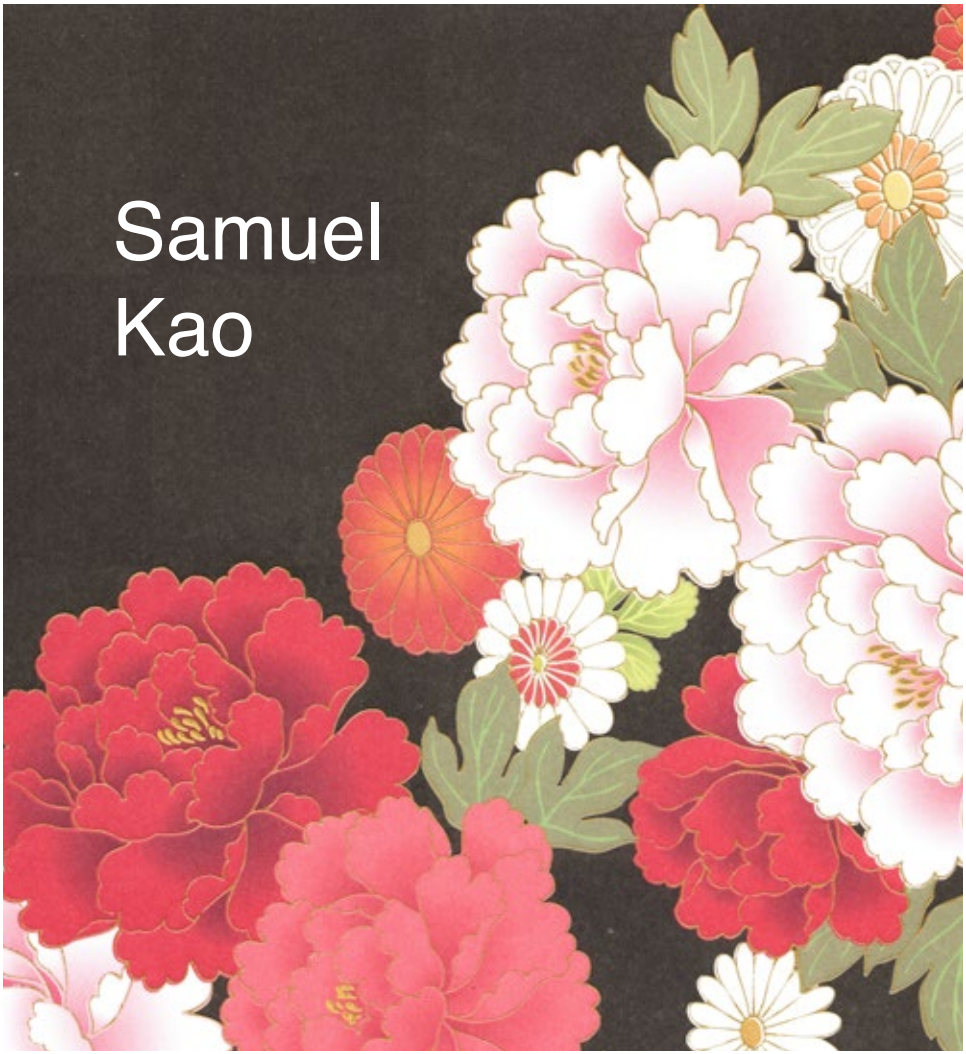
Asian America and the Politics of Guilt



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Asian America and the Politics of Guilt

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If elections were held today for the presidency of Asian America, the winner would probably be Jeff Yang. If you're not familiar with Yang, he's a prominent thought leader who can often be found giving his considered opinions on all things Asian American. He serves as a distinguished expert whose task is to explain Asian America not just to his fellow Asian Americans, but also to everyone else. In this capacity, he frequently writes for CNN and elsewhere. His work, however, is illustrative of a particular worldview that promotes a debilitating politics of guilt, with an emphasis on the authority of elite Asian American intellectuals like himself.

