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Representations of Foreign versus (Asian) American Identity in a Mass-Shooting Case: Newspaper Coverage of the 2009 Binghamton Massacre

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Abstract

Scholarship on media representations of Asian minority identity has established that historic constructions of the Other perpetuate a conflation of ethnic with foreign. Previous studies of Seung-Hui Cho and the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings concluded that though Cho was a South Korean national, news media overemphasized his foreign identity, despite his living in the United States most of his life. This study examines newspaper coverage of the 2009 mass shooting at an immigrant-services center in Binghamton, New York, and of perpetrator Jiverly Wong, who immigrated from Vietnam, had lived in the United States for two decades, and was a naturalized U.S. citizen.

Keywords

representations of Other, immigrant identity, foreigners and foreignness, Asian and Asian American identity

On April 3, 2009, a gunman entered an immigrant-services center in Binghamton, New York, and opened fire. By the time the assault was over, thirteen people were dead and four were critically wounded, while the gunman, Jiverly Wong, identified as

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a forty-one-year-old Vietnamese immigrant who had been a client of the center, had killed himself. "It was the nation's worst mass shooting since April 16, 2007," the *New York Times* reported on the following day's front page, "when Seung-Hui Cho, twenty-three, shot and killed thirty-two people in a dormitory and classroom at Virginia Tech University in Blacksburg, Virginia, then killed himself in the largest shooting in modern American history."[1] The shooters in the Binghamton and Virginia Tech incidents were both ethnically Asian, born outside the United States.

Shortly after Cho was identified as the Virginia Tech shooter, the Asian American Journalists Association issued a media advisory titled "Continuing Coverage on Virginia Tech Shooting," which stated,

> We are disturbed by some media outlets' prominent mention that the suspect is an immigrant from South Korea when such a revelation provides no insight or relevance to the story. The fact he is not a U.S. citizen and was here on the basis of a green card, while interesting, should not be a primary focus in the profiling of him. To highlight that suggests his immigration status played a role in the shootings; there's been no such evidence.[2]

Public reaction to this statement was negative, accusing the association of attempting to alter the facts of the story—Cho was, in fact, a South Korean national whose legal status in the United States was that of a permanent resident.[3] Why not represent him as such?

Subsequent studies of news coverage of the Virginia Tech shooting, some of which mentioned the Asian American Journalists Association advisory, concluded that media outlets were preoccupied with Cho's race and ethnicity, looking to it as a possible contributor to violent behavior.[4] Furthermore, the news media emphasized Cho's foreignness, underscored by the fact that he was a South Korean national with permanent resident status in the United States, to the degree that "it hardly registered in the first two days of reporting that he had immigrated to the United States when he was only eight years old."[5] News media depictions of Cho were sometimes compared to those of Chai Soua Vang, the Hmong hunter who in 2004 shot and killed six white hunters in Wisconsin.[6] As with Cho, the news media confused Vang's time of arrival in the United States, assuming he had recently immigrated. News media speculated that Vang's military history, as part of secret CIA recruitment of Hmong in Laos during the Vietnam War, may have influenced his violent actions and deadly aim. But like Cho, Vang was a small boy when he arrived in the United States and trained as a sharpshooter only later with the U.S. National Guard.[7]

Searches in major academic databases indicate that little or no scholarly literature has yet addressed news coverage of the Binghamton shooting. This may be because the shooting garnered far less media attention than the Virginia Tech incident. Nevertheless, coverage of the Binghamton shooting provides a compelling focus for a study. The argument against the Asian American Journalists Association's advisory—and, in effect, the existing literature on media coverage of Virginia Tech—is that

emphasis of Cho's foreign status is due to his permanent resident (non-American citizen) status and not indicative of any patterns of coverage of Asians and Asian Americans. Therefore, selecting a case for analysis in which the perpetrator of a mass shooting was not only a longtime resident of the United States like Cho but also a U.S. citizen provides an opportunity to test the conflicting assertions made about the Asian American Journalists Association advisory. If Cho, a U.S. legal permanent resident (aka "green card" holder), and Wong, a U.S. citizen since 1995,[8] are represented as equally "foreign," then the lack of distinction would suggest news media embraced a narrative unrelated to the men's actual "Americanness," that is, immigration/citizenship status. By examining whether representations of Wong, particularly in ways that marked him as foreign, exhibited similar characteristics to those in coverage of Cho, the role of stereotype and ethnic-foreign conflation come into relief.

