

Identity Dilemma of the Second-Generation Chinese Americans—Take Andrew Yang’s “Rejecting Identity Politics” Strategy as an Example

Chen Zhitong^{1,*}

¹*College of Foreign Languages and Cultures, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan 610065, China*

^{*}*Corresponding author. Email: zhitong97@qq.com*

ABSTRACT

The strategy of "rejecting identity politics" adopted by Andrew Yang in his 2020 US presidential campaign shows the identity dilemma of the second-generation Chinese Americans. Taking Yang's identity strategy as an example and combining with the Pew Research surveys, this paper explores the situation and the reasons of the second-generation Chinese Americans' predicament, as well as the influence of Yang's strategy. The author aims to show the cultural gap the second-generation Chinese Americans live in, the reasons behind it, and the hidden damage of Yang's identity strategy to the development of Chinese Americans in the long run.

Keywords: *Andrew Yang, identity, second-generation Chinese Americans*

1. INTRODUCTION

The second-generation Chinese American Andrew Yang announced his presidential bid for 2020 in February 2018 and dropped out of the race two years later [1]. Although he leaves the campaign, Mr. Yang has already overperformed what many experts believed he would accomplish in the Democratic primary. He is the second Chinese American who runs for president (the first one is Hiram Leong Fong) in US history and the lone person of color on the Democratic debate stage of 2019. Scholars and community leaders who study Asian-American history say Mr. Yang's emergence onto the national political scene is no accident [2]. After decades of immigrant exclusion, the second-generation Asian Americans have grown up and steeped into American politics, with their voices louder and their behaviors more prominent.

Yang's style of success is thrilling, but it needs to be noticed that he does not embrace the strategy of using his Asian ethnicity and identity to appeal to voters nationwide. Instead, he rejects "identity politics" [3]. He describes himself as "an Asian man running for president who wants to give everyone \$1,000 a month" but manages to be an "Asian Everyman" who plays down "identity politics" and opts for an almost anachronistic message about everyone coming together [2]. Mr. Yang said repeatedly that he was proud of his background and was well aware that he was being seen as a representative of the Chinese American community. At the same time, however, he has made it a point to eschew the prominent feature of Democratic Party progressivism: identity politics. In his mind, leading with race and identity is not "necessarily the most helpful way to move any community forward" [2].

When reading the news about Andrew Yang, his way of dealing with his ethnic identity has caught my attention. Why does he try to ignore his ethnic identity? Why does he

often make ethnic jokes about himself at the same time? How does his attitude affect Chinese Americans and the American society? Particularly, Mr. Yang can be seen as one of the representatives of the second-generation Chinese Americans as he is the record-breaker in the Chinese American history and the interest in Mr. Yang's candidacy has been especially high among the second-generation Chinese Americans. In this sense, Andrew Yang's "rejecting identity politics" strategy could also reflect the dilemma and the attitude of the second-generation Chinese Americans in terms of identity. Hence, a step-further question is raised: what's the attitudes of the second-generation Chinese Americans concerning identity?

When traced back to history, the modern immigration wave to the United States began with the passage of the landmark Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Since then, 2.4 million Chinese immigrants (includes Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macao) have come to the United States. With different values and cultures clashed, however, identity has become a most complex and prominent issue in American society. The identity dilemma of the second-generation Chinese Americans has aroused the interests of many scholars in the field of Chinese American studies as well as Chinese American literary criticism. In terms of domestic studies, most Chinese scholars concentrate on the studies of Chinese American history or Chinese American literature, with few books and papers devoted to explore the shaping factors of the second-generation Chinese Americans' identities. The foreign researches are relatively mature, with several books and papers dealing with the identity issue of the second-generation Chinese Americans. Some books relate personal problems and conditions to specific sources in Chinese and American cultures and the immigration experience. For example, the book *Chinese Americans and Their Immigrant Parents: Conflict, Identity and Values* [4] provides specific examples to illustrate the conflicts between the first and the second generations. Others analyze the identity problem

from a cultural perspective. In *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity and Ethnicity* [5] edited by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, the contributors show how Asian American youth have created an identity and space for themselves historically and in contemporary multicultural America. In *Becoming New Yorkers: Ethnographies of the New Second Generation* [6], the authors discuss the role of parents in the academic choices of Chinese Americans. Unfortunately, the researches on the identity issues of the second-generation Chinese Americans taking public figures as examples are quite limited. This paper, however, tries to answer the above questions concerning identity from a novel perspective. By analyzing Andrew Yang's identity strategy in his presidential campaign and combining with the Pew Research surveys, the identity dilemma of the second-generation Chinese Americans is shown.

