

New Zealand Herald session with Tessie Chen, Tze Ming Mok and Alistair Kwun Tuesday 24 May, 2005

We are three random Chinese people, and can't 'represent' Asians. Can you?

What is an 'Asian'? Asia Minor, the Asian Subcontinent, East Asia and Southeast Asia span the globe from Turkey to Tokyo, from Siberia to Sarawak. So when the media refers to 'Asian crime', 'Asian immigration', 'Asian youth', 'Asian food', who are they talking about? We're not sure. And we're meant to be the Asians.

Some 'Asians' you may or may not have been talking about (off the top of our heads...)

By diaspora generation:

- 19th century-1950s – 'Old Generation' Chinese – the goldminers, market gardeners and war-refugees of yore, almost exclusively Cantonese.
- 'Old Generation' Indian – eg the Rupas of Freemans Bay - as early a presence as the Chinese, large Gujurati contingent
- 1950s-70s Colombo Plan science/medicine and technology students and professional Southeast and South Asian migrants (ie from English-speaking Commonwealth countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, India), eg Tze Ming's parents.
- 1960s-70s Southeast Asian refugee populations from Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, often ethnic Chinese (mostly Cantonese and other Southern Chinese dialect groups), eg Lim Chhour of Lim's supermarket fame (Cambodian Chinese).
- 1960s-70s Mainland Chinese refugees fleeing the Cultural Revolution
- 1960s-70s (and prior to then, and ongoing) – The Saiga – Chinese Samoans. Checked out Tana Umaga's eyelids? Think 'Pat Lam' is a Samoan name? *Sapasui*?
- post-1987 – the Indo-Fijian wave, as distinct from the India-Indians.
- post-1989 – Mainland Chinese refugees fleeing the post-Tiananmen Square crackdown
- mid-1990s so-called 'Asian Invasion' wave, predominantly business-migrant families from Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, fewer mainland Chinese. Often came with school-aged children who we now call the 1.5 generation, eg Tessie Chen and those who followed her. Strong Hong Kong contingent 'fleeing' the 1997 handover of Hong Kong back to Mainland China.
- post-1999 – Mainland Chinese refugees fleeing the crackdown on the China Democracy Party
- 1990s-2000s – international students here without their families from all throughout East, South and Southeast Asia, including Japan. Strong recent Mainland Chinese presence. Includes secondary school students, language-school students, and university students. Many would stay in New Zealand if they could find jobs.
- 2001-2005 – Nearly all of the Tampa refugees and their families are of the Hazara ethnic group of Afghanistan (central Asia), descendents of the Mongolian Khans.
- 2000s – the skilled-migrant category migrants. Recently the mainland Chinese presence is very strong. Often married with young children, and encountering serious difficulties finding work that matches their skill-level.
- There are countless other national and ethnic groups, and a lot of people not bounded by these generational clumps. We are just three random Chinese people who can't give you the full picture. For example, if you think the differences between Chinese diaspora generations and countries-of origin is complex, the South Asian population is probably even more complex. You'll have to ask them.

Important geopolitical, cultural, social, linguistic or ethnic differences:

- Mainland China vs Taiwan
- Mandarin-speaking vs Cantonese-speaking
- Korea vs Japan
- Mainland China vs Japan
- Taiwanese cultural affinity with Japan vs every other East and Southeast Asian country having historical enmity with Japan
- Chinese-Taiwanese vs Taiwanese-Taiwanese (see Pakistan and Mohajirs)
- Southeast Asian Chinese vs East-Asian Chinese
- Sinhalese vs Tamil
- Fiji-Indians vs India-Indians vs South African Indians vs Singaporean/Malaysian Indians
- Northern Indian vs Southern Indian
- 'Malay' (indigenous ethnicity of Malaysia, aka 'bumiputra') vs 'Malaysian' (citizenship status of person from Malaysia, who in NZ are mostly Chinese).
- India vs Pakistan vs Bangladesh
- Mohajir Pakistani vs non-Mohajir Pakistani
- Old generation vs 1st generation local born/2nd generation vs 1.5 generation vs recent migrant vs International Student
- the list goes on...

Sub-group twists:

- ethnic-Korean Japanese
- ethnic-Manchurian Taiwanese
- ethnic-Japanese Taiwanese (eg Takeshi Kaneshiro from the House of Flying Daggers)
- ethnic-Korean Mainland Chinese
- Peranakans aka Straits Chinese (eg 'Nonya' restaurants, referring to Peranakan women) – 'indigenised' Malay-speaking ethnic-Chinese, of the Malaccan Straits (eg Lee Kuan Yew)
- indigenous Taiwanese (Austronesian/Polynesian)
- Muslim ethnic groups from Mainland China (eg Hui, Uighur, Kazakh...)
- the list goes on...