The Asian American Journalists Association's media advisory argued that the media's focus on Cho's status as a South Korean national "suggests his immigration status played a role in the shootings." Therefore, there is reason to examine whether news stories about Wong tended to attribute possible causes of the shooting to his foreignness, and whether the fact that Wong was a U.S. citizen, unlike Cho, caused news media to represent Wong as less "foreign" and more "American." As Song asks (in regard to Cho), "At what point does a resident alien from Asia become an Asian American?"[9]

News Media Conflation of Ethnic with Foreign

Fears surrounding turn-of-the-century immigration in Western Europe and the United States established the news media's association of ethnic with foreign, often leading to the conflation of the two.[10] Based on this pattern, news media have maintained a perpetual-foreigner identity when it comes to Asian Americans. Scholars have noted that while European immigrant groups (e.g., Germans, Italians, Irish) gradually assimilated into an ever-shifting "white" mainstream identity, non-Europeans (e.g., Asians, Latin Americans) maintained an "ethnic" identity in the news media because they were perceived to have more pronounced physical and/or cultural differences from "whites."[11] Historically, coverage of Asian Americans has evolved from a focus on immigrant problems or World War II agenda setting to broader, but still problematic, coverage that reinforces model-minority stereotypes.[12] This trajectory has been heavily influenced by early Hollywood "Yellow Peril" stereotypes that still infiltrate media images of Asian American men.[13] Such images often present Asian American men as both threatening and emasculated, as sexual deviants who are dangerous because their frustrated sexual energy leads to violent acts against mainstream white society.[14]

One of the most notable recent case studies involving ethnic-foreign conflation featured an MSNBC News Alert headline during the 1998 Nagano Olympics, shortly after Tara Lipinski won the gold medal in women's figure skating over fellow U.S. team member Michelle Kwan: "American beats out Kwan." Lee, writing in *Editor & Publisher*, summed up the headline's underlying message as, "White equals American;

non-white equals foreign."[15] Song likened the gaffe to *New York Times* stories about Taiwanese American nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee that referred to him as a "Chinese Spy," conjuring the World War II refrain, "a Jap is always a Jap."[16] Chong argued that when the Asian American in question performs a loathsome and inexplicable act, the mass media project historian Patrick Rael's "racial synecdoche," which "fuses all people of [common] descent into a single group united by an ascription of their vicious characters."[17] Hamamoto argued that while African Americans and Latinos have been the subjects of more blatant criminal stereotyping in the media, Asian Americans, "even as they are being applauded for their high level of academic achievement and industry, certain sectors of [this] immigrant community have been identified as threats to the larger social order."[18]

News Media Constructions of the Other

The representation of foreign, and specifically Asian, identity in the news media is rooted in an extensive body of scholarship on how mass media construct the Other. Research on news media has focused on their tendency to take on a hegemonic white male perspective, shifting patterns of media coverage of minorities from overt to more benign-seeming stereotypes (stereotypical selection), and the historic media conflation of ethnic with foreign.[19]

Scholarship has established that mass media compose a powerful vehicle for the majority culture's power to stereotype. The technology of media provides a means for widely distributing stereotypical representations, while producing and legitimating collective cultural memory.[20] Meanwhile, Hall argues that the audience itself changes as well in response to these stereotypes, absorbing repetitive media images as common sense and creating a "circuit of culture"[21]—which consists of the representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation of meanings.[22] Media representations are not passively received by an audience, but rather perpetuated in a relationship that often becomes defined by power, which Hall associates with the "attempt to fix meaning,"[23] or the "*dominant cultural order*" that weighs certain connotative codes over others.[24] Such a relationship can be seen in Said, who established in his groundbreaking 1979 work that Orientalism relied on the "exteriority" of the Orientalist, who "positions himself as outside the Orient."[25] To Hall, binaries such as this one are perceived by scholars as essential to language itself: "*The argument here is that we need 'difference' because we can only construct meaning through a dialogue with the 'Other.* "[26] Ultimately, Hall argues that these representations of difference reinforce a "racialized regime of representation" that equates nonwhites with Other.[27]

