



*Journal of Race, Ethnicity, and Religion*

## **After Authenticity:**

### **Clarifying the Relevance of Culture as a Source of Moral Reflection in Asian American Christian Ethics**

**Ki Joo (KC) Choi**  
Seton Hall University  
[kijoo.choi@shu.edu](mailto:kijoo.choi@shu.edu)

Can the cultural experience of Asian Americans serve as a substantive source of moral insight for Asian American Christian ethics? If it can, then in what way should the nature of this moral insight be understood? How should we understand, for instance, the moral salience of the kind of familial and ancestral values and customs practiced by Asian Americans?<sup>1</sup> This article

---

<sup>1</sup> A recent panel convened by the Asian/Asian American Ethics Working Group of the Society of Christian Ethics, titled "Asian Cultural Traditions and Christian Ethics: Problems and Prospects" (Annual Meeting of the Society of Christian Ethics, Seattle, WA, January 11, 2014, Concurrent Session IV).

proposes an approach to such questions by excavating the complex interplay between Asian American culture (both its formation and practice) and the socio-economic and political experiences of Asian Americans. To advance this proposal, I expand on the various critical approaches to the idea of ethnic distinctiveness and cultural authenticity in theology, philosophy, and Asian American studies (and the subfield of Asian American food studies). In short, by outlining how the notion of cultural authenticity, particularly in relation to ethnic identity, is problematic, my aim is to specify the significance of moving away from a notion of Asian American culture as fixed and self-originating in favor of a notion of Asian American culture as indicative of the ways Asian Americans enlist and construct cultural identities to negotiate the constraints of their social circumstances, or what I shall refer to as their social positioning. What such an argument implies for the nature and use of Asian American culture as a source of moral reflection closes this essay.

**The Cultural Dimensions of Asian American Experience:  
Assumptions of Cultural Authenticity, Interrupted**

A lively exchange between the chef-turned-television personality Anthony Bourdain and the Taiwanese American restaurateur Eddie Huang is instructive of the kind of assumptions often ascribed to ethnic identity and culture and, correlatively, the kind of descriptive and conceptual

challenges to the idea of cultural authenticity.<sup>2</sup> In the series finale of Bourdain's popular television series *No Reservations*, Bourdain and Huang find themselves at Andy Ricker's highly acclaimed Thai restaurant Pok Pok NY, in Brooklyn, discussing the merits of Thai food cooked by a white American chef. Below is a partial transcript of that conversation:

Bourdain: So why am I in a Thai restaurant with a Chinese dude?

Huang: That's a good question. That's a good question.

....

Huang: I am always curious about gringo chefs doing Asian food, especially gringo chefs that win James Beard awards doing Asian food.

Bourdain: Right, because they probably suck.

Huang: They probably suck.

Bourdain: That's what you're thinking.

Huang: Yeah.

Bourdain: [You're probably thinking,] "I really would like this place to suck."

Huang: I want it to suck.

....

Huang: Then I ate it, and it's mind blowing!<sup>3</sup>

Huang's declaration is revealing in its incredulity. That he ultimately finds Ricker's Thai food delicious (more specifically, that he realizes Ricker is able to cook great Thai food) undermines Huang's initial desire to maintain a tight bond between culture and ethno-racial identity. Is it possible for a non-Asian to cook great, authentic Asian food? Probably not, if, as Huang wants to believe, cultural authenticity is dependent on a corresponding ethnic identity.

---

<sup>2</sup> Many of the observations registered in this article regarding ethnicity/ethnic identity (in relation to the idea of cultural authenticity) also apply to race. To underscore this point, in some instances below, I refer to ethno-racial identity or ethnicity and race rather than simply ethnicity or ethnic identity. In doing so, I am affirming the notion that race and ethnicity are synonymous terms even though the category of ethnicity is often deployed as a strategy to avoid the conceptual and descriptive complexity and pitfalls of race. However, this strategy simply reinscribes the conceptual and descriptive problems of race to a more "localized" way of talking about identity. See Immanuel Wallerstein, "The Construction of Peoplehood: Racism, Nationalism, Ethnicity," in Etienne Balibar and Immanuel Wallerstein, eds., *Race, Class, Nation: Ambiguous Identities* (Verso, 1991), 71-85. See also Jorge J. E. Garcia, eds., *Race or Ethnicity?: On Black and Latino Identity* (Cornel University Press, 1982); both in J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 44, note 14.

<sup>3</sup> *No Reservations with Anthony Bourdain*, "Brooklyn," *The Travel Channel*, November 5, 2012.

Note that Huang states, rather colorfully, that he *wants* Ricker's food to be bad, which would then confirm his belief that a white person has no business cooking Thai food, especially given his many experiences of eating Asian food cooked by non-Asians gone wrong, sometimes terribly wrong, at least in his judgment.<sup>4</sup> On this account, one might say that a cultural practice (say, cooking) is not authentic or genuine unless it is practiced by a person belonging to a group that originated (and therefore "owns") that particular element of culture. Obviously then, Thais from Thailand make the best, most authentic Thai food since it is "their" food; Thai cuisine prepared by non-Thais would be second rate, imitation at best. (This would presumably apply to other ethnicities and races, too, for instance, only white Americans from Appalachia play the kind of bluegrass music that is worth listening too, or only African Americans from the South can cook properly soul food.) But, as Huang discovers and eventually admits, Ricker has proven him wrong, or at least given him reason to reconsider.

That Huang would even assume that cultural beliefs and practices are properly the properties of certain ethno-racial identities is not surprising given the kind of communities that populate much of our urban and suburban landscapes and the kind of cultural assumptions that frame our perception of the identities and experiences of those communities and its residents. In Huang's case, the New York City metropolitan area, to which I also call home, continues to be divided into ethnically and racially delimited communities. The enduring reality of such borders,

---

<sup>4</sup> Whether Huang's negative judgment of most Asian food cooked by non-Asian chefs is correct is debatable. (Is P.F. Chang's better or worse than Chinese food cooked in Chinatown? For some Asians the answer is probably yes. But for some others, the answer could very well be no.) But rather than adjudicating the merits of Huang's culinary judgment, I am more interested in the fact that Huang clearly thinks that the best, most authentic Asian food is cooked by Asians, a position supported in part by his judgment that he has had terrible Asian food cooked by non-Asian chefs. But whatever Huang's reasons, the question worth asking is whether the link Huang makes between cultural authenticity and ethnic identity is warranted.

despite contemporary postracial rhetoric, engender and sustain impressions and associations of what persons who live (or may have at one time lived) in such enclaves are like in terms of their daily cultural dispositions, from food, speech, and dress to religiosity and family customs, traditions, and values.<sup>5</sup> Thus, not uncommon in New York and New Jersey, as well as in many other metropolitan areas in North America, are assumptions (and sometimes fierce debates) about where one may find the most authentic food, or experience the most traditional celebration of a particular holiday or custom. So, for instance, go to Edison or Jersey City, NJ, or Jackson Heights, Queens, for authentic Indian food; for genuine Korean, where else but Fort Lee or Ridgefield Park, NJ; or to experience the best Lunar New Year celebrations, take the 7 train to Flushing, Queens, as the conventional wisdom goes.