I wish to turn to a CNN column of Yang's from this summer, because it's a perfect example of what I mean. Titled "It's time for Asian Americans to unite in solidarity with black Americans," Yang's op-ed[1] exhorted Asian Americans to get on the same side as the Black Lives Matter movement. At first glance, it would be difficult to find fault with Yang's thesis. The uprisings of the summer of 2020 were a world-historical sequence of events in the struggle against racism, deserving of wholehearted support from Asian Americans.

But how exactly does Yang construct his argument? There are three primary tracks. The first claims that Asian Americans are "silent" and "voiceless" in the United States. This theme of alleged Asian American silence (itself a pernicious stereotype that will be discussed later) is a major point for Yang here. "Silence," he writes in the CNN op-ed, "is the scar that forms over the small, persistent wounds of our lives as Asian Americans." Later, he says, "Asian Americans have a particular role to play as allies: We need to be loud. Because in the past, our silence has led to our being used as an example of a 'good minority' that doesn't protest."

The second track of the argument follows from the first: Asian Americans are undergoing a process of assimilation into U.S. society. At the end of the op-ed, Yang poses these rhetorical questions: "Are we unassimilable aliens, or intrinsically American? Do we seek adjacency to whiteness, or coalitions of color? By speaking out now," he explains, "we answer these questions for ourselves." Here, Yang delineates two types of Asian American assimilation: bad and good. The bad type is assimilation into whiteness ("adjacency to whiteness"). The good type is assimilation into "coalitions of color." Assimilation, for Yang, also means invoking a hierarchy of racial privilege: "in comparison with black Americans," he writes, "we have privilege." So far, so

1 https://www.cnn.com/2020/06/05/opinions/tou-thao-asian-american-solidarity-with-black-americans-yang/index.html

good, you may think.

The third track of the argument deals with the origins of the term "Asian American." Yang tells us, "The very beginning of Asian America, the origin story for our pan-Asian identity, is intertwined with black history; the term 'Asian-American' was coined by students seeking to march in solidarity with black activists." Yang refers to the '60s-era activism of Chinese American and Japanese American students in the Bay Area, who were the first to adopt and use the "Asian American" label. Yang draws a historical contrast: once, in the heroic era of the 1960s, Asian Americans were loud, progressive political actors; now, Asian Americans are silent and apathetic, living adjacent to whiteness.

Yang tells a punchy story, but it's not quite *true*. Historian Andrew Liu, commenting on some recent open letters that also rebuke Asian Americans along similar lines, wrote, "[I]f we set aside the particular *content* of these [open] letters, ranging from the Chinese to Filipino/a experience to South Asian experience, they broadly share a general *formal shape*, that of millennial and younger diaspora telling their elders how to act like good white U.S. liberals… One consequence is that this does not open up a broader discussion about racism from multiple perspectives but instead encourages the assimilation of Asian diaspora (and Latino/a and Muslim, etc.) views into the norms and values of white liberals, namely, guilt and privilege talk.[2]" That is to say, while claiming that Asian Americans are too cozy in their white-adjacent status, these letters are demanding that Asian Americans become even more white-adjacent, by absorbing a liberal politics of guilt entirely.

Furthermore, Liu, offering an alternative to the epistemic deference of Yang's argument, writes:

> It is bizarre to me that almost every letter includes some preamble declaring that "black Americans have faced more racism than Asians have," as if this is an actual question (does anyone doubt this) or, more importantly, a productive way to frame things. For instance, when talking about exploited Chinese workers in the U.S., why try to "rank" their oppressions alongside black labor, as if on an ESPN talk show, dividing them rather than looking for shared interests?…The end result, though, is a paralyzing interpassivity, wherein it is signaled to Asian immigrants that they should participate but that their role is not to talk about their own life experiences but listen silently to stories of white-black racism in the US.

2 https://goodbye.substack.com/p/about-those-letters-to-my-asian-parents

Liu is not alone in his perspective, but he is an outlier; Yang and these open letters reflect a consensus among Asian American intellectuals and academics. Many other authors have echoed Yang's arguments: the indictment of Asian Americans for their alleged "silence," and therefore their complicity; the distinction between positive and negative forms of Asian American assimilation; and the unfavorable contrast between the Asian Americans of the 1960s and the Asian Americans of the present.