Such dynamics were noted by the 1968 Kerner Commission, which addressed racial inequality in the United States in the wake of riots in major urban centers. The commission reported that the media "report and write from the standpoint of the white man's world."[28] Scholars have concluded that since the Kerner Commission, news media reports on racial minorities have continued to reflect a largely white perspective.[29] Since the Kerner Commission, the news media have less frequently demonstrated

overt racism but are more likely to reflect a "myth of marginality" about nonwhite Americans,[30] by either rendering them invisible in the press or underscoring a sense of Otherness in reports about Americans of color.[31] Wilson and Gutiérrez defined the current phase of media coverage of racial minorities as "stereotypical selection," meaning that milder, or implied, versions of historic stereotypes are still invoked as a way of keeping minorities "in their place."[32]

Research Questions

Using these concepts as a theoretical framework, the coverage of Jiverly Wong was analyzed to examine the following research questions:

RQ1: In constructing a posthumous profile of Wong, did newspapers emphasize characteristics that conform with Orientalist patterns of representation and stereotyping?

RQ2: Do patterns in these representations of Wong, specifically denotative or connotative references to his foreign or American status, reflect a conflation of foreign and ethnic?

RQ3: Was there a difference between how national/regional newspapers and how the two local upstate New York newspapers addressed the factors in **RQ1** and **RQ2**?

RQ4: How frequently did newspaper coverage of Wong mention Seung-Hui Cho, and in what context?

Method

Through a mixed-methods data analysis of newspaper coverage, this study explores how Jiverly Wong was depicted in the weeks following the April 3, 2009, Binghamton shooting. The study explores representations of the Other in characterizing the perpetrator of a mass shooting, and how the facts of his immigration status (that he is a U.S. citizen) are represented through denotation (e.g., explicit references to Wong as a "Vietnamese immigrant" or "U.S. citizen") and connotation (e.g., references to Wong's English ability, his ability to adapt to life in the United States or achieve aspects of the "American Dream"). By contextualizing representations of Wong through the historic conflation of ethnic with foreign, as well as Orientalism and Otherness in news media representations, this analysis seeks to illuminate patterns observed in the coverage of Seung-Hui Cho and Virginia Tech. By determining whether Wong was characterized in ways similar to Cho, it is possible to better discern whether racial or immigrant-based stereotyping may have played a role in news media representations of Cho—and whether the assertions in the Asian American Journalists Association's advisory had merit.

A mixed-methods approach, consisting of a content analysis in which data are interpreted both quantitatively and qualitatively, was conducted. This methodology

aligns with Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie's definition of a mixed-methods data analysis: "The use of quantitative and qualitative analytical techniques, either concurrently or sequentially, at some stage beginning with the data collection process, from which interpretations are made in either a parallel, an integrated, or an iterative manner."[33] Some elements of quantitative research, such as providing numerical comparisons for the frequency of certain coded categories, that is, modes of representation, were employed to provide a means to "estimate the frequency of a particular defined phenomenon according to other pre-defined variables and to be able to generalize those frequencies."[34] Then articles in the data set were analyzed qualitatively in the context of those numerical results to explore the latent and deeper meanings of denotations. A mixed-methods approach allowed this study to achieve a measure of breadth and depth, of representation and legitimation,[35] that proves essential for observing coverage patterns on issues as complex and subtle and representations of identity and race.

