous interpersonal sensitivity. This is in contrast to Americans' highly mobile and shifting friendships, jobs, marriages, places of residence, and social affiliations. The Asian paradigm is to be highly in tune with others' needs, wishes, moods, and esteem, but not that much with one's own; but to fully expect the other to be reciprocally empathic with one's own needs, feelings, and esteem *without having to voice them*.

Cultural attitudes constantly support idealization of elders and superiors from earliest childhood throughout life, including mythic figures and gods and goddesses. In India, where metonymic thinking sees the elders and idols as partial manifestations of the gods and goddesses rather than symbolic of them, as in Western dualistic thinking, idealization is even further reinforced. In Japan, men praise each other while being extremely modest and humble, but then expect full reciprocity (Masao Miyamoto, personal communication). Moreover, the person with superior qualities, that is, with maturity, wisdom, or spiritual realization is always more idealized or venerated.

As a result of these culturally supported mirroring and idealizing selfobject relationships, the issue of maintaining high levels of self-regard is far more central for Asians than for North Americans, and is popularly referred to as "maintaining face." Asians' vulnerability in self-esteem is usually, although by no means always, not so much due to the deficits that so plague Americans as to having to maintain high levels of inner esteem. They are therefore extremely vulnerable to slights, disappointments, and criticisms. Special efforts are made in their self-object relationships to maintain an unusually high level of empathic attunement, to avoid criticism or other threats to their self-esteem, and to have seniors available for genuine idealizable selfobjects.

I have observed in psychoanalytic conferences in India and Japan that a large percentage of those present may have little interest in the

subject, but are there to give support to the esteem of the speaker with whom they have some relationship. Challenging questions or comments are rarely raised so as not to threaten the speaker's esteem. The issue of maintaining each other's esteem is always more important than hashing out the truth of a matter or even expressing objective facts.

Moreover, because there is such a fundamentally different cast to their we-self in contrast to the I-self of North Americans, we cannot speak of self-regard in Asians, as it is too individualistic. Instead, we must speak of *we-self-regard*. The inner esteem of Asians is profoundly tied up with family and group honor and reputation, as well as with others in hierarchical relationships. One is constantly sensitive to how one's public behavior reflects on one's family and group reputation, and, in turn, how other members affect it.

I found in a counseling group that Indian female students were constantly anxious in attending their coed college because a stranger might negatively evaluate them and spread the word, which would then seriously reflect on the family's reputation and the marriagibility of the daughters (see Roland, 1988, pp. 179–182, for a fuller discussion). One Indian patient, Ashis, kept his father's suicide secret from his most intimate friends because of how it would reflect on him; and quickly terminated therapy with me the first time I saw him as soon as this secret surfaced through a dream (see Roland, 1988, pp. 25–47).

The interdependence of esteem and family reputation is particularly true of the Indian father–son relationship, where each expects the other to reflect well on him continuously, and where the son even as an adult strives to gain the respect of his father, even after the latter's death. Three of my patients went considerably against their own inclinations or endured real hardships to reflect well on their fathers. And Ashis experienced a serious decline in we-self-regard when his father committed suicide, even though he was 19 at the time.

In a few of my cases, and in other Indian men I have known socially, I have found that when fathers have not treated sons as the latter felt they should be treated, the sons never became involved in any open rebellion to strive to do what they wanted. Rather, they did poorly at what the fathers insisted they do, thus getting back at their fathers by reflecting badly on them. This dynamic had been central to a highly negative father transference of an Indian man in long-term psychoanalysis with me, where his strong self-destructive behavior was meant

(unconsciously) to reflect badly on me as the supposed expert psychoanalyst on Indians.

