There is some evidence that people from Asia landed on the shores of California around the year 500 A.D., well before Christopher Columbus crossed the Atlantic (Mertz, 1972). Over the last century, however, many more Asians have made the trip across the Pacific to make North America their home. We will describe some aspects of what it is like to be Asian in North America.

RUTH: A CASE OF MISTAKEN IDENTITY

Ruth was born in Korea but she was adopted as an infant by a Swedish-American family and raised in an English-speaking Christian home. Her childhood was not unlike many middle-class Americans. She attended a suburban public school, went to church on Sundays, and enjoyed a McDonald’s hamburger once a week after her Girl Scout meeting. In high school, Ruth did well academically and her gymnastics team won the state title the year she graduated. She was offered scholarships at several large universities but decided to attend a small, private, liberal arts college. Like most first-year college students, Ruth had to make some adjustments being away from home and friends. However, the most difficult challenge she faced was unexpected. Ruth experienced racism.

One of the first questions her roommate asked her was “How long have you been in America?” She assumed that Ruth was a recent immigrant or an international student. Ruth was also embarrassed by a professor who thought she was Japanese and asked for her opinion about Japanese management style in class. On another occasion, her math professor assured her that she should do well in her course since “you people do so well in mathematics.” Also, her resident assistant paused uncomfortably when she met Ruth “Jorgenson,” expecting to meet someone who looked Swedish rather than Korean. These kinds of mistakes were also made by Asian students. For example, a Korean-speaking student greeted Ruth and upon realizing that she could not answer in Korean quickly turned away with an embarrassed and somewhat judgmental smile. And when Ruth agreed to go out on a date with a “white” man, a Chinese girl in her dorm jokingly called her a “banana” (yellow on the outside, white on the inside). To say the least, these experiences hurt and confused Ruth.

We present this case study to illustrate some aspects of being Asian in North America. However, Ruth’s particular circumstances (i.e. being adopted...
and raised in an English-speaking Christian environment) should not be taken as representative of all Asian Americans. The total number of adopted Korean children is minuscule compared to the 7.3 million Asian Americans. Ruth's situation should be taken as an illustration of how diverse Asian Americans are, how racism is often directed towards Asians, and why many Asian Americans experience some degree of marginality.

Diversity among Asian Americans

The terms, "Asian American" and "Asian Canadian" have been used to refer to a variety of people who immigrated or whose ancestors immigrated to North America from countries in Asia. Some of these countries include China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, India, and the Philippines. Sometimes the term, "Asians and Pacific Islanders" is used to encompass people from the Pacific Islands of Fiji, Hawaii, Samoa, Guam, and many others. And although people from these nations share some similarities, there are vast differences between and among them. For example, there are well over 15 different languages represented by the Asian-American label and there are 55 different ethnic groups or sub-cultures of Chinese. In addition to this diversity among Asian Americans, each group has its own history of migration to the United States and Canada. The Japanese and Chinese, for instance, arrived in the late 1800s voluntarily while the Southeast Asians (e.g. Vietnamese, Cambodians, Thais, and Hmong) have only recently immigrated having been forced out of their homelands because of political and military unrest. The differences between the cultures subsumed under the Asian-American label are far greater than the similarities. Thus, it is extremely difficult to talk about "Asian Americans" as if they were a single cultural group.

The diversity among Asian Americans is often not recognized by those who have limited contact with them. Although it may initially appear that "all Asians look alike," it is possible with enough experience to tell the difference between some Asian groups. Ruth's experience of being treated as if she were Japanese is not an uncommon experience among Asians. This kind of error was made in 1982 when Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American, was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two Detroit unemployed autoworkers because they thought he was Japanese. The murderers were convicted of manslaughter but were only sentenced to three years probation and fined $3,750. If two Chinese men had beaten a white man to death with a baseball bat, we think the sentence would have been much more severe... which brings us to the topic of racism.

Racism

Racism is usually associated with violent behaviors, like the murder of Vincent Chin. But racism can be much more subtle as in the case of Ruth's roommate assuming that she was an international student or her resident assistant's uncomfortable pause during their introduction. Racism includes the attitudes, practices, and policies that result from a belief that skin tone determines attributes or behaviors. Just because Ruth looked Korean did not mean that she grew up in Korea, had a Korean name, spoke Korean, and would excel in mathematics. Ruth's personality and interests are reflected more by the "culture" she grew up in and not the color of her skin or "race." She spoke English, attended a Christian church, valued education, and loved gymnastics because of the family environment in which she was raised. Instead of inquiring into the kind of culture Ruth was from, the people at her college were simply using Ruth's physical features to infer her social and personal characteristics. This kind of racism is common in North America and occurs between and among all groups and not just among those folk who have "white" skin. For example, the student who addressed Ruth in Korean made the same kind of racist error as her roommate and math professor committed. All of these people were guilty of assuming something about Ruth solely on the basis of her physical features, which is at the core of racism.

