

Winning: Only in America

Immigrant Entrepreneurs Experience American-Style Success

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Baseball is America's great national pastime. But when the crowd cheers for a player's home run in the World Series, chances are that player isn't even American. One-fourth of all Major League Baseball players are foreign born. They're Dominican, Venezuelan, Japanese, Cuban. They're living out their American dreams, they get to stay in the U.S. as long as they play ball, and many of them will become U.S. citizens.

For centuries, the United States has been the land of opportunity for immigrants -- it was a Russian, Igor Sikorsky, who gave America the first helicopter. And Alexander Graham Bell wasn't American. He was Scottish, but he unveiled the first telephone. Immigrants have been a driving force in business ventures all across America; companies like Yahoo, Google, eBay and Intel were all founded by immigrants.

Twenty-five-year-old Tom Szaky is the CEO of Terracycle, a company that creates garden products entirely from waste. "I think America by far is one of the best countries for people to come to as an immigrant, especially as an entrepreneur," said Szaky, who was born in Hungary and raised in Canada.

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Szaky came to the United States to attend college, where he came up with the crazy idea to sell worm waste as a fertilizer for plants.

'A Great Idea'

"My friends and I sat down in our dorm room, wrote up a business plan, and within a year, the company started growing," he said. Terracycle has been tripling in size each year it's been in production. "Everyone in America, when I went to them with this idea, thought, you know, it's a great idea. I met a gentleman, he shook my hand and gave me half a million dollars." But in Canada, Szaky said, he got a different response.

"They just said, 'You know what, you're 21. Go back to school, get an MBA, and then maybe we'll talk. But you don't have the experience. We just don't want to risk it,'" he recalled.

Szaky said there's more freedom in America to run the company his way. He can hire and fire on a seasonal basis, the tax system is better, and there is boundless room for growth as well as the flexibility to downsize. Szaky said, "I know there's certain countries, like Germany, for example, France, where it's almost impossible to downsize your company."

Terracycle does most of its production during the spring months and almost nothing during the fall and winter. "It's very hard for us to keep the same labor force all the way through," Szaky explained. "We just couldn't succeed and grow." The company gets school kids involved collecting the soda bottles that become Terracycle's packaging. And even though Terracycle provides jobs for Americans and puts a good, environmentally-friendly product on the market, because Szaky isn't an American citizen, there's always the chance that he could be sent back to Canada. Szaky only has a temporary visa that he must renew every few years, a process that involves endless paperwork and legal fees. "It's always a little tricky because you could get a letter back that said you can't stay," he said.

"America is the best country that exists, and especially for what I'm doing. But it's sort of funny. & Our factory's in the inner city, we're employing all of these people, and I think to myself that there is a chance that, you know, in a month, I could not be here."

Employing Americans

Stuart Anderson of the [National Foundation for American Policy](#) said the United States should make every effort to keep people "who are creating jobs" in the country. "They're looking for an opportunity to create wealth and innovation. If we don't let them stay and innovate here, they're gonna go to other countries and create jobs and wealth in those countries," he said. Anderson points out that according to a [National Venture Capital](#)

[Association study](#), each year publicly traded immigrant businesses contribute more than \$500 billion and 220,000 jobs to the American economy and over 400,000 globally.

Anderson said most of the highly skilled immigrants come from "India and China, but you also see them coming from Taiwan and Korea and Israel."

Restaurant mogul Andrew Cherng employs 17,000 Americans, many fellow immigrants among them. Cherng, who was born in China, came to America to study in 1966. He met his wife, Peggy, at college, and after graduation, he got into the restaurant business. In 1973, he opened the Panda Inn, an upscale Chinese restaurant in Pasadena, Calif.

Cherng said his original goal was "to survive and to have a place that we could all have a job." But it was more than a job. The Panda Inn would become an American empire. "I don't think in China they need another Chinese restaurant," he said, explaining why he decided not to return to his homeland. He knew the United States was his land of opportunity, and in 1983, Cherng opened the first Panda Express storefront restaurant at a nearby mall. He revolutionized the concept of the food court restaurant and today the Panda Restaurant Group has more than 1,000 restaurants in 37 states, and a billion dollars in annual sales. That adds up to 44 million pounds of orange chicken each year. Cherng points out that "in this country, they seem to be much more adaptable to new ideas, new cuisines and new tastes." Now U.S. citizens, Andrew and Peggy Cherng, run the company together. Peggy Cherng says "I think the most important thing for any business is to really serve your customer well. So at Panda, our philosophy is always focus on great food, great service and great ambiance at each location, and that coupled with great pricing."

Her husband proudly proclaims, "Yes, I am living American dream. It is beyond my wildest dream."

'America's Built on Entrepreneurship'

Korean-born Jay Chung is also living his American dream. He came here to study graphic design, and after graduation he started a small business to support his growing family. "We started with a small, small company which does, you know, T-shirt design using just some & graphic design on the T-shirts," said Chung. "After about eight years, we start to get into souvenir business. So we are very successful in that." Most of his souvenirs, like key chains, mugs and pens have the "I Love NY" logo on them and are sold to tourists. Chung wants to deliver similar products to more American cities and is

developing souvenirs for Chicago and Las Vegas. His son Joshua lends a fresh eye to the business. Joshua said, "We keep on developing new ideas and new items according to trends."

Chung's little souvenir company, called Jay Joshua, may not be a big conglomerate like Panda Express, and you may not see his products sold on TV like Terracycle's, but Chung is proud of his success. "From now on & of course, we're gonna have difficulties and failure, but I don't think that's going to stop me going forward. So I'm very confident I'll be a winner."

Only in America could a Korean businessman find success making New York City souvenirs. Tom Szaky also believes that only in America could he have become a success. "The best place to build a company, especially for someone my age and with such a wacky idea, is America," he said.

Like many immigrant entrepreneurs, Szaky knows that the American public loves new ideas and loves to take risks to turn those ideas into reality. "America's built on the idea of entrepreneurship," he said. "And that people embrace it, are willing to finance crazy ideas or willing to commit themselves to it. And that ability to take risk doesn't exist anywhere else."