But the perception that members of a particular ethno-racial community generally embody or practice common cultural values and traditions and that only their practice of those values and traditions can be merited as authentic is, to be sure, based on a very limited engagement with such communities of persons. While such conventional associations may indeed apply to some, to the extent that they do not necessarily apply to all who identify with a particular ethnicity and race unveils the cultural diversity and complexity of ethno-racial identities. A striking case in point is how the growing use of Mandarin and the correlative

---

<sup>5</sup> For a view of such communities and a sense of the character of such communities in New York City, see Ford Fessenden and Sam Roberts, "Then as Now—New York's Shifting Ethnic Mosaic," *The New York Times*, January 22, 2011, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/01/23/nyregion/20110123-nyc-ethnic-neighborhoods-map.html?\\_r=1&](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2011/01/23/nyregion/20110123-nyc-ethnic-neighborhoods-map.html?_r=1&); Joseph Berger, "Answers About New York's Ethnic Neighborhoods," City Room Blog, *The New York Times*, December 12, 2007, [http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/12/12/answers-about-new-yorks-ethnic-neighborhoods/?\\_php=true&\\_type=blogs&\\_r=0](http://cityroom.blogs.nytimes.com/2007/12/12/answers-about-new-yorks-ethnic-neighborhoods/?_php=true&_type=blogs&_r=0). See also *The Brian Lehrer Show*, WNYC, June 02, 2011, <http://www.wnyc.org/shows/bl/clusters/2011/jun/02/june-guest-andrew-beveridge-and-new-littles/>. For a view in New Jersey, see the demographic visuals compiled by the Cooper Center at <http://demographics.coopercenter.org/DotMap/index.html>.

decline of Cantonese is challenging what it means to be Chinese American today in communities such as New York City's lower Manhattan and Flushing, Queens. Due to shifting patterns of Chinese immigration to the U.S., particularly from the district of Taishan in the Pearl River Delta and Hong Kong to mainland China, primarily Fujian Province, Mandarin has been steadily displacing the Cantonese dialect. While both Mandarin and Cantonese share the same written characters, the vast difference in pronunciation lends to a vastly different and mutually incomprehensible spoken language. Consequently, many New York City Chinese are increasingly finding their Chinese neighbors as foreign as some of their non-Chinese, English speaking neighbors. Amusingly, *The New York Times* quotes a forty-four-year-old Cantonese-speaking New Yorker who claims that when she is walking through East Broadway Avenue in New York City's Chinatown, she is now "just as lost as everyone else."<sup>6</sup> In short, even Asians of ostensibly the same ethnicity who, in some formal sense, share a common language, do not necessarily, in practice, speak that language in common.

That we would be too hasty in generally associating "speaking Cantonese" as part and parcel of "being Chinese" brings into relief one way in which the notion of cultural authenticity is not as straightforward as many may assume. What is authentically Chinese depends in part on who you are referring to—the question is, authentic to whom? While a Mandarin speaking Chinese person may be no less Chinese than one who speaks Cantonese, what it means to be Chinese may mean one thing to the Mandarin speaker and another to the Cantonese speaker.

---

<sup>6</sup> Kirk Semple, "In Chinatown, the Sound of the Future is Mandarin," *The New York Times*, October 21, 2009, <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/10/22/nyregion/22chinese.html?scp=2&sq=mandarin%20in%20nyc&st=cse>.

But the complicated nature of cultural authenticity goes beyond the reality that ethno-racial identities and communities are culturally diverse rather than monolithic. While there may be no single Asian American culture per se but rather numerous Asian American cultures (and, more accurately, numerous cultures within particular Asian American communities), the cultural beliefs and practices of particular Asian American communities are not necessarily “theirs” in some direct or simplistic way. Consider once again the misgivings Huang expresses to Bourdain about Ricker’s Thai food. Huang suggests that only a Thai person can cook Thai food worth eating because presumably Thai food originated from or is the invention of Thai people! (In Bourdain’s narration of this segment of the episode, he notes that Ricker’s Thai food draws from the cuisine that is indigenous to Thais in rural, northern Thailand.) But whether a cultural object, tradition, or practice is the invention of a particular ethno-racial community is a more opaque question than it may seem.

Begin first with the emergence of a cultural practice or value as a dynamic, multivalent, and, in a manner of speaking, multicultural process. Such a process is especially underscored in what Hispanic theologians often say about Latino/a and Latin American culture as *mestizaje* or blend of ethnicities.<sup>7</sup> As a dynamic process of intermingling and synthesis, culture by its very nature, as the theologian Kathryn Tanner puts it, “[is not] a product of isolation; it is not a matter of a culture’s being simply self-generated, pure and unmixed. . . . Cultural identity becomes, instead, a hybrid, relational affair, something that lives between as much as within cultures.”<sup>8</sup>

---

<sup>7</sup> For a sampling of the diversity of approaches to *mestizaje*, see Roberto S. Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús: Toward a Hispanic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1995), chapter 1; and Rubén Rosario Rodríguez’s *Racism and God-Talk: A Latino/a Perspective* (New York: New York University Press, 2008), chapter 3.

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Tanner, *Theories of Culture: A New Agenda for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 57-58.