What is true of father-son relationships is true of formal hierarchical relationships in general, where the esteem of each is considerably tied up with the other. This is on the whole rare in American culture, but I have noticed it in the long-term, student-teacher relationship in music, through my son who was studying at Juilliard. Students' esteem is clearly tied to the reputation of their noted teachers; but it is also clear that teachers' esteem depends a great deal on how their students progress and perform. This kind of reciprocal selfobject relationship, which only in recent years has been spelled out by Atwood and Stolorow (1984) in their work on intersubjectivity, is typical in hierarchical relationships in India and Japan. It is modeled after a familial father-son relationship, and in Japan today also after a mother-son one, where there is always reciprocity. I believe that it took psychoanalytic self psychology as long as it did to formulate the reciprocity of selfobject relationships because of our cultural emphasis on individualism. Asians automatically assume it.

From psychoanalytic work with Indians and Japanese, but especially with the latter, it struck me that one must separate out the dependency-nurturing dimension of human relationships from the empathic selfobject one. I have noticed on occasion that an implicit equation is made of a supportive, nurturing therapeutic relationship with a mirroring selfobject transference. I have frequently found among Japanese patients that there was almost always a warmly affectionate, nurturing relationship with their mothers in their childhood and adolescence in which they could be highly dependent, as is characteristic; but an empathic attunement was sometimes seriously missing as the mother would be too involved in the "shoulds" and perfectionism of the Japanese ego-ideal. As one woman patient put it, "My mother does not have her own thoughts and feelings; instead she does what she should. . . . So far I use mother's response as the major criteria to evaluate myself; therefore, unfortunately, I do not even know what kind of person I am."

Another issue of dependency is, however, very much related to self-objects in Asian hierarchical intimacy relationships in a way that is very difficult for most Westerners to understand. Depending on and asking of another—expectations of being able to be dependent and being

given to are much more intense and pervasive than in typical American relationships—is actually a way of enhancing the esteem of the other. It establishes the other as the superior in the hierarchical relationship, and evokes an ego-ideal response of being able to be the nurturing superior who can fulfill the subordinate's dependency needs. Thus, subordinates use superiors to get their dependency needs fulfilled, while subordinates become selfobjects for superiors in enhancing the latter's esteem. Asking is giving where dependency and esteem are subtly exchanged.

An example of this is a Japanese man in psychoanalytic therapy who felt hurt and angry at his stepfather for not giving him sufficient recognition for his hard work in the prospering family business. The patient then refused to ask his stepfather for all kinds of expensive appliances, as his brothers and sisters did, knowing this would deeply hurt the esteem of his stepfather who could not then give them to him (Yoshiko Idei, personal communication).

Asian Selfobject Relationships in Psychoanalysis

How do these variations in the self and selfobject relationships manifest themselves in the psychoanalytic relationship? Both Indians and the Japanese expect much more of an emotionally connected we-relationship between patient and analyst than is typical with American patients. This connotes an expectation of care and nurturance on the part of the analyst, and of being dependent and deferent on the part of the patient. In Japan, the patient enters psychoanalysis with an expectation that this relationship will be for life (Mikihachiro Tatara, personal communication).

In terms of selfobject relationships, the analyst as superior is always idealized regardless of whether or not there have been deficiencies in the patient's familial, idealizing selfobjects. For a Japanese man with a male analyst, either Japanese or American, the analyst will be idealized as a mentor or teacher for life (Taketomo, 1989). Likewise, Indians come to a psychoanalytic therapist as a real person who can fulfill qualities that were missing from an important parental figure, and such patients will continue the idealizing relationship with the therapist throughout life (Ramanujam, 1989). This, of course, will take on a par-

ticular coloration in each individual, depending on idiosyncratic familial experiences with idealizing selfobjects.

The greater the degree of dependency an Asian has in his or her insider relationship with the psychoanalyst—Indians will manifest this almost immediately, whereas Japanese will take somewhat longer—the greater will their esteem of the analyst be as the nurturing superior. However, if American analysts are not aware of this subtle exchange, which is so foreign to their own psychology, then they can easily experience this asking and depending on as psycho-pathological, or as a manifestation of deficits, or even as an infringement on their own autonomy, and therefore react unempathically.

