



“Asian”: Just A Simple Word

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“Asian”—just a simple word. Defined by Merriam-Webster Dictionary as “a native or inhabitant of Asia.”¹ To others, however, the word “Asian” is widely portrayed and associated with docile model minorities, exotic strangers, and passive individuals from a distant shore far in the East. This state of being exotic has created this sense of false exoticism among society about Asians from the “exotic” East.² Asians, whose racial ethnicity may be from Asia but who live their lives in the United States, are viewed as Asian Americans with strong focuses on educational and academic pursuits as means of obtaining social equality in their new land. Often times, their struggles for social justice are gained privately as individuals instead of voicing their opinion in the public arena like African Americans and other minority groups. Although some Asian Americans fit the stereotypes that perpetuate the “model minority” myth, society needs to take a closer look at how these false assumptions end up hurting Asian Americans and dividing ethnic groups along with ignoring important is-

1. Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary. Online. www.webster.com

2. Webster’s Dictionary.

sues facing Asian Americans in the United States.

Since the first Chinese immigrants arrived in California as railroad workers in the nineteenth century, Asians have made significant contributions to developing nationhood and expansion of democratic institutions in the U.S. As the years have gone by, the flood of Asians into the United States has increased tremendously. The racial formation of Asian Americans can be traced throughout United States’s history. From the Chinese railroad workers to Japanese strawberry farmers, to newly arrived refugee “boat people” from Southeast Asia, the simple term Asian is no longer defined as “a native or inhabitant of Asia,” but also associated with a number of myths and **stereotypes**—“a standard mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude or uncritical judgment.”³ These have in turn caused tremendous problems for the Asian American community and has caused me personally tremendous turmoil as a Cambodian American living in the United States.

In *The Karma of Brown Folk*, by Vijay Prashad,⁴ the question “What does it feel like to be a solution?” was proposed to the Asian American community by the author.⁵ The notion of the Asian Americans being the “model minority” has created a picture of a hard working, studious group of Asian Americans who excel in academics and attend the top universities throughout the United States. This term was first used in print by sociologist William Peterson in an article titled “Success Story: Japanese American Style” published in the *New York Times Magazine* in January of 1966. Peterson concluded that Japanese culture with its family values and strong work ethic en-

3. Webster’s Dictionary.

4. Prashad, Vijay. *The Karma of Brown Folk*. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press. 2000

5. Prashad. P. viii

abled the Japanese Americans to overcome prejudice and to avoid becoming a “problem minority.”¹ This idea that Asians are the successful minority has become so widespread that admission offices at colleges and universities across the country do not include Asian or Asian Americans in their diversity recruitment efforts or affirmative action policies because Asian Americans are overly represented at the top schools and universities in the United States, even though they remain a minority group in the public’s opinion because they are a part of the population that makes up the majority—whites. Many will argue that Asian Americans should not be bitter about these ideas and perceptions that shine light on their accomplishments. But, at the same time, this model minority myth has thrown Asian Americans into a limelight that has cast a shadow on the disturbing numbers of Asian American males and females suffering from behavior problems, substance abuse, and mental health problems.²

On March 10, 2004, Diana Chen of Cupertino, California, a nineteen year old sophomore student at New York University, took her own life by taking the fatal plunge from her midtown Manhattan apartment. Investigators reported that Chen ended a one-year relationship with her boyfriend that night which may have ignited her unspeakable action.³ A week earlier, on the 3rd of March, the body of a Massachusetts Institute of Technology (M.I.T.) student Daniel S. Mun was found in the Charles River after his disappearance earlier that December. Police official stated that Mun’s death was indeed a successful suicide since Mun’s body was fully clothed and wearing roller skates.⁴

1.Chin, Andrew. Origins. www.modelminority.com. 21 April 2001.

2.Chow, May. “Failing APA Youth.” *Asian Week*, 19 March 2004

3. Chow. “Failing APA Youth.”

4.Hemel, Daniel J. “Body of MIT Junior Found.” *The Harvard Crimson*. 3 March 2004.

