

MAKING PAPER CRANES

*Toward an Asian American
Feminist Theology*

MIHEE KIM-KORT



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To my parents, Yong and Son, who pushed me out of the nest so
I would journey courageously and creatively

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Foreword

By Grace Ji-Sun Kim

“PENISENVY”!

I write this on the blackboard on the day I cover Feminist Theology in my course, *Theology from the Underside*. I ask the students to read it. Most students read it as “penis envy.”

The way my students read this phrase seems to reinforce how Sigmund Freud has deeply influenced our societal perceptions of men and women. According to Freud, “penis envy” refers to the inner desire that women presumably wish they were men. For some time women adapted Freud’s teachings and actually believed that a penis was they all desired inwardly

Margaret Atwood believes otherwise. Atwood stated that it was not “penis envy” that women had, but that it was rather “pen is envy. It is not that women want to become men, but that women have always wanted to write their stories and influence literary discourse, which then affects how society thinks, understands, and conceives reality. Women have wanted to make a contribution to society in addition to being mothers who raised their children.

For much longer, women have recognized that the pen is mightier than the sword. There is power in the pen. The pen gives power to those who possess it, own it, and use it. The pen is the medium used to convey ideas, stories, knowledge, and meaning. There is an awesome power in the pen.

So it is that women do not envy the penis, but rather envy the pen. Throughout much of history, it was men who wrote stories, shared thoughts, and recorded events. Their stories have influenced how we interpret historical events, biblical stories, and theological understandings. Men have theologically monopolized the ecclesiastical

enterprise. Women have longed to write their stories so that they can also shape the world's present context, the past, and the future in all spheres of life. There is strength and empowerment in being able to mold and shape people's thoughts through the writing of narratives, biographies, stories, facts, fiction, and theology.

I strongly believe Atwood is correct, and it should be our perspective on women needs to shift towards the realization that women have something to say that is valuable, and more than that, necessary. This understanding makes Mihee Kim-Kort's book all the more important for our time and within theological discourse. In her book, she shares her own personal stories and narratives, which nudge us toward an Asian American feminist theology.

Asian American feminist theology is still at a very nascent stage and only emerges in the aftermath of Christianity's involvement in colonialism.¹ Korean immigration to the United States occurred in three major waves. Political exiles were living in the United States as early as 1885, but the first significant wave of immigration was to Hawaii (1903-05). This can be described as immigrants concerned with either the Korean political situation or interested in Christianity and the Christian churches. The second wave was after the Korean War (1950-53), and involved a more heterogeneous group, consisting of wives of American servicemen, war orphans, and students. The current wave began as a result of immigration reform through the 1965 Immigration Act² in the United States. These immigrants are contending with a multitude of issues, including cultural and linguistic differences, parent-child stress, and changes in roles, especially among women. They are also coping with cultural conflict in norms and values, a healthy identification in a predominantly white society, and varied levels of acceptance by both the majority and other minority groups already here.³

With this historical backdrop, *Making Paper Cranes* takes us on a theological journey that explores, reflects, and contributes to Asian American feminist theology discourse through engaging literary, historical, and sociological sources. Most importantly, Kim-Kort writes from her heart as she finds herself in the statistics and dates of these literary, historical, and social narratives. She opens up her life and shares her journey, in theological terms, from Korea to the United States, and through artful ways, Kim-Kort tugs at our heart through a theological narrative rooted in the genuine fragility of life told honestly.

Kim-Kort's book adds richness to the Korean immigrant history as Asian American feminist theologians remember, recall, and retell our stories. Much of her stories are experiences she recalls with clarity, spontaneity, and integrity. She candidly shares her own personal struggles growing up as a Korean child in America. Many of the stories, both hers and other Asian Americans, are difficult to digest at times as they become our stories. Many Asian Americans can personally identify with the experiences of sexism, racism, prejudice, and subordination she confronts in this writing. Kim-Kort provides valuable insights into the woundedness, pain, and *han* that exists within many immigrant women. Despite the particularity of all these stories they become the life stories of all of humanity as we see a glimmer of ourselves in them.

It is only when we all enter into this journey that we begin to understand, welcome, and embrace those who are different from us, for then we recognize our sameness in them. As Kim-Kort manages to open up our own personal wounds, heartbreaks as well as joys, miracles, and wonders, we are invited to examine our own theological journeys and enter into this wonderful enterprise of theological reflection. Her deliberate methodology and the use of compelling metaphors and images potentially can be appropriated by others in their own reflections. But again, the most important piece to this process is clearly an uncanny willingness to share one's life story. She does so, and brings a compelling new voice to this nascent theology. It is moving, heartening, enlightening, and joyous to read a fresh new voice in theological discourse in general.

Theology is biography and biography is theology. As people engage in writing their stories, they are writing their theology. Life is, indeed, a theological journey. It is the stories of God's participation in our lives and our participation in the life of God. These stories are passed on throughout church history and have enhanced our perception of God.

Kim-Kort builds on the theology of the first wave of Asian American feminist scholars and challenges us to move forward to the next stage. She writes from the faraway spaces of her heart, thereby exposing our minds and hearts to the goodness of God and a world where we coexist in beauty, love, and peace. Kim-Kort engages with Asian American feminist theological writers such as Chung Hyun Kyung, Grace Ji-Sun Kim, Anne Joh, Kwok Pui Lan, and Rita Nakashima Brock and wrestles with their voices, building order to develop her own distinctive voice within the academy.

As Kim-Kort writes, we recognize the power in her stories. They are constructive, refreshing, moving, endearing, and embracing. Her poignant and provocative words challenge us to continue the journey toward a liberative world. And she shows us, how, yes, “pen is envy,” and that once we take a step forward to reinvent the normative expectations of our gender and culture, then we invite all to write their stories of grace and redemption too.