Asians will also expect from the beginning a fine degree of empathic attunement both to what is being said and to what is left unsaid. In psychoanalytic therapy with a traditional Japanese patient (Roland, 1983), the Japanese analyst is expected to empathically sense what is not being openly expressed by the patient; and, in turn, the Japanese analyst expects the patient to sense interpretations that are not being openly expressed by the analyst. This kind of empathic sensing of the innuendos of communication by Japanese is mind boggling to most Americans, who are so verbally oriented. They can easily view it as almost telepathic.

Another variation of this mutual expectation of high levels of empathic sensing and silent communication was related to me by Ms. May Ng, a Chinese psychoanalytic psychologist. She had just had a session in New York City with a Chinese teenage boy who flew into a rage at her and threw a chair against the wall when she made an interpretation. His rage was not at all at the content of the interpretation, but rather at her voicing something she knew about him *that he had already sensed she knew*. To verbalize what he had already sensed she knew is crass and insulting in Chinese empathic communication. She admitted her mistake in putting it into words.

In Japanese there is a saying that nothing important is ever to be expressed verbally. And when Rogerian psychotherapy was introduced to Japan during the American Occupation, it became extremely popular; but the empathic reflections are always made *nonverbally*. In all Asian societies, it has been observed that women of the extended family can communicate with each other by well over 50 different kinds of silences that they are empathically in tune with.

Because the levels of we-self-regard are so high, as well as the expectations for highly empathic and idealized selfobjects to be present in their reciprocal hierarchical relationships, Asians may react with considerable anger when there are disappointments or slights. I have had both Indian and Japanese patients rail when they felt that there was insufficient attunement with them or that they had been let down by an idealized superior. This anger, however, cannot be expressed directly in hierarchical relationships if you are the subordinate because it will disturb the nurturing relationships on which you are so dependent. As a result, it is extremely difficult for Asians to become directly critical of or angry at the analyst because they feel it will seriously interfere with the nurturing, empathic psychoanalytic relationship.

In psychoanalyses with both an Indian and a Japanese man, it took well over a year for the slightest criticism or voicing of ambivalence to be directly expressed to the analyst. This was followed in each case by the patient coming to the next session in an anxiety state.³ When the connection was made between the criticism and his anxiety over a possible rupture in the psychoanalytic relationship, the patient's anxiety was greatly alleviated. Soon after, somewhat more direct criticism or anger in the transference would be expressed, followed by another anxiety state, which again was alleviated by interpretation. This process followed for some months until after at least one and a half to two years of analysis, these patients became involved in a full-fledged transference-neurosis of open rage at the analyst. Working with this greatly resolved a number of symptoms and maladaptive defenses in both men.

Comparative Psychology of Idealizing Selfobjects

The psychology of idealizing selfobject relationships is oriented ultimately toward a different inner psychological goal in Asians than in North Americans, and attains a different coloration. Kohut (1984) has emphasized as the goal of mental health a cohesive self in which there is an arc of ambitions from early mirroring relationships that is inte-

³ A noted Chinese-American social scientist recounted a similar experience in his own psychoanalysis, only it took him close to two years to criticize his analyst for the first time, and shortly afterward he had an anxiety attack.

grated with the ideals of later idealizing ones via the skills of twinship selfobject relationships. This enables a person to actualize and fulfill an inherent ground-plan of his or her self in everyday relationships and work. Implicit in this formulation are social patterns and cultural values that accord the individual a great deal of autonomy, choice, and mobility in all major life decisions and activities. As mirroring or idealizing selfobject deficits are gradually resolved through their transferences and transmuting internalizations in analysis, patients move on in their life situations in North America in any number of ways: through new or improved love and friendship relationships, jobs, activities, hobbies, and such. Kohut's cases are replete with these movements, which result from a more cohesive self and better self-regard.

In Asian societies, traditionally, all major life decisions from marriage to education to career are made for the person through the elders. There is little autonomy of choice accorded to the person, nor is there much in the way of social options or physical or social mobility. To be sure, there have been Westernizing/modernizing changes in the urban areas of Japan and India that do accord somewhat more choice and mobility; but to a considerable extent things are still the same. The psychological goal, then, is not to actualize inner potential or an inner ground-plan of the self through the choice of relationships, work, and activities—although that is now happening to a limited extent in modernized urban circles. Rather, the basic cultural aim is to be involved in a psychological process of *self-transformation* to more refined inner qualities and ultimately to the realization of a spiritual self.

