

solidarity across borders, from Ferguson to Palestine, from Flint to Yemen. These folks on the ground did not need the validation or respect of academia; in fact, historically, much of liberatory philosophy has originated outside the walls of academia. This realization allowed me to not constantly try (and fail miserably) to gain credence as a philosopher. It freed me, to a certain extent, from worrying about writing from the periphery, about my career as an academic, but rather to focus on matters of conscience, to center the issues that I am most concerned about. This education has given me the freedom to pursue projects that are not deemed substantial under academic measures of productivity but give me a meaningful sense of direction about how I want to progress. For example, last year I started a podcast dedicated to the life and works of Muslim women academics.³ I don't think it counts for a lot within academia, nor do I have incisive cutting-edge sound bites on my podcast. Rather, we talk about the mundanity of our lives, because it is within that mundanity that we find our lived truths. I want to keep pushing this podcast as long as I can, as this is something that I enjoy doing and where I know I am providing a platform to challenging what academia in general thinks of Muslim academic women. I see this as a way of moving past issues of mere inclusion that restrict our entry as tokens of our minority status and then restrain our scholarship to strictly perform within the language of academia.

But this second chance at my education is hopefully helping me redefine for myself what it means to be an academic, to engage theory with my lived experiences, to be a philosopher of Asian descent.

NOTES

1. Cressida Heyes, "Identity Politics," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2018/entries/identity-politics/>.
2. Sana Rizvi and Altheria Caldera, "Solidarity Across, Solidarity Within, Equity for All," in *Duoethnographic Encounters: Opening Spaces for Difficult Dialogues in Times of Uncertainty*, ed. Teressa Anne Fowler and Willow Samara Allen (New York: DIO Press, forthcoming).
3. *She Speaks: Academic Muslimahs*, podcast produced and hosted by Saba Fatima, <https://sites.google.com/view/academicmuslimahs>.

Thinking While Asian

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One of the more unexpected aspects of teaching at MCPHS University, a school with a large percentage of Asian pre-professional health-care students, is that I find myself serving as an informal adviser to many students. Often, Asian students who are less than enthusiastic about their education and career paths ask me, "How did you convince your parents to let you study philosophy?" I understand the context of the question. Like me, many of my students have recent immigrant roots. And they too have heard the common refrain, often from our parents, that the best way to strive

in a society where racism and xenophobia can derail one's life's path is through an education in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. I vividly recall the first time my mother warned me of racist obstacles that would be thrown my way like so many flaming barrels in the Donkey Kong video game (as she tried to speak my language). I had had a particular unpleasant experience in my high school's World History class. One of the assignments for the class required students to learn a cultural practice from a foreign land and demonstrate it in class. My Caucasian friend Jerry and I tapped a Korean friend's mother to teach us how to make sushi rolls. After our classroom presentation, our World History teacher informed Jerry that he had received an A- and I had received a B+. When I pressed him to explain the discrepancy, he replied, "Um, I mean, you already knew how to make sushi."

As my mother comforted me, she taught me a lesson that would be familiar to many Asian children: Words and essays are judged subjectively, but numbers and experimental results are objective. If you have the right number, no racist can dock you.

Of course, as I continued along the path of my education, post-Kuhnian philosophy would teach me about subjectivity in science. More importantly, I have learned that racism can always find a way. It doesn't matter whether one has a PhD in literature or in astrophysics. It doesn't matter whether one is rich or poor. It doesn't matter how much one's speech lacks the telltale accent that betrays one's naturalization history. The flaming barrels keep coming and there are no safe corners to hide.

The subtle pressure to find the path of least racism, I suspect, steers plenty of young Asians to eschew the humanities and pursue STEM majors. Data from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) show that between 2017 and 2018, Asians are three times more likely than their Caucasian counterparts to major in computer and information sciences than philosophy and religious studies.¹ According to NCES, in 2011-2012, 8 percent of all undergraduates are immigrants and second-generation college students comprise another 16 percent.² Although recent Asian immigrants are coming to the US with a higher level of education and socioeconomic status, a significant number of Asian immigrants live in economically desperate conditions. A 2008 comprehensive study of Asian American poverty shows that almost 1 in 5 Asians in New York City live below the poverty line and another 41 percent live in low-income household (twice the federal poverty line). The respective numbers of non-Hispanic whites in New York City are 11 percent and 24 percent.³

For students who come from impoverished backgrounds, a college degree represents a path for their families to escape economic desperation. Given the oft-repeated claim that STEM majors enjoy some of the highest "returns on investment," it is unsurprising that first- and second-generation Asian immigrants tend to pursue degrees in science, technology, engineering, or mathematics. Indeed, at my institution where the vast majority of students are pre-professional health-care students, over 25 percent of our students are of Asian descent. A doctorate in pharmacy

(PharmD), for instance, requires six years of training (undergraduate and graduate combined) and promises a job with a six-figure starting salary. The nudge towards a STEM education is as much about the avoidance of racism as it is about economic necessities. The common professional advice “follow your passion” is admirable, but it would be irresponsible if I were to ignore the socioeconomic reality of many Asian families when counseling my students.