Prologue

Making Paper Cranes

Memories, Stories, Legends

I know. It's a bit cliché, making paper cranes—especially an Asian person doing origami. I remember when my mom first taught me how to make a paper crane. We sat at the kitchen table, took regular white copy paper, folded the paper over in a triangle so it made a perfect square, and creased the bottom so that we could carefully tear it off and discard it. After that, it was fold here, open here, bend here, fold again . . . and then, wow! Amazing. Blow gently into the bottom so that it puffs out a little, fold one end a little so it has a beak, and there—we had a perfect paper crane. For the longest time, this picture of my mother and me connecting over such a simple but magical object has stayed with me. I can hear her voice as she tells me, almost wistfully, “If you make a thousand of these little creatures and put them in a box, you can make a wish that will come true”—or was it, “get a long life of good health,” or maybe, “find a lot of luck.” It was definitely something like that. I couldn't remember if it was Chinese, Japanese, Korean, or all of the above until I googled it and found a wide variety of information about it on Wikipedia. Wherever it came from doesn't ultimately matter. It remains in my mind as a rare, lovely moment without any barriers between us.

This little tradition with my mother faded away as I grew older, but the memories of it have come back in recent years as I try to make sense of my place in the world. The memory is compelling to me—this image of my mother and me creating something together, the act of making the paper crane, and then the image of the origami

paper crane itself. My connection to my mother is essential in this journey of discovering who I am, emotionally, psychologically, and theologically, because she is my family and has had the most influence in shaping me. I have other “mothers,” too, the Asian American women in this country who have bravely told their stories. They have had a hand in molding me, too. Similarly, the very act of making paper cranes—the process of making something delicate and lovely out of the intersection of creases—speaks to me of the journey one takes in becoming whole (though at one level I am cognizant that it may negatively perpetuate the stereotypes associated with Asian Americans). We humans, no matter what season, need some flexibility, some bending and folding. While it seems to make little sense as a work in progress, the end result is an exquisite creature. Finally, the paper crane is a symbol of the crane itself; it is a story of something in reality. In particular, the paper crane holds various meanings mythologically, and the narratives, the beautiful legends associated with it are intriguing. The paper crane invites me to enter into it as metaphor for sorting out my own story, and hopefully, the larger story, too.

I love poetry and the play between words and space. Specifically, metaphors are useful in the way they allow me to engage my life artistically as a person of faith in a particular context as an Asian American and a woman. Because I grew up with rigid structures and strict grammatical systems, I have only recently begun to allow myself the creative expression of poetry through which I am tentatively, but more and more openly, writing about my journey of faith as an Asian American woman. During these past many years, I have been blessed by a number of meaningful intersections with other people of color who share in the struggle to be fully received as persons of worth and dignity. The bold formulations of their own experiences have unlocked whole worlds for me.

In these most recent seasons, I also discovered a new freedom that allowed me to acknowledge a poignant chaos within me, which was the result of a phenomenon I call “collisions.” Growing up in a mostly Anglo, suburban, homogenous neighborhood, I avoided any conflict with others as much as possible. I generally tried to “keep the peace.” After college, these collisions increased in number and were inescapable as I sought constantly to be reconciled to myself and others, especially those who came from different regions of the country or world, those who had different ethnic backgrounds, or those who were male. The power of these collisions was overwhelming

and led to something I call “fragmentation,” which is a disjointed state, like being in the middle of a pile of shattered, broken puzzle pieces. Most importantly, as a person of the Christian faith, I realized I did not have a theological framework with which to address this fragmentation *as an Asian American* woman. Very little in the Church spoke specifically to the Asian American woman’s experience. Thus began the slow birth of this project, which I believe will be a long delivery process: writing and journeying toward an Asian American feminist theology.

The metaphor of collision resonates in me as a potentially expressive piece of the experience for Asian American women in its connection to the fragmentation that occurs in daily life. By *collision*, I mean the ongoing encounter of stereotypes, expectations, standards, and conflicting worlds that leads to fragmentation. In verbalizing the beginnings of an Asian American feminist theology, I emphasize the necessity for theological work to be rooted in the dynamic play and conversation between Scripture, tradition, and experience—a theology of the body that stresses the embodiment of faith. I believe a dialogue between these salient experiences of Asian American women and other theological perspectives will help determine how this conversation can point us to a fresh space to live into and out of God’s whole redemption, which I explore further toward the end of this book.

In this project, I investigate experiences unique to Asian American groups, including immigrants and their descendants, but focus primarily on the experience of the generations of Asian American women who are children or later descendants of immigrants. I acknowledge that the story of Asian American women is incomplete without including the history of all Asian immigrants, men and women. I further acknowledge that the cultural tendencies I discuss are broad and, as in any circumstance, there are numerous possibilities for exceptions, the gray in-between cases among all Asian Americans, like Asian adoptees and the children of interracial marriages. These basic patterns are a jumping-off point, and for me, necessary for beginning to dialogue about this experience. I hope to do my best in attempting to avoid overgeneralizations and keep everything descriptive rather than prescriptive. In terms of labels, for the most part I will use the phrase “Asian American,” which will potentially include people of East Asia (China, Hong Kong, Japan, Mongolia, Korea, and Taiwan), Southeast Asia (Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Thailand, Vietnam, and Malaysia), South Asia (Bhutan,

India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka), and the Pacific Islands (Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia), though not all stories will include all groups. Even these geographic labels are incomplete, but I try to include as much territory and as many people as possible. Finally, as the more pertinent resources do in their writings, I interchangeably use “European American” or “Anglo American” to refer to the dominant culture in the United States.