Today, suicide has become the second leading cause of death among Asian American youths, yet many have neglected to discuss the issue openly in fear of breaking the stereotype of this “perfect” model minority. Very few teen outreach organizations that were established to help youths at risk of drug abuse, violence and other social behavior have reached out to the Asian American community because many are blinded by the “model minority” myth. In order to help Asian Americans who are in a position where they need professional assistance, the public needs to destroy the false ideas and misconceptions that the “model minority” myth has perpetuated. In addition to this, research shows that Asian Americans have the leading number of attempted suicides within the last few years and very few have been aware of this matter. With the pressure from parents, school and surrounding community placed on the shoulders of an Asian youth to succeed, many feel obligated to uphold the stereotypes created by society based on their racial identification and when they fall short of these expectations there can be several psychological problems that may lead them to do the unthinkable. No matter how successful individual Asian Americans are in society, we cannot ignore the problems they face. The question still remains, if Asian Americans are model minorities, are these actions—drug abuse, attempted suicide, depression—model behaviors?

When looking at the model minority myth, individuals must recognize that biologically, not all Asian Americans are born natural scholars. There is no scientific evidence proving that there is some special gene within Asians that allows them to have unprecedented intelligence compared to other racial groups. Asians are diversely different with a broad range of intelligence, occupation and wealth. There seems to be this false belief that all Asian immigrants are examples of “rags to riches” story because many immigrated to the United

States and have been successful in establishing themselves in this new land they call home. However, we cannot ignore the countless number of Asians who still live in the slums and unsanitary conditions in urban dwellings in Chinatowns across the United States.

If we continue to perpetuate this misconception that Asians are science and math scholars in academia, society continues to corner Asian Americans to believe that if they do not fit these ideas set before them, then there is something “wrong” with them.¹ It is no surprise that adolescence is believed to be the hardest period in an individual’s life. Social acceptance by one’s school community or surrounding environment is extremely vital in an individual’s self-esteem. But for many Asian American youths, school events and social functions may lead to a feeling of isolation and anxiety. Unaccepted by their peers and classmates, pegged as four-eyed science geek and returning home to a house where their parents can’t accept “B”s for English papers can be quite hard for an Asian American youth.² It can get lonesome when you have unrealistic expectations placed on you by society and parents, such as being valedictorian, getting a 1600 on your SATs, becoming an accomplished violinist, obtaining a 4.0 GPA and getting into an ivy league university? What is the value of getting into Harvard, Yale, Princeton and the alike when depression runs rampant and more expectations of succeeding at university is thrown in your direction because you were born into a racial group that you could not control and more expectations of succeeding at your academics pursuits are placed upon you once you receive the ivy league acceptance letter that your parents, not you, have been waiting for?

The world can be extremely racist without knowing it. When people in the U.S.

think about racism, discrimination, and prejudice, they refer to the African American struggles, years of slavery, Dr. Martin Luther King, and the civil rights movement. Most public schools annually celebrate African American history month and read works like W.E.B. Dubois’s *The Soul of Black Folk* where the question of “what does it feel like to be a problem” is proposed.³ When the month of May rolls around, schools often neglect Asian American history month. Rarely do schools include Amy Tan novels in their curriculum or focus on the Chinese Exclusion Act that regulated Chinese immigration into the United States or the bombing of neutral Cambodia during the 1970s. Everyone forgets the Japanese internment camps set up by the United States government, but remembers the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, the loss of “American” lives during the Korean War, and the number of innocent U.S. soldiers who died in the Vietnam war—a war that the U.S. should not have involved themselves in. Yet, the Vietnamese are the “evil” communist, a negative orientalism in the eyes of the general public and to those who served in the war. So, while model minority myth seems to say that Asian Americans are model citizens in the United States, how come we are rarely celebrated for our accomplishments both as a “racial” group and as “ethnic” individuals?

