9

Life in the Fishbowl

An Asian American Autobiographical Theological Reflection

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It is no exaggeration to say that I felt—literally and figuratively—as if I were existing and functioning in a fishbowl when I resettled with my parents in the United States in 1966, a time that people of Asian descent made up less than 1 percent of the country's population. I lived a public life in the sense that my physical appearance was an object to be discussed at times and ogled out of a curiosity both blind and intellectual. Because many Americans at this time had never previously been in contact with Asians or Asian Americans, I either felt apprehensive or derived considerable pleasure from being unique. In retrospect, I see that the public realm appeared to me to lack discretion, credibility, and accountability in the categorization of race.

During the years in which I acquiesced and also egressed from being a singular-minded child to a multifarious young adult, I began to notice even more how I was portrayed as a racialized Other. The assumption was that I practiced some form of Asian martial arts as if it were a dark magic that included superhuman strengths to be feared or admired. I also heard racial epithets and ethnic slurs such as "gook" and "chink" from either the dominant group or African American and Latino students; this was inimical and denigrating, not just to me, but also to all Asian Americans who have roots in the era of the civil rights movement, which centers on the African American experience. Today, the Asian American population is 5.6 percent of the total,[1]

a figure that does not include hundreds of thousands of students from China and other parts of Asia studying in American universities; people of Asian descent can be found in every major city in the United States. Therefore, it seems idiosyncratic that the persistence of racial epithets, ethnic slurs, and other offensive caricatures continue to reinforce the long-standing stereotype of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners.

Growing up in the inner city, I knew that some neighborhoods were safer than the one where my family lived. But it wasn't until I was older that I became aware of the effects of institutional racism that shows up in tangible ways, from redlining banks to discrimination at work. It wasn't until college that I learned about the one-drop rule, perpetual foreigner syndrome, and other ways of classifying American minorities into a subordinate racial-ethnic group. Hypodescent, or the one-drop rule, a notion derived from the long-discredited belief that each race had its own blood type, was correlated with physical appearance and, more specifically, that a black person is a person with as little as a single drop of "black blood." My contention is that the question "Where are you from?" or, in particular, "Where are you really from?" when applied to Asian Americans, in many instances, is a hypodescent question. This is particularly the case when the question is posed because the questioner has detected a slightest trace of Asian feature in our appearance or accent in our speech. Due to Anglo conformity and the melting pot ideology, the litmus test of Americanization since the height of nativism in the late-Victorian era has been the acquisition of non-accented English. This test has been applied to Asians and Asian Americans every time we speak English. Some among us pass with flying colors because we were born here. Even for these Asian ethnics, the hypodescent rule applies: "Where did you learn to speak English so well?"

Those of us who speak English with a more normative accent compared to a thick "foreign" one have weathered through a unique set of "double" or intensified marginalization that many US-born Americans of all ethnicities take for granted. We are perceived as foreign outsiders not only for our racialized bodies but also because of our accented speech that is further used as a proxy or justification for exclusion from the national community. Americans in general tend to praise people with European, Canadian, or Australian accents for having "a beautiful accent," or "a lovely Irish brogue." Those with a discernable Asian accent, however, have historically been considered "inscrutable" and fundamentally alien to US norms. Those of us

who grew up in North America have been on the receiving end of racial slurs such as "ching-chong" or being teased with sing-song speech patterns that mimic supposed Asian languages. Such inherent cultural biases against Asian accents further marginalized those of us who speak discernably accented English. Although we recognize our responsibility to do our best to communicate in ways that are comprehensible to our listeners, it does not entail eradicating our accent, which may be impossible for those who migrated at an older age. In short, the pedagogical problem is often not our accent per se, but rather limited racial epistemologies that continue to stereotype Asian Americans as perpetual aliens.

During my adolescent years, I took the hypodescent question at its face value. I figured they simply wanted to know where I was born. Because I lived in a community where hardly anyone was of Asian heritage, I thought it was the way I looked, or the manner of my speech that gave away of my "foreignness." Once I became familiar with Asian American literature, however, I learned that the hypodescent question has been directed to Asian Americans of every class and generation. To be sure, the question, "Where are you from?" is often the first question foreign students from Asia would pose to other Asians and Asian Americans. Foreign students and recent immigrants are looking for people with similar culture and background with whom they can connect. They recognize the American-ness of our Asian American identity even as they seek to connect with our Asian-ness. This, however, is not the case with those whose American-ness would never be called into question, but who cannot detect in us the slightest symptom of suffering from what Derald Wing Sue, professor of counseling psychology at Columbia University, called "racial microaggressions," the "everyday slights, insults, indignities, and denigrating messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned White people who are unaware of the hidden messages being communicated."[2] We will see that the hypodescent question, when posed to Asian Americans, is often a racial microaggression.