Ultimately, my vision is to be a part of the community that is articulating a theology that liberates Asian American women to live as whole, free human beings with a distinct voice and story, and then to empower Asian American women to be active instruments in changing the status quo. Utilizing the image of the crane in the first chapter, “Flight and Migration: The Asian American Journey,” I focus on the social history of Asian Americans (both men and women) in general in the United States, beginning with the first waves of immigration. I offer a brief engagement of the political and cultural issues that Asians faced in America as well as stories of their engagement of church and faith. The main point is to communicate the stories of the ocean crossing that begin in the mother countries and continue in this country, as well as to begin to understand the distinctive experience of racism that characterizes Asian Americans’ journeys.

In the second chapter, “Fidelity, Prosperity, Longevity: The Asian American Woman,” I focus more specifically on Asian American women and the types of oppression they experience in North America as rooted in gender issues. The double-edged sword of racism *and* sexism stifles the lives of Asian American women, so for them to achieve any level of fidelity, prosperity, and longevity (themes associated with the symbol of the crane), it is important to name the phenomenon that threatens the identity development of those in this community.

In the third chapter, “Fight, Struggle, and Survive: The Asian American Woman’s Resistance,” I attempt to illustrate the possible ways of talking about how Asian American women navigate these negative social forces in terms of *compartmentalization* and *assimilation*. A preliminary description may be helpful here: I identify *compartmentalization* as an intentional separation between two different worlds—namely, the Asian culture and the dominant culture, while acknowledging the need for both. I define *assimilation* as systemic identification with the dominant culture and rejection of the Asian culture. These categories are by no means scientific or exhaustive, but introductory. This chapter also includes stories of feminism,

Asian American feminism, and specific stories of resistance enacted by Asian American women, both within and without the church.

The book takes a theological turn starting with the fourth chapter, “A New Flock: Currents from Asian and Asian American Feminist Theology,” which engages the Asian American feminist community (e.g., Rita Nakashima Brock, Kwok Pui Lan, and Wonhee Ann Joh), looking in particular at the themes that are often raised for discussion in their projects.

The fifth chapter, “Freedom Songs of Long Life,” is my own creative (constructive) attempt to lift up another theological perspective out of the Asian American feminist project. The metaphor of song speaks to poetic narrative, and “threshold” is a potential space in which this song is present. Here, I engage the content of this song—the experience of fragmentation, which I define as a deconstructive but potentially reconstructive process that examines the forces that impose certain identities onto Asian American women. I believe it is a process that can lead to compartmentalization or assimilation, but my hope is that there is potential healing in connecting and creating out of this fragmentation.

The sixth chapter, “Food for the Journey: A Third Space and Threshold Theology,” explores ways for Asian American women to journey intentionally by embracing the concept of a third space. In other words, the third space is an attitude, transformative and often subversive, and it allows for a way to work toward changing present circumstances. Threshold theology continues in the same vein by permeating that perspective. The third space can potentially be a threshold—more than a holding place—and a dynamic place of possibility and hope.

The epilogue, “A Thousand Cranes: Everlasting Wishes,” looks with hope to the future at other possible projects and where the journey might take this community of Asian American women.

Finally, as a matter of clarity, I want to explain that I choose to identify myself and this endeavor as “Asian American” rather than as Korean American, though that is my specific ethnicity. I recognize that *Asian American* is a vastly broad term, as the term *Asian* includes all possible countries between Japan and India, Malaysia and Taiwan farther south, the Philippines, and the Pacific Islands. This term encompasses ethnic groups like the Hmong, Laotians, and Hawaiians. The range of languages, traditions, and cultures is hardly containable in one term. Moreover, the dominant culture in this country has had the tendency to ignore the rich diversity

of Asian groups, which has resulted in the creation of a singular, negative, and often destructive stereotype of the numerous Asian communities. Yet I make this move intentionally to be as inclusive as possible, so I might address the basic issues that impact the group(s) of people who are lumped together in this category; how people in the United States view Koreans affects how they view those of Japanese, Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese descent. No doubt an interconnectedness exists in our experience because of our current social location in North America, whether or not the groups historically agree or get along with each other.

I believe that the most effective route toward giving any of these groups a voice is through establishing a genuine unity—not homogeneity—rooted in the tension of acknowledging a similar reception by the dominant culture while simultaneously encouraging the distinctions of each Asian cultural expression. I want my identity and my work to be in solidarity with all the Asian groups represented in North America and all around the world. Eventually, I hope my work finds expressive solidarity with peoples that experience any kind of oppression and marginality as a *liberation theology*.

This work is important to me. It has been formative in my own understanding of embracing my identity as an Asian American woman of faith. I recognize I do not develop this work in solitude but in constant conversation with others by sharing in their communities and stories. That means this project is, and perhaps will always be, in constant process. By no means do I claim that I am any kind of authority or that this project is comprehensive; but at the very least, I hope it is a beginning, meaningful sketch. There are little pieces, memories, and stories all over the place that I'm still trying to fit together to make sense of me, my family, and my community. I desire this to be a space where I remember, create, and make some more paper cranes alongside others in this field and in other disciplines. I am increasingly inspired by the rapidly growing number of Asian Americans who are making new patterns, breaking out of boxes, and allowing their stories to take flight. I want and need to be a part of it, too, for the sake of my family, and especially for the sake of my daughters someday.

1

Flight and Migration

The Asian American Journey

Bird migrations are easy to spot during any season, above all during those transitions from colder to warmer weather or vice versa. The exuberant sound of these creatures is irresistible. During my walks on any quiet hiking trails, whether in Colorado or in Pennsylvania, I cannot help but pause, look up, and follow the V-formation cutting those slow, dark lines through the sky like fighter jets going in slow motion. I have always wondered what the world looks like to them from that lofty distance, especially at that methodical pace. Do they look up, down, or straight ahead? Do they have to stop and ask for directions, or do they take the same airways, so it is familiar to them? Do they take a lot of bathroom breaks? Do they deal with a lot of strange weather? Do they enjoy these flights?