Recognizing the relational, hybridized character of culture prompts a reexamination of whether the idea of cultural authenticity is conceptually coherent. If an ethnicity's culture is built on, is an extension of, or involves some level of appropriation of elements of another culture, then defining what is culturally authentic to a particular ethnicity becomes confounding. The moral philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah's description of culture as a kind of onion calls attention to this challenge quite vividly. Finding "some primordially authentic culture" is not unlike "peeling an onion," he writes. Take for instance the following: "textiles most people think of as traditional West African cloths are known as Java prints; they arrived in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the Javanese batiks sold, and often milled, by the Dutch." Or, how about the "traditional garb of Herero women in Namibia derived from the attire of 19<sup>th</sup> century German missionaries." Considering these examples, what constitutes authentic West African culture? Or authentic Namibian culture? "How far back must one go?" asks Appiah.<sup>9</sup> Insofar as "[c]ultures are made of continuities and changes," to suggest that this or that attire, cultural attitude, and practice define a particular ethnic and racial identity is to rarify it and, thus, to camouflage its historical complexity.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> One can also ask similarly interesting and challenging questions in the arena of food and cuisine. For instance, while much of Italian cuisine is hard to imagine without tomatoes, tomatoes are not original to the regional foods of Italy. Rather surprisingly, tomatoes were integrated reluctantly when first introduced to Europe from the "new" world. See K. Annabelle Smith, "Why the Tomato was Feared in Europe for More Than 200 Years," *Smithsonian.com*, June 18, 2013, <http://www.smithsonianmag.com/arts-culture/why-the-tomato-was-feared-in-europe-for-more-than-200-years-863735/?no-ist>. Also with chili peppers, which were introduced to European and Asian cuisines from the Caribbean islands in the middle 15<sup>th</sup> century. See Jan Timbrook, "The Natural History of Chile Peppers," Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, <http://www.sbnature.org/crc/332.html>.

<sup>10</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, "The Case for Contamination," *The New York Times Magazine* (January 1, 2006), [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/01cosmopolitan.html?\\_r=1&scp=1&sq=the%20case%20for%20contamination&st=cse](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/01/magazine/01cosmopolitan.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=the%20case%20for%20contamination&st=cse); see also his *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2007).



It is of course neglect of the historical complexity of a particular culture that makes tidy typification of cultures problematic, according to Tanner.<sup>11</sup> The attitude that “[w]e are all one way; they are all another” only masks the reality of intermingling and mixture that makes cultures what they are. Consequently, “[o]ther cultures are turned into static stereotypes to produce a clear difference from one’s own,” when those differences may not be as hard and fast as one may wish.<sup>12</sup> And yet, while the hybridity and relationality of culture belies a concept of culture as self-contained and self-originating, those who identify with a particular ethnicity often claim their culture in such a way that maintains differences from other ethnicities and races.<sup>13</sup> After all, it would be hard to imagine that just because Koreans and Japanese (or Koreans and Chinese, or Vietnamese and Chinese, and so on) share many cultural elements in common, Koreans and Japanese would be inclined to admit that many of their traditions and customs are simply variations of one another’s and, therefore, their identities as Koreans and Japanese are essentially alike.<sup>14</sup> While cultures may share common elements, that fact does not render differences between cultures meaningless. Rather, as Tanner observes, while “cultural elements may cross such boundaries without jeopardizing the distinctiveness of different cultures[, what

---

<sup>11</sup> Paraphrase of Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 55.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>14</sup> The case of the Vietnamese bahn mi sandwich perhaps underscores the point more strikingly. As a sandwich based on the French baguette (or the Vietnamese iteration of the baguette, a legacy of French colonialism in Vietnam), the common elements between French and Vietnamese culture are on display in this one sandwich. But whether the French would claim the bahn mi’s baguette as essentially the same thing as the baguette baked in a French boulangerie [which must follow certain rules and regulations set by the French state for a baguette to be properly a baguette] is debatable. See Emily Ho, “Banh mi: The sandwich that marries the flavors of French and Vietnamese Cuisine,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 2012, [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-09-05/features/sns-201209051500--tms--foodstylts--v-b20120905-20120905\\_1\\_banh-mi-pickled-carrots-and-daikon-place-tofu](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2012-09-05/features/sns-201209051500--tms--foodstylts--v-b20120905-20120905_1_banh-mi-pickled-carrots-and-daikon-place-tofu).

establishes the distinctive identities of cultures] is the way in which such common elements are used, how they are handled and transformed.”<sup>15</sup>

### **The Cultural Differentiation of Asian American Identity**

“Don’t call it a croissant! It’s a cornetto!”

–Roman tour guide on *The Layover*<sup>16</sup>

It may be obvious that differences between cultures matter in everyday, lived reality. Less obvious yet nonetheless critical, however, is how the assertion of cultural difference functions in relation to ethnicity and identity. If one were to claim, say, “this Korean food is our food, and this is how it is different from your food,” note that the assertion of cultural difference does not simply point out differences between cultures but also recognizes differences between the identities of particular communities of persons. In other words, a sense of cultural difference, within the context of ethnicity and identity, often assumes or advances a sense of ethnic difference; my culture is different from your culture is often taken to mean this is how my ethnicity and race is different from yours. This dynamic also holds true without an explicit assertion of cultural difference between ethnicities. So even the simple ascription of a particular cultural practice as Korean or Filipino (e.g., this is a Korean custom; this is the way Koreans do it; that attitude or behavior is so Filipino, and so on) suggests implicitly a measure of ethnic distinctiveness on a cultural scale, even if there is some level of recognition that there are shared

---

<sup>15</sup> Tanner, *Theories of Culture*, 57.

<sup>16</sup> *The Layover with Anthony Bourdain*, “Rome,” *The Travel Channel*, December 5, 2011.

cultural elements between ethnicities. Otherwise, the assertion of Koreanness or some other ethnic identity is a meaningless assertion, an assertion without a difference so to speak.

At least three caveats are worth noting. First, cultural difference in the service of ethnic difference may serve relatively benign yet admirable goals such as the preservation of ethnic identity and heritage. For instance, preservation in the sense of handing down a way of life to succeeding generations or keeping “alive” a way of life that is receding, whether due to globalizing market or political forces, generations of conflict and war, or, simply, the aging and dying of senior members of a community. In other words, asserting and maintaining cultural and, therefore, ethnic difference need not mean drawing boundaries between persons simply for the sake of drawing boundaries as an end in itself. It also need not be for more muscular reasons such as propping up and advancing those boundaries for the sake of maintaining some notion of ethnic, cultural purity or for the purpose of “conversion,” which is to say, the desire to expand the number of members of a particular community.