2. SITUATION

Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets give a detailed account and thorough analysis of the issue of identity in their book *Identity Theory*. They define an identity as "the set of meanings that define who one is when one is an occupant of a particular role in society, a member of a particular group, or claims particular characteristics that identify him or her as a unique person" [7]. As identity is closely related to social and cultural factors, and "torn between two cultures" is a common dilemma confronting Chinese Americans, the hybrid identity and the marginalized situation of the second-generation Chinese Americans is nothing surprising. For instance, Andrew Yang embraces his Asian American background, drawing support from Asian Americans. He also at times, however, leans into stereotypes commonly associated with Asian Americans on his campaign trail. In his word, he chooses the "not left, not right, but forward" [8] way to unify the people, a middle way which is very similar to what the second-generation Chinese Americans often choose in American society.

2.1 Being Proud of Their Background

Living across two cultures, many second-generation Chinese Americans regard the issue of identity as "an either/or choice" since they are eager to gain a sense of wholeness and belonging. For example, Andrew Yang talked about how growing up Asian American had made him feel like his "spot in this country is somewhat in question" [8].

Some second-generation Chinese Americans are proud of their heritage, emphasizing their ethnic identity. One of the most epoch-making events is the Asian American movement in the 1960s, which marks the watershed in their understanding and assertion of their unique cultural heritages and identity as both Asians and Americans. William Wei points out that these Asian American activists were attracted by "identity politics" which aroused their "ethnic consciousness" and encouraged them to fight for

equality [9]. Identity politics is a political approach based on people prioritizing their particular racial, religious, ethnic, sexual, social, cultural or other identity, instead of engaging in more traditional, broad-based party politics. According to Pew Research surveys of the second-generation Americans in 2013 [10], most second-generation Chinese Americans have a strong sense of identity with their ancestral roots. Majorities say they identify themselves most often by their family's country of origin (Chinese American) or by a pan-ethnic or racial label (Asian American).

2.2 Choosing to Be "A Typical American"

As the second-generation Chinese Americans living an American lifestyle have grown up, however, the opinions of their identity have gradually changed. Many Chinese Americans have sometimes deflected questions about identities, choosing to describe themselves simply as "a typical American". When Andrew Yang chooses to reject "identity politics", he also represents those Chinese Americans who choose to be complete "Americans"—by mainstream standards. Pew Research surveys of the second-generation Americans in 2013 also find that roughly six-in-ten Asian Americans adults in the second generation consider themselves to be a "typical American", about double the share of immigrants who say the same. Besides, 27% of second-generation Asian Americans say they most often describe themselves simply as "American" [10].

In order to assert their Americanness and individuality, many try their best to play down the Chinese-ness in them. Some second-generation Chinese Americans have developed their strategy to win recognition from the whites, which is to blend into the white world, avert association with Chinese Americans and even Asian Americans at large. In narratives of the second-generation Chinese Americans, many believe race should be downplayed and minimized, not highlighted and brought to the surface. For example, a new Pew Research Center report of Americans' views of race in 2019 [11] finds that about three-quarters of black adults say their race is extremely or very important to their sense of identity while only 56% of Asians say the same about being Asian.

2.3 Leaning into the Stereotype

The stereotype, which overgeneralizes Asian Americans as diligent and high-achieving, dates back to a broader culture of anti-black racism in America that helped to justify a kind of racial order. In 1966, sociologist William Peterson described Japanese Americans as ethnic minorities who, despite marginalization, have achieved success in the United States. Later, a similar article called *Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.* published [12], praising Chinese Americans for their achievements. Since then, Asian Americans have been referred to as "model minority". This depiction disguises the discrimination and bias that Chinese American are facing in society, and places them

under tremendous psychological pressure to maintain the shining image. The stereotype is problematic because it flattens a massive group of people into a monolith. It gives birth to the stereotype of Chinese American students as nerds and geeks whose sole interest is studying math and science, and implies that they are fixated on certain professions like doctors and engineers. They have been prevented from being promoted to high-level administrative and managerial positions for their reserved and unsociable characteristics. Besides, the mainstream society has taken advantage of the model minority image to displace racial discrimination and inequality problems as the emergence of the model minority image was actually intended to implicitly criticize African Americans. As time goes by, it damages the relationship between Asian Americans and other ethnic minorities and even evokes anti-Asian sentiment.