Many people, too, are prone to migrations of a sort, maybe in the form of vacations and weekend trips. For instance, I have friends who enjoy bed-and-breakfasting on the coast or backpacking across some unusual regions. But at times we face bigger journeys involving new locations, new jobs, or new homes. When I was growing up, my family was privy to both. We moved around a lot, trying to find a spot to nest, in a way, from Seoul to Colorado Springs to Denver, then back to Colorado Springs, all over Colorado Springs, and then to Princeton. But we also very regularly went on vacations that took us away from our ordinary lives. During the hot summers, we traveled to places even hotter than our Colorado home, exotic places like Las Vegas and California. We took long journeys across deserts, through

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mountains, and over wide, open spaces, all within our family van, where I read my Judy Blume books, my brother played with his toys, and my parents listened to cassette tapes of church services and sermons in Korean. We would pause at rest stops for meals. My mother packed an icebox full of things like *kimbap* and sandwiches. We would eventually get to our destination, whether it was the Grand Canyon, Circus Circus, or the Hoover Dam, and take hundreds of pictures.

That first journey that my parents took across an ocean would mark all of us forever. I often wonder what it must have felt like to step onto that huge, formidable mechanical bird clutching a few suitcases with me asleep in their arms. How did it feel being on a plane for so many hours for the first time ever? Did they stay up to watch the in-flight movie, restless and uncertain about what was waiting for them? What was it like to say good-bye to their families indefinitely? They left everything. Unlike those who throw everything off and don't look back, they did look back—and still look back often. It would be something ingrained in me, too, this looking forward and looking back at the same time, as I made my own migrations.

Racism: Beyond Black and White

In my high school and college social studies classes—the US history classes—I recall studying the arrival of European immigrants in the New World seeking out religious and economic freedom. I was shocked by their baggage—unheard numbers of African slaves, including men, women, and children. I learned that this was just the beginning of a system of oppression in this country. A complicated society developed, including a web of interactions between African American descendants and European American descendants. The result was inexplicable economic exploitation, cultural marginalization, and physical oppression of millions of Africans and African Americans. Despite the power of the civil rights movement, the residue of these earlier circumstances—that is, the establishment of this country at the costly expense of African and African American lives—remains in the minds of many people today. Both overt discrimination and subtle forms of racism, as reflected in debates over welfare, classism, and unequal employment, are constant reminders of the consequences of this severely entrenched system in our society.

Yet, while understanding this part of US history and present-day culture is obviously important, I was and still am affected by the lack of time given to understanding the histories of other immigrants and their experience of this system of race. Since an understanding of race relations has often been packaged as a black and white issue,

I never believed I, or any other nonblack person or community, had ever been or would be impacted by discrimination or prejudice based on race. It was literally a black *or* white issue. But as I have grown older, despite the reality that all power and race relations have come to be seen within this framework of subordinate/majority dynamics,¹ I have become more aware of the complex, not-so-black-and-white dynamics involving race in many relationships. Specifically, I have realized how this dynamic is unique to the experience of Asian Americans. I simultaneously realize that as an Asian American woman, although I am affected by this system of viewing race as a black/white paradigm, this discussion on race must go beyond black and white to become relevant to the increasingly diverse nonblack communities in this country.

Growing up going to mostly Anglo schools in Colorado, I got along with anyone and everyone. My close friends were Anglo-American and African American, and I had one Latina friend. I had a few Asian American friends, but in terms of those who were non-Anglo, there were only a few of us. I never received any overtly violent gestures of racism but there were those typical cliché moments when a kid would chant at me in an annoying, singsongy way, speaking gibberish and asking if I understood it, or our class would get a new student who happened to be Asian but Chinese, and the teacher would ask me if I spoke Chinese and if I could translate for them. Every so often there was a breakdown of groups, whether for kickball teams at recess or for projects in class, and though I remember watching groups of white kids sit together immediately, and the black kids slowly congregate together, I would look around, wavering, trying to feel out where I felt I belong the most. Some days I made my way over to the white kids, and I felt like I was joining the cool kids group, the ones who had everything. Other days I felt rebellious and thought that sitting with the black kids, who were also cool in their own way, suited me the best. But neither group ever made more sense to me, and I vacillated between both.

The acknowledgment of the not-white-or-black factor is becoming increasingly more a part of Asian American experience. Frank Wu's *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White* offers a refreshing, yellow-in-a-black-and-white-world perspective. He writes that "race matters," and moreover,

words matter, too. Asian Americans have been excluded by the very terms used to conceptualize race. People speak of "American" as if it means "white" and "minority" as if it

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means “black.” In that semantic formula, Asian Americans, neither black nor white, consequently, are neither American nor minority. Asian Americans should be included for the sake of truthfulness, not merely to gratify our ego. Without us—and needless to say, without many others—everything about race is incomplete.²

No doubt, Asian Americans are caught between two unaccommodating worlds. This experience of being unable to find reception from either community, while constantly being identified as the “Other” is arguably most visible within the Asian American (though now experienced by many other groups today). In addition, Asian American communities find themselves as the scapegoat for problems that arise out of complicated race dynamics and result in violent confrontations between groups. For instance, in New York City in 1990, tensions ignited between Afro-Caribbeans, African Americans, and Korean Americans because a Haitian immigrant charged that she was beaten by the manager and employees of the Family Red Apple Market in the Flatbush section of Brooklyn after a dispute over three dollars’ worth of groceries. As a result, the store owner was arrested and charged with third-degree assault, while Flatbush residents, members of the December 12th Movement, and others began a daily vigil of demonstrations that would last for almost a full year. The city did little to respond to the numerous assaults on Asian Americans throughout that year. According to Helen Zia, a prominent journalist, “to many African Americans, Korean stores and the material success of Asian communities in general represented their economic disenfranchisement at the hands of the white oppressors and their Asian surrogates.”³ Hence African American communities would often identify Asian Americans with European Americans, while Asian Americans are often relegated to some ambiguous minority status by the dominant culture.