The specter that haunts this consensus is that of the dreaded model minority. In the dominant worldview of Asian American intellectuals, the model minority is a loathed figure, a symbol of complacency and complicity with the (white) power structure, striving to rise within historically white and privileged institutions. However, though these intellectuals are quick to condemn the status-seeking of the supposed adherents to the model minority myth (not them), they certainly don't hesitate to take advantage of their own elite credentials. Yang attended Harvard. He amassed influence because he founded *A Magazine*, a publication for Asian American yuppies that was popular in the 1990s. One of the open letters discussed by Liu bears the following title: "A Letter from a Yale Student to the Chinese American community." It would seem that the call is coming from inside the house.

Given this apparent hypocrisy, or self-criticism directed outward, it's worth examining how Asian American intellectuals have themselves undergone assimilation, given the elite spaces from which many hail. To do so, we need to realize how racial identity can be commodified and vacated of its radical content. This process cannot be understood without first grasping the particular institutional context of the post-1960s academy, with special attention to the development of the discipline of Asian American studies.

In 2002, Viet Thanh Nguyen, himself a professor of Asian American studies, argued that Asian American intellectuals have been "most interested in representing themselves and the object of their study—Asian America—as sites of political and cultural contestation against forms of racial and class hierarchy," and therefore have not been as interested in "critiquing how [Asian American intellectuals] may be obscuring differences of power within Asian America."[3] He goes on to criticize the "ideological belief that Asian America is *only* a place of ethnic consensus and resistance." For him, there exists a "*contradiction* between the radical intellectual goals of Asian American studies and its institutional location" in the academy. After all, in the

3 Nguyen, Viet Thanh. *Race & Resistance: Literature & Politics in Asian America*. Oxford University Press, 2002.

academy, scholars must engage in the capitalist practice of winning promotion and prestige: writing papers, giving lectures, and producing knowledge. Practitioners of Asian American studies must engage in this capitalist mode of production by leveraging the radical content of Asian America, which serves as their currency in the academic marketplace: this is where the contradiction lies. According to Nguyen, one consequence of this has been that Asian American identity has undergone commodification, and subsequently, the ability to sell a commodified racial identity in the intellectual and cultural marketplace became valuable for scholars of Asian American studies.

The commodification of racial identity is a process that hinges upon someone's perceived racial "authenticity" and their ability to market themselves based on said "authenticity." It's advantageous for an Asian American intellectual to present one's writings as the product of an "authentic" Asian Americanness (as opposed to some sort of inauthentic one). This grants them the legitimacy to speak on Asian American issues on panels and to write academic papers and op-eds for CNN.

Nguyen argued that this process of "identity commodification" reflects the co-optation of Asian America after the revolutionary years of the 1960s. In the following decades, former student radicals became respectable and entered universities as scholars who produced knowledge about Asian Americans. The radical content was stripped out of Asian America while preserving the radical form; though these former radicals continued to maintain the belief that Asian America is a place of inherent resistance to the power structure, they wound up contradicting themselves in their practice, due to the imperative to maintain themselves within the academy. Arguments, therefore, that fetishize the radicalism of 1960s Asian Americans, and condemn contemporary audiences for their insufficient zeal, fail to account for the commodification and assimilation of Asian American radicalism itself.

People who go on to become Asian American intellectuals usually learn about Asian America under the contradictory conditions of identity commodification that Nguyen describes. They are taught that Asian Americans are supposed to have progressive politics, because Asian America is supposed to be a place of inherent resistance. However, they also end up profiting off a commodified Asian American identity. Equipped with their university training, these newly-minted Asian American intellectuals are now ready to become the leading spokespersons of Asian America, exhorting the rest of us to "do better."

With regards to this process, Nguyen wrote,

> While it is critical for us to acknowledge that Asian America is an outcome of radical social movements that were opposed to capitalism and its excesses, we must not forget that in the contemporary moment Asian America is also useful to capital through racial formation. Through race in its contemporary form, the state is able to identify populations and select representatives for a pluralist system of government that is committed to propagating capitalism, which in its turn transforms Asian American identity into both a lifestyle commodity and a market for that commodity.