Articles that contained "Jiverly Wong," published from April 4 to April 30, 2009, in U.S. newspapers, were found using LexisNexis Academic, Factiva, and Academic Search Premier databases, yielding around four hundred hits. The vast majority of articles about the shooting appeared within the calendar month of the shooting; thus, April 30 was chosen as a cutoff point. We focused on articles in the ten U.S. newspapers with the highest circulation in 2009, not only because they reflect what a high proportion of U.S. readership would have consumed, but also because smaller-circulation newspapers tended to rely on wire reports. Those top-ten newspapers were, in order, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *New York Times*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, *Daily News* (New York), *New York Post*, *Chicago Tribune*, *Houston Chronicle*, and *Arizona Republic*. In addition, three local newspapers in upstate New York were chosen because, in addition to top-circulation newspapers, they had the greatest volume of coverage and provide the possibility of comparing national/regional versus local coverage. The three local newspapers were *Press & Sun-Bulletin* (Binghamton), *Post-Standard* (Syracuse) and *Times Union* (Albany). For greater geographical diversity, four newspapers in the top eleven through twenty circulation ranking were chosen, on the basis that those four had the most hits for a search on "Jiverly Wong"; these were *San Francisco Chronicle* (no. 12), *Boston Globe* (no. 14), *New Jersey Star-Ledger* (no. 16), and *Cleveland Plain Dealer* (no. 18). After duplicate articles were eliminated, and Associated Press reports were selected only when they were published and credited by a newspaper, in an effort to document what the readership of each newspaper would have seen, 145 articles remained ($N = 145$) to be analyzed. Of those, 24 originated from the Associated Press and 3 originated from other wire services; the remaining 118 were original reports from their respective newspapers. Of all 145 articles, 78 were from the top-circulation national and regional newspapers and 67 were from the three local newspapers.

Only those articles about the shooting and its aftermath in which Jiverly Wong was explicitly named were included. Initial reports in which the shooter had not yet been identified by police were not used since they would not address Wong's identity and motives. The

fact that Wong initially was identified by law enforcement officials and in media reports as "Jiverly Voong" (a name that Wong had used before) was accounted for in the searches.

A content analysis of the sample was conducted, using code categories to determine how Wong's immigration status, nationality, ethnicity, time in the United States, and citizenship status were represented, and whether Seung-Hui Cho was mentioned in stories about Wong. In order to determine patterns of additional themes in Wong's characterization, the author and a second coder conducted a first reading of the articles before a coding scheme was finalized. When consensus on key themes in Wong's characterization was reached, the researchers then coded each article in a second reading based on the predetermined categories (immigration status, nationality, ethnicity, time in the United States, and citizenship status, as well as mentions of Seung-Hui Cho), as well as the additional inductively developed categories. These categories represented key themes in Wong's characterization: the recent loss of his job, his difficulty speaking English, his divorce, his antisocial behavior, and his expression of anti-American sentiments. The researchers' findings were compared and found to be largely consistent in all but two categories: antisocial behavior and the expression of anti-American sentiments. It was determined that those two categories were too vaguely defined, and therefore they were eliminated from the study. Additional analysis of the remaining categories, as well as textual analysis of the source articles themselves, reflects how national, regional, and local newspapers constructed Wong on a spectrum of Americanness versus foreignness—and whether characteristics offered as possible explanations for his violent actions resonated with and reflected stereotypes.

Findings

Coverage Focused on Wong and/or Victims, but Also Touched on Recession, Gun Control

The bulk of the coverage of the Binghamton shootings, particularly in national/regional newspapers, appeared in the week following the shooting. Of the 145 total articles, 113 were published between April 4 and April 11. Initial coverage honed in on either Wong or the victims, attempting to deconstruct the state of mind and motives of the former, and chronicling the lives and heroic actions of the latter. A significant portion of the national and regional coverage of Wong also highlighted Binghamton as one of eight mass shootings that killed fifty-seven people between March 10 and April 7, including the April 4 shooting that killed three Pittsburgh police officers. The articles focused on the fact that the Pittsburgh shooter, Richard Poplawski, like Wong, had recently been laid off from a factory job and speculated that the spate of shootings might be linked to the economic recession.[36] Stories toward the end of the study period were mostly from the local papers and tended to address gun control or chronicle the attempts of the city and immigrant-services center, the American Civic Association, to get back to life as normal.

