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Asian American Women Faculty: Stereotypes and Triumphs

Celeste Fowles Nguyen

Asian American women are a small but growing population of higher education faculty in the United States. In 1980–81, there were 252 female Asian full professors in the United States, which increased to 1,267 in 1999–2000 (Hune, 2006, p. 28). Of all Asian Pacific American faculty, 19% were female in 1979–80, and 30% were female in 1999–2000. Asian American women faculty work primarily at the junior level, and are less likely than Asian Pacific American men to hold tenure (Hune, 2006, p. 28). The statistics give a general overview of Asian American women in the academy, but the individual narratives of these women reveal the distinct challenges, strategies, and triumphs of working in the traditionally White male academy.

Each Asian American female faculty has unique personal experiences, including family histories, immigration stories, and professional paths. *Asian American* encompasses a wide variety of ethnicities, distinct by geography, culture, language, economics, and history. Chinese, Malay, South Indian Asian, Vietnamese, Japanese, and Hmong are just a few examples of the variety of backgrounds that constitute Asian Pacific American. Additionally, the identities of the individual people varies widely. Some define themselves by their ethnicity, or as Asian, Asian American, or Asian Pacific Asian Islander.

Struggles with identity are just one of the common challenges of Asian women faculty in universities. In their narratives, some women express surprise at how others define them as compared to how they define themselves. Jing Lin (2006) recounts that when she joined a U.S. university, “overnight my identity changed ... [suddenly] I was a Chinese representing China’s 1.3 billion people ... for the first time I was defined by my race” (p. 295). Stereotypes are another challenge common to many narratives, most often as

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a “model minority” or “lotus flower” (Shrake, 2006, p. 183). The model minority stereotypes Asians as hard workers who quietly achieve high results. The lotus flower, or geisha stereotype, defines Asian females as feminine and passive. Immigrant Asian faculty face additional challenges about their credibility due to their accents. These three stereotypes, of model minority, geisha girl, and nonnative speaker, present challenges to many Asian female faculty. This essay explores the stereotypes Asian women faculty face and these women’s coping strategies and unique triumphs.

Model Minority

One prevalent stereotype of Asian Americans is the model minority. The perception is of “uncomplaining perseverance and submissiveness to authority” (Shrake, 2006, p. 184). The model-minority myth “assumes feminine qualities of passivity, submissiveness, self-effacement and reticence to speak out” (Shrake, 2006, p. 184). The stereotype ignores Asian Americans’ wide variety of ethnicities and socioeconomic backgrounds. It also mistakenly labels Asians as overly successful and overly represented in higher education (Hune, 2006). The model-minority stereotype groups all Asians together, and ignores the unique needs of subgroups and individuals (Hune, 2006).

These dynamics play out in Asian American female faculty classrooms, where the teacher is expected to be nonconfrontational and uncritical of mainstream America. Akindes (2002) unpacks the model-minority myth with students, exploring it in relation to her role as a teacher. Shrake (2006) found that when she addressed societal inequities, students responded in a negative and intimidating way. They questioned her in class and confronted her style in course evaluations as “too aggressive and outspoken” (p. 185). She was “supposed to conform to, and not challenge, the model minority stereotype” (Shrake, 2006, p. 185). For Shrake (2006), the powerful force of the model-minority stereotype led her to initially accept the role cast upon her: “conforming to acceptable stereotypes is the most convenient strategy to avoid unpleasant and stressful situations, I took

on the model minority traits of compliance and quiet accommodation” (p. 187). Masquerading as a model minority was her way of handling stereotyped expectations.

Geisha

Asian women are also stereotyped as a “geisha” or “lotus flower,” in which they are objectified as exotic women for men. The lotus flower stereotype is “based on western male sexual fantasy, a product of colonial and military powers interwoven with sexual domination” (Shrake, 2006, p. 188). The portrayal is evident in mainstream Hollywood movies like *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). In the movie, geisha status is the highest honor for the most beautiful, disciplined young women, who are sculpted to meet men’s vision of an ideal woman. The geisha is an art object for men’s enjoyment.

In the classroom, the sexualized objectification of Asian women causes challenges for the faculty. Shrake (2006) finds that being considered delicate and feminine devalues authority. She explains, “being perceived persistently as exotic, subservient, passive, and nonassertive, I internalized these stereotypes and thus behaved in accordance with these stereotypes expectations” (Shrake, 2006, p. 188). Shrake (2006) put on the mask of the “lotus blossom” to meet the expectations of the dominant group in her university. Additionally, the geisha myth feeds mainstream thinking, especially White males’ belief of Asian American women as “sexual objects par excellence” (Shrake, 2006, p. 188). The objectification of Asian women leads to sexual harassment and derogatory behavior towards Asian American female faculty.