Idealizing selfobject relationships in a hierarchy by the qualities of the person are an important avenue in this inner process, as are several other ways. Efforts are made to be as close as possible to the person of superior qualities who is greatly idealized. In India, just to share in the presence of a venerated spiritual person is called *darshan*. Silently identifying with or assimilating some of these qualities aids in the process of self-transformation. Moreover, Indians may attribute mythic status to certain elders, gurus, and others in idealizing selfobject relationships, or may indeed identify with idealized mythic figures or with the gods or goddesses themselves. Traditional first names all have some transcendent meaning, or parents may identify a child with a mythic figure. Anthropological work has described Indian women's identification with

attributes of the goddesses in important idealizing selfobject relationships (Wadley, 1980).

This kind of idealizing selfobject relationship is integrally related to Indian cognitive modes of metonymic thinking, which differ considerably from Western dualistic modes (Ramanujan, 1990). Here, the idealized figure or object is not a symbol of something spiritual but is considered to be a partial manifestation of divinity. Not only are the idols used in worship perceived to be partial manifestations of goddesses or gods, but even books are considered to be partial manifestations of the goddess of learning, Saraswati, and are therefore to be treated with great respect. Thus, as one identifies with an idealized mythic figure, one is gradually self-transformed into a more spiritual being.

Intercultural Encounters

What happens when Indians, Japanese, and other Asians live in North America, where in the American lifestyle there are very different kinds and modes of selfobject relationships? It can frequently result in cultural misunderstandings and painful experiences. Both Indian and Japanese patients complain about the much lower levels of concerned empathy compared to what they are used to at home. Asian societies are relationship-centered and highly attuned to issues of esteem in a way that American society is not. One Indian woman living in American lifestyle relationships returns periodically to India for empathic refueling.

A whole other set of problems occurs in selfobject relationships in American hierarchical relationships. In Asian hierarchical relationships there are explicit internalized standards of reciprocity. Asians expect the superior here to be empathically sensitive to their needs and nurturing of them in a way most American superiors are not. The forthright criticism by supervisors here is experienced as quite painful by Asians. They also become hurt and angry over finding that they must assert themselves here for what they want, such as a raise, in a way they would not have to at home. In addition, normal Asian deference, receptivity, and politeness to the superior, whether boss or professor, which functions to enhance the esteem of the superior, is fre-

quently culturally misinterpreted by Americans as passivity and ineffectualness or manipulation.

In working with Asian patients, I have usually found it necessary in the early stages of psychoanalytic therapy to convey empathically the sharp differences in relationships they encounter in America, and the considerable anguish this often generates in them. Only after dealing with the conflicts generated by different expectations in selfobject relationships can we delve into more personal psychopathology and skewed familial relationships.

Indians encounter very particular problems in America because of their selfobject relationships. As I mentioned before, Asians are all involved in a subtle exchange of dependency and esteem in their hierarchical intimacy relationships. In both the Japanese and Indians, this occurs in insider relationships, all Asians making a sharp distinction between intimate insider relationships and more distant outsider ones—*uchi* and *soto* in Japan, and one's own people and others in India. Indians, in considerable contrast to Japanese, will constantly test outsider relationships for intimacy and the kinds of dependency-esteem exchanges they have in insider relationships, hoping to convert an outsider relationship to an insider one where the person will be drawn into the orbit of the extended family. The Japanese, by contrast, are highly restrained in their dependency needs and asking in outsider relationships, as are other East Asians such as Koreans and Chinese.

What happens is that Americans tend to react adversely to the degree of asking that Indians will do with Americans when they are acquaintances. For Americans, this is experienced not as an enhancement of esteem, where the dependent one becomes a selfobject; rather, most Americans experience Indian requests as an infringement on their privacy and autonomy. A more sophisticated understanding of the subtle but unmistakable differences in selfobject relationships within Asian and American cultures will help a great deal in lessening misunderstandings between Asians and Americans.

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