It is not that we are ashamed of our nativity or our ancestry. Indeed, most recent immigrants and foreign students are elated when someone asks them about their country of origin. However, for those among us whose American lineage goes back two or more generations, or have lived in the United States for many years, we see ourselves as Americans of Asian descent, not foreigners or "aliens ineligible to citizenship." Because the question "Where are you from?" is generally the first question most people ask of us, we cannot

help but wonder whether our appearance has something to do with the question. It becomes a racial microaggression when the questioner is not satisfied with our answer and counters, "Where are you really from?" This is a loaded question because the word "really" in the question assumes, even if the questioner is not aware of it, that Asian Americans are the Others and that we cannot be "real" Americans. Moreover, the frequency with which the hypodescent question has been directed at me and other Asian Americans seems to indicate that it is a form of exotification, a way of signifying our marginal status, even if the questioner is oblivious to it, rather than a genuine interest in learning about who we really are. Perhaps it is easier to pin us down as either Asian or American rather than acknowledge the liminal space Asian Americans actually occupy. Because of our experience of marginalization, we are neither fully Asian nor fully American, and yet both Asian and American. Although many of us are proud of our hybrid identity, in cross-cultural encounters the American-ness of our identity is often overlooked and we find ourselves expelled to Asia.

In hindsight, life for me was not always on Cloud Nine. The winds of woes that blew my way were not king-sized—like those encountered by Jung Young Lee in his quintessential autobiographical account of his marginalized experience in America.[3] Nevertheless, I do not have the luxury to interpret the medium-sized woes in retrospect as transitory happenings, brief interruptions of an otherwise charmed existence. It is, therefore, not surprising that the woe of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners extends to the religious arena. As a 1.5-generation Asian American priest in the Roman Catholic tradition, I often see myself as unique or *sui generis*. I am the only Asian American priest in the Servites, the religious order to which I belong, the only Asian American priest at the university in which I teach, and the only Asian American cleric in all the apostolates to which I have been assigned. Part of what it means to live out my priestly vocation as an Asian American is learning to live with hypodescent questions directed at me. When I preside over mass at a new parish, for example, the reactions of the people who see me as I process into the church vary, but invariably some of those in the assembly assume that "he probably can't speak English well and he's probably a lousy preacher" and other abilities, qualities, or characteristics regularly attributed to persons of Asian heritage. Before I utter a single word, I have already many stereotypical hurdles over which to jump that my brother priests from the dominant culture do not have to think about. Perhaps some in the congre-

gation have encountered a priest who fits those assumptions, but that these thoughts creep unsummoned into their consciousness tells us that the image of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners has been deeply etched in their memories. This image is so deeply engraved that they may not even be aware of it. Like a beating of a heart, it is faint enough to conceal its presence but, when agitated, strong enough to make its particularities known.

Running through the entire encounter in church or casual exchanges in social gatherings, like underground streams hidden from the eye but functioning nonetheless, are some of the characterizations of the past when Asians in the United States were regarded as unassimilable, sneaky, inscrutable, and other stigmas of foreignness that have rendered us incapable of being American. Historically, these negative characterizations achieved legal status in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Culturally, they have resulted in the hyperfeminization of Asian women and in the emasculation of Asian American men in popular culture. This has prevented them from playing the lead role in American movies and entertainment industry. Psychologically, a hypodescent question directed at Asian Americans is a classic example of racial microaggression. According to Derald Sue, the power of microaggressions lies in their invisibility because "they don't allow Whites to see that their attitudes and actions may be discriminatory." Although microaggressions appear to be insignificant slights, they can have detrimental effects on job performance, social life, and mental health of people of color.[4] Theologically, the invisibility of racial microaggressions that have harmful consequences on the lives of the marginalized are manifestations of a social sin at a structural and systemic level passed down from one generation to the next. Social sin points to elements within society that are destructive of human dignity. Racial microaggressions and attitudes that exclude another denigrate the self-image of adolescents. And when the self-image of a person is shattered, self-hatred and other negative attitudes and behaviors can be easily internalized. Like sexism and other forms of social sins, we cannot sweep exclusionary or racist attitudes under the carpet. The more we pretend such attitudes do not exist, the more insidious they become.