Elite intellectuals like Yang can be seen as examples of these selected "representatives" who are "committed to propagating capitalism." Yang appears to be fine with capitalism as long as it isn't of the "robber baron" variety. He was a prominent backer of Elizabeth Warren, who described herself as a "capitalist to my bones" and premised her presidential bid on fighting "corruption," not capitalism. So much for the radicalism and inherent resistance to dominant societal structures.

One major consequence of Asian American identity commodification, according to Nguyen, has been the elision of significant class and ethnic differences to produce a homogenous Asian American category. This homogenization makes it easier to hawk the identity in the marketplace. As a result, there is a conflict of interest between the representatives and the represented. The drive among the representatives to peddle a commodified Asian America to mainstream U.S. society means ignoring these crucial class and ethnic divides. It should come as no surprise that these elite figures display contempt towards the Asian Americans they supposedly represent, and this contempt was evident from their response to the Tou Thao incident.

Tou Thao is the former Minneapolis police officer who infamously stood by as Derek Chauvin murdered George Floyd. In his aforementioned summer column, Yang cited Tou Thao as a particularly shameful example of Asian American "silence." Yang described Thao as "impassive," "indifferent," and "avoidant," and wrote, "His inaction was painful to witness—and a stark symbol of why, now more than ever, Asian Americans cannot afford to be voiceless watchers of this moment." Thao became an instant synecdoche for the collective failure of Asian Americans.

In service of this argument, Thao has been depicted as the ultimate example of the Asian American model minority, who collaborates with the (white)

power structure instead of subverting it. But the shoe doesn't quite fit. While it's appropriate to criticize his choice of occupation, Thao is Hmong American, and Hmong Americans as a whole do not conform to the model minority stereotype. They are not the highly educated East Asian immigrants who come to the U.S. and work for Google. In fact, they are among the poorest ethnic groups deemed to fall under the "Asian American" umbrella.

Like Andrew Liu, journalist Jay Caspian Kang has criticized the affected penitence adopted by Asian American intellectuals[4]. Without in any way excusing Thao, Kang wrote, "The concern [of this affected penitence] isn't so much to come out and confront anti-blackness 'in our community,' but rather to disassociate oneself from the racist [i.e. Thao] in the video. *He may look like me, but I am not him. 'Real Asian Americans' reject him. Don't let any of his racism splash on me.*" The idea was to shun Thao, to show that his misdeeds did not reflect Asian Americans as a whole, rather than to take any kind of concrete action against anti-Black racism.

Kang observed further:

> It shouldn't surprise anyone that these declarations almost always come from elite-educated, upwardly mobile East Asians and they're almost always directed at poorer, or, at the very least, less genteel immigrants, whether nail salon workers, beauty shop owners, or, in this case, a Hmong-American policeman… Hmongs and other poorer Asian groups really only become "Asian American" when they fuck up and do something racist, or when they unexpectedly do something that falls in line with the sort of elite multiculturalism promoted by the professional "Asian-Americans"…Hmongs and wealthy East Asians do not share a history, except at some point, one of them was oppressing the other. They also do not "benefit from White Supremacy" in the same way. Any category that includes both of them fails, mostly because wealthy East Asians define "Asian American" through their own personalized politics. So, why would the Hmong community have to carry the guilt burdens of wealthy Chinese, Korean and Japanese immigrants? And why, for God's sake, do upwardly mobile Chinese, Korean and Japanese immigrants feel the need to launder their own class guilt through the Hmongs?…Professional Asian Americans almost never reach out to populations like the Hmongs, except in the most cursory, box-checking ways. There is no "examination of our communities" because we — the wealthy East Asians — never really considered

4 https://goodbye.substack.com/p/tou-thao-and-the-myths-of-asian-american

them part of our communities anyway.

Condescending to an imagined Asian America that is supposed to share their values, these elites end up demobilizing and depoliticizing the people they claim to represent. They tend to present the phenomenon of racism among Asian Americans as a function of incorrect thinking on the individual level, which must be atoned for. In their priestly roles, only these intellectuals can offer absolution by leading the benighted away from sin. Such a dogmatic approach neutralizes collective politics, and it is hardly conducive to any realistic path toward eliminating these oppressions.