Wong's Immigrant Identity Emphasized over His U.S. Citizenship

All but one of the fourteen top-circulation national and regional newspapers identified Wong as a Vietnamese immigrant. The exception was the *Wall Street Journal*, which gave no indication of Wong's ethnic identity or immigration status. Forty-three of the seventy-eight articles from those national and regional newspapers identified him as a Vietnamese immigrant. Some of the follow-up coverage or stories focusing on topics other than Wong himself did not use any ethnic or national identifiers, though all the studied newspapers but the *Wall Street Journal* identified him as a Vietnamese immigrant at least once. Some of the coverage, like an April 6, 2009, *USA Today* article, noted Wong's immigrant identity in the context that he had once been a client of the center at which the shooting occurred: "The victims shared much with their killer, also an immigrant (from Vietnam) who struggled with English and, until a month ago, came to the American Civic Association to study the language."[37] However, far more examples were evident in which Wong's Vietnamese-immigrant identity was described independently of his association with the center, or even the fact that his victims were immigrants, as was the case with an April 6 article in the *Plain Dealer*: "Jiverly Wong stormed into the American Civic Association and went on a rampage before killing himself. . . . Police speculated Wong, who was ethnically Chinese but was from Vietnam, was angry over losing a job and frustrated about his poor English skills."[38]

Similarly, a *Daily News* article two days after the shooting began, "He went from killer to coward in under two minutes. The tormented Vietnamese immigrant who massacred 13 people planned for a blazing gunfight with police—but instead killed himself at the first sound of sirens, authorities said yesterday."[39] This particular article did not mention the time of Wong's immigration (in 1990), as was the case in twenty-seven of the forty-three national and regional stories that described Wong as a Vietnamese immigrant. Furthermore, as was the case in thirty-five of those forty-three, this *Daily News* article also did not indicate that he was a U.S. citizen. The three local upstate New York newspapers also described him as a Vietnamese immigrant, but only in twelve out of sixty-seven articles.

Only five of seventeen newspapers studied, *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *New York Post*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Press & Sun-Bulletin*, published articles that mentioned that Wong was a U.S. citizen. The *New York Times* reported the chronology of Wong's naturalization in relation to his obtaining a gun license: "He became a naturalized citizen in November 1995 and the next year received a license to own a handgun in Broome County."[40] Wong was ethnically Chinese, though he was from Vietnam, a fact that nine of the newspapers mentioned. Therefore, more newspapers correctly identified Wong as ethnically Chinese than correctly identified Wong as a U.S. citizen. The emphasis on Wong's identity as an immigrant, a foreigner, reinforces the critiques that newspaper coverage of Cho focused on his foreignness. Cho was arguably American by virtue of being in the United States since he was eight years old, or nearly two-thirds of his life. In Wong's case, the tendency to conflate ethnicity with

foreignness is further highlighted by the fact that Wong had not only been in the country for nearly two decades, he was also, by all legal definitions, an American.

Posthumous Profiles of Wong Present Relevant Characteristics, but through the Lens of Immigration or Stereotype

Previous research shows that news media have tended to focus on characteristics of mass-shooting perpetrators that appeared to offer explanations for their possible motives, as in preoccupation with the Columbine killers' association with the "Goth" subculture.[41] In a comparison of news coverage of Columbine and the 2005 Red Lake Indian Reservation School shootings, Leavy and Maloney posited that when the perpetrators are "People Like Us," that is, white and middle class, news media are more likely to view race and class as invisible and focus on nonracialized characteristics.[42]

