

Survivor: Yau-Man Chan on reality TV

From the Editors in the [July 10, 2007](#) issue

Reality television is not known for its portrayal of virtue. And Yau-Man Chan is not someone you might expect to progress to the final four on Survivor: Fiji, the 14th season of the reality television show that is famous, and sometimes infamous, for its stark portrayals of human strength and weakness. Chan, a 54-year-old computer engineer with a love of table tennis, surprised fellow contestants with his intelligence, wit, creativity, stamina and inner and outer strength. But beyond these game-winning traits, Chan became an unusual and compelling figure among viewers by displaying the virtues of humility, generosity, friendship and honesty—what Aristotle might have called the art of living well. The Century talked with Chan about how he became a popular-culture icon.

Why and how did you decide to participate in *Survivor: Fiji*?

I was one of the recruits. In its effort to showcase more diversity in its programming, CBS was encouraging minority and older contestants to apply. The network found me through the National Collegiate Table Tennis Association. After the initial contact, I talked to my family, and they were very supportive and encouraged me to participate. Why did I participate? For no other reason than \$1 million. Why else would you choose to starve and get bitten by bugs and snakes?

Frequently, you made surprising choices on the show. For example, you chose to share key pieces of information out of trust and friendship; you chose to be generous, to refrain from overt criticism and even, we might say, to live by the golden rule. How did you make those decisions?

It is really a reality show in that we are who we are. We can pretend all we want, but in the end, with the stress of harsh living conditions and mentally exhausting scheming and plotting as part of the game, our true character will show. I am who I am, and that's what you see.

I am by nature a generous person because I was raised in a very generous and giving household. My culture—Chinese—celebrates honor in interpersonal dealings

above all. My heritage expects humans not just to be reasoning but also reasonable. When I lost, I was a humble and gracious loser only because that's how I was raised and how I raise my children. Play hard, play fair, play to win, but when you lose, be gracious and you will get a chance to play again.

I suspect that we all know what is right and what is wrong, but whether we choose to do the right thing or not depends on our character. It is easy to do the right thing when someone in authority is watching (parents, teachers, God, Allah), and it is easy to do the right thing when there is nothing at stake. It is perhaps the lowest and most primitive form of morality to do the right thing out of fear of punishment (by parents, teachers, police officers, God, Allah, etc.) if we don't. Can we teach our children to do the right thing when no one is watching, when the parents are not there; to do the right thing just because it is the right thing to do and even when doing the right thing means losing \$1 million? I teach my children that character is what you are when no one in authority is looking!

What did you learn about yourself by playing the game?

I learned that I am stronger mentally than many, and with mental strength come physical capabilities that I never thought I had.

In your understanding, what is the appeal of reality TV?

I am afraid it is the same reason people are attracted to accident scenes—it is the “everyone wants to see a train wreck” phenomenon. I myself had never been a fan of reality shows. In fact the only reality show I had watched was the very first series of Survivor—and only because it was filmed in Borneo, where I grew up. I think the audience is fascinated with ordinary people in the limelight, and they take pleasure in the misfortunes, pitfalls and chaos that are generally the highlights of these shows. In many of these shows, the participants are always teetering on the edge of emotional outbursts or mental meltdowns—and the viewers love it, if only because it validates their own behavior when they have their outbursts and meltdowns.

On the other hand, Survivor does stand in a class by itself. It is multi-dimensional: it involves a social game, testing the contestants' social skills in an environment beset with personal conflicts, and it incorporates game strategy (complex game theory developed by Nobel Laureate John Nash). It is also a test of personal endurance and is physically challenging. It is definitely complex, and viewers with different social and educational backgrounds put different emphasis on different aspects of the

game.

Why do you think you became one of the season's most popular players?

I was very surprised that I became a popular player. Going into the game, I thought that I would be the most boring. How exciting can a 54-year-old computer geek, married to the same woman for 24 years, with two teenage daughters, be? I think I appeal to many who thought that a scrawny old guy who should have no chance against young muscular men managed to outplay them by taking time to think through and analyze the situation before jumping in. I think I hold out the hope that even in this age of television, which tends to highlight the young and the beautiful, an older, ordinary-looking man with some intellect and character can make a TV show interesting.

How would you characterize your religious or spiritual tradition and practices, if any?

I am currently an agnostic and do not practice any religion. But I am deeply interested in all kinds of religion and have studied them thoroughly, especially Christianity and Islam. I grew up in North Borneo (Malaysian Borneo) and spent my first 12 years of schooling in an Anglican mission school where Bible study was the main course. (I probably read the Bible more times from front to back than most "Bible-thumping" Americans I have run across in this country!)

But my family was Catholic, so I had a good view of Christianity at an early age from both the Protestant side (if you consider Anglicanism Protestant) and the Catholic side. After independence in 1963, when North Borneo became part of Malaysia, where Islam is the national religion, we had to learn about Islam even though we were still in a Christian mission school. I came to the U.S. when I was 17 to pursue higher education, which wasn't available at that time in Malaysia.