Sadly, the myth of the model minority is one that is still firmly attached to the Chinese American identity today, even many Chinese Americans at times lean into the model minority stereotypes. The notion that "white is power" in American society has been firmly ingrained in some second-generation Chinese American youth' minds. Take Andrew Yang as an example: although he is proud of his background, he often uses stereotypes as jokes in his presidential campaign. For example, When Mr. Yang give his speech, he often used his well-worn tagline: "The opposite of Donald Trump is an Asian man who likes math" [14]. He has called himself as the "nerdiest presidential campaign in history" in his presidential campaign, and took some heat for saying "I am Asian, so I know a lot of doctors" in the September Democratic debate [14]. His fans wave signs "MATH", an acronym for one of his campaign's slogans, "make America think harder" to support the self-proclaimed candidate of numbers and data. Naturally, he has been criticized for using racial stereotypes during his presidential campaign, but he sees them in a way he could differentiate himself in a crowded field. He told ABC News correspondent that he believed the way he made light of certain stereotypes was helping expose how ridiculous some of them were [13]. He tweeted that the society has become too vindictive about offensive jokes, and anti-Asian racism wasn't taken as seriously as racism against black people. To show his "broad mind", Yang even offered public absolution to Shane Gillis, the comedian who called Yang a "Jew chink".

3. REASONS

The second-generation Chinese Americans are stuck in the ambivalence and conflict concerning their self-identification. Most immigrants, especially their children, want to assimilate into the mainstream culture and not being seen as foreign. "Longing to be a complete American" can be best summarized as the reason explaining the identity dilemma of the second-generation Chinese Americans. When accepted by the mainstream society, they tend to draw a clear line between their ethnic group and themselves, trying to downplay the ethnicity. When faced with racial

discrimination in society, they form defense mechanisms to protect themselves by making light ethnic jokes about themselves and minimizing the importance of ethnic identity.

3.1 Americanness Before Ethnicity

The difference between the second-generation Chinese Americans and their parents is that the children have accepted the American values and lived the American lifestyle since they were born. Apart from the influence exerted by their parents, it is difficult to find traces of traditional Chinese cultural elements in their school and social life. Children are no longer interested in the immigration experience that their parents are fond of.

Take language proficiency as an example. Language is a crucial element in shaping one's identity, an important feature distinguishing inter-group and out-group members. For the second-generation Chinese Americans, English is the language used at school, and they feel that there is no incentive to learn Chinese or speak Chinese. According to Pew Research surveys of second-generation Americans in 2013 [10], the second-generation Asian Americans are much more likely than the immigrants to speak English; to have friends and spouses outside their ethnic or racial group, to say their group gets along well with others, and to think of themselves as a "typical American". About nine-in-ten second-generations are proficient English speakers, but their Chinese proficiency is quite limited. Just four-in-ten report that they can speak the language used in their familial country of origin either very well (18%) or pretty well (23%). The plurality (33%) report that they speak just a little of the language from their family's country of origin, and fully one-fourth (26%) report that they don't speak that language at all. Besides, compared with second-generation Hispanic Americans, second-generation Asian Americans are less likely than their immigrant counterparts to value the ability to speak their ancestral language, with 68% of the former and only 37% of the latter reporting it is very important.

For the second-generation Chinese Americans, their Americanness stands at the primary position while their ethnicity steps back to the second place. They tend to ignore their differences and blend into the mainstream by behaving "more American".

3.2 Forming Defense Mechanisms

Being regarded as "model minority" and "numb minority", Chinese Americans still face visible and invisible racial discrimination in American society. According to Pew Research surveys of Americans' views of race in 2019 [11], most whites (67%) say they have never experienced race discrimination while about three-quarters of blacks and Asians (76% of each) say that they have experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly regularly or from time to time. One notable finding is that, among all of the

situations being discriminated, being subjects to slurs or jokes is the most common situation Asians have faced. Compared with 37% Whites, 46% Hispanics and 52% Blacks, 61% Asians have experienced this kind of racial discrimination. For example, Andrew Yang grows up in largely white communities in Schenectady, New York. He recalls that "I was one of the only Asian kids and I'd skipped a grade, so I was very scrawny and felt small and out of place." [3] He was called "chink" and "gook" and various other slurs at school, endured racial abuse and bullying, and ended up fighting with his tormentors.