In constructing a posthumous profile of Wong, the articles in this study most frequently mentioned two characteristics: his recent job loss at a Shop-Vac factory and his difficulty with English. These attributes each appeared in about a third of all of the articles, and not overlapping ones (e.g., some mentioned job loss but not the English difficulty, or vice versa). Wong's job loss and English skills did, in fact, have direct relevance and newsworthiness to the story. In interviews, Wong's peers and family members said he had been despondent over his job loss. An article in the *Post-Standard* reported, "He'd told members of the small Vietnamese community that he was depressed because he was out of work."[43] Wong's English ability was relevant and newsworthy because he had taken English classes at the American Civic Association. Wong also made reference to his lack of English skills in the "manifesto" letter he mailed the day of the shooting to a Syracuse television station.[44] In a lengthy profile of Wong about a week after the shooting, the *New York Times* reported, "Nearly two decades after arriving in America from Vietnam, Mr. Wong still had trouble with basic English, a fact of life for many immigrants, but a problem he seemed especially sensitive about."[45] The *Daily News* noted the irony of Wong's reference to his English skills in his letter: "Summing up, Wong apologized not for the blood he was preparing to spill—but for his poor English. 'I am sorry I know a little English,' he wrote."[46] Overall, this foreign characteristic of Wong was as prominent as one that appeared to have no direct connection to immigration or race, the loss of his job.

However, the non-immigration-specific characteristics were often presented through the lens of immigration. An Associated Press–credited article that ran in the *Houston Chronicle* analyzed a spate of mass shootings that occurred in the previous month: "The man believed to be the shooter, Jiverly Wong, had lost his job at an assembly plant, was barely getting by on unemployment and was frustrated that the American dream, so highly billed and coveted, wasn't coming through for him. Early reports suggest that the suspect in the Pittsburgh officers' killings, too, was angered at being laid off from a glass factory."[47] The article implies that Wong's job loss represents a "frustrated . . . American dream," whereas Richard Poplawski, the white Pittsburgh shooter, was simply angry about his layoff. The aforementioned *New York*

Times profile contrasted the rest of Wong's family's success in learning English and maintaining jobs with Wong's failure to do either: "They had improved their English-speaking skills and advanced their careers, while Mr. Wong, now jobless, had moved back in with his parents on a dead-end street in nearby Union."[48] A *Los Angeles Times* story based on interviews with other Vietnamese immigrants in Binghamton (some of whom were acquainted with Wong, others of whom were not) framed Wong's characteristics as a reflection of the Vietnamese immigrant experience: "As details emerged about Wong's life—recently laid off, troubled by poor language skills, unable to find a toehold in the United States—many Vietnamese here saw their own struggles in his travails. It was a reminder, as if they needed one, that their transition from war-torn Vietnam to Binghamton has not always been easy."[49]

For local papers, like the *Press & Sun-Bulletin*, Wong's father became a window into the local Vietnamese immigrant community: "Voong's father is a respected member of the Vietnamese community who is always willing to help others with filling out documents and translation, said Thanh Huynh, 45, an employee of Hang Phat, a Vietnamese grocery on Main Street in Binghamton."[50] By April 14, Wong's father, described by the *Daily News* as a "former captain in the South Vietnamese Army who did time in Communist jails," was quoted by multiple media outlets apologizing for his son's behavior.[51] The mention of his father's military past implies to readers that he was on the same side as the United States in the Vietnam War, contrasting this "American" attribute to his son's foreignness.

Scholars have noted that in the coverage of Virginia Tech, the news media's preoccupation with Cho's aberrant behavior toward women reflected stereotypes of Asian male masculinity as deviant and dangerous.[52] News stories about Cho speculated, but never confirmed, that one of his shooting victims was an ex-girlfriend. They also reported on complaints of Cho's harassing behavior toward female classmates. Song argues that Cho's Asian identity enhanced existing stereotypes of the mass shooter "to accentuate through a process of racial emasculation the sense of a beleaguered sexual identity, or, more accurately, the perception of violence as itself a behavioral manifestation of a frustrated sexuality."[53] In the case of Wong, a small but significant proportion of the studied articles, about one-tenth, mentioned that he was divorced or unmarried. The *New York Post* pointed to Wong's divorce as a salient factor in a "failed life": "The lunatic behind the Binghamton massacre was a pathetic, gun-loving coward who got divorced, lost his job and was driven to depression because he could barely speak English after many years in the United States, officials and people who knew him said yesterday."[54] The cover headline on that day's *Post* was, "DEADBEAT: PATHETIC KILLER OF 13 LOST WIFE, JOB, MIND." With this emotive language, the *Post* exploits what Hall refers to as *naturalized* codes that "demonstrate the degree of habituation produced when there is a fundamental alignment and reciprocity—an achieved equivalence—between the encoding and decoding signs of an exchange of meanings."[55] The *Post*'s use of words such as "lunatic," "coward," "deadbeat," in association with "divorced," "lost his job," "depression," and "because he could barely

speak English," links the failure to keep a wife, a job, and one's sanity to the failure to assimilate to American life.