Marginality

In confronting racism Ruth would learn that her skin color does influence how other people perceive
Being Asian in North America

Ruth is a partial member of two groups but not fully accepted by either one. As shown in Figure 1, she is a member of one group that does not fully accept her because of her skin tone or race (racism). And, she is a member of another group which does not fully accept her because of her ethnicity or culture (ethnocentrism). How she responds to this situation, or what sociologists call “marginality” (Stonequist, 1937), can vary. At one extreme, she might rebel against or ignore the expectations people have of her and continue living as a Swedish American who looks Korean. At the other extreme, she might try to embrace Korean culture and reclaim what could have been hers if she had been raised in Korea. Or, Ruth might learn to live her life between the extremes taking what her family had given her and exploring Korean and Korean American cultures for what they had to offer her as well. How Ruth responds to her marginality cannot be easily predicted, but we can confidently predict that she will continue to encounter the kind of racist and ethnocentric attitudes and behaviors that place her on the margins in the first place.

How people deal with marginality has been the focus of much research and debate among social scientists. One of the first articles to describe marginality among Asian Americans was written by two Chinese-American psychologists, Stanley and Derald Sue. In 1971, they published an article that described three personality types among Chinese-Americans and the type of mental health issues each encounters. Ben Tong (1971) in the premiere issue of Amerasia criticized the Sue brothers for psychologizing (and thus legitimizing) the effects of racism on Chinese-Americans. The debate continued for a while but it became clear that any discussion of Asian-American marginality or cultural identity could not take place without addressing racism as well (Atkinson, Morten, & Sue, 1983). Marginality can also occur among Euro-Americans. Janet Helms (1990) offers a model of “white racial identity development” which describes stages Euro-Americans go through in becoming conscious of their own subculture and racism. It is our conclusion that how a person learns to live on the margins depends on many factors. These include family, language proficiency, income, friendships, place of residence, religion, and other cultural variables.

**RACISM AGAINST ASIANS**

We now return to the problem of racism against Asian Americans. We believe that a major aspect of the Asian experience in North American culture is learning how to deal with other people’s perceptions of us because our skin color is something other than “white.” That is, learning how to live with and to confront racism is part of being Asian in North America. We have chosen historical as well as contemporary examples because the Chinese exclusion acts and Japanese-American internment have frequently been omitted or misrepresented in high school and college history textbooks.

**Chinese Exclusion Acts**

In 1882, the U.S. Federal Government passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, and in 1923, the Canadian Parliament signed into law the Chinese Immigration Act. These laws restricted the immigration of Chinese into North America and required that every person of “Chinese origin,” even those who had been born in North America, to formally register with the government and denied them the right to vote. These Acts went through a variety of revisions, but were not fully repealed until 1965 in the United States and 1962 in Canada.

The Chinese exclusion laws were acts of racism. They defined and identified people of “Chinese origin” solely on the basis of physical features. A person with “white” skin who was raised in a Chinese culture was not affected by these laws. But, a person with “yellow” skin who was raised in a British culture would be denied immigration. Newspapers, magazines, and even school textbooks described Chinese people as unclean, diseased, sexually perverse, opium addicts, gamblers, thieves, deceitful, and unable to assimilate into the English-speaking Euro-American mainstream culture. Thus, people

![FIGURE 1 Marginality: Ruth on the margins](image-url)
believed if a person looked Chinese then he or she supposedly possessed these "Chinese" characteristics. The stated rationales for the acts pointed to these racial traits with little or no reference to how the Chinese immigrants were willing to work for lower wages than their white-skinned Euro-American counterparts. That is, racial incompatibility was used to justify the acts, while protecting jobs for "white" immigrants was probably more salient in the legislators' minds (Ward, 1978).

Japanese American Internment

On December 8, 1941, the day after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the United States declared war on Japan. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 which ordered the removal of all people of "Japanese ancestry" living within 200 miles of the Pacific Ocean. A similar move was taken by the Canadian government on February 27, 1942.