Although the second-generation Chinese Americans live a typical American lifestyle and want to assimilate into the American society, others will never fail to notice their ethnic differences. There is a kind of contradiction: The ethnic identity of Andrew Yang helps him attract public attention although he rejects using identity politics. While Andrew Yang says his Asian-ness is kind of obvious in a way that is just a fairly evident reality, issues of race and representation become factors in his candidacy whether he admits it or not, especially when the field winnowed to a handful of white front-runners. On the other hand, ironically, Andrew Yang's impressive candidacy was ignored by mainstream media. For example, MSNBC and CNN have "forgotten" to include this Chinese-American in graphics and polls on several occasions, even as he was polling better than other candidates. Other outlets got his name wrong, an error that would have attracted trenchant criticism for days if he were a black or Latino or female candidate. Yang's invisibility, in my opinion, is largely because his uncomfortably ambiguous status as a Chinese American in the white-dominated political field. Just like Gene Wu, a Democratic state representative who is Chinese-American said, "Asian-Americans have been relegated as the sub-minority—that we're not black, we're not Hispanic. For a large part, we're an afterthought." [15]

To deal with this, Andrew Yang's approach to race is the conciliatory style a nonwhite candidate might have adopted—a self-deprecating, a little humiliating and almost dismissive defense mechanisms about identity. This kind of defense mechanism is often used by the second-generation Chinese Americans who want to blend into the white world. When Asians are surrounded by white people, they tend to use such mechanisms to "like everyone else": They are the so-called model-minority Asians who don't "play the race card" and know how to assure others that they belong. The more they want to become more American and more popular, the further they tend to keep the distance from their ethnic cultures.

4. INFLUENCE OF YANG'S STRATEGY

Chinese Americans will be happy to see anyone from their community willing to break the "bamboo ceiling"—the barriers faced by many Chinese Americans in the professional arena. However, the contradiction of Andrew Yang's "rejecting identity politics" speaks to a core tension in his candidacy: On the one hand, he serves as a bridge which unify different ethnic groups and interest groups; on

the other hand, he is the destroyer who sends the messages that actually reinforce the toxic "model minority" stereotypes. Although he attracts more public attention by rejecting identity politics, leaning in on some kinds of caricatures of Chinese-Americans has a far-reaching and damaging influence in the long run.

4.1 A Bridge

Andrew Yang's embodying for Chinese Americans on the national stage has been significant and inspiring. After all, he broke the mold by showing young Chinese Americans that they can also pursue something other than the "preplanned paths" of medical or law school. For some, Andrew Yang's jokes are nothing harmless but humorous, as Yang has been fighting against discrimination head-on by doing something practical and helpful for his community. For example, when he was a student, he started an Asian American student group at Columbia Law School, and stood up to raise the subject of racism within the Asian community during an orientation for students of color at Brown University [3]. In his immigrant policies, he also eloquently expresses his support for affirmative action and DREAM Act which are good for immigrants.

As an outsider presidential candidate, Yang believes he has to make as wide an appeal as possible — even if that means cracking the occasional joke about being Asian. Yang thinks his responsibility as a presidential candidate is to build bridges, and leading with race and identity is not the most helpful way to move community forward. As Black, White, Hispanic, Asian people all have many of the same problems, he believes the biggest problems that concern Americans are things like economic system, climate change, healthcare system and educational system. Yang's strategy does work, as "Yang Gang"—his most fervent supporters, certainly became both racially and ideologically diverse, attracting Trump voters and Bernie Sanders supporters and everyone in between.

4.2 A Destroyer

While Yang may have innocuous intentions with his comments on Chinese American stereotypes, the remarks are nonetheless reaffirming toxic tropes. Yang's statements on this subject matter because his candidacy offers high-profile representation for Chinese Americans in politics, so his words carry significant weight and frame not only in his own candidacy, but how Chinese Americans are perceived overall.