While Wong's salient characteristics, as presented by the newspaper coverage, were often relevant and had news value, coverage tended either to focus on those that directly related to his foreignness or to present nonforeign characteristics, such as job loss or a divorce, in a way that emphasized the immigrant experience or reinforced Asian-male stereotypes. Whether these patterns suggested, as the Asian American Journalists Association media advisory asserted in the case of Cho, that news media were implying that Wong's foreignness played a role in the shootings, cannot be fully ascertained because characteristics related to his immigration status did have some news relevance. What is apparent, however, is that newspaper coverage demonstrates stereotypically selective reporting, as defined by Wilson and Gutiérrez: "Information items that conform to existing White attitudes toward other groups are then selected for inclusion in news media and given repeated emphasis until they reach thematic proportions."[56] Such an approach, though inadvertent, has the ultimate affect of giving a historic "us versus them" dichotomy a new dimension.[57]

Local Newspapers Less Preoccupied with Wong's Overall Identity and Characteristics

The three local newspapers studied, *Press & Sun-Bulletin, Times Union*, and *Post-Standard*, mentioned the coded identifiers far less often than the regional/national newspapers did. The three upstate New York papers mentioned in only eleven out of sixty-seven articles that Wong was an immigrant, and only the *Press & Sun-Bulletin* reported that he was a U.S. citizen—in two out of forty-nine articles. Seven local articles mentioned his job loss, and eight noted his difficulty with English. This pattern can be attributed to the local newspapers' focus on the victims of the shootings and the trauma to the local community.

Mentions of Seung-Hui Cho Contextualized by Factors Other than Race

Louisa Schein and Va-Megn Thoj have theorized that a "discursive chain" based on Asian race caused mainstream media to link Seung-Hui Cho with Chai Soua Vang, the Hmong hunter responsible for the 2004 Wisconsin shooting.[58] Other journalistic commentaries have addressed the linkages between Cho and Wong.[59] Lam of *New America Media* wrote, "Whenever a minority commits a heinous crime, it seems to beckon us in the media to search beyond an individual motive for a cultural one. We saw it in the case of Cho Seung-Hui of Virginia Tech, and now, in the latest case involving Jiverly Linh Phat Wong."[60]

However, only seven of the articles in this study mentioned Cho at all, and only in contexts that appeared to be relevant on levels beyond their shared Asian ethnicity or

immigrant history. The *New York Times* article on the day following shooting notes that Wong's crime was "the nation's worst mass shooting since April 16, 2007, when Seung-Hui Cho, 23, shot and killed 32 people . . . at Virginia Tech."[61] In the later profile of Wong, the *New York Times* noted that he differed from Cho in terms of mental-illness history: "Unlike Seung-Hui Cho, who killed 32 people and himself at Virginia Tech University two years ago, Mr. Wong displayed no outward sign of mental illness."[62] The other stories noted the similarity of Cho's and Wong's "manifestos," both sent to television stations and both featuring pictures of the killers with guns, or simply listed Cho and Wong among other (non-Asian) perpetrators of mass shootings.

Conclusions

This study sought to apply specific characteristics of the coverage of Jiverly Wong and the 2009 Binghamton shooting to broader patterns of coverage relating to Asian Americans and Other identity, in particular drawing parallels and contrasts to the coverage of Seung-Hui Cho and the 2007 Virginia Tech shooting. Because a relatively small number of newspapers covered the Binghamton shooting (insofar as they had staff reporters on scene, as opposed to using wire reports) in comparison to Virginia Tech, the differences in scope of coverage, as well as in competition between media outlets, could have had an impact on the conclusions.

