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*DEADLY VIPER CHARACTER ASSASSINS:*  
CYBER DISCOURSE ON ASIAN AMERICAN MARGINALIZATION AND IDENTITY

by

EILEEN WANG

Under the Direction of Marian Meyers

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Asian Americans articulate their marginalization and identity, as well as other issues related to race, through the use of blogs. Specifically, I look at discourse surrounding the *Deadly Viper Character Assassins* publication controversy on three different blogs. I draw upon critical discourse analysis (CDA) to compile patterns, themes, and anomalies from the online discussions. This paper highlights key findings, given the scarceness of Asian American voices in public culture, that prompt ongoing discussions about identity and the use of blogs as a platform to speak and conceptualize Asian American identity.

INDEX WORDS: Asian American, Identity, Marginalization, Blogs, Cyber discourse, Internet, Critical discourse analysis, Race, Intersectionality

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by

EILEEN WANG

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in the College of Arts and Sciences

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## **DEDICATION**

To my husband. For inspiring me and believing in me from day one.

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

In 2007, Zondervan<sup>1</sup> published a book called *Deadly Viper Character Assassins: A Kung Fu Survival Guide for Life & Leadership* by Mike Foster and Jud Wilhite. The authors began with the aim to produce a book conveying a message about Christian leadership. The marketing of the book, however, led to a virtual debate on Asian American<sup>2</sup> marginalization and identity. Reverend Dr. Soong-Chan Rah<sup>3</sup> wrote to the authors of *Deadly Viper*, a conversation which he later posted on his blog (“Response from one of the authors,” 2009, November 3), arguing that the authors co-opted Asian culture in inappropriate ways.

Rah noted that the authors meshed the ancient Chinese martial art of Kung Fu with Japanese motifs. The lack of distinction between the two cultures implies that all Asians are the same. The authors used language that demonstrated a reliance on the stereotypes of Kung Fu, using terms such as “Grasshopper,” which stemmed from the nickname given a character in the television series *Kung Fu* (“Kwai Chang Caine,” 2010). The authors also depicted Asian language, mannerisms, and features as comical and sinister in the book and also in their promotional videos on the *Deadly Viper* website. Because of offenses such as these, Rah asked Foster and Wilhite to rethink the theme of *Deadly Viper*.

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<sup>1</sup> In 1931, Zondervan was founded as a bookselling company. Since then, it has become one of the world’s largest international Christian media and publishing corporations.

<sup>2</sup> The U.S. Census Bureau lists the following as Asian and Pacific Islander: Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, Vietnamese, Southeast Asians (Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Thai), and South Asians (Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Bangladeshi). For the purposes of this paper, it is not necessary to focus on individual ethnicities.

<sup>3</sup> Rah is an associate professor at North Park Theological Seminary in Chicago, Illinois, and the senior pastor of Cambridge Community Fellowship Church. He is also the author of *The Next Evangelicalism: Freeing the Church from Western Cultural Captivity*. Rah was the first to take this issue up with Zondervan and the authors.

Rah also wrote a letter to the publishers at Zondervan asking for several reparations, including that the publishing company issue a public apology (“An open letter,” 2009, November 3). Consequently, Zondervan then CEO, Moe Girkins, apologized, admitting that the book’s characterizations and visual representations were offensive to many people despite its otherwise solid message (Rah, “Zondervan’s Public Statement,” 2009, November 19). Zondervan stated that it would discontinue the publication of the book in its original form. A number of self-identified Asian Americans, and others who sympathized with them, continued to voice strong objections to the marketing of the book on the *Deadly Viper* website.<sup>4</sup> After much discussion between the authors and various blog commenters, Foster and Wilhite issued a public apology and eventually took down the website (Rah, “Some good news,” 2009, November 25).

