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Punk Rebels and Uncle Toms

Everytime I go home for vacation, I always dread running into this one guy, "Lewis," who happens to be quite involved in the whole "Asian Americans Unite" movement. He is into identity discussions, founding campus ethnic-cultural organizations, and making generalizations about Asian America. But that's not what bugs me.

"So, Sterling, what are you studying at UNC?" some third party is bound to ask.

"I'm double majoring in journalism and film," the answer goes.

But before my lips close, if I happen to be with Lewis, the same response leaps like a cuckoo out of his mouth.

"Unlike the rest of us boring pre-med majors," he says—at which point the live studio audience chuckles knowingly while he begins a routine on the toils of the pre-med student and the heroism of the liberal arts major, Champion of Breaking the Asian American Stereotype.

Okay, I admit it: the only reason I'm studying journalism and film is to pick up those ASA chicks who are into fighting stereotypes and that sort of thing.

Despite all the connotations and rhetoric, stereotypes in themselves are not bad. Stereotypes are merely generalizations, and, as with any generalization, stereotypes are useful in organizing and sorting information. At worst, stereotypes are only as bad as the least accurate generalization. The real harm occurs when people start applying stereotypes to real life.

Obviously, not all blacks eat watermelon and fried chicken, but when people apply the "coon" stereotype to reality, believe in it and take it seriously, some serious harm will probably occur. As the rhetoric goes, a dominant group will often use stereotypes to control and oppress the "out" group.

But to let a stereotype control my life in this way is no less perverted than letting the stereotype control my life in a way such as, say... letting it decide what I study in college. Even if one deliberately sets out to pursue an expressly atypical Asian American lifestyle, the stereotype is still the thing in control—not the individual. The punk rebel is no better off than the Uncle Tom if his whole philosophy is just to be "non-Asian."

No matter what we do, stereotypes and a debilitating self-consciousness always seem to haunt us. In this issue of EAST WIND, ASA President Billy Fan recalls his "true-blue American" childhood experiences with stereotypes as one of the few Asian American kids of Clayton, N.C., while Jennifer Schmitt recalls her preconceptions of Asians as an adopted child in a "true-blue American" white family. Amidst media images of Indians lying on beds of nails or as unintelligible 7-Eleven clerks, Dr. Narain Naidu brings his medley of Las Vegas-style Indian pop songs to UNC.

But just when we laugh at all the stupid Charlie Chans, Bruce Lees and Suzie Wongs, the distinction between living and living a stereotype becomes confusing. Hubie Yang writes about stereotypes with the Asian American community, while David Liu describes the outrage over the Great Asian American Wimp image of men at UC San Diego in our "Weatherwane" section.

When putting together this issue of EAST WIND, we initially had some qualms about doing articles on such stereotypical topics as the martial arts. With the "pre-med" article we worried that our research would turn up statistics only validating the Asian American science geek stereotype.

To attract more readers (especially non-Asians) we originally wanted to confront the issue directly and print the headline, "ARE ASIANS SCIENCE GEEKS?" After hearing some of the initial reactions, we felt that it would offend too many of our Asian American readers to risk printing so we changed it.

But someone once advised: You have to play into the stereotypes to get people initially interested; from there you can explain the stereotypes.

Using stereotypes for our own ends?

That, Lewis, is empowerment.

Sterling Chen
EAST WIND Assistant Editor

East Wind Staff

Editor
Vicki Cheng

Assistant Editor
Sterling Chen

Contributing Writers
Rishwa Amin, Ching-Hua Chen
Vicki Cheng, Billy Fan
Dorothy Lin, David Liu
Ngoc Nguyen, Jennifer Schmitt
Jennifer Whangbo, Hubie Yang

Photography
Sterling Chen
Cindy Hong

Layout
Phet Sayo
Sterling Chen
Vicki Cheng

Illustrations
Ameena Batada
Claudine Chen

Graphics
Sterling Chen
Phet Sayo

Advertising and Fund Raising
Alex Lee

Faculty Adviser
Chuck Stone

Please send letters, comments or questions
care of ASA:

CB# 5240
International Center
Student union
UNC-CH
Chapel Hill, NC 27514