This study focused exclusively on national, regional, and local newspaper coverage. Television, radio, and online news accounts might have yielded different findings, or at least provided a fuller picture of coverage patterns. In addition, mass shootings are by nature extreme and dramatic news stories that may not reflect patterns of more general coverage.

The theoretical framework of this study draws primarily upon scholarship related to representations of Other and stereotyping based on race in news media. Though some specific studies and history related to Asian Americans and Asian immigrant identity are cited, the ways in which coverage of all racial or ethnic minorities diverge from coverage of Asian Americans merits greater exploration. Additional case studies that analyze foreign versus American identity in coverage of other immigrant groups, such as Muslim Americans or Latinos, would provide greater understanding of how representations of Other identity have been applied to other ethnic and racial groups.

This study expands upon the body of scholarly work that has addressed concepts of race and immigrant identity in news coverage of the Virginia Tech shootings and offers a case in which the perpetrator had some similarities to Cho. Wong's key difference from Cho, that he was a U.S. citizen, allowed this analysis to test assertions that news media fixation on Cho's foreignness stemmed from racial stereotyping. As seen in the findings from **RQ1** and **RQ2,** on both denotative and connotative levels, Wong was identified more with foreign identity (e.g., being referred to as a Vietnamese immigrant, or characterized as struggling with English) than with American identity (e.g., being referred to as a naturalized U.S. citizen)**,** which suggests that the actuality of a perpetrator's Americanness was overshadowed by racialized and stereotypical

notions of foreignness. Hence, mainstream newspapers appeared to have conflated ethnic with foreign, which Gandy attributes to a historic fear of immigration and the Other.[63] The media coverage of Wong seems to answer Song's question, "At what point does a resident alien from Asia become an Asian American?"[64] with a resounding, "Never."

Analyses of **RQ1** and **RQ4** show that overt stereotyping and racialized characterizations are less prevalent in newspaper coverage than more subtle and complex ones, such as applying the "American Dream" narrative to Wong's job loss, or invoking connotative codes to associate his divorce with an abnormal masculinity, and hence a tendency to violence. Newspaper journalists appeared to understand that linking Wong with Cho because of their shared Asian racial identity or immigrant history would appear stereotypical or racist. This is consistent with "stereotypical selection phase" coverage of racial minorities, in which stereotypes are reflected in less-overt ways to "neutralize White apprehension of people of color while accommodating their presence."[65] Newspaper constructions of Wong's posthumous profile still reflected a preoccupation with linking his characteristics to his immigrant, or foreign, identity, with the possibility of ascertaining cause. For example, in interviewing local Vietnamese immigrants on ways in which Wong's struggles reflected their own, a "discursive chain" is established between the difficulties of adapting to the United States and homicidal intent.

It can be further posited, based on Patrick Rael's "racial synecdoche," which focuses on violent acts,[66] that associating Wong's brutality with race or foreign characteristics shifts the burden of the crime to minority groups. Scholarship has demonstrated the media's tendency to associate racial minorities with violence and conflict.[67] Therefore, by emphasizing Wong's foreignness, to the news media's predominantly white male perspective, he becomes the opposite of "People Like Us." This oppositional coding reinforces Hall's definition of stereotyping as "part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order."[68] Thus, in the case of Wong, newspapers played their key role in Hall's "circuit of culture," perpetuating this racialized order by constructing narratives about Wong that all but blame his foreign identity—his "frustrated . . . American Dream," his failure to hold onto a job or a wife in his adopted homeland, his inability to speak English—for causing him to "snap" and turn to violence. These representations place Wong squarely on one side of Hall's "symbolic frontier between the 'normal' and the 'deviant,' the 'normal' and the 'pathological,' the 'acceptable' and the 'unacceptable,' what 'belongs' and what does not or is 'Other,' between 'insiders' and 'outsiders,' Us and Them."[69] Ultimately, the news media wield some measure of power in deciding who gets to be an American and who remains a foreigner. Therefore, through the lens of the news media, Wong becomes Other, the epitome of Edward Said's Oriental, irrational, childlike, "different," in contrast to the European, who is rational, mature, "normal."[70]

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