

Why Vincent Chin Matters

By FRANK H. WU Published: June 22, 2012



Joe Mortis, Photograph by Associated Press

ON June 23, 1982, in Detroit, a young man named Vincent Chin died. Four nights earlier, he had been enjoying his bachelor party with friends at a local bar when they were accosted by two white men, who blamed them for the success of Japan's auto industry. "It's because of you we're out of work," they were said to have shouted, adding a word that can't be printed here. The men bludgeoned Mr. Chin, 27, with a baseball bat until his head cracked open.

The men — a Chrysler plant supervisor named Ronald Ebens and his stepson, Michael Nitz — never denied the acts, but they insisted that the matter was simply a bar brawl that had ended badly for one of the parties. In an agreement with prosecutors, they pleaded to manslaughter (down from second-degree murder) and were sentenced to three years of probation and fined \$3,000.

I was a Chinese-American teenager growing up near Detroit then. I remember the haunting photograph of a smiling, fresh-faced Mr. Chin, shown repeatedly in newspapers and on TV, and the tears of his mother, Lily Chin, who lamented that his killers had escaped justice. Mr. Chin was buried on the day he was to have been married.

The killing catalyzed political activity among Asian-Americans — whose numbers had steadily increased since the 1965 overhaul of immigration laws but who then represented only about 1.5 percent of the population — as never before. "Remember Vincent Chin" turned into a rallying cry; for the first time, Asian-Americans of every background angrily protested in cities across the country. For all that Asians had been through — racial exclusion, starting with a ban on Chinese migrant labor in 1882; the unconstitutional detention of Japanese-Americans during World War II; the legacy of America's wars in the Philippines, Korea and Vietnam — no single episode involving an individual Asian-American had ever had such an effect before. And none has since.

The circumstances of the Chin case were no accident. The early 1980s were, like now, a time of malaise. The unemployment rate was at its highest since World War II; inflation was stuck in the double digits; "Japan Inc." threatened to devour not only Detroit manufacturing but also New York real estate. White flight had emptied a great metropolis that once stood for industrial progress. Imported cars became a hated symbol of foreign encroachment.

Spurred by Asian-American activists, federal prosecutors brought civil rights charges against the two assailants in 1983. (The men denied using racial epithets, as some witnesses had reported.) The stepfather, Mr. Ebens, was convicted of violating Mr. Chin's civil rights and sentenced to 25 years in prison, but the conviction was overturned on appeal.

The Chin case showed the power of the saying "You all look the same." An assimilated son of Chinese immigrants somehow came to be identified with Japanese automakers. (That Asian-Americans made up much of the engineering force at General Motors, Ford and Chrysler seems not to have occurred to the attackers.)

"Asian-Americans" — a term that many Asian-Americans themselves do not use — are, of course, more a demographic category than a community arising from shared language, religion, history or culture. Yet for all our diversity, we share an experience of otherness. The fifth-generation Japanese-American from California, the Hmong refugee in Wisconsin, the Indian engineer in Texas, the Korean adoptee in Chicago and the Pakistani taxi driver in New York — all have at times been made to feel alien, sometimes immutably so.

Thirty years after Mr. Chin's death, hate crimes seem to be a remote threat for Asian-Americans. But it is premature, if tempting, to celebrate progress.

On Tuesday, a Pew Research Center study, "[The Rise of Asian-Americans](#)," reported that Asians overtook Hispanics in 2009 as the country's fastest-growing ethnic group and now represent 5.8 percent of the population. It reported that Asian-Americans, on the whole, have higher incomes and better educations than whites, blacks or Latinos.

Though the study noted that discrimination, poverty and language barriers still confront refugees, undocumented immigrants and other vulnerable groups, Asian-American advocates for social justice winced. Despite decades of debunking by social scientists and historians, the model minority myth — Asian-Americans as overachieving nerds — persists. The study was based on a rigorous survey, though relying on self-reported attitudes and behaviors is not a fireproof methodology.

But the more important criticism is this: When it comes to race, nuance matters. The Pew findings encourage us to consider how positive attitudes may contribute to socioeconomic success. But history also teaches us that before Asian-Americans were seen as model minorities, we were also perpetual foreigners. Taken together, these perceptions can lead to resentment. And resentment can lead to hate.

Vincent Chin has lived longer in memory than reality. Today China, not Japan, is on the rise. Another recession has come to an uneasy close. Detroit limps along. Asian-Americans, through increasing civic participation, have asserted themselves as members of the body politic and reached some of the highest offices in government, academia and business.

Asian-Americans who have achieved success owe a debt to the agitators who followed the Chin case, often defying their own cultural backgrounds as well as the stereotype of passivity and quiescence. Everyone who cares about the promise of our increasingly diverse nation ought to see in this case the possibility of social change arising from tragic violence.

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