This type of continuous marginalization from both sides creates a difficult-to-verbalize experience for Asian Americans, so space to articulate another aspect of the race paradigm becomes necessary. To initiate this discussion, it becomes absolutely crucial to examine the primary elements of the Asian American experience, which are described by numerous Asian American journalists, lawyers, and activists as the “perpetual foreigner syndrome” and the “model minority myth.”

Perpetual Foreigner Syndrome

A little more than a year ago I was dismayed by a statement my father made to me when we were discussing the hardship of interracial marriage and multicultural ministry: “Your mother and I have lived in this country for twenty-five years, but we still feel like foreigners.” It had never dawned on me that my parents did not feel accepted or viewed as Americans. When my father surprisingly disclosed their feelings of rejection, any romantic notions about a thorough acceptance from those around me disintegrated before my eyes. Images of various moments from my past flashed in my mind—words, interactions, and even subtle (and not-so-subtle) looks that revealed to me this sad reality. Based on my race, the Asianness of my face and skin tone, my inability to easily recall simple American idioms, and my usual preference for Asian foods, I have always endured the question of whether or not I am a foreigner. At least my English is without any Asian accent. For my parents, even though they have resided here for more than half their lives, it is a different story. Like me, they are naturalized US citizens and while they speak English well enough, since it is “tainted” with the Asian lilt, they are seen automatically as foreigners.

This recent revelation has helped me to understand my own feelings of frustration at my awkwardness in trying to field questions about my identity. When I look back, I remember countless introductions followed by the question, “Where are you from?” If I did not satisfactorily respond with the name of an Asian country, the new acquaintance would insist, “Where are you really from?” This would spiral down into some kind of guessing game. Even worse, I encountered many times the supposed compliment that my English is so competent and the question, “How long have you been in this country?” These questions perpetuated the feeling that I remained outside, and therefore, not truly a citizen.

The aforementioned are some of the surface characteristics of the perpetual foreigner syndrome: We are figuratively, and even sometimes literally, returned to Asia and ejected from America.⁴ Though citizenship is legal, ethnicity tends to override it, which further perpetuates the foreigner image. Thus while ours is a citizenship based on consent, not descent,⁵ this citizenship continues to be illegitimated because the descendant of Asian Americans finds himself or herself from a different shore, and indeed from an “obviously” foreign and alien place. What needs now to be part of this analysis of

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the perpetual foreigner syndrome is the basis of this foreigner image. The roots of this image are multifarious and require an engagement of imperialism, colonialism, orientalism, and both the relationships between Europe and Asia and the relationships between the United States and Asia. Rather than examining every possible origin of these images, I want to explore a particularly insidious but strong manifestation of these roots, which is found in the early stereotypes of Asians revealed in the social history and literature about Asian immigrant communities in the United States.

Much can be gleaned from literature of the specific historical context of Asians within America. This literature potentially points to ways the perpetual foreigner syndrome is connected to other sources and contexts. But specifically, the categories for Asians and Asian Americans, as revealed in the historical and social context of the United States, have served as a way for non-Asians to contain the unfamiliar, foreign element of those who are of Asian descent. For instance, as Elaine Kim, a professor and avid sociopolitical activist at the University of California at Berkley, carefully describes,

There are two basic kinds of stereotypes of Asians in Anglo American literature: the “bad” Asian, which includes the sinister villains, brute hordes, uncontrollable, and those who need to be destroyed, and the “good” Asian, which are those who are helpless heathens to be saved by Anglo heroes or the loyal and lovable allies, side kicks, and servants.⁶

In both cases, the Anglo-American portrayal of the Asian person serves to function as a dichotomous template for the Other, further perpetuating this relationship, and basically describing the Anglo as a contrast to the Asian—that is, as “not-Asian.”

When the Asian is heartless and treacherous, the Anglo is shown indirectly as imbued with integrity and humanity. When the Asian is a cheerful and docile inferior, he projects the Anglo’s benevolence and importance. The comical, cowardly servant placates a strong and intelligent white master; the helpless heathen is saved by a benevolent white savior; the clever Chinese detective solves mysteries for the benefit of his ethical white clients and colleagues.⁷

The Anglo is at the center, while the Asian (and presumably any other non-Anglo) is present for the sake of establishing the Anglo identity. A common thread running through these portrayals is the

formation of permanent and irreconcilable differences between the Chinese—or, more broadly, the Asian—and the Anglo, differences that define the Anglo as superior physically, spiritually, and morally. These initial images serve to affect a dualistic relationship between whites and nonwhites, in this case those of Asian descent. This sense of the Other as viewed in the person of Asian descent further maintains the necessity not only for apprehension but for appropriation in the forms of conquest, control, and manipulation to the advantage of the dominant cultural group. This critical approach to understanding the dominant view of Asians in North America finds deep roots in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, in which Said defines *orientalism* as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."⁸ In this case, *the Orient* encompasses not only those residing in the countries considered the Orient but also those scattered in diasporas around the world. He further purports that Western knowledge about the East is not generated from facts, but through imagined constructs that see all Eastern societies as fundamentally similar, all sharing crucial characteristics unlike those of Western societies, and in essence this knowledge establishes the East as antithetical to the West. "Such Eastern knowledge is constructed with literary texts and historical records that often are of limited understanding of the facts of life."⁹ The impact of these images, for the most part of the Asian as foreign, is oppressive at various levels as evidenced throughout history; it has resulted in everything from different work conditions and housing policies for certain Asian groups to the forced internment of Asian Americans during World War II.