Part of the model minority myth and part of what society has conceived of Asian Americans in addition to the exoticism and academic scholars is the idea that Asians don’t have a voice—they are passive individuals. White society has pegged Asians as model minorities because unlike other racial groups like African Americans, we have accepted many of the injustices placed upon us like the Japanese Internment camps created during World War II and the Chinese Exclusion Act implemented in 1886. Many newly arrived immigrants

1.Prashad. P.4

2.Chow. “Failing APA Youth.”

3.Prashad. P. vii

have this attitude that America is not their land and therefore they feel as if they do not have a voice in American society and culture. They came “here to work hard and make money, and not to interfere in political matters.”¹ The establishments of African American history month and the implication of African American literature in school curriculums were the result of persistence and vocal protest for change by the black community at large. However, many Asians do not feel that it is their place to voice their opinion; therefore, they have often been ignored and rarely celebrated as a community.

When people think of the word “Asian,” countries like China, Japan, Korea and Vietnam and model minority myths pop into their mind. What many often ignore is the simple fact that Asians are much more than that. There are many other nations that make up Asia. In addition to racial stereotypes, there are also very many ethnic stereotypes within the Asian community; these ethnic stereotypes also help break and mold the model minority. What if you are Asian in every sense of the word but completely ignored by your own racial group? What if your ethnicity is often viewed as the ugly duckling—the black sheep of the Asian community? This is something that is unknown to the American (white) society, but the Asian community is fully aware of it. To the eyes of other minorities and white society, you appear to be just another smart and successful Asian, but to your own racial community, you have contributed nothing. This is what it is like to be me, a Cambodian American with two identities.

Today, the nation of Cambodia remains one of the poorest countries in the world. After years of civil war and turmoil, bombed by the United States during the 1970s after false accusation of siding with North Vietnam, followed by four years of

genocide under the Khmer Rouge, in addition to military invasion and occupation by Vietnam in the 1980s, Cambodia is often viewed as a deteriorating country on the verge of collapse by other Asian countries. When American society views the Far East, they often think of the “four rising tigers”—nations like Japan with rising economic power in a world context. Many ignore the fact that most of Asia remains poverty stricken, “third world” nations like Cambodia. When the United States opened its door to Cambodian refugees, several families immigrated to the United States bringing with them the blood that flowed through the “killing fields”—a word coined for the Khmer Rouge regime that slaughtered two million Cambodians from 1975-1979. Unlike the boat people of Vietnam, the people of Cambodia spent four years under the rule of Pol Pot, a communist dictator whose “re-education” program consisted of destroying Cambodia’s culture, society and institutions. Any sign of wealth or education led to death. Two million out of Cambodia’s six million population were unjustly slaughtered. Sadly, this dark past has followed refugees who immigrated to the United States.² This largely contrasts with several other ethnically Asian groups like Japanese, Koreans and Chinese who came to this country searching for new opportunities and a better standard of living. These groups did not flee their native land the same way that many Cambodians had to in order to live.

Fearful of what succeeding in education may cause, several Cambodian American youths are rarely pressured by their parents to pursue a college degree after graduating from high school. In fact, Cambodian Americans have the highest percentage of high school dropouts, and the lowest percentage of college graduates. This, of course, contradicts the model mi-

1.Prashad. p.106

2.Flaccus, Gillian. “The Killing Fields of Long Beach.” A. 13 February 2004.

nority myth and stereotypes that have been placed on the Asian American community by society. Unlike broader society, the Asian American community is fully aware that Cambodians do not excel in academia like most Asian Americans, which have caused tension between Cambodians and other Asian groups. Several Asian Americans have also bought into the notion of the “model minority” myth and believe that the community should perpetuate this “positive” stereotype so that we can prove to society that indeed we are the “rags to riches” racial group who have established themselves in the United States. Asians and Asian Americans who enjoy the stereotypes coined by society on Asians believe that Cambodians are disrupting the validity of the reputation and insist that Cambodians catch up to the rest of the Asian community by being successful. However, the Cambodian community has ignored other Asian groups because many of them are struggling to feed their kids and make enough money to pay the rent—education just isn’t a priority when many are struggling to keep their kids away from gangs and violence.