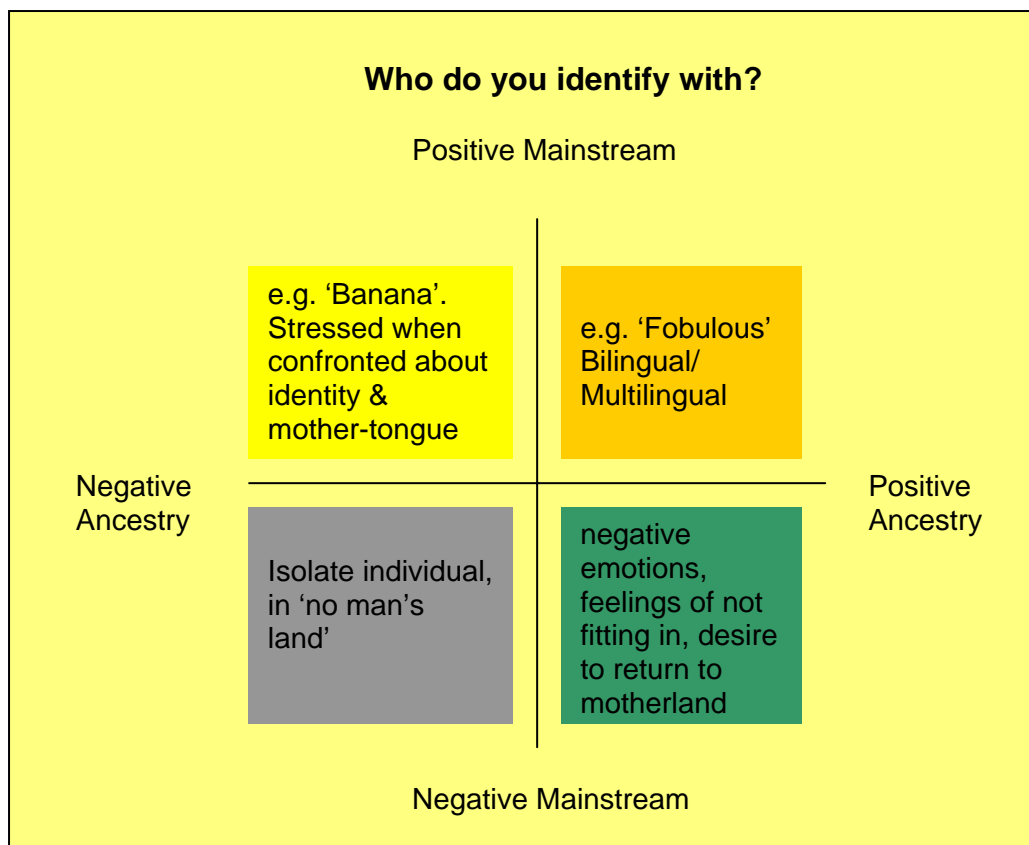
You see why it is annoying when we are all lumped together? And why, if you do lump us together for no good reason, it just makes you look ignorant? Asian communities notice immediately if a situation is being misrepresented, skewed, or sensationalised to feed anxieties. And we will take our dollars elsewhere.

What can you do about it?

Key issues

1. Stereotypes

You all know it is wrong to perpetuate negative stereotypes. But you may not realise that for minorities whose right to be here is constantly challenged, that stereotypes strike at the very heart of our identities, and have the power to **seriously destabilise our feelings of security and belonging**. Our families live under constant stress, battling with not only discrimination, but also self-doubt about our ethnic and national identities. When the odd migrant cracks, we all get blamed. This further strains our love for being New Zealanders and for being "Asian". [See the 'Who do you identify with?' graph below.]



2. Conflicting stereotypes

We can tell that newspapers play stereotypes very consciously, and sometimes feel 'guilty'. But from our perspective, **it's not good enough to 'balance' a sensationalist, negatively stereotypical story by running a feel-good stereotype story** nearby, eg one page 'Asian youth crime!', next page 'Chinese piano prodigy!' If you think this is the best you can do, then you underestimate your ability as a journalist to **seek out the real issues beneath the stereotypes** and incorporate them within a story. It is worth noting that the stereotype of the 'rich Asian' does not apply to a lot of people, particularly the most recent generation of skilled-migrant category migrants who appear to be experiencing the worst underemployment in the country.

