

BECOMING ASIAN AMERICAN: PERSONAL REFLECTIONS AND MESSAGES FOR MY PLANETARY SCIENCE COMMUNITY. Parvathy Prem, Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Lab (parvathy.prem@jhuapl.edu).

I feel as though I came of age as a planetary scientist and as Asian American at roughly the same time. One of those journeys has been about figuring out my relationship with the country I have spent most of my adult life in, and with its people of color – past, present, and future. The other has been about figuring out my relationship with the solar system, and with those who spend their days wondering about it. These are some reflections on my personal experiences, and an effort to distill from those experiences some messages for my planetary science community.

Asian Americans count. It's 2016, and I am at a professional conference listening to an otherwise excellent speaker talk about representation in planetary science. She calls out the invited speaker roster at that meeting – mostly male and White, she points out, except for the Asians, but, she says, “Asians don't really count, and are in fact over-represented in the field”. I don't recall the words precisely, but I do recall that they left me feeling out of breath, and it took me a few years to figure out why. The idea that Asians/Asian Americans don't count, and yet at the same time there are too many of us, has a long past. It is an idea that has dogged generations of immigrants who came to this country in search of something, pushed and pulled by colonialism, war, economic opportunity, love, and other forces [1].

The 2020 Survey of the Planetary Science Workforce [2] found that 10% of respondents (members of the planetary science community) identified as Asian or Asian American. This compares to 6% of the civilian labor force in the United States, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics [3]. This 6% is staggeringly diverse in terms of national origin, language, and culture: Indian (25%), Chinese (22%), Filipino (14%), Vietnamese (9%), Korean (8%), and Japanese (5%), with the remaining 17% classified as ‘Other Asian’, which includes those who identify as Pakistani, Cambodian, Hmong, or another group [3]. The Pew Research Center notes that 17% of Asians in the U.S. identify as multiracial (non-Hispanic) or Hispanic [4]. I want my professional community to know those numbers, and to know that we count.

The ‘model minority’ myth is a pernicious thing. The myth goes like this: “that Asian Americans not only have overcome the bondage of racial discrimination, but also have become a successful model minority worthy of emulation by other minorities” [5]. The myth is not true. Statistically speaking, educational levels, income, and poverty rates vary widely within the broad category of ‘Asian American’ [3], and are intimately connected

to class, immigration status, English language proficiency, and other factors. The harm caused by the model minority stereotype, particularly to students – of all levels – has been recognized for decades [5,6,7]. Simply put, the stereotype reinforces systems and mindsets that result in students not receiving the institutional and social support they need. Perhaps the most pernicious thing about the model minority myth is that it requires the existence of ‘non-model’ minorities. This idea, at its worst, reinforces the casteism and colorism that runs deep in many Asian American (and other) communities [8]. There is no way to win at being a model minority.

On foreignness. It's 2020, and I am at a U.S. Consulate in India to get a visa stamp in my passport so that I can return to the U.S. after visiting my family in India. The lady at the counter looks at my documents, and asks me what I do. “I'm a planetary scientist!” I say proudly (it's taken me a while to get there). She smiles, not kindly, and asks, “You're a *what* scientist?” and with a sinking feeling I know this is not going to be the routine process I thought it would be. I did not get the visa stamp that day. It is an incredibly jarring feeling to be unable to return to a place you call home, and to a position that you have worked so hard to reach (to say nothing of your wonderful spouse and cats). I did eventually make it back, just in time before the pandemic led to border closings, but the knowledge that almost everything you have could be taken away by the stroke of a pen is hard to shake.

The Pew Research Center notes that almost six in ten Asian Americans (seven in ten for Asian American adults) in the U.S. were born in another country, compared to 14% of Americans overall [4]. Beyond those numbers, the perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners has a long history [9] with ugly manifestations ranging from the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II to the spate of hate crimes during the ongoing pandemic. The vagaries of the U.S. immigration system mean that even “documented” (that slippery status) young people who have spent almost their entire lives in this country can too easily find themselves without legal status or permission to work [10]. The talk about a space race with China [11] genuinely scares me when it is juxtaposed with the recent treatment of scientists who are Chinese U.S. citizens [12].

Does this ‘Asian American’ thing even make sense? What does it mean to identify as Asian American when there is no single Asian American experience?

The force that gives the identity meaning, and draws me to it, is solidarity. Prof. Daryl Maeda puts it well: “Asian American’ – rather than describing our personally felt identities or describing our family histories – expresses an idea. And that idea is that as Asian Americans, we have to work together to fight for social justice and equality, not only for ourselves, but for all of the people around us.” [13] There are sometimes profound differences in where we are from and how we move through the world, but if in spite of that, Asian Americans can find a shared story and find solidarity in each other, then perhaps there is hope for all of us.

We all need to belong. I promised that I would distill from all of this some messages for the planetary science community. These are recommendations that I believe would support the Asian American part of our community, but also many others. (1) Become aware of who Asian Americans are, and at least the broad contours of the history of Asians in America. (2) Grow institutional support for broad, focused, and intersectional affinity groups, recognizing that identities are often made up of overlapping circles. (3) Recognize that we work in a field in which nationalism and militarism can manifest in uncomfortable ways that can directly affect people we work with. (4) Recognize that inclusion is not a zero-sum game; there is space for all of us in planetary science, and many different ways to walk a successful path.

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References: [1] The Making of Asian America (2015), Erika Lee. [2] 2020 Survey of the Planetary Science Workforce [\[link\]](#). [3] US Bureau of Labor Statistics [\[link\]](#). [4] Pew Research Center [\[link\]](#). [5] The Myth of Asian American Success and Its Educational Ramifications (1980), Ki-Taek Chun. [6] Beyond Black and White: The Model Minority Myth and the Invisibility of Asian American Students (2007), Jean Yonemura Wing. [7] Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype: Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Higher Education (2002), Bob H. Suzuki. [8] Caste in the United States (2018), Equality Labs. [9] Where are you really from? Asian Americans and the perpetual foreigner syndrome (2002), Frank H. Wu. [10] ‘I Don’t Want to Stay in a Country That Doesn’t Want Me As Badly as I Want It’ (2019), John Washington, The Nation. [11] Can the U.S. and China Cooperate in Space? (2021), Leonard David, Scientific American. [12] ‘In the End, You’re Treated Like a Spy,’ Says M.I.T. Scientist (2022), Ellen Barry, New York Times. [13] After 50 years of ‘Asian American,’ advocates say the term is ‘more essential than ever’ (2018), Caitlin Yoshiko Kandil, NBC News. [14] Center Mural, Asian & Pacific Islander Student Center, Cal Poly Pomona [\[link\]](#).



This gorgeous mural at the Asian & Pacific Islander Student Center at Cal Poly Pomona was painted by students working with Southern California Filipino American muralist Eliseo Silvia [14], and depicts some of the history of Asian America. It is a history that I am still getting to know.