Presently, although an enormous amount of work has been done to try to dispel these stereotypical images through the dedicated activism of Asian Americans in local communities, cities, colleges, and universities, these images continue to haunt today's generations of Asian Americans. Magazines like *Asianweek*, *aMagazine*, *KoreAm*, Web sites like *Asian Nation*, *8 Asians*, and *Bamboo Girl*, Asian American coalitions and organizations, and the slowly growing number of Asian American actors and actresses, musicians, writers, and bloggers like "Angry Asian Man" (<http://www.angryasianman.com>) continue to actively contribute to the movement to counter these antiquated images by vocalizing outrage, raising awareness, and resisting through other deliberate acts. Nonetheless, it is necessary to diligently fight the disturbing reality that Asian American representations, whether through general stereotypes or literature or media images, continue to be more believable than a real person,

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as though it is easier to know Asian Americans through representation than through reality.¹⁰ It remains increasingly efficient to interact with predictable images rather than flesh-and-blood people who may actually have more in common with the rest of humanity. Again, these representations conveniently put the Asian American in a specific role within a very limited relationship; moreover, they provide an avenue for the non-Asian person, whether intentionally or unintentionally, to maintain a secure status quo wherein they are active agents, and the Other is nothing more than a passive canvas.

One issue of enormous significance to the Asian American community that has an effect on the status quo is the discussion on affirmative action. This is an example of an issue that does not precisely fit into the black and white paradigm. Moreover, it is related to the perpetual foreigner syndrome in that it raises practical ways to counteract the consequences of these stereotypes. According to Wu, though it is not a perfect solution, the intention behind affirmative action is equality and integration.¹¹ The hope is to begin to counter the disequilibrium that has occurred for hundreds of years in American society, mostly in those spheres of life that are affected by class and economic status, race and culture, and gender. Wu continues: "Affirmative action is the applied component of the commitment to work toward achieving a society that not only happens to be racially diverse but also strives to be egalitarian and inclusive."¹²

Thus affirmative action is about membership and genuine inclusion for the Asian American community, as well as other groups, into larger society. It tries to transform the nature of the larger society and the terms of membership. Concerning the other options besides affirmative action—that is, color blindness and meritocracy—Wu writes that these are illusory ideals because color blindness requires color consciousness or it becomes impossible to discern itself,¹³ and meritocracy is arbitrary because merit is based on the standardization of certain expectations that do not take essential contextual and circumstantial aspects into the fullest consideration. While the point here is, again, not to assert that affirmative action is the best or most comprehensive course of action, I do wish to highlight the implications of this discussion, that is, the need to recognize and dialogue about these unavoidable social realities of marginalization lived out at numerous levels that are connected to the perpetual foreigner syndrome.

Tokenism is another specific way the perpetual foreigner syndrome is manifested in relation to issues surrounding affirmative action. I have often appreciated the opportunities that were most

likely the result of affirmative action efforts, ones that I believe I would not have acquired because my ability or talent might have been downplayed because I look like a foreigner—like someone ignorant of how certain things are done in this culture and unable to fully communicate in English. And yet—perhaps this is part backlash and part natural consequence—I have often found myself the “token,” whether it was the token Asian or token Asian girl. It seemed I was a good placeholder in those endeavors for diversity, more like a trophy that expressed the group including me was now truly progressive and sensitive to the role of minority cultures in society. Again, my ability or talent, my perspective and voice were downplayed because they were not necessary; just my being Asian and foreign was good enough to belong to the group.

There is a connection between the perpetual foreigner syndrome, tokenism, and the phenomenon of a sort of evolution of this Asian American stereotype into the “model minority myth,” which provides a glimpse into another dimension of this story.

Model Minority Myth

My father often tells me stories about my kindergarten year. I was a fairly typical five year old who loved making chocolate-covered pretzels, finger painting, playing tag during recess, and especially being fidgety during naptime. At the end of the year, there was an awards ceremony to recognize the students who were the most successful throughout that year. During this time, my father worked late nights to earn extra income for the family, so he woke up on the morning of the ceremony to a phone call from my teacher reminding him to come to school so that he would be able to take photographs of his “special daughter.” He laughs when he recalls this story because he did not have time to shower, he was fairly disheveled when he arrived at school, and he forgot the camera, but he came just in time to see me receive a bright blue ribbon that said “Top Student” (only two students out of the kindergarten class received this award). Another parent graciously took a Polaroid snapshot of me in a ruffled pink dress awkwardly holding a large ribbon. This moment was somehow meaningful to both my parents because they felt this would be the beginning of great achievement in my life.

Growing up, I fulfilled the prophecy of the model minority: I was an overachiever in the areas of math and science, often a year or two ahead of my classmates. In class, I was overtly quiet, hardworking,

and (the most important) I was polite to the students and teachers. Wu describes this phenomenon, writing that the phrase “You Asians are all doing well anyway” summarizes the model minority myth, which is the dominant image of Asians in the United States. As a group, besides being intelligent, gifted in math and science, polite, and hardworking, we are seen as being extremely family oriented, law abiding, and successfully entrepreneurial.¹⁴ Asian American historians write that this portrayal began in the mid-1960s, a time of massive racial upheaval. The term was first used by the press to depict Japanese Americans who struggled to enter the mainstream of American life and to laud Chinese Americans for their remarkable accomplishments.¹⁵ According to Zia, as this new stereotype emerged on the American scene, Asian Americans became increasingly the object of “flattering” media stories. After more than a century of invisibility alternating with virulent headlines that advocated eliminating or imprisoning America’s Asians, a rash of stories began to extol our virtues. Thus the model minority myth was born.¹⁶ This label filtered into college textbooks where it further promoted this image of Asian Americans as minorities who “made it” in this “land of opportunity.”

