

## Labels We Carry

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Equality and diversity come to mind when I think of race. However, race has many different layers and has evolved into being more than just categories of humans. It also encompasses history, culture, and superiority.

Micro-aggressions toward Asians are common in the boarding school environment, more frequent than I would like. I used to wonder if I was just too sensitive about the fact that I am Asian. There have been so many times that I felt as though people only saw the *face* of an “Asian.” They don’t see the student, the girl, the artist, the person. Just the other day, I was in history class and someone turned to me and said “你好吗?”, which is hello in Chinese. I knew he was just trying to be funny, but there was nothing funny about it. I honestly didn’t know what to say. Did he expect me to cheer him on because he managed to say a single sentence in Chinese? There are also times when I meet someone, and the only thing they ever say to me is, “How do you say (--) in Chinese?” It’s as though I have a giant label on my head that says, “Chinese-speaking person right here.” They don’t ask me about how my day is, or what my interests are, or anything. They just expect me to teach them how to say something in Chinese, because apparently I’m a living dictionary.

Last week I attended the Asian American Footsteps Conference in Phillips Andover, which was a deeply formative experience. I dug deeper into what it meant to be Asian, particularly East Asian, in an American environment. The speakers in the conference were brilliant and helped address so much questions I had about my own identity. This conference was the first time I ever focused solely on issues of race in relation to Asians; specifically, we looked at how stereotypes affect our lives. Although we talk about racism and equality at Brooks, it feels like the Asian perspective is never a part of the conversation. Even though I’m glad people care about equality, I feel excluded when these conversations arise. For this reason, it was especially meaningful to have a space where we could specifically talk about racism towards Asians. More than 250 students attended the conference from twenty-four independent schools. It was amazing to see how people had drastically different yet similar experiences.

At the conference, Tina Chang, an accomplished Asian-American poet and educator, reassured me that I was not making things up in my mind. Her composure and eloquence gripped me. I especially admired her courage in ignoring the expectations of her parents to become an accountant and instead choosing the not as “safe” choice of becoming an author. Many Asians experience the same pressure from their parents when they are making big decisions. Most end up giving in to what their parents want instead of pursuing their interests. Tina Chang decided that she was willing to risk not having a stable income and picked her true passion, despite her mother’s disapproval. I felt her struggle when she said that there were still people who did not consider her as an American because she was too “Asian”, even though she grew up in the US.

She talked about how she got asked, “Where are you really from?” because of her Asian appearance (which is dehumanizing because it supports the idea that, in order to belong somewhere, one has to look a certain way). This goes back to stereotypes. If someone looks “Asian”, people assume they are either from China, Korea, or Japan. Although sometimes these assumptions can be correct—I *am* East Asian and I *am* from China—it is frequently not. I have a friend who is Asian who grew up in America, and there are people here who go up to her and say “你好”(hello) in hopes of making friends with her. Although well-intentioned, this sort of action only demonstrates a painfully awkward lack of cultural awareness and interpersonal sensitivity. How could someone assume that an Asian person must be from China?

Asians are non-existent in civil rights movements and equality movements. There is a black and white binary in many Western societies where it is literally either Black or White. At school, speakers talk about equality, saying things along the lines of “equality among all races” and then go on using the terms “black and white people.” My heart drops a little bit each time someone exclusively uses “black people and white people” as the definition of people. Do other races not even exist?

I feel lucky that the Brooks faculty are so respectful and that they try their best to understand different people’s perspectives. However, we still have a long way to go. For one, the courses here are very Western-centered, even in a “World History” class. A friend told me that last year, when she was taking world religions, they spent only a single day going over Confucianism and Buddhism and spent the rest of the year studying Rome and Greece. One reason why micro-aggressions exist is because people are ignorant of other races. Especially for Asians, the narrative of Asian stories are so one-sided that Western people fail to see the complexity of the Asian culture and history. People would not assume that all Asians are only good at math if they learn about all the talented politicians, artists, and writers in history that were in fact Asian. In addition, schools need to be more inclusive when they talk about race. It should never only be Black and White. Asians deserve recognition as well. Last of all, Asians should fight against the stereotypes people have developed about them and speak-up. If we don’t, who will?