However, there seem to be more pressing issues at hand than ending structural violence. Yang, for instance, is very interested in ensuring adequate representation for those few Asian-Americans in the entertainment industry. This is evident from the Hollywood focus of his podcast, where Yang often interviews Asian American actors and directors about the movie business. (His son, incidentally, is an actor who starred on ABC's *Fresh off the Boat*.)

As part of this depoliticizing work, the vast majority of Asian Americans are often characterized as "voiceless" or "silent." In his CNN column, Yang writes, "[The] silence that might protect [Asian Americans] in small ways in the short term leads to a moral callus over the soul in the long term that can…be mistaken for disdain, or become indifference in truth," before citing Tou Thao as an example of this refusal to speak. The "silent" and emotionally flat Asian or Asian American, is, of course, a nasty stereotype, and yet the term keeps cropping up, often used by Asian Americans to describe other Asian Americans. Why do these intellectuals and thought leaders choose to depict their people as an inert mass?

The answer lies in the aforementioned conflict of interest between representatives and represented. If those one claims to represent are indeed "voiceless," then of course, one must step into the role of voice for the voiceless, conveniently arrogating the power to speak. Asian Americans are of course perfectly capable of expressing themselves, but acknowledging that could put these intellectuals out of a job (perhaps a more accurate description of "silence" is this: someone who has not been awarded column inches). Yang does not bother to provide any evidence for his assertion that Asian Americans are "voiceless," other than anecdotes: "Silence is what [our immigrant forebears] taught to us, their children and grandchildren, through adages like 'The nail that sticks up gets hammered down.'" Somehow these just-so stories involving non-universal adages are sufficient evidence of widespread

Asian American "silence."

Besides securing an elite monopoly on Asian American speech, claims of "silence" play another role. If, as the intellectuals argue, Asian America is a naturally radical space, then Asian Americans ought to espouse an inherently progressive politics (under the appropriate intellectual leadership, naturally). But many Asian Americans do not have progressive politics; in fact, many of them have right-wing politics. A significant minority of Asian Americans, with variations among ethnic groups, actually consider themselves Republicans, and they are by no means "voiceless." The existence of these right-wing Asian Americans presents a narrative inconvenience, and it's much easier to portray Asian Americans as "silent" and to write off the right-wingers as mere outliers, deluded by "false consciousness."

This would be a mistake. The Asian American community has been increasingly swept up by the right-wing current, as evidenced by issues such as activism against affirmative action and support for Donald Trump. Instead of self-righteous moralizing, it would be better for progressive Asian Americans to recognize that a substantive response is necessary to avoid ceding further ground to the right. What that response might look like in practice remains an open question.

One potential answer was present in the streets of Flushing, New York, this past July. During the sequence of uprisings against the police, various Chinese American immigrant groups assembled a pro-NYPD rally in Flushing. In response, several progressive Asian American grassroots organizations led a counter-protest in support of Black Lives Matter. (Neither group, incidentally, can be characterized as particularly "silent," or passive; it's almost as if that isn't the real issue here.)

In an interview[5] with *Lausan*, Kate Zen—one of the organizers of the counter-protest—noted the bourgeois orientation of the pro-NYPD rally, organized in part by Flushing real estate groups and business owners. Crucially, Zen gave reasons why certain Chinese Americans hold right-wing views. Many of them believe that Chinese Americans are the victims of crime (which they associate with Black people), and many of them see Black people as "less deserving" and thus resent affirmative action, which they feel is harmful to Chinese Americans. Obviously, these views are wrong, but Zen's aim is not to justify them, but rather to address the underlying causes and, more broadly, deal with the problem of ideology.

5 https://lausan.hk/2020/opposing-chinese-american-conservatism/

Zen was careful to note that these Chinese Americans "genuinely believe" these right-wing ideas, and that is an important point. Ideology is not brainwashing, silence, or lack of thought; it's based on genuine belief. It works because it's anchored to some degree in material, lived reality—like the reality of being a victim of a crime, or of enduring racism—even if totally wrong in its conclusions about who or what is to blame. "To understand the formation of Chinese American conservatism," Zen said, "we have to understand that Chinese immigrants are marginalized in American society. Because a lot of their struggles do not align with mainstream liberal concerns, their struggles are often invisibilized. That's why right-wing media has been so effective at courting Chinese immigrants."

