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Prospects for a Democratic Thailand



Thaksin Shinawatra talks with a monk as he leaves the Supreme Court in Bangkok on Wednesday. (Sakchai Lalit/The Associated Press) <<http://www.ah.com/articles/2008/03/12/asia/thai.php>>

On February 28th, Thailand's ousted former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra returned to face corruption charges. Ousted about a year and a half ago by a military coup, Thaksin is charged with conflict of interest in regards to a property transaction. He has also been charged with concealing his assets, while his wife remains free on bail in Thailand in connection with the charges.

The military coup d'état which overthrew Thaksin in September 2006 was a very unusual one, for several reasons. First, it was almost completely bloodless. Second, the military junta which succeeded Thaksin declared that elections would be held for a new democratic government in one year. Third, the military junta declared that this revolution was on behalf of the king, and claimed that the government of Thaksin "has caused an unprecedented rift in society, widespread corruption, nepotism, and interfered in independent agencies, crippling them so they cannot function . . . They [his government] have also repeatedly insulted the king. Thus the council needed to seize power to control the situation, to restore normalcy and to create unity as soon as possible," (General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, Press Conference, Sept 20 2006).

So, one and a half years later, what can we say about the military junta's promises? To begin with, election were held fifteen months after the coup and the People's Power Party, composed of many former members of

Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party, won a clear majority in the legislature. Even after a coalition between the PPP and several smaller parties to gain an even stronger majority, the military has so far not signaled that it will attempt to block these results. This seems promising – but the junta has also decreed that the provisional council appointed by the military would permanently remain as part of the government, as a Council of National Security. There also continues to be a series of human rights violations, including restrictions on the Internet and occupation of television broadcasting stations. In short, it is a mixed bag of results which will be stirred up even further with the return of the focal point of the military's ire: Thaksin Shinawatra.

But the truly puzzling factor which may be more important than previously indicated is the role of the king. King Bhumibol Adulyadej, the longest sitting monarch in the world, endorsed the revolution the day after it was announced. In the past sixty years, every successful coup had been endorsed by the king, while two unendorsed coups lasted only a few days before failing. But what exactly was the reason why the king endorsed this coup?

On the surface, this seems like a simple answer: Thaksin's corruption and politicking was causing social instability, and the king desired a new, less corrupt, and more democratic government. But could the reason be something else? It is interesting to note that in the early hours of the coup, the king was holding an audience with Prem Tinsulanonda, the Privy Council President and a harsh, outspoken critic of Thaksin. Prem has been accused of having been deeply involved in the coup, including having executive control over many leaders and in helping handpick the new government. His involvement in the coup was denied repeatedly by all parties, however. But the fact that Prem, the man who had once compared Thaksin to Hitler, was meeting with the king at the exact moment the military began its coup to overthrow Thaksin implies a link far deeper than many even suspect.

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FINDING THE ASIAN AMERICAN VOICE

As I write in an Asian American journal, I can't help but wonder, is writing in the Asian American voice doing more good or bad for Asian Americans?