Second, the use of culture as a way of asserting or affirming ethnic identity and differentiation also applies to the maintenance of non-ethnic kinds of identities, such as religious and national identities. Efforts at delineating a sense of religious identity often involves identifying not only doctrinal but also cultural elements that differentiates it from other religions partly because certain religions are closely knit to particular ethnic identities (e.g., Arab/Sunni Islam, Persian/Shi'i Islam, Greek/Eastern Orthodox, Dutch/Reformed or Calvinist). This also applies to nationalities in that ethnicity is often bound tightly to a nation state (e.g., France,

Russia, Ghana, India, and the United Kingdom<sup>17</sup>), or because the nation state model necessitates the intentional cultivation of a common culture to engender a sense of cohesion and unity to what is often a political amalgamation of multiple ethnicities and cultures (for instance, the United States in its cultivation of a civic culture). Religions and nationalities (and thus, by implication, ethnicities in some cases) also employ other non-cultural realities to secure a sense of national selfhood and identity, such as force or military prowess, territorial or geographic integrity, and sometimes expansion. At any rate, the larger point to be had is that communities, whether nations, religions, and, in our case here, ethnicities, possess a variety of tools to secure and maintain the longevity of their identities, and one of the primary tools is the assertion and maintenance of cultural differentiation.

Third, while culture may be a primary or, at least, readily accessible tool for ethnic differentiation and self-definition, that does not mean that the mere adherence to certain cultural practices will necessarily merit membership into a corresponding ethnic community, even if that ethnic community generally understands itself primarily within that cultural framework. A passage from Amy Chua's notorious *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* illustrates the kind of

---

<sup>17</sup> Recently in the United Kingdom, the British minister of Education has proposed that the General Certificate of Secondary Education English Exam focus more on British literary authors and eliminate a number of novels from American authors. See Steven Erlanger, "Goodbye, Steinbeck; All Hail, Shelley," *The New York Times*, May 30, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/05/31/books/goodbye-steinbeck-all-hail-shelley.html?module=Search&mabReward=relbias%3Aw%2C{%221%22%3A%22RI%3A9%22}>. In India, note how the Flag Foundation of India articulates its strategy for the promotion of Indian patriotism and national unity through appreciation of the Tiranga or Flag of India: "One of the primary objectives of the Foundation [of India] is to instill in citizens of India, a sense of pride in Tiranga. In order to spread the symbolism of the Tiranga, the Flag Foundation uses all available mediums such as music, art, photography, cultural programmes, festivals, seminars and workshops." See the homepage of the Flag Foundation of India at <http://www.naveenjindal.com/meetnaveen/flag-foundation-india.aspx>

problem I refer to here. The following is a lively account of Chua's trip to China with her daughters Sophia and Lulu:

Sophia and Lulu were model children. In public, they were polite, interesting, helpful, and well spoken. They were A students, and Sophia was two years ahead of her classmates in math. They were fluent in Mandarin. And everyone marveled at their classical music playing. In short, they were just like Chinese kids.

Except not quite. We took our first trip to China with the girls in 1999. Sophia and Lulu both have brown hair, brown eyes, and Asianesque features; they both speak Chinese. Sophia eats all kinds of organs and organisms—duck webs, pig ears, sea slugs—another critical aspect of Chinese identity. Yet everywhere we went in China, including cosmopolitan Shanghai, my daughters drew curious local crowds, who stared, giggled, and pointed at the “two little foreigners who speak Chinese.” At the Chengdu Panda Breeding Center in Sichuan, while we were taking pictures of newborn giant pandas—pink squirming, larvalike creatures that rarely survive—the Chinese tourists were taking pictures of Sophia and Lulu.<sup>18</sup>

Whatever one may think of Chua's account of the so-called Chinese model of parenting, the above passage alerts us to, in a striking, lively way, basic realities of the relationship between ethnicity and culture. While there may be some sense of what it means to be Chinese in terms of cultural practice across Chinese communities (in this case, in the U.S. and mainland China), not all Chinese communities will regard all practitioners of what is understood as Chinese culture as authentically Chinese. While cultural practice to some large degree must be manifest, some will also require or, at the very least, will reflexively assume other measures of identity. In the case of Chua's two daughter's reception in mainland China, the measure of skin color or tone and other morphological features (they looked too “white” or “American” as biracial children of Chinese and Jewish descent) mitigated what Chua suggests is their perfection in Chinese cultural

---

<sup>18</sup> Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (New York: Penguin Books, 2011), 56.

behavior.<sup>19</sup> This, to some large extent, reinforces how race intersects with ethnicity in such a way that ethnicity cannot necessarily be understood as separate from race. (Hence, the choice, as noted earlier, to interchange race and ethnicity as one and the same or, alternatively, to refer to ethno-racial identity throughout this essay.<sup>20</sup>) At any rate, while culture may not be the singular differentiator of ethnic identities, without culture, ethnic differentiation and self-definition is hard to imagine. Perhaps this is why those in mainline China were so fascinated with the Chua daughters: how could these women who looked, from their perspective, so foreign act so familiar?

Inasmuch as culture is an integral means in which ethnic differentiation and self-definition is made visible and manifest, it is not difficult to see, as Appiah insightfully reminds us, why, when it comes to ethnicity and culture, “it is so easy to conflate them.” He continues:

ethnic identities characteristically have cultural distinctions as one of their primary marks....Ethnic identities are created in family and community life. These—along with mass-mediated culture, the school, and the college—are, for most of us, the central sites of the social transmission of culture. Distinct practices, ideas, norms go with each ethnicity in part because people want to be ethnically distinct: because many people want the sense of solidarity that comes from being unlike others. With ethnicity in modern society, it is often the distinct identity that comes first, the cultural distinction that is created and maintained because of it—not the other way around. The distinctive

---

<sup>19</sup> The Chua daughters’ experience is not unusual for mixed race Asian Americans, as the historian Paul R. Spickard observes. He relays the experience of Cindy Cordes, “a woman of Caucasian and Filipino ancestry raised in Hawaii.” She recounts, “I have a *hapa* [multiple-identity] mentality. I look white but I don’t identify with white culture. I grew up with a Filipino mother in an Asian household. We ate Asian food, had Filipino relationships, Filipino holidays, with Filipino values of family....” “But then,” according to Spickard, “she went to Columbia University and found that other Asian Americans ‘look at me as white.’ When she went to a meeting of an Asian American student group, ‘They asked me, ‘Why are you here?’” See Paul R. Spickard, “What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, eds. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 394-395.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. note #2

common cultures of ethnic and religious identities matter not simply because of their contents but also as markers of those identities.<sup>21</sup>

Whether ethnicities have cultures is not in question. What is in question is the ordering of ethnicity and culture, that is, whether both are necessarily bound together or whether one precedes the other. For Appiah, the ordering more often than not falls toward the latter, a prevailing phenomenon especially, as he suggests, in modern society given concerns over preserving difference in the face of globalization and other homogenizing trends.<sup>22</sup> On this account of ethnicity and culture, cultural difference or distinctiveness is less a conceptually coherent idea in itself and more a feature that is “added” to culture (or, more precisely, given more weight to it) in the effort to secure borders between identities. In the effort to define who we are as a people (or who we are as Korean Americans or Vietnamese Americans), the typical route taken is to identify with certain attitudes and customs that are “indigenous” or “original” (i.e., authentic) to Koreans or Vietnamese, or to identify with how one’s parent’s or prior generations have embraced traditions so-conceived.

