

Asian Immigrants vs. America

by Abbey Burkhalter

I am most interested in the way Charles Yu depicts racism in his novel *Interior Chinatown*. Not only does the novel show institutional racism, it shows everyday racism as well. Racism is used in small stories like Allen Chen's— one character from the novel— but it also is used all throughout *Interior Chinatown*. Willis Wu's father was faced with a very difficult time when coming to America and the court case is another example of racism. These examples from the novel show what is happening in the real world today. There has been a bad history record about Asian Americans and white Americans as well. Charles Yu represents racism in his novel *Interior Chinatown* to show what Asian Americans are going through and what they have to face.

In the novel *Interior Chinatown*, the main character Willis Wu is an actor trying to become Kung Fu Guy, which is the highest role an Asian American actor can get. He starts off with the role as the Special Guest Star and changes to Young Asian Man that he plays. The novel is written as a screenplay and in the second person. Throughout *Interior Chinatown*, Willis is trying to find out what his real dreams are and what more he can become. The popular show "Black and White" in the novel is just like the show "Law and Order" but it meshes with Willis Wu's life. The two cops are Sarah Green who is a white woman and Miles Turner who is a black male. This is why the show is called "Black and White." Willis Wu ends up being arrested for something he did not even do in the show "Black and White." The court case that took place was a joke and Willis Wu had no chance of winning. His character ends up being killed off and then Willis Wu will focus on his real life with his daughter, Phoebe.

More about the court case in Act VI; Willis was treated differently and was laughed at while trying to give his side. Before the court case even occurred in the novel, there was a list of laws that prohibited Asian immigrants from coming to the United States, buying land in America, and working in certain areas. These were listed to show how much Americans have control over all of the immigrants that come through and can make them do whatever America wants them to do just so they get to stay. It also shows how Asian Americans bothered Americans so much they had to make laws in order to control them. In the court case, no one against Willis took it seriously. At one point, the judge said he liked the prosecution's pantsuit and he laughed (Yu 223). Then the prosecution asked the detective what she was doing for dinner (Yu 226). This just shows how the case was not taken seriously and they already knew that Willis will be guilty without giving him a chance. When the jury left, they were only gone for a few minutes to see if Willis was guilty. This shows that they already knew what the verdict was going to be before they even went back into the room. This whole story of the court case shows how Americans always get their way and if others do not fit in their role then they will be punished.

Another example of Asian Americans not being treated fairly is the backstory of Willis Wu's father. In the beginning of Act IV, Willis Wu's father, also known as Young Yu, backstory is explained. Young Yu thought that going to America was going to be a happy moment. The main thought from his character was "In his dream, he arrives on a bright Monday morning, the ship pulling into the port, friendly strangers waving him and the others onto shore (Yu 144). This in fact did not happen. Young Yu arrived in the dark night and had to wait in lines to get papers stamped. There was no one there to greet him in the cold either (Yu 144). It was not what Willis Wu's father expected in America and he was treated very differently than he thought he would

have been. In this case, Young Wu felt like an outsider and not part of America like he dreamed of happening when traveling. This is because America advertises an image for everyone as this paradise place but it is not really like this. Most of the immigrants come to America for the money since the United States pays better. Young Wu's story shows how the American Image is very known to immigrants but they are not treated how America said it is supposed to treat them.

This leads to the story of Allen Chen. Also in Act IV, Allen started off by eating cat food instead of real food but Young Wu, his roommate at the time, asked him to not eat cat food anymore. Young Wu took Allen to dinner and bought him a hamburger that night. Young Wu would leave a few dollars on his desk every week. They also looked for a cat together and the cat food Allen Chen had bought to eat would be given to cats. Allen was called names just like his four other roommates. They would compare names and think it was harmless and funny. Allen ended up in the hospital after someone beat him up one day. He was beaten because this person blamed him for the Pearl Harbor attack even though he is from Taiwan. This is when all the housemates realized that these name callings were serious and not something to compare. Allen ended up being the best and brightest of all the housemates. He got married and had two kids, one daughter and one son. He still suffered from headaches for the rest of his life after the beating. Allen did not feel at ease in the United States and Taiwan is not home to him anymore either. He was 58 years old when he took his life by taking half a bottle of sleeping pills (Yu 145-149). Allen was overall tired of being bullied and pushed around. He felt like an outsider when everyone was being racist towards him and not accepting him.