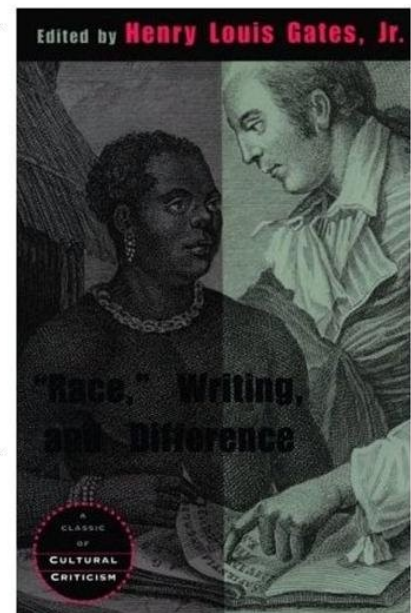
In Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s *Race, Writing, and Difference*, there is a quote in regards to African American writing and slave narratives, stating it did not serve "to obliterate the difference of race" but rather it inscribes a "black voice" in Western literatures that is preserved, repeated, imitated, and revised in a "separate Western literary tradition, a tradition of black difference." Thus, writing about the Asian American experience would do more harm to Asian Americans in mainstream Western literature because it inscribes a voice of difference rather than of integration. As an Asian American, I have to reconcile between an upbringing of Asian American traditions at home and growing up in white mainstream American traditions. But when I write about my Asian American experiences growing up to mainstream America, instead of gaining relateability, understanding, and insight from my readers; it only marks me as different and a separate voice than mainstream America. A separate and different voice that is regarded in less or different favor than the white Western voice. That is the catch-22, that writing of my experiences of being Asian American, which I sometimes have to write about because that is who I am, does not work to evoke more racial understanding but only works to remind and perpetuate a separate and different voice from white mainstream literature. Things seen as different or separate, run the risk of being seen as not equal and not the same, and here I would say is where these writings are not taken objectively and where prejudice arise. I would even go on to say that if an Asian American wrote in perfectly assimilated English and wrote nothing of Asian American experiences, the reader when reading that the article was written by an Asian American, it will already mark to the reader as a little different voice, and would be taken in a way a little different than a white American name.

But there is a quote in Mikhail Bakhtin's "Discourse in the Novel" that states that language is always "half someone else's" and does not belong to one particular group of people. And what one must do, is to take a word, which is always half someone else's, and make it his own by speaking or writing of it with his own

"intention" and "accent". Language never really belongs wholly to anyone, so you must take language that you heard or learned from someone else (it's half theirs) and make it your own. Anyone can take a word and make it his own when he speaks it with his own "expressive intention" for the word. But it is only partial ownership, as you say it and in the process of making it your own, for the moment you own the word; but you do not fully own the word as others hear and read your word and take it in their own context. Thus, language and context is never really owned by one person or set of people. Thus, I would say that the idea of white mainstream literature is a racial fetishization by people that has no basis to the language because language does not belong wholly to any one person.

But how do I reconcile these two quotes in regard to Asian American writing in Western literature? I believe that writing about Asian American experiences is definitely worthwhile. Language does not fully belong to anyone so anyone can take the English language and make it their own regardless of their race or if it's their second language. People are entitled to take language, make it their own, and use it how they want to. But you cannot control completely the context your words are taken in by others. When people take into account your race when they read your writing, I just want to point out that its merits is not based on any logical sense with regards to the language, but is probably by some other prejudice. So I encourage people to make language their own and write with self-assuredness that you're entitled to use this language regardless of race or any other society-placed marginalizing classifications.

- Nicolas Bui



ASIAN AMERICAN MENTAL HEALTH

Asian Americans, even when compared to other ethnic minorities, have one of the lowest rates of using mental-health related services. Only about 8% of Asian Americans use mental health related services compared to nearly 18 % of the general population . But this by no means indicates a low rate of mental illness or emotional disturbance among Asian Americans. In fact, in the United States, Asian American women age 15-24 have the highest rate of suicide than any race or ethnic group . With such alarming statistics, it is crucial to determine why Asian Americans are underutilizing mental health services and what can be done to encourage such use.

Language barriers may be an important factor preventing Asian Americans from awareness of available resources and seeking treatment. Most Asian Americans were born outside the United States and among Asian immigrants, 25 to 40 % struggle to communicate in English . In addition, of the Asian Americans who visit a psychiatrist, 56.1% of them have negative experiences due to language difficulties . Moreover, the lack of cultural understanding and language barriers causes further difficulties. For example, Asians tend to be more hesitant to open up in the first place. This added with language and communication difficulties often lead to misdiagnosis. Such miscommunication between the patient and professional may cause one to feel misunderstood when given advice or feel that the advice given is irrelevant to his/her problem. Unfortunately, this situation often results in withdrawal from the much needed treatment.