I took it for granted that, as a college student, I had to pursue an education and a professional track that would allow me to support my mother. Although well-educated, she struggled mightily in the United States to secure a livable income. She worked as a store clerk for an art supply shop, taught tai chi on the side to senior citizens, and translated for the court system. Even with three jobs, she barely made enough to cover our expenses. My sisters and I grew up with no health insurance and mindful of the fact that we lived without a safety net. Our education was the only way we could build a firm foundation. I yearned for a future in which every step did not feel like a gamble.

With a contrarian instinct, I did not want to follow the path of my Asian friends and pursue a STEM major. The experience of witnessing my mother maltreated by petty government bureaucrats and sleazy landlords convinced me that I should become a lawyer. I could advocate for those too vulnerable to defend themselves while making a decent living. Politics was the obvious pre-law major and I was entirely prepared to continue on to law school after graduation. My summers spent working at various law firms showed me that I had no love for drafting and revising legal documents. Yet the misery of being a paralegal did not dent my resolve.

Around graduation, my then girlfriend’s father chatted with me about the legal profession. A prominent construction lawyer in the Greater Boston area, he was concerned about my career choice. He warned, “In my twenty years of litigation, I have never seen an Asian lawyer.” It had nothing to do with their competence; rather, he explained, potential clients would simply decline to retain Asian lawyers because they thought of Asians as too meek to be good litigators. His well-meaning advice pushed me to rethink my plan. I wrote to the law school whose offer of admission I had accepted and withdrew. Years later, when Asian investors started to pour money into the Greater Boston area, he would tell me that he was wrong and that he wished I had pursued a legal career; Asian lawyers, particularly those who were fluent in Mandarin or Cantonese, which I was, were a hot commodity.

The pivot to pursuing a graduate degree in philosophy was quick. At the time, Tufts University’s Master’s Degree Program in Philosophy did not require GRE scores for admission. Given the lateness of my change of plan, I applied knowing little about the program and its quality. From there, my educational and professional path was a foregone conclusion; after all, a master’s degree in philosophy was not the launching pad of a well-paying job. The two years I spent at Tufts cultivated a deep affection for the camaraderie of academic philosophy and the excitement of trying out wild ideas.

I was drawn to the philosophy of language; my teachers successfully convinced me that the philosophy of language was the most foundational of all philosophy. There was also the fact that, as an immigrant, my linguistic intuitions were weak. Ryle’s example of a categorical mistake, “She came home in a sedan chair and a flood of tears,” struck my Cantonese ears as perfectly appropriate, if not wonderfully playful. I wanted to study the philosophy of language because I had convinced myself that when these linguistic intuitions became natural, I would be fully integrated. That moment never came. Even now, every sentence I write feels like the construction of a formal sentence in logic: Did I follow all the rules correctly? Have I ensured that the subjects and the verbs agree? The ubiquitous grammatical exceptions in English have led me to give up on my hope that the day will come when English flows off my tongue as Cantonese once did. It has been forty years since I first encountered English, and I am still lost in what I consider grammatical anarchy.

One of the more painful aspects of living in a community with only rare opportunities to practice my Cantonese is that, over the years, my native tongue has faded. With the death of my mother almost twenty years ago, my most regular Cantonese conversation partner is Apple’s Siri. During a recent trip to Hong Kong, a childhood friend remarked that I spoke Cantonese with an accent. “How is that possible? I grew up speaking Cantonese. What possible accent could I have?” I protested. She replied, “You sound like a white dude trying to speak Cantonese.” The ironic remark made me realize that I have indeed been Americanized, but only according to non-Americans.

I speak no language without an accent. As a result, there is no place in the world where I can safely melt into the native community as one of them. Whenever and wherever I speak, my accent announces that I am a foreigner.

The subtle reminders of being an Asian first and a philosopher second continue to rear up in my professional life. Although I specialized in the philosophy of science and bioethics, when I entered the job market in 2003, interviewers and even helpful friends would lament the fact that I did not specialize in Asian philosophy. It did not occur to them that I had but an eighth-grade education in Chinese and I would thus make for a poor candidate to study Asian philosophy. Likewise, my dissertation advisor informed me of an unfortunate exchange in which he had to confirm that I was indeed competent in English to a potential employer. I can only imagine the number of philosophy job candidates with Asian names whose applications were implicitly or explicitly tossed into the rejection pile.

