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## THE SECOND QUESTION

JENNY-LIN SMITH

I was minding my own business, sitting with a mug of chamomile tea and my Chinese homework in my lap, when I noticed him noticing me. He had brown hair and glasses and was wearing a university sweatshirt and jeans. I was a college freshman at a Christian weekend retreat, and I was sure I hadn't met him. His gaze wasn't aggressive, or even that uncomfortable really, but I hoped he would stop gawking and come over to introduce himself. He was standing in a small group of Japanese girls. I trusted their judgement. I smiled at him to signal that I caught him looking and that it was safe to approach. He left the group of girls he was with and before I could even squeak out the first hello—

“Let me guess,” he said. “You’re Korean!”

I shook my head. “Um, Chinese.”

“Oh, thanks. My friends over there are trying to teach me how to tell the differences between Asian ethnicities. I know you don't all look the same.”

Why is it always white boys who say rude things? I'm sorry, it's not just the white boys. Many people are unintentionally insensitive about race, myself included. But in my experience, it's the white boys who are the main culprits and feel entitled to ask their weird questions.

An Asian in Montana generates mystery, which I've never understood given the first Japanese and Chinese immigrants arrived in America in the 1800s. Asians have been here for a while now, and they're here to stay. It's disconcerting when university students hear my perfectly unaccented English and still ask how long I will stay in Montana. I think their ears play tricks on them. Besides, the Albertson's grocery clerks have told me that I have great articulation.

My community in high school already knew I was adopted from China and that English was my first language. They speculated

that the most “Chinese” thing about me was my affinity for white sticky rice and my gifted ability to eat with chopsticks. Now at the bright age of 21, I am constantly reminded that I am Chinese.

I understand why people ask stereotype-based questions and I don’t always mind them. There’s a tone you can hear in people’s voice when they are genuinely curious.

“So, do you...I mean... well, what I’m trying to say, er ask... do you eat a lot of rice?” my boyfriend’s mom asked. She used the delicate approach, but she was sincere.

Sometimes the tone isn’t there, and any reply just confirms their expectations they already had about you. Old ladies in church ask my hometown friend where she is from then they ask me and they don’t believe me. They pause and wait for me to clarify. Oh, wait, you want to know where I am really from. Okay, why didn’t you say so?

I understand why people ask stereotype-based questions because I do it too. When I see someone dressed to the nines or in a costume, it makes me curious. Otherwise, I wouldn’t have given them a second look. My curiosity sometimes discriminates by race too. I get excited when I hear accented English or a foreign language. I always turn my head, smiling, trying to identify the country or region. And then I look at him or her or them and listen to a babble of words I don’t understand to see if I was right.

I’ve spent some time in China during the summers, and I get excited when I see white people or black people or basically anyone who isn’t Chinese in China. One day I was enjoying a large portion of tomato-egg rice in a crummy Chinese cafeteria when the bell above the door rang. I turned to see two white men step into the restaurant. Their bewildered stares at the menu confirmed my suspicion that they were indeed foreigners. In broken Chinese and finger pointing, they ordered their dishes and sat down.

I approached them. “Where are you guys from?” I asked.

They paused and looked at one another, before answering slowly, “A-mer-i-ca.”

I smiled, mischievously. “That’s great. I’m from Montana.” I said, enunciating just as clearly. Not as slowly.

I don’t know how to talk about race. I don’t like to talk about it. I was raised in white culture. I value integrity, critical thinking, and productivity. I believe in a diligent work ethic to get where you want to be in life. As a child, I used to eat Cheerios with slices of banana,

consume episodes of *Dragon Tales* every Saturday morning, and earn an allowance by picking up rocks in my parents' backyard. I think it's natural that I would feel pretty assimilated. I'm more than happy to acknowledge how race might affect others, but I don't like to think about how race might affect me.

I can't tell you that I feel like a victim of oppression and racism because I don't feel wronged. Before more than 100,000 Japanese Americans were relocated to internment camps in 1942, Japanese women were burning letters and photographs from home, packing their kimonos, and hiding Buddhas in the attic, doing anything they could to distance themselves from their home country and prove their loyalty as immigrant Americans. But the Japanese got put away anyway. They gave up their homes, they lost their jobs, and they sent their sons off to fight the Axis powers. It's an extreme example, but it's what I think about when I think of Asian discrimination in America. This isn't my experience.

I used to think Asian discrimination in the United States was a non-issue, certainly in contrast to discrimination that the African American community faces because generally speaking, Asians have been viewed as a successful minority. Most Asian immigrants in the 1800s kept their heads low and their voices quiet, choosing to assimilate to Western culture and minimize cultural differences. The Asian communities continue to do this today. "Don't you see, Jenny? That's part of the problem," my friend Kim, half-Korean, told me.

Asian Americans suppress their culture and heritage, as if becoming more "white" or more western is an upgrade. Some of my Asian friends' only learned English, their parents afraid their sons or daughters would be teased at school for an accent. Other parents did so because, when they moved to America, they decided to ascribe to the culture of their new home. In some cases, it's the children who don't want to learn their ancestor's tongue because they think it sounds strange or too different. It's a subtle discrimination, and one I don't believe the general public tries to reinforce. Collectivism, however, is so embedded in Asian American community that it's difficult for many traditional families to want to share their stories, much less their thoughts and opinions.

