

Professor talks law and Asian American identity

The Johns Hopkins News-Letter: Johns Hopkins University

March 5, 2020 Thursday

University Wire

Copyright 2020 UWIRE via U-Wire All Rights Reserved

Section: NEWS; Pg. 1

Length: 653 words

Byline: VICTOR SUN

Body

Frank Wu is a Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of California, Hastings.

The Inter-Asian Council hosted Hopkins alum Frank Wu, the William L. Prosser Distinguished Professor of Law at the University of California, Hastings presented on the history of the legal and governmental treatment of Asian Americans on Tuesday.

Wu illustrated his topic using examples from the 1982 murder of Chinese American draftsman Vincent Chin. Wu explained that at that time, the competition between Japanese and Americans led to a build up of tension that precipitated the tragic death of Chin, who was beaten to death by two white men in Detroit. Wu noted that learning about Chin was pivotal for him, as he grew up in Detroit.

Chin, who was Chinese American, was assumed to be Japanese American by his attackers.

"This case exemplified all the themes of Asian American identities. The model minority, the perpetual foreigner, the notion that you all look the same," Wu said. "It's the idea that Asian Americans have nothing to complain about since they are doing so well anyway. "

Wu pointed out how Asian Americans often feel constrained in their identity and behavior, especially in moments with economic and political tension.

He added that fear of China's status as an economic powerhouse today drives racism against Asian Americans.

"It is not just about political correctness," Wu said. "It spills over... [such as] the fear that everyone with a Chinese background must be a spy stealing economic secrets."

Wu moved on to share his perspectives on racial issues, pointing out that most of the books he read in college about race relations were one-sided, asking for a more empirical perspective.

"It's too easy for us to ignore what is subtle, what is structural, what is implicit because all we focus on is the clear-cut, hardcore evidence," Wu said. "But there is so much more just beneath the surface. You don't see it if you are only looking at one incident. You only see it if there is pressure or if you aggregate enough data."

In an email to The News-Letter, senior Jasen Zhang shared his thoughts on the significance of inviting Wu to campus.

Professor talks law and Asian American identity

"It promotes dialogue about Asian American issues at a time where anti-Asian sentiment is moderate due to the coronavirus," Zhang wrote.

At the same time, he pointed out that there are still improvements to be made on campus.

"Hopkins' Asian student percentage is pretty big and self-segregation always happens on both sides. It's hard to get people to explore the other side, but it's a matter of time and growing up around diverse communities," Zhang wrote.

Freshman Ian Cataluna echoed Zhang's idea about promoting exchange on campus in an email to The News-Letter.

"Hopkins needs to be more inclusive in terms of all its students' backgrounds. For instance, allowing more cultural appreciation when it comes to different groups; for instance, as a Pacific Islander, I do not feel as if the institution adequately supports me," Cataluna wrote. "Being aware and sensitive to different identities is a crucial step to prevent problems, for both students and the institution alike."

Wu told the students that they should engage civically in order to define their own identities.

"This is how we get a sense of shared purposes that we are stakeholders," Wu said. "Stereotypes are the scripts others write for us, telling us how they think we should behave. But when we start to write the scripts for ourselves, we define who we are."

IAC President Alisha Chen, added onto Wu's comments on student activism and the racism Asian Americans encounter in an email to The News-Letter.

"It's important to recognize how we navigate our cultural identity as we grow older," Chen wrote. "I hope that his story reminded students that it's not up to history books and stereotypes to tell us who we are. Rather, we should seek to empower ourselves to become the type of individual you want to be."

Load-Date: March 5, 2020