Though the publication controversy subsided, issues that dealt with Asian American marginalization and identity construction lingered, as did the concern of members of the Asian American virtual community with whether or not their voices mattered. My research on the *Deadly Viper* controversy looked at how Asian Americans have resisted the *Deadly Viper*’s conceptualization of themselves as a group on the sites of three different Asian American bloggers – the Rev. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah, Kathy Khang, and Eugene Cho. I also looked at whether the dominant, hegemonic notions of Asian American identity have been reinforced through this discourse. I sought themes, patterns, and anomalies from the blog posts and user comments to reveal how Asian Americans articulate their own identity and issues of marginalization, as well as other related aspects of Asian American representation. I looked at the roles of gender and class, along with race, in the blog’s discourse on marginalization and

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<sup>4</sup> www.deadlyviper.org is now called “The People of the Second Chance” (POTSC). All previous entries surrounding the controversy have been removed. The first new entry on POTSC, though, vaguely references past conversations and motivations for revamping the website. Rah posted screen shots of a few of the email conversations he had with Foster and Wilhite on his blog.

identity, taking the cue from Black feminist theorists who argue that race, gender, and class cannot be mutually exclusive categories of analysis (Crenshaw, 1989). This trifecta can only be understood within the context of their intersection (Meyers, 2004). Various Asian American blogs created a discursive space for these issues to be addressed. For the purpose of this paper, I used the Rev. Dr. Rah's blog since he spearheaded the conversations and has the most pervasive coverage of the controversy as it happened. I also looked at the blogs of Kathy Khang and Eugene Cho, as they represented the Asian American community during the conference calls with the authors and with Zondervan. Several other Asian American representatives took part in these conference calls as well. Their blogs, however, are either unavailable to the public, or they have very few postings, if any at all.

The *Deadly Viper* controversy sparked conversations on questions of Asian American marginalization and identity. Given the scarceness of such events that receive media attention concerning Asian Americans, especially events that include public comment and contributions, I find this controversy to be a significant case study. While previous studies have documented major stereotypes and narrow representations (or misrepresentations) of Asian Americans (see, for example, Hamamoto, 1994; Lee, 1999; Said, 1978; Shim, 1998; Suzuki, 2002; Zhang, 2010), as well as addressed issues of Asian American identity (see, for example, Junn, 2007; Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Lien, 2001; Zia, 2000), this study takes a fresh approach using critical discourse analysis (CDA), which looks directly at the cyber discourse of Asian Americans.

The comments made on the blogs provide insight into how a marginalized group engages in identity discourse apart from the dominant culture. An understanding of the dichotomy between the dominant and the marginalized – the center and periphery – is informed by postcolonial and subaltern studies. Dominant and marginal relationships are used in reference to

European nations and the West and the areas they colonized or once ruled (Ang & Stratton, 1996; Chakrabarty, 1988; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988). Scholars Ien Ang and Jon Stratton (1996) argue that the discourse of postcolonialism is, in part, about finding reactions and resistance to the cultural history of colonialism and imperialism (p. 18). I find the *Deadly Viper* controversy to be not only an interesting case study, but also a study that can provide insight into larger questions about Asian American representation and how they articulate their own identity.

My research draws upon subaltern studies as a way of creating space for the subaltern to speak. Subaltern studies provides a useful theoretical framework in examining marginalized voices because it focuses on those groups that have traditionally been silenced (Chakrabarty, 1988; Chatterjee, 1993; Guha, 1997; Hall, 1992; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988a, 1988b). Under this theoretical framework, I used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to ascertain themes and patterns, as well as variances, from within the blogs and comments to draw out new and/or existing conversations that are taking place among Asian Americans when talking about marginalization and identity. Using CDA, I examined both the dominant notions of Asian American identity, and the resistant speech that acts against the ideologically constructed subjectivities of and for Asian Americans. In other words, I analyzed: 1) what is being said about Asian American marginalization and identity within the context of the *Deadly Viper* controversy; 2) the strategies of resistance within the blogs; and 3) the dominant articulations of Asian American identity that are being reinforced through the blogs.