When Andrew Yang jokes that as an Asian, he knows a lot of doctors—it implies that many Asian Americans are well-educated and culturally-inclined to become doctors. This joke forgets to see the staggering wealth gap among Asian Americans which leaves more than 10% of Asian Americans living below the poverty line and ignores the evidence that many Asian Americans still struggle with far-reduced access to college. In Yang's campaign, "Math" is

both a campaign slogan and a humorous chant at rallies. But for the Chinese Americans, STEM (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) fields were emphasized as a shelter from anti-Asian racism because of "model minority" myth. Thus, his message reinforces the skewed perception of Chinese Americans, setting the tone for how many people may see Chinese Americans and perpetuating a damaging caricature in the process. It can be seen that Yang's identity strategy actually has done far more harm than good for Chinese Americans because of its hidden and far-reaching damage.

The way Mr. Yang has chosen to lean into stereotypes about Asian Americans, has also led to tension among members of the community. For many progressive Asian Americans have aligned their identities with a more modern political consciousness, Yang's approach has raised hackles. Thus, Yang had to meet with a collection of Asian-American and Pacific Islander journalists who peppered him with tough questions about his comments on race and the harm they might inflict on others. His candidacy has also been intensely polarizing within the Asian American community, in part because of his discordant views on race and identity.

5. CONCLUSION

Andrew Yang's strategy of "rejecting identity politics" in his 2020 United States presidential campaign shows the identity dilemma of the second-generation Chinese Americans. The author finds that the second-generation Chinese Americans are torn between two cultures, so while they are proud of their Chinese background, they often want to be "a typical American" and sometimes even lean into the "model minority" stereotypes. When accepted by the mainstream society, they put Americanness first, trying to play their ethnicity down. When faced with racial discrimination, they form defense mechanisms to avoid identity problems. Yang's identity strategy, despite its apparent emphasis on solidarity, actually has a far-reaching damage to the development of Chinese Americans in the long term.

REFERENCES

- [1] Merica, Dan., Sullivan, Kate. (2020) Andrew Yang ends 2020 presidential campaign. <https://www.cnn.com/2020/02/11/politics/andrew-yang-ends-2020-presidential-campaign/index.html>
- [2] Stevens, Matt. (2019) At a Historic Moment for Asian-American Candidates, Andrew Yang Leans In. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/22/us/politics/andrew-yang-2020-asian-candidates.html>
- [3] Fisher, Anthony. (2020) Andrew Yang says identity politics is a 'counterproductive' way for Democrats to campaign. <https://www.businessinsider.com/andrew-yang-identity-politics-counterproductive-way-democrats-campaign-2020-1>
- [4] Tung, May Paomay. (2000) *Chinese Americans and Their Immigrant Parents: Conflict, Identity, and Values*. Haworth Clinical Practices Press, New York.
- [5] Lee, Jennifer., Zhou, Min. (Eds). (2004) *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*. Routledge, New York.
- [6] Kasinitz, Philip., Mollenkope, John H., Waters, Mary C. (2004) *Becoming New Yorkers: Ethnographies of the New Second Generation*. Russell Sage Foundation, New York.
- [7] Burke, Peter J., Stets, Jan E. (2009) *Identity Theory*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- [8] Shyong, Frank. (2019) Andrew Yang faces his critics in the Asian American community. <https://www.latimes.com/california/story/2019-10-07/andrew-yang-asian-american-faces-critics>
- [9] Wei, William. (2004) A Commentary on Young Asian American Activists from the 1960s to the Present. In: Lee Jennifer, Zhou, Min. (Eds.), *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*. Routledge, New York. pp. 299-312.
- [10] Pew Research Center. (2013) Chapter 3: Identity. <https://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2013/02/07/chapter-3-identity/>
- [11] Pew Research Center. (2019) Key findings on Americans' views of race in 2019. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/04/09/key-findings-on-americans-views-of-race-in-2019/>
- [12] Park, L. (2008). Continuing Significance of the Model Minority Myth: The Second Generation. *Social Justice*, 35:134-144.
- [13] Garcia, Armando. (2020) Andrew Yang defends 'joke' of Asian stereotypes, talks economic policies at dinner with voters. <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/andrew-yang-talks-stereotypes-economic-policies-dinner-voters/story?id=68052307>
- [14] Hassan, Adeel. (2020) How Andrew Yang Handled His Asian-American Identity on the Campaign Trail. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/15/us/how-andrew-yang-handled-his-asian-american-identity-on-the-campaign-trail.html>