However, cultural misunderstandings and language barriers are difficulties that all minorities face. So why is it that Asian Americans are underutilizing mental health services even when compared to other ethnic minorities? One possible explanation may be the collectivistic nature of the Asian culture where the group's goals are placed above individual goals . Therefore, Asian Americans tend to be more concerned with the negative implications of asking for help, including the risk of burdening others, disrupting the harmony of the group, and bringing disgrace to one's family . A stigma attached to mental illness exists, as it may be interpreted as a sign of personal weakness and a family's failure of proper upbringing. Moreover, Asians are fearful of "losing face," or in other words, what family and friends might think if

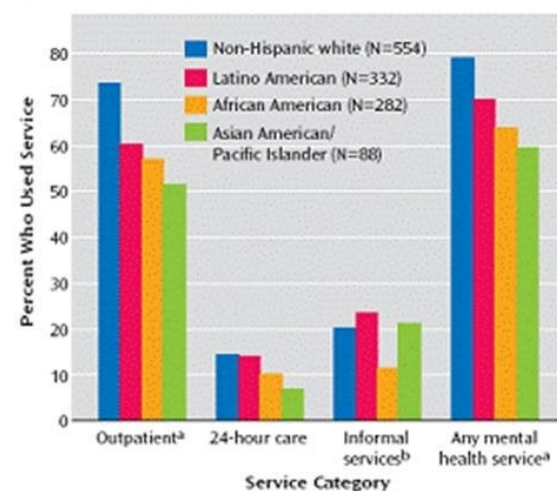
they sought treatment, thus are more reluctant to seek help. In addition, the widespread belief of Asians being the "model minority" which refers to a minority whose members are highly successful and well-educated, further exacerbates the problem .

Studies that have focused on Asian American attitudes on mental health services across generations, give further support that Asian American culture stigmatize professional services. Atkinson and Gim have found that Asian American attitudes on psychological professional help were directly related to acculturation. That is, the more acculturated one was in the American culture, the more likely they were to recognize the need for professional help, to be tolerant of the stigma associated with professional help, and to be open about discussing their problems with a professional . Such evidence supports the idea that there is a cultural element in Asian cultures that stigmatizes mental illness, prevents Asians from seeking help for such illness and offers proof that Asian traditional values conflict with the way mental services are provided.

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Figure 1 below is taken from API Info Net for further reference.

FIGURE 1. Mental Health Service Use Among Youths Age 6–18 Years in a Large, Publicly Funded System of Care by Racial/Ethnic Group (N=1,256)



^a Significant difference among racial/ethnic groups (p<0.001, chi-square test).

^b Significant difference among racial/ethnic groups (p<0.02, chi-square test).

Continued from page 1 ...Democratic Thailand

For the king of a constitutional monarchy to be able to command such power as to instigate a military revolution against a democratically elected government, no matter how corrupt, is dangerous. As respected as King Bhumibol is, and as good as his intentions might be, it is the opinion of this author that democracy in Thailand will not be complete so long as a monarch wields to ability to overthrow democratic governments at his will.

- Thomas Lee

Continued from page 3 ...Mental Health

More important than the fact that Asian Americans stigmatize mental health services more than any other ethnic group, is the fact that these cultural values or misunderstandings are deeply impacting the Asian American community. The factual reality is that Asian Americans have more severe symptoms than other racial groups when first visiting clinics. It is also important to point out that Asian Americans have one of the highest drop out rates and dissatisfaction with mental health services. Moreover, Asian American mental health is being unno-

ticed. A tragic example is Cho Seung-Hui, who slipped through the hands of professionals by claiming he was not dealing with difficulties, but ended up killing a total of 32 students and faculty members at Virginia Tech. These alarming statistics, ideas and studies on Asian Americans serve as proof that there is a need for change in the mental health community. There is a need to somehow integrate mental health into Asian American culture. There is a need to educate professionals to have a cultural understanding of the population they serve. There is a need for cultural specific treatment. But none of these can be implemented without spreading awareness. There is a great need to reach out to communities and educate them about mental illness and the available services and treatments. By reaching out to the Asian American community and meeting their mental health needs, mental illnesses such as depression, suicide or another tragedy such as what happened at Virginia Tech can be prevented.

- Malin Kimoto

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