As Stuart Hall observes, culture is a terrain of ideological struggle (Storey, 2006). That is to say, popular culture is a site of struggle over meaning where, more than likely, dominant forces win out. This study examined the role of new media in the struggle over meaning when talking about identity and how new media can act as an agent of resistance. Generally speaking,

the Internet is a site of resistance in the sense that it can be used to construct new social and political relationships (Kahn & Kellner, 2004). More specifically, I analyzed blogging as a site of resistance and whether or not resistant discourse legitimates Asian American “voices.” I also analyzed how discourse in the blogs may reinforce hegemonic articulations of Asian American identity. As Teun A. van Dijk (2003) notes, specific discourse structures are deployed in the reproduction of social dominance. Typically, dominant ideologies make their way into mainstream discourse. In the *Deadly Viper* case, specifically, Rah challenges the dominant ideology around the construction of Asian American identity.

In my research, I found that Asian American discourse both challenged and supported dominant assumptions and representations of their identity. Asian Americans who contributed to the blogs were able to name specific stereotypes and push back against these misrepresentations. For instance, commenters questioned why Asians were portrayed as sinister and comical in the *Deadly Viper* material and voiced concerns about the narrow use of these images. There were also Asian Americans, however, who made it a point to say that they were not offended by *Deadly Viper’s* conceptualization of Asians. In this sense, marginalized voices did not challenge hegemonic views and ideas, essentially reinforcing articulations of the hegemon.

I also found that sexism and class were not as salient to Asian American identity. Gender was predominately talked about on Kathy Khang’s blog. Even then, gender was discussed in terms of the *lack* of discussion on gender identity. Asian American women felt that they had to choose between their race and gender, with race being the more pertinent and urgent issue. Class was largely ignored in the conversation about identity. This is not to say that class identity is not important, but it was not prominent in the discourse. Christianity, however, was very integral to Asian American identity of those who contributed to the blog.

Christian identity was used to reinforce and resist dominant notions of Asian American identity. Commenters noted that there were more important matters at hand than arguing about the *Deadly Viper* material and its racial implications, such as bringing people to Christ. This type of either-or tactic was used, perhaps, to quell Asian American voices against speaking out about marginalization. There were also many commenters, though, who stated that conversations about marginalization and identity were very important, especially as Christians. Christian brothers and sisters should hold each other to different standards and keep each other accountable in what they say and do. Christian identity encompasses all intersections of identity.

Lastly, I found that many commenters, Asian and non-Asian, thought that having these discussions on blogs seemed abrasive. Commenters questioned why Rah and others bloggers chose to publicly challenge the *Deadly Viper* authors. The general consensus also acknowledged, however, that it was necessary to start these conversations online because marginalized voices would have more leverage and impact. Many also agreed that further conversation that required a deeper and more intimate connection needed to be taken offline.

In approaching the *Deadly Viper* controversy, it is clear that we cannot begin to understand identity construction without first understanding how identity can be framed. In Stuart Hall's view, identity acknowledges the critical points of deep and significant difference that constitute what we are – or what we have become through history (Hall, 1992 & 1997). In laying the groundwork for Asian Americans to speak openly in a discursive space about marginalization, it is necessary first for Asian Americans to have a space to then speak about their identity that is set apart from the center. Asian Americans lack the ability to even attempt to form an identity when the dominant culture is allowed to speak for them. So to begin to build an

identity, Asian Americans must collectively build a voice, and, in this sense, cyberspace should be looked at further as a site for the articulation of voices from the margins.

## 2 LITERATURE

### 2.1 *Asian American Stereotypes and Representation*

Scholarly research has contributed to growing awareness of Asian stereotypes, myths, and cultural misconceptions perpetuated by the media and their impact on different Asian American populations (Feng, 2002; Hamamoto, 1994; Lee, 1999; Ono & Pham, 2009; Xing, 1998; Zhang, 2010; Zia, 2000). Media watch groups<sup>5</sup> have released numerous reports on these issues and continue to monitor all facets of the media, advocating for balanced and positive portrayals of Asian Americans and scrutinizing prevalent stereotypes. The “model minority” is one of the most dominant stereotypes for Asian Americans, carrying repercussions that are difficult to pinpoint.