3. The answer to our problems is good journalism

Lack of support is the biggest social issue for migrants. But the analysis usually gets traded away for sensationalism – even though **real insight into people's lives is a good story.** Don't underestimate your audience. Stereotypes attract because people like to think they know about other people. Therefore, **people might also think real facts and real Asian people's perspectives are interesting.**

4. There's nothing particularly 'Asian' about the social problems of migrants

Migrants have some key problems in common across immigrant groups. When people are not supported in a new environment, there will always be strain and trouble and exploitation – **there's nothing particularly 'Asian' about this.** New migrants and international students are drawn into NZ for their skills and money, but when they arrive, the lack of support conflicts with what was advertised. This generates a sense of mistrust, disappointment and betrayal - this is not an exclusively 'Asian' experience either.

5. Lift your game or get shown up

Sensationalist and negative reporting about 'Asians' turns people off mainstream media. **Ethnic media is earning a better reputation for accurate reporting** on issues in Asian communities. WTV and Skykiwi are scooping you, feeding you tip-offs, and exposing shoddy reportage in the mainstream media. **What are you going to do about it?**

6. When it's okay to say 'Asian': Asian Pride

There is no 'Asian' community. We live in different neighbourhoods, speak different languages, have different class backgrounds, and have roots in countries that are at each other's throats. The many generations of diasporas mean that experiences across families and communities, let alone different ethnic groups, are vastly different. All these things are obstacles to building the kind of 'pride' movement that has so changed the meaning of what it is to be, for example, Pacific or Maori in New Zealand over the last twenty-five years. **But we do need an Asian pride movement** to strengthen our communities and the identities and lives of our young people. To do that we need to start with a more complex and attenuated concept of being 'Asian' than is commonly (mis)understood in the mainstream media, and it's something we are working out for ourselves. Being 'Asian' in New Zealand incorporates so many diverse experiences that its only unifying factor is that we are responding jointly to a monolithic prejudice that has damaged our identities and lives. Asian organisations who take on the word 'Asian' when they communicate to mainstream media may do so because they want to reveal and celebrate the hidden and ignored aspects of those real, diverse experiences – eg the Asia New Zealand Foundation, or the Asian Film Festival, who are truly 'representing' for a diverse pan-ethnic identity based on a multicultural and internationalist ethos.

Quick tips:

- Be specific! If you know the ethnicity of the person you are reporting on, and it is somehow relevant to the story, report that ethnicity. There is no reason to use the word 'Asian' if you already know that the subject is eg. Chinese or Korean or Filipino.
- If you find yourself using the generic 'Asian' term, because you don't know the ethnicity of your subject, question your motives, your understanding of the situation, and the quality of your journalism. Because we will.
- If your subject chooses to identify as 'Asian' in a positive sense, it is probably a more complex identity than you may realise.
- Please do not assume, just because you have read the list on page 1, that you have a firm grasp of 'Asian' community dynamics.
- Don't think of moving outside your cultural knowledge as difficult. Help may just be a phone-call away. You could ask your neighbour, or a kid standing on a street corner. People will be happy to correct you on mistaken assumptions, misspellings, or any number of things that are easy to pick up but could make you look foolish to a lot of people if they are published in a national paper.
- However, if you 'acquire' a regular inside cultural/linguistic advisor, don't take their help for granted. Chinese culture for example, places a high value on reciprocity. Respect is gained and trust earned through good hospitality and returning favours.
- Don't assume that the 'Asian' journalist will have an inside handle on every 'Asian' story you throw at them. They might not be that kind of 'Asian' or appreciate being pigeonholed. It pays to check.
- Don't assume that just because an 'Asian' journalist has been assigned to a negatively-stereotyped 'Asian' story that this gets anyone off the hook.
- If the mainstream media provides accurate and specific cultural and social knowledge to the public, it could take credit for decreasing racism, rather than increasing racism against 'generic Asians'. Which would you prefer?
- Newsroom market imperatives appeal to the lowest common denominator with sensationalist stereotypes – realise that this reinforces institutional racism and make the choice to do something about it!
- Think how odd it would be if your next crime story was headlined 'Pakeha white-collar crime and high-income tax-evasion costs nation billions'.
- If things don't improve, we gonna come an' kung-fu your ass. It's an 'invasion', remember?