Claims to cultural authenticity offer a strategy for reinforcing the desire for ethnic difference. There is a certain stability and solidity to one’s ethnic identity and sense of self when a culture can be claimed as genuinely belonging to that identity. Otherwise, a sense of meaningfulness in claiming and living that identity diminishes. Recalling, for one last time, Huang’s dialogue with Bourdain can be instructive on this point. Huang’s contention with Ricker’s efforts at cooking northern Thai food is that Ricker is not a northern Thai person

---

<sup>21</sup> K. Anthony Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity: Misunderstood Connections,” in *Color Conscious: The Political Morality of Race*, eds. K. Anthony Appiah and Amy Gutmann (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 89.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*.

cooking food from that region but instead a white chef from Portland, OR, cooking northern Thai food in Redhook, Brooklyn. As he admits to Bourdain, “I am always curious about gringo chefs doing Asian food.” In that short, single statement, Huang ethnically and racially marks a certain kind of food and employs a metric for cultural authenticity that assumes tight, intrinsic linkage to particular ethnic identities. That is why Huang finds Ricker, initially at least, somewhat troubling: inasmuch as Ricker cooks good Asian food, his skill destabilizes common, conventional perceptions of what it means to be Asian: e.g., Asians cook Asian food, among doing other “Asian” things, and to the extent that Asians cook Asian food, they are most capable of cooking it well (especially since experiences of eating good Asian food cooked by non-Asian chefs are far and few between, at least in Huang’s experience, as we saw earlier). But alas, Huang finds a white person doing what is not necessarily (or conventionally) expected of a white person: cooking good or, as Huang finally attests, “mind-blowing” Asian food.

### **Asian American Identity as an Exercise in Selective Cultural Performance**

To further emphasize the idea that cultural expectations are often enlisted as a central means of giving ethnic identities distinct form and definition, Appiah proposes the metaphor of ethnic and racial identity as a kind of script.<sup>23</sup> Just as the dialogue of a script gives the script its shape, so too the cultural expectations that typically delineate an ethnicity’s particularities. In other words, it is the desire for a distinctive script that comes first, and the dialogue that follows in support of that desire; in the case of ethnicity, it is culture that supports the goal of ethnic distinctiveness.

---

<sup>23</sup> Appiah, “Race, Culture, Identity,” 97.



In drawing comparisons between a script and ethnicity, Appiah's aim is to set a conceptual frame to illumine the negative possibilities of ethnicities. If being of a particular ethnic identity means following some script that goes with being that ethnic identity, then Appiah wonders whether ethnic identities are too constraining, limiting life possibilities and stifling cultural creativity.<sup>24</sup> I am not unsympathetic to such claims. However, ethnic identities as Appiah conceives of them in terms of their likeness to scripts need not only draw our attention to the potentially restrictive qualities of ethnic identities.

The conception of ethnic identity as script is also useful in illumining the degree of cultural creation and choice that goes into embracing and embodying a particular ethnic identity. For instance, consider Appiah's account of contemporary Black identity as emergent from the Black Power movement:

An African-American after the Black Power movement takes the old script of self-hatred, the script in which he or she is a nigger, and works, in community with others, to construct a series of positive black life scripts. In these life scripts, being a Negro is recoded as being black: and this requires, among other things, refusing to assimilate to white norms of speech and behavior.<sup>25</sup>

For Appiah, contemporary Black identity is a function of African American agency. Black identity, as any script itself, is a creation that draws from multiple sources to make visible or manifest a particular way of life, in this case, a certain-existence that disavows "white norms of speech and behavior." So too with Asian American identity. As the sociologist Min Zhou explains, "The term 'Asian American' was coined by the late historian and activist Yuji Ichioka during the ethnic consciousness movements of the late 1960s. To adopt this identity is to reject

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 98.

the Western imposed label of ‘Oriental’.”<sup>26</sup> In both cases, Black and Asian American identities are creations and, thus, a function of choice, but not in some absolute sense, just as literary scripts are not simply created ex nihilo from the author’s mind. Black identity as well as Asian American identity (and, importantly, what it means to be those identities at the cultural level) emerge in response to past and present social circumstances or experiences (e.g., racism, economic and political marginalization). And it is from this response to a specific social reality and history that such identities are given definition through, among other means, selective cultural retrieval and construction. Asian American is not simply a reiteration of a particular Asian culture, just as Black identity is not a mere repetition of some African culture; the cultural landscapes of both identities are more complicated than that.

Amerasian adoptees, particularly of Korean ancestry, provide an especially focused view into such complexity. Korean Amerasian adoptees, according to the sociologist Paul R. Spickard, tend to express more interest in Korean customs and traditions than non-adoptee Korean Americans and Amerasians. Reasons vary, but, as Spickard suggests, those who are adopted into white, non-Asian households and communities (e.g., rural Minnesota, where there is a particularly high concentration of such adoptees), tend to express a desire “to connect with their Korean background.”<sup>27</sup> Such a desire would seem to underscore the earlier point that the embrace of ethnic identity through culture is responsive to social circumstance. Particularly

---

<sup>26</sup> Min Zhou, “Are Asian Americans Becoming White?” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, eds. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 354.