The model minority is a seemingly celebratory image born with the publication of two articles in 1966 – “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” by William Petersen in the *New York Times Magazine* and “Success of One Minority Group in U.S.” by a *U.S. News and World Report* staff member (Zhou and Lee, 2004). Authors Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee (2004) note in their study on Asian American youths that these two publications marked a significant departure from the portrayal of Asian Americans as foreigners and commended the Chinese and Japanese citizens for their perseverance in overcoming hardship. The Chinese and Japanese citizens were praised, essentially, for raising themselves up by their bootstraps without the help of others.

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<sup>5</sup> Two of the larger watch groups addressing Asian American media representation include Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) at [www.manaa.org](http://www.manaa.org), and the HearUsNow.org project of the Consumer Union at [www.hearusnow.org](http://www.hearusnow.org).

While the model minority can be regarded as a “positive” stereotype, many researchers have found that this portrayal can still be harmful to the self-image of Asian Americans, as well as the ways in which other races view Asians in general (Fisher, Wallace, & Fenton, 2000; Paek & Shah, 2002; Taylor, Landreth, & Bang, 2005). Kim and Yeh (2002) reported that even when Asian American students excelled academically, the Asian American youth reported more depressive behaviors and symptoms, poorer self-images, and more dissatisfaction with their social standing than Caucasian American students.

Kim and Yeh (2002) also reported that this stereotype serves to create conflict between Asian American students and their peers, as well as conflict between classes, resulting in peer and class discrimination, and anti-Asian sentiments. The model minority stereotype creates conflict *within* the same race, such as when Korean students distance themselves from Southeast Asian students because they do not want to be perceived as “welfare sponges” (Kim & Yeh, 2002, p. 4). Zhang (2010) found that Asian American students faced exclusion from social groups more frequently than other races because they are considered “nerdy” and not as much “fun.” Consequently, the model minority stereotype sets people of the same race in opposition to each other, and also sets Asian Americans as outcasts in the dominant culture. So while this stereotype seems positive, there are still many more consequences that come with it.

The dominant cultural narrative routinely ignores poor and working class Asian Americans (Sanders, 2012). The focus on successful model minorities overshadows the plight of certain Asian American groups who have the “lowest rates of per capita income of any racial group” (Sanders, 2012.). When poor and working class Asian Americans are taken into account, they are often portrayed as foreigners who cannot be assimilated, or have assimilated poorly. Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) cites that the working poor class of

Asian Americans are depicted in a limited range of professions, including the shopkeeper, cab driver, gangster, prostitute, and laundry worker, to name a few. These clichéd occupations are coupled with the image of the foreign-speaking, highly accented, unassimilated Asian American, making the working poor inherently “alien” to America, further marginalizing Asian Americans (MANAA, “Restrictive Portrayals of Asians in the Media”).

Dominant stereotypes for Asian men include the asexual Asian man, the incompetent clown, martial arts expert, wise old man, and the evil “Fu Manchu” character that presents a threat to white male dominance (Kawai, 2005; Tewari & Alvarez, 2009). Rosalind Chou, author of *Asian American Sexual Politics: The Construction of Race, Gender, and Sexuality*, argues that Asian American experiences have been intentionally affected by White supremacist design, as the dominant culture imposed gendered meanings on Asian American males to support “the white racial frame and hegemonic masculinity” (2012, p. 9). Specifically, Chou states that Asian American men, unlike other men of color in the United States, “have gone through an emasculating, castrating process” (2012, p. 9).

Asian women, on the other hand, are frequently portrayed as submissive, non-confrontational, docile, and hyper-sexualized. Christine Hall (2009) notes that a prevalent image of the Asian American woman is that of the “ingénue” – one who is “sweet, subservient, fragile, and needs to be rescued” (p. 198). Hall goes on to say that an Asian American woman’s traditionally small stature, facial features, and extremities perpetuate a “childlike image” that conveys weakness and innocence, and someone who does not argue or question authority (p. 198).