Nonnative Speakers

In the narratives of immigrant Asian women faculty, professional conflicts also arise is due to the expectations based on their accents. Linguistic and cultural conflicts occur, which Liang (2006) refers to as “nonnative linguistic peripheralization” (p. 85). Students and colleagues challenge nonnative English speakers’ credibility. Cindu

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Thomas-George, a South Asian professor in Illinois, recounts when she mispronounced “pseudo” for three years:

I am very aware there are times I look like I am not credible. I address that. I say we need diversity and we need to accept all people. I show my students you don't have to be perfect and you don't have to be elite to be a professor. I defy that stereotype in being. [personal communication, October 15, 2011]

Her mispronunciations impacted the climate of her classroom. Thomas-George utilized these moments as teaching opportunities.

Other Asian females recount similar challenges. For three native Chinese-speaking female professors, the classroom was a “minefield of student resistance and negative attitudes” (Liang, 2006, p. 85). The professors experienced “internalized peripheralization of linguistic self and socioculturally marginalized professional identities” (Liang, 2006, p. 86). Students challenged their authority in the classroom and their credibility in their fields. Some resistant students confronted the teachers during class, while others expressed hostility in course evaluations.

Strategies

Many of the women faculty address the challenges of straddling two cultures, and not feeling completely a part of either (Lin, 2006). One common thread in the narratives was finding one's own unique voice in the classroom and institution. Shrake (2006) experienced “unmasking” to shed away the layers of other people's stereotyped expectations of her. This involved changing her teaching style to adopt more authority. Akindes (2002) struggled with “imposter syndrome,” and sought to “decolonize” herself after her experience as a colonized person in Hawaii. The Chinese immigrant faculty interviewed by Liang (2006) recounted how they turned their ability to speak multiple languages into an asset: “They turned their linguistic disadvantage and their experiences with it into a resource for their own teaching and for

their students' learning" (p. 99). For all these women faculty, finding their own unique voice was critical to succeeding in the academy.

Finding one's voice is complimented by enlisting mentors. The support of mentors was a significant theme across many of the narratives. One Chinese immigrant faculty explained her relationship with a department chair: "She listened to me, gave me suggestions and backed me up ... I felt really fortunate to have her as my mentor" (Liang, 2006, p. 96). Thomas-George recounts an Asian, gay, male faculty member who mentored her: "I credit that for my career ... He taught me to realize that I'm worth something. He showed me with how to deal with being a faculty of color" (personal communication, October 15, 2011). Rong (2002) recommends that other faculty join her in the "multiple-mentor experience" (p. 238). Different mentors can advise in different areas, such as teaching or politics. Finding the support of mentors made a meaningful difference for these Asian women faculty of color.

Many of the narratives address turning difficult situations with students into teaching moments. As uncomfortable as confrontations can be in the classroom, they opened up opportunities for learning. Faculty also described changing their learning style to a more student-centered approach. Immigrant faculty, for example, utilized visual teaching methods to compliment their speaking (Liang, 2006). A South Asian professor recounted the story of a student who assumed she had bad grammar since she was not originally from the United States, even though she was raised speaking English in a former British colony (Asher, 2006). Her response was at first emotional, but then she told the class, "I will answer the question. But first let's discuss where the question is coming from" (Asher, 2006, p. 163). She shifted the tension in the question into a pedagogical opportunity.

Triumphs

Asian women's presence in the classroom brings unfamiliar perspectives for students at predominantly White institutions. For example, Akindes (2002) taught her students to relearn the history of Japanese internment camps through the perspective of

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the Japanese. One student researched the local camps and rewrote a local newspaper article about the camps from a new historical perspective. Through exposure to new viewpoints, the student was able to expand her horizons and reappropriate history. For Rong (2002), the dominant culture of the university was clearly exclusionary to faculty of color. She challenged the administration to alter policies around curriculum and tenure, and succeeded in making gradual changes to the institutional practices.

Asian women faculty persevere through many challenges and stereotypes to bring unique contributions to the academy. Asian female faculty serve as mentors to students of color and junior faculty of color. Thomas-George explained, "I have Mexican students, Indian students, Black students who say I want to be just like you. Just my presence in the classroom is positive and can make a positive impact on students" (personal communication, October 15, 2011). Asian female faculty bring unique perspectives to institutions, and in some cases bring about social and institutional change. Rong (2002) shares her experiences with others to encourage women of color in higher education: "If I can do it, then you can do it. And you can do it with a sense of humor and forgiveness" (p. 137). Each of the individual narratives draws attention to the unique challenges of Asian women faculty. By sharing their stories, these faculty educate and inspire others to learn from their strategies and triumphs.

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