<sup>27</sup> Paul R. Spickard, “What Must I Be? Asian Americans and the Question of Multiethnic Identity,” in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, eds. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 401. The high concentration of Korean American adoptees in Minnesota has spurred a robust newspaper that caters specifically to them. See *Korean Quarterly* at <http://www.koreanquarterly.org/Home.html>.

curious, however, are the kinds of practices, traditions, and customs that are taken as Korean or, at the very least, exemplifying Korean identity for many adoptees of Korean ancestry: tae kwon do, Korean drumming, Korean fan dancing, and the like.<sup>28</sup> To be sure, Korean cultural practices, as is the case with cultures generally speaking, are wide ranging. But inasmuch as these few practices (often practices associated with Korean royal court life) are considered gateways to better appreciating Korean and Korean American identity, the attention given to these practices rather than other perhaps more obscure practices raises interesting questions about the extent to which the cultural identity of ethnicity is *selectively* constructed in response to specific social dynamics.<sup>29</sup>

Another example, but this one in the realm of Asian American food, reinforces further the idea that social circumstance or experience often informs the selective cultural construction of ethnic self-understanding and differentiation. In the opening to her article on the history of Filipino food in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the historian Dawn Bohulano Mabalon recounts a formative event in her father's ethnic consciousness. The poignancy of the recollection merits an extended citation:

---

<sup>28</sup> See, for instance, the website to Camp Friendship NJ, <https://www.campfriendshipnj.org/Korea/>, a summer camp in Stirling, NJ at the Shrine of St. Joseph. This camp is dedicated to introducing Korean adoptees to Korean culture as a way of better understanding and appreciating their ethnic heritage. (The tagline for the camp is "A Korean Culture Camp.") A camp for Chinese adoptees is also sponsored by the organization.

<sup>29</sup> Or consider the popularity of Hindu Heritage Summer Camp in Macedon, NY. According to a recent profile on the camp, its attraction stems from the interest of Indian immigrants to the U.S. in strengthening their children's identity as Indians "in a polygot nation with an enticingly secular popular culture." As such, the camp's "approach is built around a set of hybrid rituals," a blending of Hindu customs and so-called American customs. For instance, a common morning activity is gathering "in a circle [of] about 150 children and counselors burst[ing] into 'Rise and Shine,' an American Christian song about Noah's Ark—a story that also happens to have a Hindu parallel in the myth of Manu, who helps to save humanity from a great flood." In the evenings, campers may reenact "the Hindu festival of Holi, which observes the coming of spring, with an Indian-American version of color war." See Samuel G. Freedman, "Building on U.S. Tradition, Camp for Hindu Children Strengthens Their Identity," *The New York Times*, August 22, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/23/us/building-on-us-tradition-camp-for-hindu-children-strengthens-their-identity.html?src=xps>

My father Ernesto Tirona Mabalon arrived in Stockton, California, in 1963 to be reunited with his father, Pablo “Amblo” Mabalon, who had left their hometown of Numancia, Aklan, for the United States in 1929. My *lolo* (grandfather) Ambo ran a popular Filipino American diner, the Lafayette Lunch Counter, in the heart of Stockton’s Little Manila. Almost immediately after he arrives, my *tatay* (father) was “itching to have dried fish” and craved his favorite variety, called *tuyo*. When my *lolo* stepped out one afternoon, my father threw some *tuyo* on the restaurant’s hot grill. The reek of the fried, fermented fish wafted down Lafayette Street. *Lolo* rushed back to find angry patrons [most of whom were Filipino Americans] and warned *tatay* never to fry *tuyo* again. After he ate, *tatay* lambasted the customers. “I said, *Mabaho pala kayo!*” (You’re the ones who stink!), he remembered.

After this *tuyo* debacle, [Tatay] swore that “wherever I am, I will always eat dried fish, the old dependable.”<sup>30</sup>

For Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, *tatay*’s daughter and author of the article from which I have been citing, the *tuyo* story raises questions about the history of Filipino food both in the Philippines and in the U.S., such as was *tuyo* a food staple for Filipinos before migration and afterwards? While an interesting historical question, I am more interested in how this story pushes us to consider the kind of dynamics that shape the cultural choices Asian Americans make to give definition and differentiation to their respective ethnic identities. In other words, what are the social forces that inform the choices of Asian Americans to adhere to or celebrate this tradition over that? Or, what are the social forces that contribute to Asian American re-appropriation, recreation, or re-imagination of certain cultural forms? In some cases, why do Asian Americans prefer or desire to preserve, to the extent possible, as much of their ancestral homeland customs?

---

<sup>30</sup> Dawn Bohulano Mabalon, “As American as Jackrabbit Adobo: Cooking, Eating, and Becoming Filipina/o American before World War II,” in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 147.

For tatay, before coming to the U.S., eating *tuyo* was part and parcel of everyday life; taken for granted, in other words. It is only when he arrives in the U.S. that it takes on a different status, becoming a way of asserting what he thinks it means to be a particular kind of person. More specifically, the decision to “always eat dried fish” is now marked as part and parcel of his ethnic identity as Filipino and, thus, not as one who has succumbed, he suggests, to a way of life in the U.S. that questions its propriety. Tatay, therefore, devotes himself specifically to a cultural dimension of Filipino life as a means of reasserting and preserving a particular Filipino identity in response to specific socio-economic and socio-political forces that may discount that particular identity. Revealing is Tatay’s continued tirade against his fellow Filipinos in Stockton, CA, who complain of the smell of fried, fermented fish in his grandfather’s diner:

I said: When you left the country [the Philippines] you were eating dried fish, were you not? This is what made you what you are! Dried fish! Because you are here [in America], you hate the smell of dried fish? You did not come to this country if you were eating steak in the Philippines!<sup>31</sup>

For Tatay, the eating of *tuyo*, despite its odious smell, is an act of rejecting a kind of cultural imperialism, the perception that to fit in American life requires softening the edges of one’s own cultural practices. Eating *tuyo* is also an act of rejecting classism in that for tatay it serves to affirm a rural way of life that presumably many of his fellow Filipino émigrés to the U.S. are attempting to escape in hopes of a more affluent lifestyle in the U.S. Interestingly, the social forces that inform Tatay’s insistence on eating *tuyo*, and thus on the preservation of a particular Filipino identity, are not all that different from the desire of many Hawaiians in the 1980s and 1990s to advocate for what they called regional Hawaiian cuisine: rural, local, and

---

<sup>31</sup> Mabalon, “As American as Jackrabbit Adobo,” 147.

drawing from indigenous Hawaiian communities rather than the cooking philosophies and tastes of continental or European cuisine.<sup>32</sup>

Tatay's *tuyo* story draws attention less on the question of cultural authenticity and more on the question of the reality of cultural construction. After all, how authentically Filipino is eating *tuyo*? For tatay, the point is not about authenticity per se, but about resisting the marginalization of a particular identity and way of life. As such, the story calls specific attention to the socio-political/socio-economic context from which Asian Americans (or any other ethno-racial identity for that matter) construct a cultural identity.