On the other side of the spectrum, the stereotype of the “Dragon Lady” portrays Asian women as extremely harsh, domineering, and untrustworthy (Li & Beckett, 2006). And, in recent

years, the “Tiger Mom” image has also garnered public attention (Chua, 2011; Paul, 2011). The “Tiger Mom” renders Chinese mothers – and other mothers of Eastern descent – as authoritarian parents, mercilessly demanding perfection from their children. This stereotype further depicts Asian women as harsh and domineering.

The lack of representation and *mis*representation of Asian Americans have been well documented in current research. Every year since 2002, the Asian American Justice Center (AAJC)<sup>6</sup> creates Diversity Report Cards and Statements concerning the lack of representation of Asian Pacific Americans (APA)<sup>7</sup> on television. As of 2010, the AAJC reports:

Overall, there were 37 APA actors cast in regular prime-time roles for the 2009-2010 season, an increase of four from the previous season. Although the quality of these roles has vastly improved – APAs are now cast in roles with real dimension, not just as sidekicks or in menial roles – APAs are still less likely than actors from other racial groups to appear in primary roles. (Asian American Justice Center, 2010, p. 2)

APAs have more prominent roles in shows such as *Flash Forward*, *Grey’s Anatomy*, *Lost*, *Heroes*, and *Glee*. Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA) suggests, however, that while APAs are seen more regularly on prime-time television, there are still restrictive portrayals of Asians in the media (MANAA, “Restrictive Portrayals of Asians in the Media”). One portrayal is of Asian Americans as foreigners who cannot be assimilated, making anything Asian inherently “alien” to America. The MANAA report is reflected in the media with the “disproportionate number of unacculturated Asian characters speaking with foreign accents,” and the unchallenged satirizing of Asian accents by the dominant culture (“Restrictive Portrayals of

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<sup>6</sup> The AAJC was founded in 1991 and “works to advance the human and civil rights for Asian Americans, and build and promote a fair and equitable society for all” ([www.advancingequality.org/about\\_us](http://www.advancingequality.org/about_us)).

<sup>7</sup> In 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau listed Asian and Pacific Islander as two separate groups. Here, however, the AAJC uses the term Asian Pacific American to refer to Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans together to describe people who trace their origins to the Asian continent, as well as those from the Pacific Islands.

Asians in the Media”). For instance, in NBC’s *Heroes*, Japanese American actor Masi Oka plays the role of Hiro Nakamura, a comedic, non-threatening superhero who does not speak English well. In actuality, Masi Oka is fluent in English and admits on PBS’s *Tavis Smiley* show that he took the role because he was at the right place and at the right time and was getting frustrated with the lack of roles for Asian Americans (pushsense, 2007).

With any growing body of knowledge, though, there are always gaps and areas that lack sufficient research. While studies such as the ones done by AAJC and MANAA raise awareness about the lack of representation and the misrepresentation of Asian Americans, and, in a sense, act as the “watch dogs” for racism, prejudices, and stereotypes, few studies look at how Asian Americans attempt to resist dominant cultural misrepresentations, and how they attempt to articulate identity. How are peripheral and semi-peripheral groups actively and practically resisting (or breaching) the core conversations? In other words, how are Asian Americans articulating the conflicts that came out of *Deadly Viper* through the blogs? What does the *Deadly Viper* controversy reveal about Asian American marginalization and identity, as well as other related aspects of Asian American representation? These are questions I endeavor to look into through my research.

## 2.2 *Subaltern Studies, Marginalization, and Systemic Racism*

Subaltern studies has provided a popular framework in the discursive conversation of identity construction for marginalized groups, groups that traditionally stand on the periphery and semi-periphery (Chakrabarty, 1988; Chatterjee, 1993; Guha, 1997; Hall, 1992; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988a & 1988b). According to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988b), the subaltern holds a subordinate position that is always associated with, but at the same time outside of, the dominant power. From a postcolonial point of view, scholars are attempting to create a space for

the subaltern to articulate its own subjecthood outside of the dominant discourse (Spivak, 1988a). Essentially, subaltern studies attempts to rewrite history from below, creating a space for the subaltern to speak. Conversations on subalternity give rise to the question: how does the subaltern find a voice in dominant discursive space if their condition is marked by an absence from this space?

