

Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White

By Frank Wu

"Where are you from?" is a question I like answering.

"Where are you really from?" is a question I really hate answering.

"Where are you from?" is a question we all routinely ask one another upon meeting a new person.

"Where are you really from?" is a question some of us tend to ask others of us very selectively.

For Asian Americans, the questions frequently come paired like that. Among ourselves, we can even joke nervously about how they just about define the Asian American experience. More than anything else that unifies us, everyone with an Asian face who lives in America is afflicted by the perpetual foreigner syndrome. We are figuratively and even literally returned to Asia and ejected from America.

Often the inquisitor reacts as if I am being silly if I reply, "I was born in Cleveland, and I grew up in Detroit," or bored by a detailed chronology of my many moves around the country: "Years ago, I went to college in Baltimore; I used to practice law in San Francisco; and now I live in Washington, DC."

Sometimes she reacts as if I am obstreperous if I return the question, "And where are you really from?"

People whose own American identity is assured are perplexed when they are snubbed in this manner. They deserve to know why "where are you really from?" is so upsetting. My white friends of whom I have asked the question are amused at best and befuddled at worst, even if one of their grandparents was an immigrant or all of them once were. They deserve to know why "where are you really from?" is so upsetting to Asian Americans even if it carries no offensive connotations to them.

Like many other people of color (or a few whites who have marked accents) who share memories of such encounters, I know what the question "where are you really from?" means, even if the person asking it is oblivious and regardless of whether they are aggressive about it. Once again, I have been mistaken for a foreigner or told I cannot be a real American.

The other questions that follow in the sequence make the subtext less subtle. Assuming that I must be "really from" someplace else and not here, even pausing for the preliminary "where are you really from?" some people proceed to ask me: "How long have you been in our country?" "Do you like it in our country?" "When are you going back?" and "Do you have the chance to go home often?" I am asked these questions with decreasing frequency over time but still too often, and I am surprised at the contexts in which they continue to pop up.

When I give a speech, every now and then a nice person will wait to chat with me and with utter sincerity and no hint of irony, start off by saying, "My, you speak English so well." I am tempted to reply, "Why, thank you; so do you."

I don't suppose that such a response would make my point to anybody but myself. I am disappointed by these tiresome episodes because strangers have zeroed in on my race and seem to be aware of nothing else. Taken together, their questions are nothing more than a roundabout means of asking what they know could not be directly said, "What race are you?" Their comments imply that I am not one of "us" but one of "them." I do not belong as an equal. My heart must be somewhere else rather than here. I am a visitor at best, an intruder at worst. I must know my place, and it is not here. But I cannot even protest, because my complaint exposes me as an ingrate. I don't appreciate the opportunities I have been given. People who know nothing about me have an expectation of ethnicity, as if I will give up my life story as an example of exotica.

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I have heard the point as a direct taunt. It comes as the heckler's jeer: "If you don't like it here, then go back where you came from." Or it comes as the snubbed host's uncomprehending whine: "Don't you like everything this country has given you?"

The perpetual foreigner syndrome also can be expressed as empathy. Now and again, people introduce themselves to me by speaking pidgin Chinese. Or they make an elaborate show of bowing that is so inept that it might as well be a parody. They don't realize that I speak English perfectly well and am accustomed to shaking hands.

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Here at home, many Asian Americans are familiar with those awful moments when, in a dispute over who was in line first at the cash register, where dogs can be walked, who bumped into whom, or in declining to give money to a panhandler, and so forth, a person who is white or black suddenly shouts something about “go back to where you came from” or mutters an aside meant to be overheard about “all these damn foreigners.” In these instances, Asian Americans must decide whether they can and should disregard the racial tone. I find that when I respond, even if I try to reason with someone, they sometimes become implacable and the effort to engage them is futile. They insist more hotly that they are right, not racist. They were merely claiming the parking space they saw first, and even if they said, “You know, this is the way we do it in America” or asked, “How long have you been in this country, anyway?” it wasn't a veiled racial reference and I shouldn't take it as such.

Excerpted from Frank Wu, *Yellow: Race in American Beyond Black and White* (Jackson: TN, Basic Books, 2001). Wu is a law professor at Wayne State University's Law School.