The conversations I have with my Asian students who yearn to pursue their intellectual passions vary greatly from student to student. In one case, a student finishing her doctorate in pharmacy confessed her love of writing. “How can I convince my parents that I hate being a pharmacist?” she asked. I reminded her that her parents merely wanted one thing: that she would have a future that did not require the kind of struggle that they had endured. Perhaps, a recognition of that mutual love between parents and children can help find a compromise. She went on to earn

a JD at the University of Pennsylvania and now works as an intellectual property lawyer specializing in pharmaceutical patents, a job that she finds deeply gratifying. For other students, the dilemma they confront is painfully difficult. Between tremendous financial investments that their parents have made to support their children's education and a world at large that reinforces the message that a STEM path proves most friendly to young Asians, it would be morally impossible for me to urge them to follow their hearts.

What I do say, however, is that the world at large will not change unless we engage it. STEM careers can certainly impact our lives, but if we want to undo cultural and structural racism, there is no better way to do it than addressing it head-on. From working for the ACLU to defend the rights of vulnerable people to sharing our experiences so that others might feel less alone, there are myriad ways to tear down and break free from the confinement of our lives. Like other disciplines within the humanities, philosophy supplies us with the keen eyes to see what is hidden, the relentless mind to question norms, and the compassionate ears to hear the cries of injustice. We challenge the limitations imposed by a myopic society in which race plays a significant role in our life pursuits hoping that members of the future generations will be able to follow their passions and live a more authentic and flourishing life. In that respect, it matters little what one does to pay bills so long as one is civically engaged.

My parents' willingness to let me pursue a career in the humanities and forgo the financial support from a son with a well-paying job was certainly a sacrifice. But I suspect that they also knew that philosophy could give me the tools to better examine the kind of person I would like to be and the kind of world I would like to live in. If our parents' sacrifices were to ensure that our lives would be easier than theirs, then we ought to reciprocate by venturing beyond the cocoon of economic comfort and confronting bigoted systems around us. It is not economic freedom our parents yearn for; it is freedom, *simpliciter*.

NOTES

1. National Center for Education Statistics, "Table 322.30. Bachelor's Degrees Conferred by Postsecondary Institutions, by Race/Ethnicity and Field of Study: 2016-17 and 2017-18," 2019, accessed July 14, 2020, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d19/tables/dt19_322.30.asp.
2. Caren A. Arbeit, Sandra Staklis, and Laura Horn, "New American Undergraduates: Enrollment Trends and Age at Arrival of Immigrant and Second-Generation Students," National Center for Education Statistics, November 29, 2016, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2017414>.
3. Asian American Federation, "Working but Poor: Asian American Poverty in New York City," October 2008, accessed July 14, 2020, <http://www.aafny.org/doc/WorkingButPoor.pdf>.

Does He Get Paid?

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I was kindly invited to write about being a philosopher of Asian descent. I never regarded myself as a philosopher of Asian descent until recently. We are *philosophers*—attaching “of Asian descent” feels a little bit like adding ~*P* after saying *P*; somewhat cross-purposed. Besides, I received my basic education in Japan from elementary school through graduate school, so I became a philosopher in Japan, not in North America. Becoming a philosopher in Japan was perhaps an unusual experience—my parents complained that it was unacceptably weird—but at least “of Asian descent” was not something I had to think about back then. Reflecting on the matter further, I thought I would share with readers how I became a philosopher in Japan, continued my education in Canada and the United States, and moved to Hawai'i where I now teach Japanese philosophy, American philosophy, and logic. I also wish to mention a few things that have made me more conscious of my Asian background recently.

I was born in Osaka, Japan. I grew up mostly in Tokyo and went to Waseda University in the metropolitan area. In my college years, I did not imagine making a career out of philosophy. When I was a senior, I thought I would become a police officer. I applied to the Tokyo Metropolitan Police Department, did lots of push-ups and abs to pass their physical exam, and got in. I remember Tokyo Metropolitan Police checked if I could hand-write such words as “burglary,” “arrest,” “prison,” and “lawsuit” in Chinese characters, a skill needed to write police reports. A bit shaky with some of the characters, I was given a police school drill book to practice them.

But I declined the offer from the police and decided to go to graduate school. I became an MA and then a PhD student in philosophy at Waseda University. I studied under Hiroshi Endo. He was a wonderful philosopher and mentor who molded me into a *philosopher*, whose existence seemed absolutely impossible otherwise. Through him, I was introduced to analytic philosophy, Alfred North Whitehead's philosophy of organism, and classical American philosophy. After several years of graduate work at Waseda, I was awarded a scholarship to study abroad. I became a Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholar in the Kitchener-Waterloo area in Ontario, Canada, where I visited the Philosophy Department at the University of Waterloo.

The Philosophy Department at Waterloo had a tradition of Peirce studies. I met with James W. van Evra, whose work on Peirce's logic and philosophy of science I appreciated, as well as Angus Kerr-Lawson, a renowned Santayana scholar who often took me out for lunch. Including my host Rotarian Kathi Smith, everyone was exceptionally kind and supportive throughout my year-long visit. In the Toronto area, I met with many scholars such as Paul Bouissac, a semiotician of inexhaustible energy who frequently invited me to events, and Cheryl Misak, whose works on Peirce and