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What Kind of Asian Are You?

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What Kind of Asian Are You?

Abstract

You don't know anything about me. You've never been to my country; you don't know my native language; you may not even be able to locate Vietnam on a map.

And that's ok. What matters isn't that you already know about my country and my culture. What matters is your attitude toward learning about it. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, race, ethnicity, Asian American, Vietnam, minorities, school population

Disciplines

Asian American Studies | Asian Studies | Community-Based Research | Educational Sociology | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology

Comments

Surge is a student blog at [Gettysburg College](#) where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at [surgegettysburg.wordpress.com](#) Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

SURGE

[VERB] : to move suddenly or powerfully forward or upward

WHAT KIND OF ASIAN ARE YOU?

July 31, 2013

You don't know anything about me. You've never been to my country; you don't know my native language; you may not even be able to locate Vietnam on a map.



And that's ok. What matters isn't that you already know about my country and my culture. What matters is your attitude toward learning about it.

Among the small population of international students on Gettysburg's campus, Chinese students make up the majority (22 out of 55 international students last year were from China – no other country had more than two). You're also more likely to interact with a person of Chinese descent among the Asian population in America. However, the fact that I am from Asia, and that I have black hair and yellow skin doesn't mean I'm Chinese, despite what some people seem to think.

One of my American friends used his difficulty in distinguishing between Asians as an explanation for making assumptions. However, I think this is not a valid excuse. He, like most people, stills acknowledges the concept of cultural diversity. It's not acceptable to lump people into categories to which they don't belong or link them to stereotypes just because it's easy.

Now, before we write him off as an "ignorant American," I'd like to point out that I've been assumed to be Chinese by a Chinese student. This really surprised me, as I expected him as an international student to be sensitive to the variety of nationalities among the group. This only proves though that everyone has trouble responding to difference. Couldn't this misunderstanding be avoided if one simply asked "Where are you from?" instead of going with the stereotypes? Asking is crucial, and it's also important to make sure that you carefully consider how you phrase your questions and responses. Certainly avoid saying things like "[What Kind of Asian are You?](#)"

Another reality of cultural difference is that something that may seem trivial to one person is extremely important to someone else. For example, during the month of January or February, you often see red posters celebrating "Chinese New Year" around campus. I mean no disrespect to the Chinese club or any of the Chinese students on campus, but as someone from one of the numerous other cultures that also celebrates this event, I prefer [the](#)

[term Lunar New Year](#). I find it's more inclusive. However, when I shared this opinion, one of my friends said "Why does it matter? It has always been known in America as Chinese New Year".

She probably said this because no one has pointed out the difference between the terms to her before. In China, the holiday is not known as "Chinese New Year," but something that translates to "Spring Festival." How did Americans (and others) come to call this holiday "Chinese New Year?" Is it because China is so big or because its people make up the majority of Asian immigrants in the US? Neither of those seem like very good reasons.

What really bothered me though wasn't that she didn't know about this difference, it was the fact that at the moment when I showed her my culture she chose the easy way out by saying that the name wasn't important. She stuck with what was familiar instead of considering a new perspective from another culture. My culture means to me as much as yours does to you, and respecting my culture is part of respecting me.

On the other hand, there are friends around me who are open-minded and always accepting me for who I am. It's our conversations about each others' countries that made us become friends. They often have questions about Vietnam, about our culture, education, and history. What makes these conversations so delightful is that my friends show interest in knowing about how different I am from them while also making an effort to accept and respect my differences. In the same conversation about Lunar New Year, instead of ignoring my opinion, my friends apologized if they ever used the term incorrectly around me, and they were glad to learn how they should apply the two terms appropriately. Their actions helped to break down the barrier between us rather than solidify it.

If you don't know how to act toward an international student (or any person) due to cultural difference, ask questions and get to know them before making assumptions. You should also expect, accept, and respect differences. I can't speak for everyone; some people may be more open to questions than others. However, I don't mind if you don't know a lot about Vietnam or if you ask me a question that I never thought I would hear. In fact, I appreciate your interest in knowing my culture, and I know many other people who feel the same way. In the end, I'm abroad not only to learn about other countries but to represent my own culture and let people know about us. I carry our culture and beliefs and present them as part of my personality wherever I go. I do my best to accept and respect the values, beliefs, and culture of Americans; I expect the same from them.

By the way, in Vietnam, the Lunar New Year is called Tết Nguyên Đán, or Tết for short. But don't worry, you don't have to call it that.

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