Zen offered several tools for countering this marginalization. When doing advocacy work, she explained:

> [We] need to be really intentional about making sure these immigrants feel heard. On the subjecting [*sic*] of policing, we've found it more useful to start our conversation around the topic of police corruption and violence…Chinese immigrants know that the police aren't good to Asians. They themselves have often encountered situations where they are treated poorly by the police because they don't speak English fluently. So the conversations we need to have with them are really to start drawing the connections between these struggles and those of Black people.

This is a stark contrast from the academic/intellectual approach: rather than writing an open letter or taking to Twitter to denounce "problematic" people, Zen tries to persuade people to join her cause. Best of all, she does this in a way that fosters solidarity and builds coalitions. This is how organizers, not pundits, think. Zen is also willing to acknowledge an unpleasant truth: these immigrants are often marginalized in U.S. society, and mainstream (read: white) liberals are largely indifferent. Instead of shaming people, or telling them that they need to speak up, Zen listens.

There is one issue with Zen's theory of politics here: it is premised on the existence of a stable Chinese American/Asian American identity category. By definition, this category underpins all of "Asian American politics." However, *Viewpoint* editor Asad Haider[6] argues that "identity is [not] a useful basis for understanding race. If we start with the premise that the category of race can be explained by a particular sense of self or a form of belonging, we are presuming what we are supposed to explain, and we are taking for granted

6 https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/4002-zombie-manifesto

the categories produced by racism." Adopting a Marxist approach, Haider argues, "Race is not an idea or identity: it is produced by material relations of domination and subordination." (Here, geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore's definition of racism is insightful: "group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.")

Haider continues: "Identity is the way we live and experience our relationship to the social relations that constitute us, so it will always be at play in politics—but I don't think it can function as a foundation. That is because when identities are taken as foundations, they become more and more fixed, and reduce people to particular aspects of their belonging." Asian American intellectuals have often fallen into the error of founding their politics on the ground of Asian American identity. They fail to comprehend the complexity of Asian-American politics because they "reduce people to particular aspects of their belonging." The mere fact that some people have been deemed "Asian American" is an insufficient basis for any sort of collective political project. While a common assumption holds that one's identity tends to correspond with certain politics, identity is not a guarantee of how people will think and feel. There is no authentic Asian American "nature" with an intrinsic orientation towards progressive politics. Being Asian American doesn't mean someone will necessarily oppose racism, as the existence of right-wing Asian Americans shows. This assumption is a damaging form of essentialism.

That said, this is not a call for other forms of essentialism. Haider puts it thus: "[T]his critique of identity is absolutely and emphatically not a proposal that race should be put second, or waved away as an illusion. It is in fact exactly the opposite: it is an insistence on recognizing the material reality of race as a social relation, and forming a more adequate theoretical understanding of it that can be useful for struggles against racism. And it allows us to conceive of a struggle against racism which does not revolve around winning recognition within the existing system, but instead seeks to overthrow the system itself." The course of action Haider calls for is a far cry from the pointless hand-wringing and personal excoriation that Asian American intellectuals tend to practice. Instead of trying to insinuate themselves further into the established order by claiming to speak for the subaltern, they should probably stop passing themselves off as representatives.

Consider this provocation: the abolition of Asian America. "Our challenge," Viet Thanh Nguyen writes, "is to be both Asian American and to imagine

a world beyond it, one in which being Asian American isn't necessary. This is not a problem of assimilation or multiculturalism. This is a contradiction inherited from the fundamental contradiction that ties the American body politic together." Further down, he adds, "The end of Asian Americans only happens with the end of racism and capitalism."

This is surely an uncomfortable thought. The category of "Asian American" provides a great deal of meaning and even solace for many people. Suggesting its abolition may seem heretical. But it's important to recognize that no categories are meant to last indefinitely. Still, the revolutionary history of the Asian American category means it retains some political value. Flawed though it might be, "Asian American" can serve as a name that gives coherence to certain emancipatory politics. But just as the end of capitalism should mean the self-abolition of the working class, so should the end of racism mean the self-abolition of the inaccurate umbrella term "Asian Americans," and the end of a handful of people trying to speak on behalf of everyone.

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