From October 2003 to February 2004, six Cambodian Americans died violently in Long Beach, California. Violence is not uncommon in the Cambodian American community since they first immigrated here in the 1970s.¹ Long Beach, California has one of the largest Cambodian communities in the United States and has had several shootings within recent months that led to the death of six Cambodian American men. These shootings open a window into this fragile refugee community undergoing the hardship of generation gap between parents and children, which is only made worse by the legacy of Cambodia’s past and the public’s complete denial that an Asian community has not flourished the

1. Flaccus. “The Killing Fields of Long Beach.”

same way that the model minority myth has suggested and taught us all to believe.

Unlike other Asian groups who immigrated to the United States in hopes of better opportunities, the life experiences of Cambodian American parents who fled the bloody killing fields and their American-born children differ so tremendously that most families are unable to overcome the cultural divide—which in turn has caused many Cambodian youth to turn to drug and violence, seeking refuge in the brotherhoods of gangs. Cambodian parents who grew up in Cambodia are often so busy working to provide for their kids that they are unable to look after the actions of their children. Cambodian refugees came to the United States with nothing, many of whom were women who lost their husbands and were forced into blue color jobs that prevented them from looking after their children. Even among those whose husbands survived the genocide, both parents had to work in order to provide for their children. Cambodian youth who were born and raised in the United States often view their parents’ work as neglectful of their existence and turned to gangs as a way to seek a “family.”

In addition to all this since there is very little verbal communication between parents and children, the parents speak Khmer but not English and the children speak English and often times broken Khmer. Rarely is the general public aware of this problem because they see Cambodians like other Asian immigrants who came to this country and not the dark history and struggles that have followed Cambodians who flee oppression. Those who are aware of the harsh reality for the Cambodian community have pegged Cambodians as the Asian community outcast for not succeeding in the ways that other groups have. Even those in other racial groups who are aware of the problem and the Asian community at large are unwilling to offer a helping hand, causing many Cambodians to relocate to

Long Beach, California and Lowell, Massachusetts—the two largest Cambodian American communities in the United States rigged with urban violence and drugs. These areas where Cambodian Americans are building their new lives are often poverty stricken districts where most kids end up turning to a life of violence and drugs similar to the life that had been place before Little B in the Elaine Brown’s “The Condemnation of Little B.”¹ The reason why the Asian American community does not recognize Cambodian Americans as part of their racial group is due to class conflict. Because so many Cambodian Americans do not pursue education like other Asian Americans, they often have blue-collar jobs that pay very little. The successful Asian Americans often question why Cambodian Americans struggle to catch up with the rest of the Asian community, and because of class conflict, Cambodian Americans are often not included in the racial formation of Asian American identity in the United States.

Throughout my life, I’m face with several questions of “What does it mean to be Asian?” and “How do you define being Asian?” “It’s only a word” is what I tell myself. But, I know that it is so much more than that. The racial side of my mind tells me I should break the Asian American mold of model minority myth and challenge the general public’s opinion of Asian Americans by becoming a blue-collar college dropout, or by carrying out the struggle for social justice by voicing the need to bring down the false stereotypes of “model minority” that society has built. But by doing so, I’m only validating the stereotypes that the Asian American community has placed on my Cambodian American ethnic identity. So, the ethnic part of my mind tells me that I should break the mold placed on

Cambodian Americans by getting a college education and pursuing the model minority myth. Does that mean that by doing so the racial side of my mind has won, or does that mean that the ethnic side of my mind has triumphed? The battle between which of the two molds I should be breaking remains, and I’m still torn as to what it means to be “Asian”—after all *it’s just a simple word*. Or is it?

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