### **Asian American Culture and Asian American Christian Ethics: Reassessing the Role of Culture in Moral Reflection**

What does the cultural construction of Asian American identity mean for Asian American Christian ethics? More specifically, what does it imply about Asian American lived culture as a source of moral reflection? At least four observations can be made in regards to these questions.

#### ***Observation 1: Moving Beyond Cultural Authenticity***

The moral insights that Asian American culture affords are not contingent on a claim of its originality or authenticity. Such a claim, as we saw earlier, is best understood as a means of shoring up ethnic and racial self-definition in response to particular social forces rather than correlations to some truth about cultural difference. Accordingly, a methodological imperative

---

<sup>32</sup> Samuel Hideo Yamashita, "The Significance of Hawai'i Regional Cuisine in Postcolonial Hawai'i," in *Eating Asian America: A Food Studies Reader*, eds. Robert Ji-Song Ku et al. (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 117.

must be placed on paying closer attention to the social experiences that inform Asian American cultural choices instead of simply exploring the possible moral meanings of various Asian American cultural forms and values themselves. What those moral meanings are is complicated by the social experiences that inform the choice and embrace (and sometimes rejection) of those cultural forms and values.

What are the social experiences that inform the cultural lives and choices of Asian Americans? Asian American social experience may vary depending on whether we are referring to Asian immigrants to the U.S., native-born Asian Americans, second and successive generation Asian Americans, or Amerasians, for each may experience the social dynamics of U.S. society somewhat differently. For some, the first-hand memories of forced migration (due to a lack of economic opportunity, for instance), civil war in their home countries, or the ordeal of political exile may endure and be determinative.<sup>33</sup> For others, like in Tatay's *tuyo* story, the experience of American cultural hegemony, both at the levels of race and class, may be more formative. For others still, the dynamics of race and class in the U.S. may be delineated more specifically and seminally in terms of "[mis-]treatment of Asian Americans as [perpetual] foreigners, the glass ceiling, and racially motivated hate crimes" or, contrastively, the experience of intermarriage, multiracialism, affluence, and socio-economic success in the U.S.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>33</sup> Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, "Transforming Asian America: Globalization and Contemporary Immigration to the United States," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, eds. Min Zhou and J.V. Gatewood, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 128.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 129. For an in-depth discussion of the twofold experience of Asian American mistreatment and Asian American affluence, see Ki Joo (KC) Choi, "Racial Identity and Solidarity," in *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Issues, Methods*, eds. Grace Y. Kao and Il-sup Ahn (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015).

But whatever the social experience, the kind of cultural life that is enlisted to support Asian American identity represents one durable and compelling strategy of negotiating the various social forces or dynamics that impact Asian American self-understanding. For some Asian Americans (perhaps primarily, but not necessarily, among Asian immigrants to the U.S., as Zhou suggests), that negotiation may tend toward a “concerted effort to preserve [ancestral homeland cultures].”<sup>35</sup> For others, it may lead to an appropriation of ancestral homeland cultures that is less static and instead fused, refashioned, or reimagined within an American context of multiculturalism and socio-economic diversity. Some Asian Americans may even move beyond such selective and creative appropriation, assuming a kind of symbolic or expressive Asian American identity, which is to say an identity that is supported by a cultural life that is intentionally marked as Asian but not in a committed or sustained way but more as a “‘leisure-time activity’.”<sup>36</sup> Such an approach to culture does not serve to support a defined sense of Asian Americanness but rather a kind of acknowledgement of one’s Asian American identity simply as an incidental feature of one’s personal history or story (and as incidental, elements of Asian American culture are adhered to and practiced as any other leisure-time activity, i.e., when one wishes). In sum, just as the social experience of Asian Americans is varied, so too the way in which Asian Americans make sense of their social experience and embody that understanding through cultural selection and construction.

---

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.



## ***Observation 2: Moving Toward the Concept of Social Positionality***

The notion that Asian American culture is a means of negotiating the social realities that frame life in the U.S. should not be taken to mean that Asian American culture is, as the U.S. Hispanic theologian Roberto Goizueta writes about Latino/a culture and religiosity, “*always* [a mediation] of political and economic structures and relationships.”<sup>37</sup> In reference to U.S. Hispanic popular religiosity, Goizueta elaborates, “rather than superseding the ethical-political; the aesthetic dimension of human action is mediated by the ethical-political; it is encountered and lived out within ethical-political action, as the deepest meaning and significance of the ethical-political.”<sup>38</sup> The concept of mediation in that citation, as well as in the following passage, suggests a too direct, cause-and-effect, or predictable relationship between culture and social experience:

It is no coincidence that the extent to which a particular Latino community continues to participate in traditional, popular forms of religion is closely related to that community’s level of economic and political integration into U.S. Society: in Latin America as in the United States, the religion of the upper classes is often virtually indistinguishable from liberal Catholicism. The religiosity of middle and upper class U.S. Hispanics often exhibits the characteristics of what Mark Francis called Euro-American devotionism. Thus popular Catholicism is not only a cultural but also a class phenomenon.<sup>39</sup>

The concept of negotiation (that culture is a strategy of negotiating socio-economic, political realities) rather than mediation suggests with greater precision a relationship between culture and social experience that is more reflective, involving a degree of agency, deliberation, judgment, and selection. When reflecting on the relationship between culture and identity in an

---

<sup>37</sup> Goizueta, *Caminemos con Jesús*, 127 (emphasis Goizueta’s).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

Asian American key, that sense of negotiation emerges insofar as the multivalence of Asian American culture reflects to some considerable degree the extent to which Asian Americans have responded to their social experiences with complexity: at times reinforcing tradition and perhaps stereotypes, at times innovating their self-understanding, or at times simply forsaking a cultural life that might be perceived as Asian for other forms of cultural existence.