These Japanese-American internment laws were acts of racism. They were directed at a group of U.S. and Canadian citizens who were discernible because of their physical features. A person with "white" skin who was raised in a Japanese culture was not removed from his or her home by federal agents. But, a person with "yellow" skin who was raised in a British culture would be ordered to move. The internments were justified by an appeal to national security. Keep in mind that German and Italian Americans were not perceived as a threat and ordered to relocate. (We need to stress that we do not advocate any internment-type act but wish to show how racism was involved in the internment of Japanese Americans.) The difference, of course, is that German and Italian Americans do not have salient physical features that set them apart from other Americans. The cultural characteristics that did set them apart were quickly hidden or rejected. For example, the German and Italian languages were quickly silenced during the war and last names were often "anglicized" to sound and appear English (e.g. some German Americans named Schmidt changed their names to Smith).

It was also argued that the internment was necessary in order to protect the Japanese Americans. While this may in part be true, there are other ways to provide protection for citizens besides forcing them to sell all their property, shut down their businesses, relocate to the desert, and imprison them behind barbed wire. Although there were acts of violence towards German and Italian Americans during World War II, none were to the extent of interning over one hundred thousand Japanese Americans and Canadians. The stated rationale for the relocations were national security and protection with no reference to the prime agricultural and ocean-front real estate owned by many Japanese Americans.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Japanese Americans decided to demand some type of redress (compensation) for the internment. The Commission on Wartime Relocation found that Executive Order 9066 was not justified by military necessity and that the causes of the internment were "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership." In 1988, the U.S. government passed House Resolution 442 which mandated an apology and compensation be paid to each living internee or his or her surviving family. A similar redress act was passed in Canada in 1989.

The Chinese Exclusion Acts and Japanese-American internments exemplify how Japanese and Chinese citizens of Canada and the United States were denied some of their basic human rights and publicly humiliated to serve the economic interests of those who held political and financial power. It is worth emphasizing that these examples clearly demonstrate how racism, especially when it becomes institutionalized, is designed to maintain the status quo or protect those who control the economic and political power.

Racism Today

Acts of racism towards Asian Americans are still very real in North America today. In fact, "hate crimes" (violence due to ethnic and racial discrimination) against Asian Americans are on the increase according to the U.S. Justice Department. In addition, "Asian-bashing" (verbal ridicule and degrading statements), particularly "Japan-bashing" fueled by the economic crises in North America, are also on the rise. "Hidden" acts of discrimination are also prevalent in North America. The act of exclusion or benign neglect can be just as racist as overt behaviors of racism. One exclusionary act that often goes unnoticed is that Asians are often not listed when demographic statistics are reported. That is, when a study is reported or a survey conducted, the groups that are usually listed are White, Black, and maybe Hispanic. This exclusion conveys to Asian Americans that we are not important enough to be surveyed or counted. Continued physical and verbal acts of hostility are signs that most North
Americans are still unwilling to accept and live with Asians.

The most frequently discussed topic concerning Asian Americans is why they have consistently scored the highest on North American tests of educational achievement. This topic is highly controversial since it has been suggested that the "mongolian" race (sic) is genetically superior to other races when it comes to intelligence. Although this may appear to be a compliment to us, we judge this hypothesis and its supporting evidence to be racist. We reject the conclusion that skin color is causally related to academic achievement. Recent research strongly suggests that Asian cultures, with the particular family values and child-rearing practices, emphasize the need to succeed educationally (Caplan, Choy, & Whitmore, 1992; Stevenson, 1992). Sue and Okazaki (1990) do a thorough job of reviewing the theories put forth to explain Asian-American educational achievements.

Dealing with stereotyping, racism, and marginality are three of the topics often discussed by social scientists when considering Asian Americans. But, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the other social psychological dynamics (e.g. economics and religion) that help shape the experience of being Asian in North America. One thing is for certain—Asian-Pacific Americans are a diverse people in motion and in transition.

ENDNOTES

1 Although people in the United States are commonly referred to as "Americans," Canadians can also use the term since Canada is part of North America. For the sake of brevity, we will be using the term "Asian American" for those Asians who are residents or citizens of the United States and Canada.

2 Amerasia, a periodical published by the Asian American Studies Center at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), has printed several articles exploring the reasons why Asian groups have immigrated to North America. Another excellent resource is Ronald Takaki's Strangers from a different shore (1989).

3 The combined work of Stanley, Derald, and David Sue (a third brother who is also a psychologist) stands as a monument of psychological inquiry into the Asian American experience.


REFERENCES