Yet the rewards for the model minority are less than desirable. In a speech presented to Asian and Pacific Americans in the chief executive’s mansion in 1984, President Ronald Reagan explained the significance of their success. America has a rich and diverse heritage, Reagan declared, and Americans are all descendants of immigrants in search of the “American dream.” He praised Asian and Pacific Americans for helping to “preserve that dream by living up to the bedrock values” of America. Reagan emphatically noted, “The median incomes of Asian and Pacific American families are much higher than the total American average.”¹⁷ In the view of other Americans, Asian Americans vindicate the American dream.¹⁸

My parents certainly had their version of the American dream—the familiar house, cars, television sets, and 2.5 kids. We’d have BBQs on hot summer days, Thanksgiving dinners with extended family, and a backyard so we could run around. But the core of their dream would always be centered on what my brother and I could achieve someday. To them, having a home, employment, maybe even a relatively flourishing small business, and a good connection to the church was good enough for their ultimate achievement, but of course—as any parent in any culture—they wanted more for us. Their dreams, they would often tell me, were for us, and we heard many times that they “sacrificed

and came to this country for us,” and they “came only so that we would have better opportunities,” especially during those moments I did anything remotely disappointing. They really believed in what we could accomplish, because, unlike them, somehow we would truly be Americans. And yet their language would always be almost tainted with something more, a competitive edge and a dash of bitterness or even resentment; sometimes it seemed they wanted us to be so American in terms of material success that we would be more American than Americans. We would surpass Americans in their own country. So when I did well in classes or excelled at the piano, I was fulfilling not only my parents’ expectations but those of the dominant culture, too.

Ronald Takaki insists that in their celebration of this “model minority,” the pundits and the politicians exaggerated Asian American “success” and in essence created a new myth. The comparison of incomes between Asians and Anglos failed to recognize other variables that affect income, like the regional location of the Asian American population. For instance, statistics indicate that the family incomes of Asian Americans actually indicate the presence of more workers in each family, rather than higher incomes.¹⁹ Moreover, Asian Americans experience patterns of income and employment inequality, as evidenced in their absence from the higher levels of administration. They experience the “glass ceiling”—a barrier through which top management positions can be seen but not reached no matter how diligently they pursued it. The benefits of the model minority image remain largely superficial and mythical.

My father worked for the same computer company in the finance department for almost fifteen years. He was bright, a quick learner and, of course, a hard worker. He earned his undergraduate education in the United States and went on to get his MBA. Yet he was never promoted for a higher position beyond managing a small office within the larger department. Of course, he never complained or spoke up but kept his nose to the grindstone. He always believed that somehow it would all even out and that the end result would be fair. He eventually left the company to go to seminary, so there is no way of knowing how it would have turned out.

The stereotype that Asian Americans are all “doing fine anyway” obscures many realities besides income and employment, including the real diversity of personalities, ambitions, and talents of Asian Americans. At some level, this myth presents its own quandary: “Should Asian Americans accept, if not embrace, this ‘good’ stereotype as an improvement over the ‘inscrutable alien enemy’ image of

a previous hundred years?"²⁰ Since Asian American "success" has emerged as the new stereotype for this ethnic minority, often the reaction toward Asian Americans' opposition to this image has been confusion. After all, these are positive qualities, desirable and honorable attributes, especially relative to the stereotypes as highlighted in earlier literature. While this image has led many teachers and employers to view Asians as intelligent and hardworking and has opened some opportunities, it has also been harmful. Asian Americans find their diversity as individuals denied or limited to specific arenas of life. Many feel forced to conform to the model minority mold and encounter extreme pressure from all sides if they do not fit this category. They want more freedom to be their individual selves, to be "extravagant."²¹

Again, we must note that reality is more complex than the simplifying metaphors that shape the public discourse about the Asian American experience. The model minority concept is not without its virtues; historically, it has helped turn around the negative stereotypes of Asian Americans and enhanced a positive image of Asian Americans. The model minority is usually empirically consistent with Asian Americans and with their advantageous position relative to other minorities if not always to Anglos.²² On the other hand, discrimination, which finds its roots in the influence of these stereotypes and images, still inhibits the progress of Asian Americans and the basic survival and progress of other minority groups in the United States. This occurs because this standard, as allegedly exemplified by the model Asian Americans, is in fact a standard propagated by the majority culture of the dominant group. Rather than positively impacting all minority groups, it sets up a divisive wedge between Asian Americans and the other groups. Before they were the economic wedge to distract labor unrest, they were refashioned as a political and social hammer against other disadvantaged groups.²³ Thus Asian Americans have become pawns, a "teacher's pet" community, a group resented for their success, who are also targets of violence and hatred by other groups, yet still not even accepted by the dominant culture. This sets up an oppressive, catch-22 dynamic where Asian Americans are caught in the middle.

