**The Historic Murder Case of Vincent Chin**

41 years ago (1982) near Detroit, Michigan, a 27-year-old Chinese American, Vincent Chin, was brutally murdered by two Caucasian men who believed they lost their jobs because of Japanese labor. They knew Chin was Chinese, and not Japanese. Having met at a bar, the two men (Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz) pursued Chin and battered him to death with a baseball bat. The beating was truly brutal as Chin’s head was split open and he bled to death.

In state court, the murderers were provided public legal representatives, but they didn’t even show up in court. The attending judge sentenced the prosecutors to 3 years in probation, and fined court costs. Vincent did not receive any justice even in the Court.

Eventually there would be two federal prosecutions, two civil lawsuits, a national protest movement, and more attention than had ever been paid to any single incident involving an Asian American.

The Vincent Chin story was reported nationally. It significantly united Chinese and Asians for the first time. The case also coagulated many groups of people of all backgrounds and colors, who suddenly realized that racism was a threat to all minorities. Support came from National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Christian organizations, Jewish groups, and labor groups. Whites and Blacks who had not hitherto been aware of Asian Americans recognized the universal nature of the appeals made by Chin’s grieving mother.

The brutal and heinous murder of a young Chinese man was immortalized by FullBright scholar Helen Zia who organized the landmark civil rights movement for justice for Vincent Chin and is the Executor the Estate of Lily and Vincent Chin.

A person with short hair wearing a black shirt

Description automatically generated

Chancellor Frank Wu, Hastings Law School deserves all the credit for his detailed article on Vincent Chin. As a Chinese person growing up as a minority near where Vincent Chin grew up, Dr. Wu fully understood the challenges felt by most Chinese and Asian people growing up in an America as a small minority and having to put up with the difficulties of growing up as a not too relevant individual.

Be sure to read Dr Wu’s article which is the primary source for this article.

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**Source:**

**Embracing Mistaken Identity How the Vincent Chin Case Unified Asian Americans**

**by Frank H. Wu, Chancellor and Dean, Hastings Law School**

This much is certain.

On 19 June 1982, on the outskirts of Detroit, Michigan, an individual named Vincent Chin—twenty-seven years old, of Chinese ancestry, an American citizen, from a working-class background, engaged to be married the following week—went out with a few friends for a bachelor party to celebrate his upcoming wedding. At a strip club, they encountered two other gentlemen, Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, father and stepson, simi­larly out enjoying the evening.

There was an altercation at the bar, the Fancy Pants Lounge. Then time elapsed before another encounter occurred between these strangers. After the sun had set on Woodward Avenue, the major thoroughfare of the Motor City, they met once again.

And this is what happened: Ebens swung the baseball bat while Nitz held Chin down, and the bridegroom ended up with his head literally split open. Blood, spinal fluid, and cerebral matter pooled on the pavement under his body. Before collaps­ing into a coma, he uttered his last words, “It’s not fair.”

Four days later, Chin died.

In state court, Ebens and Nitz faced criminal charges. Represented by counsel, sobered up, dressed in business suits, they accepted a plea bargain.

At the hearing, the prosecutors failed to show up. The judge, Charles Kaufman, imposed on each man the sentence of three years’ probation and a $3,000 fine, plus court costs.

Everything else is in doubt.

Eventually there would transpire two federal prosecutions, two civil lawsuits, a national protest movement, and more attention than had ever been paid to any single incident involving an Asian American. According to witnesses, Ebens and Nitz had used racial slurs to refer to Chin, they had offered a bystander $20 to help them find “the Chinaman,” and they had said, “It’s because of you little motherf\*\*\*\*ers, we’re out of work.” That comment was made at a time when the nation was experiencing double-digit unemployment and equally high inflation and in place that had prospered because of “the Big Three”—Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler, the domestic automobile manufacturers—until imported cars became popular. While Japan was feared as the Land of the Rising Sun taking economic vengeance for its World War II defeat, to Ebens and Nitz, the implication was that Chin stood for Tokyo and Toyota.

Whether it was a bar brawl, a hate crime, or perhaps both, the context, causes, and consequences of the Vincent Chin case have been the subject of unceasing controversy. Throughout, Ebens and Nitz have insisted they are not bigots; they said Chin inexplicably decided to accost them, and Ebens “just snapped.” By their understanding, the community had drummed up the charge of racism and thereby wronged them. The first federal jury convicted Ebens and acquitted Nitz; the appeals court, rejecting the claim that “Orientals” were not protected by civil rights statutes nonetheless reversed the judgment; the second jury acquitted Ebens, too.

The Asian American movement began with the Vincent Chin case. To be sure, Asian Americans existed before then, and they were politically active. But it was not until the Chin case that they formed the Asian American movement as such.

Before “Asian American”

Asian immigrants had begun coming to the United States in significant numbers in the 1830s. They and their native-born progeny participated in public life to a much greater extent than stereotypical images portray. They organized them­selves into civic associations, agitated for their rights, and started businesses. For the male workers who formed the bulk of the new arrivals, racial restrictions made it difficult to bring their wives or find mates across the color line. Despite such formal barriers, they managed to start families and form communities.