But Goizueta's larger, more essential point that U.S. Hispanic religiosity's mediation of the social provides access to the details of the social realities of Latino/a life is one that Asian American culture also bears out. As Goizueta writes,

To ignore this fact is to presuppose that 'cultural understanding' and 'cultural diversity' necessarily imply an authentic relationship of others, where particularity is affirmed and valued. It is to ignore the fact that...[Hispanic] cultural and racial mestizaje [was] brought about by ethical-political and economic oppression, not by emphatic fusion.<sup>40</sup>

For Goizueta, the ideal of cultural mediation in a Hispanic key reveals the challenge and problem of ethnocentrism and racism against Hispanics. In that respect, his concept of mediation provides what the political philosopher Iris Marion Young, borrowing from the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, calls social perspective.<sup>41</sup> So too the idea that Asian American culture is a form of negotiation of the social as Asian Americans experience it. As essential sites in which the social experiences of Asian Americans are negotiated (contested, accepted, ignored, or lived in tension), the lived cultures of Asian Americans provide particularized views into the ways in which Asian Americans are situated in society, and as such, the nature of the position Asian Americans

---

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 127-128.

<sup>41</sup> Iris Marion Young, "Difference as a Resource for Democratic Communication," in James Bohman and William Rehg, eds., *Deliberative Democracy: Essays on Reason and Politics* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1997), 383-406. For a more sustained interpretation of Young's social perspective, see Ki Joo (KC) Choi, "Should Race Matter? A Constructive Ethical Assessment of the Postracial Ideal," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 31, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 2011): 79-102.

occupy in the social structures of the U.S. (e.g., are they situated or positioned by racism or economic and political marginalization, and if so, how?).<sup>42</sup>

### ***Observation 3: Asian American Culture as Social Critique***

To the extent that the diversity of Asian American culture offers views into the nature of Asian American social positionality, Christian ethicists Jonathan Tran, Kao, and others are certainly right that contextualized approaches and interpretations of Asian American life, particularly Asian American religiosity, is warranted. That warrant also demands, as Kao and Ilsup Ahn propose, the direction of contextualized critique of Asian American life and religious practice.<sup>43</sup> But to the extent that the cultural life of Asian Americans reflect a negotiation of the social forces encountered, judgments about whether Asian cultural forms are liberatory or repressive, or advances moral agency or not, ought not to be made too facilely. To say as much is to approach cautiously any recommendation of certain Asian ancestral traditions, beliefs, or practices as more complementary to and expansive of Christian values and, therefore, more conducive to human well-being more so than other practices and values, Asian or otherwise. Correlatively, it is to recommend restraint when it comes to assessing what might be perceived as improper confluences of Asian/Asian American values with Christian beliefs and values.

---

<sup>42</sup> Zhou and Gatewood, "Transforming Asian America," 128.

<sup>43</sup> See Grace Y. Kao and Ilsup Ahn, "Introduction," eds. Grace Y. Kao and Ilsup Ahn, *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Issues, Methods* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015). This introduction expands on Grace Y. Kao, "Prospects for Developing Asian American Christian Ethics," *Society of Asian North American Christian Studies* 3 (2011): 91-102. See also Jonathan Tran, "Response: The Possibility of an Asian-American Christian Ethics," *Society of Asian North American Christian Studies* 3 (2011): 103-110.

While there is a degree of intentionality behind the cultural choices Asian Americans make, that intentionality itself is not unencumbered but bound by the social experiences of Asian Americans. In the face of such experiences, however, ethnic self-definition through cultural construction may be indicative of either resistance or conformity to such experiences, depending on whether they are perceived and felt as diminishing or threatening human dignity. One can imagine within the American context an instance in which culture is employed to differentiate one's Asian American identity from prevailing cultural forces perceived threateningly as "white" or otherwise. Or, one can perhaps imagine the employment of one's ancestral culture in a reimagined way so that one's Asian American identity presents as less foreign to the larger society. In either scenario, the cultural lives of Asian Americans should not be regarded as frivolous or thoughtless but as a kind of socially informed response. This is not to suggest that all cultural practices that Asian Americans preserve, adopt, or re-create merit moral praise. Those traditions, values, or practices that overtly or not so overtly express and reinforce sexist, patriarchal, misogynist, and authoritarian worldviews or patterns of behavior warrant sustained suspicion and critique. But even so, we ought to be sensitive to the reality of how culture is often instrumentalized in relation to identity. The kind of cultural lives Asian Americans embody may be revealing of the survival strategies Asian Americans employ in a society pressed by forces of homogeneity. In this respect, the cultural lives of Asian Americans *taken as they are* may suggest, in their own ways, an implicit and in some cases an explicit critique of the social and structural conditions of life in the U.S.

***Observation 4: Asian American Culture as a Window into the Social Positionality of Asian Americans and non-Asian Americans alike***

Finally, inasmuch as Asian American culture can be conceived of as a kind of lived critique of the social, structural conditions of life in the U.S., the moral content of Asian American culture cannot be considered strictly the domain of Asian American ethicists, Christian and non-Christian for that matter. In saying as much, I do not mean to dismiss the reality that Asian American culture is about Asian Americans; they are in a real sense the primary actors of Asian American culture. However, Asian American culture is not only about Asian Americans if Asian American culture, as discussed earlier, is approached as indicative of how Asian Americans are positioned within the social, structural environment of U.S. life. In that sense, Asian American culture, when under the lens of social analysis, offers a specialized, interpreted view of the whole.

More specifically, if Asian American culture yields an understanding of how Asian Americans are socially positioned, then by implication Asian American culture reveals how Asian Americans are positioned relative to non-Asian Americans. This means, then, that Asian American culture yields an alternative and supplementary perspective on how Latinos/as, African Americans, and Caucasians, among others, are socially positioned and, thus, how they, relative to Asian Americans, are negotiating the social, structural realities of U.S. society and their effects (e.g., by perpetuating, resisting, or simply capitulating to them). In this respect, to take seriously Asian American culture as a source of moral reflection is to engage in a form of moral reflection that is not simply “for” Asian American ethicists (and about Asian Americans). In a real and substantive sense, it is also a way of doing ethics that is “for” all ethicists (and about all

Americans).<sup>44</sup> For Asian American Christian ethicists, then, to appreciate the socially and structurally complex parameters of Asian American cultural experience is to underscore an approach to Asian American Christian ethics as one important instantiation of Christian social ethics rather than simply an insular and parochial moral discourse. For non-Asian American Christian ethicists, an appreciation of the social, structural dimensions of Asian American cultural experience invites their engagement with Asian American Christian ethics not as spectators but as active co-participants who recognize Asian American culture as an integral source for Christian ethics generally speaking.

---

<sup>44</sup> The “for” phraseology refers to the “for who” category developed in Kao and Ahn’s “Introduction” to *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Issues, Methods*, which develops further the category as it is discussed originally in Kao, “Prospects for Developing Asian American Christian Ethics,” 99.