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Panda Express(ions): Commodifying and Constructing Pan-Asian-ness

August 25, 2012 By [Jerry Park](#) [1 Comment](#)

With the start of the new semester comes the renewed search for interesting examples that provoke good conversation in the classroom on race, class, and gender. One of the persistent themes in contemporary sociology of race research is the manifold meanings of the term “Asian.” What is “Asian” anyway? And by extension what is “Asian American?” I published a [paper](#) a few years ago where I explored this very question with undergraduates I met at several universities. They explained to me that “Asian American” has a multitude of meanings but they seem to hinge on whether one plays up the internal diversity in that word, or the externalized same-ness imposed through that word. As I have shared in other [posts](#), Asian Americans are highly diverse ethnically and religiously, and yet there remains in our society an insistence that they share something in common that gets summarized by the term “Asian.”

In a racialized society, all minority groups (and the majority as well) get this kind of treatment. Historian [David Hollinger argued](#) that in the contemporary US we effectively have a “racial pentagon” which includes “white” “black” “Asian” “Hispanic” “Native American.” So racial same-ness is a key component in our culture, and minorities often struggle with maintaining ethnic particularity (“I am Korean, not Asian”) or giving in to racial generalizations. One of the common examples of this is to dine at a pan-Asian restaurant like “Panda Express” or “Pei Wei.” The menu is usually focused on “Chinese cuisine – the quotes are intentional because, if you’ve been to a locally-owned Chinese restaurant with a full menu, very little resembles what is served in these mainstream establishments. They have to make the dishes more appealing to largely white customers. But in addition, there are often notable course options that signal a pan-Asian palette through phrases that are somewhat recognizable to more cosmopolitan Americans: “Thai,” “Bangkok,” “Korean,” “teriyaki,” “udon.” These too don’t often resemble dishes prepared in restaurants with single-ethnic cuisines. So “Asian” in this example is a combination of reducing ethnicity to something more palatable to American (read: white) appetites, and symbolic displays of internal diversity.

Just because a society has a tendency to create a controlling concept like race doesn’t mean that individuals and groups are without a certain degree of freedom. Notably, a lot of Asian Americans proudly call themselves by this term. Most of the people I interviewed said so, but less than a quarter of Asian Americans surveyed by [Pew](#) and less than half of those surveyed by political scientists like [Janelle Wong](#), [Karthick Ramakrishnan](#), [Taeku Lee](#), [Jane Junn](#) also identified with the label. If you’ve been on a college campus there is often an “Asian Student Association” or an “Asian American Christian Fellowship.” Sociologist [Russell Jeung](#) explored over 30 different pan-Asian Protestant congregations in the US across the west coast and detailed the ways in which these Christian communities understood what this term means. For many, describing oneself as “Asian American” is

quite intentional – they believe that Asian Americans, regardless of ethnicity, experience some of the same trappings and dynamics that are particularly unique.

Perhaps not surprisingly, adoption of this term is not limited to the US, and its expression appears most readily in popular culture. A recent evident example I came across recently was a documentary called [“Project Lotus: The Search for Blush.”](#) This series chronicled the development of the first pan-Asian girl group called [“Blush.”](#) It was on one of those cable channels that you don’t normally run across, and as it turns out, this talent search began way back in 2010 but the story is only now reaching American markets. The series details the drama behind the production of the first ever pan-Asian celebrity group. Contestants came from five major nations: China, India, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines. Apart from the absence of Vietnam in this group, these nationalities represent 5 of the 6 largest ethnic groups in the US among Asian Americans. The final group would consist of one performer from each of these nations. This struck me as oddly uncontroversial, but it led me to ask: where are the pan-Euro girl groups? What about pan-Latino? Pan-African? I don’t have an answer for that, but I leave it to readers to send me your reflections. This was the first element that got me thinking about the pervasiveness of “Asian-ness” in my own thinking which drew from participating in a popular culture that also commodifies this term.

Like most talent search contests, the judges met with contestants based on location. But unlike most American contests, each location entailed individuals of one specific and varied nationality; and that’s where things start getting tricky. Some contestants for example were ethnically one group but their nationality was of another group. Is a contestant of Korean heritage who grew up in Japan a representative of Japanese or Korean culture? The judges, almost all of whom were white (except the choreographer), struggled a lot over these issues of identity.

As I watched the series I kept looking for ways that internal diversity came out, but instead the focus was largely a conventional talent search: lots of arduous training, physical and emotional strain, performative excellence. Since the aim of this band was to appeal to both American and Asian audiences they had to select a language that was universally acceptable across multiple nations: of course that would be English. Dance moves were not reflective of Bollywood or K-Pop or any Asian culture. Instead it seemed like conventional contemporary pop dance from Lady Gaga and the like. Perhaps intentionally, the only characteristic that stood out as particularly ethnic was the difference in their physical appearances.

The effort to create a pan-Asian ethnic girl group that is accessible to American and varied Asian audiences seems to follow the same pattern as I mentioned earlier regarding food: there’s symbolic gesturing of diversity with Asia, but its core is aimed at appealing to American sensibilities. Much like mainstream pan-Asian dining in the US, Blush is an example of displaying diversity while essentially conforming to the dominant market. It helps a lot that the nations represented in this band all think highly of America, but the concern here is that conformity for the sake of profit winds up saying “culture doesn’t matter” to audiences that don’t realize how much it actually does.

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