For 150 years when Asian Americans described themselves, they did not use the title “Asian American,” which was invented by scholar Yuji Ichioka in 1968. Instead, they preferred to identify themselves by what would come to be regarded as ethnicity, or perhaps culture, clan, language, province, or family. They were as distinct from each other as they were separate from Whites and Blacks. The lines of division among the groups were as obvious to them as they were obscure to outsiders: Chinese from Japanese, and vice versa; among the Chinese, the Mandarin-speaking, middle-class professionals who arrived as students on scholarships from the Cantonese-speaking lower-class laborers who had opened restaurants and operated laundries in the inner city.

Many individuals in these distinct groups in America remained active in homeland politics. The Korean independence movement of 1919 relied on leaders who had developed significant ties to America and a trans-Pacific network of support. At times they disassociated themselves from other groups. During World War II, Chinese Americans explained who they were in an effort to distinguish themselves as the “good” Asians compared with the Japanese (and tacitly the Japanese Americans) who were the “bad” Asians. Homeland politics was a reason to disassociate one group from other groups, whether it was Communism versus Nationalism as to the China-Taiwan Straits or the partitioning of the Indian subcontinent.

Nor were Asian Americans unique. European immigrants constituted distinct races in the popular culture—the “Irish race” and so on—until they assimilated into and enjoyed the benefits of the classification of White.

The Chin case changed all that. Its violence highlighted the importance of both aspects of “Asian American” as a self-proclaimed name; it was crucial to claim the status of a “real American,” for protection if no other reason, as well as to build bridges to other Asians, even if one’s grandparents may have been at war with their grandparents. It also became apparent that Asian Americans had to assert themselves more aggressively. It was not enough to succeed in school and at work, and indeed, the very image of Asian Americans doing well as a collective could be the undoing of an individual.

The Asian American Movement

Of course, before the Chin case there had been efforts to bring together Asian Americans. The Yellow Power movement flourished briefly in the 1960s, with origins in the San Francisco Bay Area. Filipino Americans, Chinese Americans, and Japanese Americans, primarily young people, copied the example of Black Power radicalism. A few individuals even became militants, actually joining the Black Panthers. Although these activists could boast of underground magazines, folk music, and meaningful social gatherings, their activities were limited in duration, by geography, and by genera­tion. Theirs was a phenomenon of the Summer of Love, centered on the Golden State, and it garnered slight enthusiasm among the elders. However, they deserve respect; they were vital. They created the conditions that were needed.

What made the Chin case so significant is the fact that the legal proceedings took so many years, allowing enough time for the protest effort to expand from its Midwestern roots to the East Coast and West Coast, enlisting young and old, American and immigrant, along the way The Chin case was so compelling that it overcame other considerations. It was irrelevant whether one was a “banana”—yellow on the outside, White on the inside—in the pejorative phrase, or if one had ever marched before, or if one had considered civil rights a Black issue. Immigrant engineers, who were conserva­tive in their lifestyles, comfortable in the suburbs, and ambitious for their children, who spoke with accents and otherwise counseled avoiding controversy, became involved in the Chin case, even if they had never heard of the Yellow Power move­ment or would have found it anathema.

The campaign for justice also attracted the sympathy of many others. For example, the cause was endorsed by such groups as the Detroit City Council, the city’s chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Christian organizations, Jewish groups, and labor groups. Whites and Blacks who had not hitherto been aware of Asian Americans recognized the universal nature of the appeals made by Chin’s grieving mother. Crying, scarcely able to control her lamentations, she admitted candidly she wished she could kill her son’s killers as she sought an explanation of how they could escape punishment.

The Vincent Chin case was so powerful to average Asian Americans because it was exemplary. The killing of Chin displayed all of the characteristics of hostility toward Asian Americans, certainly if the account offered by the protest and the prosecution were accepted and even to an extent on the terms of the defense.

Most importantly, the killing of Chin was mistaken identity twice over. Chin was singled out not because of who he understood himself to be, but rather as a representative of Asia—possessing yellow skin, coarse black hair, and almond eyes. The assault appeared to have been motivated by the association of an American citizen with a foreign nation, solely on the basis of superficial traits beyond his control. Chin had been adopted at a young age, and he had no relationship with Japan. The assault also seemed to confirm the charge “you all look alike” that had rendered the Far East the source of a faceless horde since the advent of Yellow Peril. Chin was of Chinese descent, but he was assumed to be of Japanese background.

The Chin case, especially within the context of the severe recession of the early 1980s and its effect in Detroit as the Motor City identified with automobile manufacturing, showed the powerful effects of scapegoating. The anger directed toward “little yellow people,” in the phrase of Congressman John Dingell, who represented part of the region then and now, held them responsible for the genuine concerns about layoffs and downward mobility (Penenberg 2008). Asians were blamed for a set of much more complex problems, including corporate leadership that had refused to consider fuel-efficient cars, consumer habits that took for granted the abun­dance of imported oil, lack of universal health care that imposed the insurance costs on employers, the failure to diversify the economic base of a metropolitan area, and cultural expectations about wages that could not continue to be met in the face of global competition, among other factors. Asians, and by extension, Asian Americans, were resented, because, it was believed, even as everyone else suffered “those people” continued to do well.