From a Catholic theological perspective, these mocking attitudes toward and negative characterizations of Asian Americans are parts of our condition resulting from some early rupture in our relationship with our fellow human beings and with God. Although we do not inherit our ancestors' sins, we do inherit the negative environment those sins caused. Before we can eradicate

it or contain it, we must acknowledge its existence; we must be able to talk about it. In short, these undesirable characterizations of Asian Americans are, willy-nilly, part of our American heritage, however little they seem to influence our conscious lives. All this baggage no doubt can contribute to the critical pangs of inquiry into which a seemingly benign but loaded question coalesced: "Where are you really from?"

The hypodescent question is especially annoying to American-born Asian ethnics whose roots in the United States go back generations. They grew up in a society in which American-ness is associated with whiteness to the degree that any desire to reclaim a distinctive element of their Asian tradition was seen at odds with their desire to be recognized as fully American. This sort of experience engendered in many multigenerational Asian Americans an ambivalent feeling about their own Asian tradition. Consequently, it is not surprising that the writings of Asian American cultural nationalists have emphasized the narratives of belonging to the American nation and downplayed their Asian-ness.[5]

The American-ness of our identity is something that we choose and seek. We can be legally "American" by naturalization or by birth, but the structural and systemic racism inherent in American society has blinded many in the dominant group from recognizing us as authentically American. The Asian-ness of our identity, however, is given to us. It is not our choice to be Asians. We are born with an Asian ethnicity. Often, the most important aspects of our identity and our relationships are not those we choose, but those with which we are born and have inherited. It is within this context of what is natural born and not chosen by us that we first learn to accept the "strangers" within the Asian American subject—that is, our Asian roots and differences in class, gender, and sexual preference.

The presence of people of Asian descent as fettered out and contextualized within the notion of the American fabric is certainly relevant to any story that explicates the national identity of America. People of Asian heritage have a significant story within the tenets and proclivities of the American framework. That said, no legal declaration in terms of our identity has yet to make us "acceptable Americans" or of the same standing of the dominant group. Unless we raise our voices and demand that we be recognized as Americans and be treated as fellow citizens, we will be forever strangers in our own country. The hypodescent question reveals more than a prejudice in the collective consciousness of our nation that has obstinately marked Asian

Americans as foreigners. Those who pose the question, more often than not, inadvertently contribute to the bigger pot called social sin in that the foreignness trope has been intimately linked with almost every racist crime—from the Chinese Exclusion Act to the murder of Vincent Chin—committed against Asian Americans. The hegemonic linkage of Asian American-ness with foreignness has become part and parcel of our American psyche that it shows up in our Orientalist representation of Asian Americans. This could be expressed in the form of a hypodescent question or it could go viral and catch like wildfire, as in the "Asians in the Library" video.[6]

All these examples are a reflection of a greater social ill in our society. They tell us that we have preconceived ideas about each other even before we speak. We expect another to earn his or her respect. But we fail to realize that our respect for the dignity of another human being needs no rationale. Respect from another as a human being is a fundamental God-given right. In other words, more than "claiming America" is involved here. From a Christian perspective, to disavow the view of Asian Americans as foreigners is to discover the inherent dignity of Asian Americans as persons in Christ.

Notes

1. World Population Review, "Asian Population 2019," accessed December 16, 2017, http://worldpopulationreview.com/states/asian-population.

2. Derald Wing Sue, "Racial Microaggressions in Everyday Life," *Psychology Today,* October 5, 2010, https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/microaggressions-in-everyday-life/201010/racial-microaggressions-in-everyday-life.

3. See Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995).

4. Sue, "Racial Microaggressions."

5. In reference to Asian American cultural nationalists, King-kok Cheung notes that the "desire to be recognized as American has sometimes been achieved at the expense of Asian affiliation. The obsessive desire to claim America has induced a certain cultural amnesia regarding the country of ancestral origin." See King-Kok Cheung, ed., *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 5.

6. "Asians in the Library" is a YouTube video posted by University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) student Alexandra Wallace on March 13, 2011. In this video, she ranted about the presence of the "hordes of Asian people" that UCLA accepted, the presence of their families on campus on the weekends, and, in particular, their

use of cell phones and speaking loudly in the campus library. The most offensive part of the video was when she mimicked an Asian speech pattern: "Ohhh. Ching chong ling long ting tong."

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Lee, Jung Young. *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology.* Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1995.

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