Since these stereotypes operate as authorities in place of history and literature, they in turn aggravate race relations.²⁴ These images, whether negative or "positive," end up dictating the conversation and setting up reference points for understanding people. In actuality Asian American success has become a race-relations failure.²⁵

Thus many Asian Americans have begun to work to dismantle the model minority myth by seeking out occupations in journalism and law, as well as becoming writers, literature professors, and artists. Moreover, these Asian Americans are breaking the mold by becoming more active in their local communities and addressing social and political issues, especially those concerning efforts to improve race relations. For Wu, the model minority is a stock character that plays multiple roles in our racial drama. For Asian Americans to participate as viable members in society, this myth should be rejected for three reasons:

First, the myth is a gross simplification that is not accurate enough to be seriously used for understanding ten million people. Second, it conceals within itself an insidious statement about African Americans along the lines of the inflammatory taunt, “They made it; why can’t you?” Third, it is abused both to deny Asian Americans’ experience of racial discrimination and to turn Asian Americans into a racial threat.²⁶

Thus “declining the laudatory title of model minority is fundamental to gaining Asian American autonomy.”²⁷

Continued work in the deconstruction of these images will lead to freedom in Asian American identity development as well as the potential for improved interactions between these minority groups. It will take off the shackles that prevent them from having greater agency not only in their actions and decisions but also in developing their very personhood and community identity. The disassembling needs to happen not only in the loaded perceptions of the dominant culture; it needs to happen in the minds and spirits of those oppressed who perpetuate the system by being silent or avoiding the issues. No doubt, this work requires acknowledging what has happened in the past by honestly looking back, and a bold articulation of the injustices and problems, as well as looking at what is before us in the present, connecting the stories, and creatively imagining solutions as we journey forward.

* * *

My family has traveled back to Korea together just a handful of times. To visit their respective families for various reasons, my

parents have gone back once or twice by themselves. It is incredibly expensive, and of course, the flight is so long. It just isn't the most appealing in terms of actual travel. But I really do love it. The first time our family took part of the summer vacation to spend time with our family in Korea was after I finished fourth grade. It was like waiting for Christmas morning; I was feverish with excitement and didn't sleep a wink. I can still remember the early-morning drive to the airport in Denver, and then the layover in San Francisco, and then boarding the final plane to stay up the rest of the night watching *The Never Ending Story*. All I remember about the movie is the scene with the boy sitting on top of the pink dragon-labrador creature flying through the sky, perhaps traveling to see his family, too, or maybe to simply go home.

I sat next to my mom, who was giddy like a young schoolgirl. When she was awake, she kept trying to get me to at least try closing my eyes, but she ended up falling asleep pretty soundly for most of the time, looking very much like the girl I saw in black-and-white photos from her album. She lay curled up on her side with an airplane blanket tucked under her chin. My brother and I played games, but he fell asleep, too. My father seemed like he was asleep for most of the time; he woke up only for the meals and promptly went back to sleep. It was as if he were trying to take advantage of having more than eight hours of sleep at a time, catching up on the little sleep he normally got because of work. He probably still felt the usual stress of everyday life, paying the mortgage, and traveling with two young children, but the worry that normally cut lines across his forehead, etched permanently, had melted away, and I could see peace in his face as he snored quietly.

My eyes eventually turned bloodshot as I kept them pried open the whole time, so my mom put Visine drops in them to make me presentable when we arrived in Seoul to be picked up by my father's older brother's family. I just didn't want to miss a single moment. When we finally got off the plane, I found myself drinking in every sight and sound. Stepping into the humid air was the first shock, like running into a wall; it knocked me back as I felt short of breath. I took a couple more breaths, and then after what seemed like an eternity going through customs, we met my father's extended family for the first time. It was awkward but strangely beautiful; through the traditional bows and painfully shy smiles, I could definitely sense the burgeoning delight that only comes from a happy family reunion. My father's eyes were bright, and my mother laughed easily and

told jokes. My cousins chattered excitedly with us and their parents. I just tried to take it all in. The rest of the time was a whirlwind of staying with both my father and my mother's siblings and their families, in the city of Seoul, outside of Pusan, the seaport, and in the little village out in the country where my father's parents had spent almost their entire lives. Initially when we drove up to my paternal grandparents' village, my heart sank because it seemed so primitive; I was a little frightened even. It ended up being the place I loved the most, and where I felt a profound sense of belonging and home. We traveled out to the rice fields. A neighbor caught a little bird for us to have as a friend during our stay, and cows would often walk through the front yard to visit with us. My favorite memory was the walk with my grandmother to the open-air market that seemed to be a few miles away. She tightly clutched my hand in hers and held an empty container with the other hand. Soon the container would be overflowing with food. She carried it on top of her head as easily as though it were an extension of her. This image is etched into my mind as a reminder of the contentment in the journey being a part of me, too, through her.

During times of feeling tossed and turned by storms of confusion caused by the world on this side of the ocean, I forgot some of those moments, especially the feeling of being rooted in a family and story that was so tangible. The next chance I had to go back was in 2004, this time during the summer after I had graduated from seminary. I went as a chaplain to a group of late high school and college-aged Korean American students sponsored by the Presbyterian Church (USA) and the National Korean Presbyterian Council Men's group. I saw it as a wonderful opportunity that fell into my lap. What better way to transition back into the "real world" after completing my seminary education than with a trip back to the motherland? My objective, according to the brochure, was to help these young souls engage in a spiritual pilgrimage. I facilitated discussions about how visiting the large Korean Presbyterian churches, perusing the historical museums and war memorials, and visiting the Presbyterian Seminary were pertinent to our faith. What did it add to our faith lives? How did it shape our faith perspectives? Where are we in these stories? I realized afterward that these questions were for me, too, questions that I had been living since that first journey across the ocean. The discussions were rich and lovely and awakened so many possibilities in me.

But the most important realization that trip solidified for me was the same conclusion I had come to after graduation from seminary:

I feel most at home in the questions. I originally thought when I stepped into my first theology class that I would find the solutions to everything about God, faith, and the church, right then and there, even in the books I carried in my backpack. I ended up leaving after three years with questions spilling out of my already-full bag. Eventually I realized that I felt most at home in the questions because they compel me to journey. But I do so with assurance and hope, whether the journey leads me physically across oceans or spiritually across whole worlds, because I know that no matter what obstacles or barriers, I have the strength and light of my family ahead of me, behind me, and next to me.