The legal proceedings in the Chin case revealed how difficult it was for Asian Americans to establish—even in what was among the clearer cases—that they were subject to genuine racial discrimina­tion. Asian Americans did not look like victims of bigotry; they were not credible. The state court proceedings demonstrated that the government would not treat Asian Americans with respect, even in death. The federal court proceedings showed that, for many observers, even the admission by the perpetrators that they had killed Chin was insufficient to demonstrate that a wrong had been done. The result left many Asian Americans with the sense that if even someone who was brutally beaten to death with a baseball bat, after the use of common slurs, could be deemed to not have had his civil rights violated, then it was impossible for all practical purposes for an Asian American to prevail under the law.

Finally, the Chin case provided a sense of the futility of assimilation. The defense lawyers noted pointedly that Chin was not so different than Ebens and Nitz. After all, they were blue-collar men who liked to drink at strip clubs; they were full of testosterone, and they did not lack tempers. That was the greatest irony. Chin was very much like Ebens and Nitz—except for race. And in the end that was all that counted.

The cultural response to the Vincent Chin case offers solace. It has achieved a mythic status. “Remember Vincent Chin” is a rallying cry, and a reference to him is a synecdoche for prejudice toward Asian Americans in all its forms. The smiling Chin, innocent in his high school photograph, became an iconic image through its reproduction on homemade flyers and in the mainstream media alike. American Citizens for Justice, the nonprofit Asian American civil rights advocacy group founded to advance the Chin cause, is memorialized in a series of pictures by Corky Lee, the “official” photographer of Asian America. There are two documentary movies about Chin, one a nominee for an Academy Award and the most widely used text in Asian American studies courses, likely watched by every student enrolled in such a class. An episode of the *Twilight Zone* television series, entitled “Wong’s Lost and Found Emporium,” based on a science fiction vignette by William F. Wu, was inspired by the case. A stage play, *Carry the Tiger to the Mountain*, has been produced. A children’s book, *A Day for Vincent Chin and Me*, has been published. Paintings commemorate Chin, including a pop art rendering by Roger Shimomura, a cityscape by Evri Kwong, and a mural in Detroit’s Chinatown. He appears in songs, including a rap at the beginning of the 2007 comedy movie *Ping Pong Playa*. Conferences and a pilgrimage to the grave site are held on the anniversaries of the crime. Through the Internet, T-shirts are available featuring a plain, black back­ground with simple white lettering, “V. Chin, 1955-1982.”

A Personal Connection

I know I am at risk of confusing my own coming of age with history. I grew up in Detroit in the 1970s and 1980s. My father was an engineer at Ford Motor Company for virtually his entire career. He designed brakes. I remember the place and the time that are integral to this account, and I doubt I could forget either. Although I did not know Vincent Chin, I can identify with him. At a gut level, I feel as if he could be my cousin, or, for that matter, even me, with the circum­stances altered imperceptibly.

The Vincent Chin case changed my life. As a child, like almost all children, I merely wanted to be accepted as normal. I would not have wanted to discuss race or civil rights, and I would have avoided the myriad issues that this story requires us to confront. As a boy, I wanted to ride my bicycle around the block with my friends, all of whom, perforce, were White, and as an adolescent, I wanted to hang out at video arcades with them.

The events that make up the Vincent Chin case made me realize that the childhood cruelties I experienced, the teasing and the taunting of the play­ground, could and should not be rem­edied or overcome with the teacher’s advice to retort that “sticks and stones may break my bones but words could never hurt me.” In fact, kids suffer all sorts of bodily harm—falling off swing sets, breaking bones, enduring high fevers—and in general they heal just fine, even if an adult could not do the same. Against all outward appearances, the psychological damage, which may seem trivial and not worthy of remarking upon at the time, can turn out to be much more severe and lasting. The risk of physical attack, moreover, comes directly from verbal abuse. A beating follows from slurs often enough. The wrong differs in degree but not kind.

Yet nobody wants to call themselves a victim either. To be pitied is to be powerless. It remains by no means easy for Asian immigrants and their American-born progeny, most of whom sought to identify with the dominant majority and few of whom aspired to stand up and speak out, to organize themselves into a cause. The protest in this situation had never been seen before by Asian Americans or anyone else. We hesitated then, and do still, from causes internal as well as external—from the traditions of cultures that did not embrace democracy to newcomers striving to meet basic material needs to the heckler’s jeer that we “go back to where we came from.”

The Vincent Chin case deserves to be known and studied because it not only represents the many Asian American experiences but also presents the great American challenge of a diverse democ­racy. While words cannot make right the tangible acts that were wrong, they at least can assure us we recognize the importance of our common memories in framing our shared future.

Acknowledgements:

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