

Sonia Lee Chou: Respect for Your Culture, Respect for Yourself, Respect for Others



Sonia Lee Chou first came to the United States from Taiwan, China on a school holiday. The daughter of Ching Hui Lee and Funguh Chang Lee, and the mother of Delia Chou, Sonia first moved to San Luis Obispo, California. She later moved with her husband to run a motel in Crescent City, a small town along California's northern coast

nestled amidst the towering, giant Redwood forest, where we met her.

“My husband loves the trees here, and in five minutes we can get everywhere in town. It’s a small town so we know everyone,” Sonia said.

Knowing people is important to Sonia now.

“When I finished college in Taiwan, my sister was in Japan. First, when I went to Japan, there were so many things to learn. Then when I came to the United States and it was very difficult because there was no family.”

For Sonia, learning the language of her adopted country presented a huge challenge. “When I went to Japan, I had to learn Japanese and when I came to the United States, I had to change from Japanese to English. If you don’t know the language well, it is hard to communicate deeply. I would really encourage people who want to go to another country to learn the language and don’t stay with your people. Go to a small town and get to know the people and to know their lives. Otherwise I would say it is very hard.”

“This is a very lovely country. People are very patient and they have good hearts. I had a restaurant for 10 years; and my guests were my teachers. They don’t look down on you. In the United States people allow you to do mistakes.”

“I always encourage people about Americans. If you have dreams in this country, your dreams will come true. People will help you out for no reason, no payback. People are just willing to help you out.”

Despite her love for her new homeland, Sonia is proudest of being Chinese. “I think being Chinese is being proud too. It’s not about the lifestyle; it is about the rich culture. There are some virtues inside of us already. You respect your parents, not just by education or by tradition. It is inside of us. If you follow your conscience then you go to any country and you can be yourself. I am so proud that I have that within me.”

As Sonia has grown older, she realized that the focus she put on acquiring material things when she was younger was really not important.

“When I was young I thought that being rich was the important thing, but now I think that it’s not the only thing. Before I would think that with money or material things, you show off yourself. But now I don’t care about how people think. If you are comfortable and you are healthy that’s important. When I saw my parents in the hospital, I realized that material things cannot buy peace. People should focus on more spiritual things - on conservation, not on collection.”

“I used to have a tough life too. I liked to challenge myself. I came to the U.S. and I had friends who were very patient, and we always laughed at them. We would think, ‘Why are you so stupid, to care about other people?’ But then I realized that if people can use them as a model and care about other people, the world will become peace. And that is when I started to change myself.”

“Now everyone walking in the store is my brother and sister. It doesn’t matter that the language or the color of skin might be different, but they all come from their parents. The spirit comes from the same area.”

“I always tell my daughter that it is very important to study because to study is one part that brings knowledge. But the most important thing is virtue. If you see moms outside on the street, treat everyone like your mom. If you see grandparents, see your own grandparents. If you see someone your age, see your brother and sister. If you see someone younger, you are always taking care of them like a brother and sister. It is important to have this mindset. You need other people wherever you go. You will have peace if you treat people like that.”

For Sonia, there is one thing she has learned in her new culture that she thinks is very important to share with other women.

“I think that the women are very different in my culture and this culture. In my culture, we depend on the men. In this culture, women should challenge themselves. You don’t have to depend on someone else. Here if you depend on the men, you can also stand up yourself. You can drive yourself. You can go anywhere yourself.... Get back your life for yourself, not for someone else. Be independent. A husband

and wife have to be like yin and yang, but you have to be able to survive if you are alone.”

“When I first came here when it was getting dark I would be lonely, feeling like I was floating without safety and security. Now I tell any guests that come to this place, you have safety and security. I always try to make them feel they know someone here and they don’t have to worry.”

“I think that every moment of life is very important; the moment of the truth. ... Every moment is very important to everyone. I think that time runs out so fast and people have to try to enjoy every moment. Do not hurt someone else, but to try to enjoy every moment. Everyone is special. Everyone is a gift from God.”

A photograph of a sunset over a dark field. The sky is filled with vibrant colors of orange, red, and purple, transitioning into a deep blue at the top. The foreground is a dark, silhouetted field. A semi-transparent white box is overlaid on the upper right portion of the image, containing text.

Love Each Other and Have Fun

“If I have any advice to give to the next generation, it would be to be patient. Don’t be afraid to keep on leaning. Don’t be afraid to admit mistakes. Don’t forget to vote. Pay your bills on time and learn the perils of debt. Love each other. And have fun!”

—Jeannette Turton