Allen's story is just a small part of this novel but means so much. It shows what it was like immigrating to America and trying to blend in. America was and still currently is not that accepting of immigrants. Many immigrants are not accepted unless they fit a certain role that is

“made” for them. An example of a role, the highest role for an Asian Actor in *Interior Chinatown* was Kung Fu Guy. Another thing to add is that most Americans do not even know about the ongoing racism towards Asian Americans. In the article “I’m Done Trying to Make You See My Humanity,” the author Nicole Chung talks about how about 40% of white Americans did not even know about the increase of Asian American racism. Most of the attacks on Asian women were from white men as well (Chung 30). Overall, this sounds like white privilege since white Americans are the problem but do not even know about it and are not getting punished for it. This is a good reason why Charles Yu wrote *Interior Chinatown*, to help spread the awareness of Asian American racism. Asian Americans are just silently suffering from these hate crimes. In the article “Asian Americans as Racial Contagion” it first mentions “Across the United States, the COVID-19 pandemic has fuelled a spike in everyday racism and hate crimes against Asian Americans” (Mallapragada 279). Ever since the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans were immediately blamed for the virus since it started in China. Since then, the increase in hate crimes have increased leading to stabbings, fires, and even racial slurs. In the video “We Asked Asian Americans to Share their Experiences with Hate” from CNN, talks about how others were harassed and called names for things they did not do. Many of them get told to go back from where they came from and most of them get called a different race. This shows that Allen’s story is an example of what Asian Americans have to go through everyday. This is also called everyday racism.

All throughout history, Asian Americans have not been treated that well. According to [history.state.gov](https://www.history.state.gov), the article says in the 1850s, Chinese immigrants came to the United States to get well paying jobs. Most started off working at the railroads, as the number of Chinese immigrant workers increased, the anti-Chinese strength increased as well. The legislation had to

limit the number of future Chinese immigrants. This is why the Chinese Exclusion Act was made (“Milestones: 1866–1898...”). This act shows how early the anti-Asian American hate crimes took place. The legislation had to limit the number of Chinese workers that came into the United States. The Chinese were forced to work so much since they had to pay off loans. The Chinese workers demanded to have high wages to help send money back home to their wives and families in the United States that did not work. This caused many of the non-Chinese workers to get pushed out of their jobs. This angered the non-Chinese workers and made them hate the Chinese. Many of the Chinese workers created their own communities called Chinatowns (“Milestones: 1866–1898...”). Just like in the novel *Interior Chinatown*, Willis Wu lived in a Chinatown in the show “Black and White.” In the town were just all Chinese people and if any outsiders came in they were told that they would not understand the people there.

Michael Luo talks about the increase in violence against Asian Americans in the past and how it is still affecting us today. “As the number of Chinese immigrants grew, the anxieties of the white Americans grew too. Violence, often shocking in its brutality, followed” (Luo). Just because Asian Americans look different than white Americans does not mean to harm them. All the way back to before the Civil War, Asian Americans were being harassed. Not only were they harassed back then, but it is still happening today. Asian Americans are constantly getting blamed for things they have not done.

In the interview that *PBS News* had with Charles Yu; the interviewer, Jefferey Brown, asked Yu what he thought about the recent anti-Asian cases and Charles Yu said “It’s horrifying what’s happening and yet, at the same time, I think it’s not shocking” (PBS NewsHour). Charles Yu also said that Asian Americans are not being seen as they should be (PBS NewsHour). He is

not shocked that they are getting hate crimes against them because it happens all the time when someone confuses the different races of Asian Americans.

In Allen's story, he and his roommates all were called names and were blamed for things that others did. Since Allen looked similar to a Japanese, they automatically blamed him for the Pearl Harbor attack. This is an example of everyday racism or also known as casual racism. "Casual racism is when the ability and integrity of people of color are routinely devalued as they go about their daily lives" (Tyson 228). All throughout the novel, are examples of how Asian Americans have to deal with racism and like Allen's story, some do not take it very well. When Allen got attacked, he felt scared for his life and confused because he did not know what he did wrong. This is happening more often than we think. Ever since the COVID-19 outbreak, all Asian Americans are being blamed for everything related to China. Many people are threatened because of this. Americans need to realize the effect of these hate crimes and racism cases are serious and need to be helped.

Asian Americans are having to face racism and hate crimes just like Charles Yu mentions in his novel *Interior Chinatown*. The stories of Allen Chen, Young Wu, and the court case are just a few examples from the novel that show racism. Charles Yu mentioned in the interview from *PBS News* that Asian Americans should be getting more recognition and help from these hate crimes. Too many Asian Americans are ending their lives due to the increase of Asian American racism and hate crimes. Americans need to notice the increase of these issues and try to help lower the number of hate crimes and everyday racism.

This all matters because Asian Americans need help with stopping or at least lower the percent of these Asian American issues. The story of Allen Chen is a key example for everything else in the novel about racism and it shows model minority. The novel overall helps explore how

these issues have effects on individuals and communities in Asian Americans lives. It shows possible examples on what could happen but in the eyes of Asian Americans. Charles Yu focuses on the Asian American point of view since there is not much out there about what they go through everyday and what they have to face. Now Americans can see an example of what Asian Americans go through and show us what America could change to help better the Asian American culture. The history trend of anti-Asian Americans should be coming to an end and everyone should just be treated equally. No one should be hurting someone because they look different than others. With one step at a time, America could slowly start to decrease the amount of hate and racism Asian Americans have to deal with. Charles Yu's novel helps show how Asian Americans are still dealing with racism in America.

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