More obvious Asian discrimination is in the American media. Asian Americans receive little to no representation, and much of the

attention reinforces negative Asian stereotypes: broken English or funny accents, nerd-geniuses lacking social skills, bad driving, shy or submissive personalities, cultural nuances, or authoritarian parents. Think of Lilly in *Pitch Perfect* who maintains a nearly silent role throughout the movie until her beatboxing skill is discovered, or the classic ending scene of the Chinese waiters singing “Fa ra ra ra” instead of “Fa la la la” in *A Christmas Story*. I know, I laugh too. I can only guess it’s because some of these racial profiles aren’t seen as stereotypes at all.

These examples are considered microaggressions. A psychological definition of microaggressions are everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership. I think the “intentional or unintentional” clause makes microaggressions especially hard to identify. The first time my eyes were opened to microaggressions in my life was in my American Literature class. Rather, it was the first time I personally related to a microaggression. Asians call it the “Second Question.”

“Let me ask you a question,” my Vietnamese literature professor, Quan Ha, said to me. “Have you been asked, ‘Where are you from?’”

I smiled, knowingly, and nodded. He often teased our class about Asian standards: straight A’s, Asian neatness, Asian revenge. Today, however, my class was studying race theory. I wasn’t sure how he would approach the topic.

“Have you been asked twice-- a second time? What do you say?” He pressed.

I shrugged. “I know people are just curious, so I usually don’t take it personally. I guess I tell them where I was born.”

“You tell them what they want to hear,” he said, critically. He addressed my friend Chase.

“Do people ask you where you’re from? What do you say?”

“I’m from California.”

“Do they believe you?”

Chase said, “Generally, yes.”

“Why do people believe you the first time, but ask Jenny and me a second time?” No one said a word. “Me,” he continued in his

Vietnamese-accented English, “I never tell them what they want to hear. If I am asked, ‘Where are you from?’ I say ‘Missoula.’ I know what kind of answer they want, to hear that I’m from Vietnam.” He looked at me. “I refuse to answer the second question because it perpetuates the belief that Asians are foreigners in this country.”

What do I experience when people ask me the Second Question? I’m not sure yet. Is asking the Second Question rude? Or have I been trained to perceive it as rude? It’s difficult for me to discern. I do not believe American culture needs to be more censored or sensitive for the sake of politeness, however, we do need to be more aware of the heart behind those comments or questions. Are we genuinely curious, or are we seeking to confirm or reject a preconceived stereotype? What makes race-comments inappropriate or oppressive are the generalized assumptions behind them. What makes race-questions rude or offensive is not ignorance—it’s when individuals expect certain responses that affirm their suspicions.

Discussing race topics will always be a challenge. I don’t think white people should feel like they must walk on eggshells around ethnic minorities. I think ethnic minorities ought to recognize when questions come from a curious heart. Some of my friends insist, “I don’t think about race when I see people, I just see everyone as the same.” The truth is, it’s more honoring when we have conversations about ethnic and cultural differences, seeking personal experience or perspectives rather than pretending to be colorblind. Many ethnic minorities don’t identify as “everyone,” and are happy to share their unique cultural and individual perspective if someone is willing to ask and to listen.

I find myself in a unique intersection of ethnic and cultural identity. I was born in China, and am ethnically Chinese, therefore I identify as Chinese. Yet, I was raised in Western culture, and I have a typical “white” American family, so I also see myself as culturally American.

Simple enough to understand, right? Plenty of people, however, have expressed an opinion of how Chinese or how American I am. When I am in China, I am not “American” enough for the Chinese nationals. I am not “Chinese” enough for my American teammates because I do not speak Chinese fluently. When I am in the United States, my Chinese friends see me as 100 percent American, but the everyday white person commonly mistakes me for a Chinese

foreign exchange student. Even when I went to a completely different country I'm told what I am. The first thing my Kenyan host told me was, "You, you are not Chinese! You are an American." I tried to explain the difference between ethnicity and nationality. "No, if you get in trouble, the Chinese government will do nothing for you." It's hard to argue with that logic.

I know I am free to identify however I please, but I do feel displaced at times. Now that I've begun this exploration of racial identity, I've begun to realize it's affecting me. I just don't know how yet. Maybe I thought I belonged in a certain cultural identity, and now I am conscious that some members of that cultural group see me as different than "them," or never considered me apart of "them" at all. Racial questions or racial comments make me feel othered an outsider looking at something I thought I was a part.

Do you know what that feels like? Do you know what it feels like to feel "othered"? For me, it happens when:

- When people refer to me as an "oriental girl."
- When the boy across the aisle asks me, "Did you receive more attention in elementary school because you are Chinese?"
- When my "white" boyfriend says he knows people who have an issue with us being in a relationship.
- When the Chinese girl says, "It's good for you to have an Asian face without the accent, you'll get further in your career."
- When English-learning Chinese college students I just met are disappointed to have me as their language partner.
- When the Chinese boy said, "Your skin is really dark. It's not a good thing."
- When the older white man spat at me; I was five years old.

Race impacts us in ways that we don't even realize. Once you see it, you see it everywhere. This is a snapshot of a young woman who is trying to understand why race has become a more prevalent—and more sensitive—topic in her life. This is me, at age 21, realizing that I am treated differently—for better or worse—because of race. This is me sharing a piece of my reality with you and asking you to believe me.