This area of research provides a useful theoretical framework in examining the marginalized voice and focuses on subaltern groups that have traditionally been silenced. In Edward Said's (1978) study of the Orient as the "Other," Said argues that the subaltern has always been comprised of a Eurocentric definition of itself. The Orient cannot have thought or action as a free subject of discourse. Orientalism, then, has limited what can be said about the Orient (Said, 1978). Subaltern studies deals with the recovery of the history and voice of the marginalized Other against the constructions of the West (Guha, 1997).

In the study of Asian American voice construction, subaltern studies lays significant groundwork. As Said notes, the Orient is the "stage on which the whole East is confined...not an unlimited extension beyond the familiar European world, but rather a closed field, a theatrical stage affixed to Europe" (1978, p. 63). Thus historically, not only has Asia been associated with the West and fixed to it, but Asia has been confined to a limited "stage" of the East. The affixation of the East to the West, of the Asian to American, lines up with the notion of marginalization and occupying a space outside of the center.

Marginalization is not a new issue or practice, and it is most certainly not specific to Asian Americans, as there are many conversations going on about how hegemony works to render the marginalized voiceless, and how this marginalization is self-perpetuating (Chakrabarty, 1988; Chatterjee, 1993; Guha, 1997; Hall, 1992; Said, 1978; Spivak, 1988a). In

my research, I want to highlight the differences in Asian American marginalization, as researchers note that because of certain stereotypes associated with Asian Americans, such as the “model minority,” they are often perceived as claiming non-existent victimization (Lee & Joo, 2005; Zhang, 2010). In a sense, they are blamed for their own victimization. Because of unique stereotypes and caricatures, Asian Americans are not seen as being legitimately marginalized. The lack of credibility in being able to speak about marginalization renders Asian Americans without a basis for identity construction because they are not given a discursive space in which to speak.

In large part, self-perpetuating marginalization can be attributed to systemic racism. Systemic racism encompasses a wide range of racialized dimensions of this society, from racist framing and ideology, to stereotyped attitudes and discriminatory habits and actions, to large-scale racist institutions (Feagin, 2006). It is far more than a matter of individual bigotry. Whether it is intentional or unintentional, the White-maintained oppression of Americans of color has been *systemic*, as in it has been “manifested in all major societal institutions” (Feagin, 2006, xiii). Peggy McIntosh (2003) states that this system of racism is a matter of “unjust, deeply institutionalized, ongoing intergenerational reproduction of whites’ wealth, power, and privilege” (p. 4). Systemic racism has a basis in history and has been perpetuated, whether intentionally or unintentionally, by the majority (read “White”) culture.

Scholars’ discussions of White privilege focus as much on the advantages that White people accrue from society as on disadvantages people of color experience (McIntosh, 2003). It is an individual and institutionalized privilege that produces blatant and unconscious oppressiveness. “It is an invisible package of unearned assets,” says McIntosh (2003, p. 14).

Acknowledging White privilege makes one newly accountable to changing the system. The majority culture must take systemic injustices into consideration and promote change.

### 2.3 *Identity, Intersectionality, and Essentialism*

Another definition that needs to be established is the concept of “identity.” Many theorists have researched identity and identity formation (Anderson, 1991; Ang and Straton, 1996; Barker, 1997; Chatterjee, 1993; Hall, 1997). Postcolonial scholars Ang and Straton (1996) state that identities are formed based on dominant cultures of the West. Even in the resistance of domination, the non-West is *reacting* under the dominion of the West. Said (1978), in *Orientalism*, argues that for the subaltern, the dominant group defines the marginalized group’s identity. Under the umbrella of subaltern studies, a space can be created for the marginalized to have a voice where the traditional locations of power are de-centered.

Anderson (1991) argues that identity is formed through the collection of “cultural artifacts” (p. 4). In other words, one’s nationality, ethnicity, and/or race comes into historical being through the acquired meanings, man-made significations, given to it over time. So the question is – if we are collecting cultural artifacts from history and constantly recreating these artifacts, how do we reach an identity, and is there one to be found? Anderson (1991) makes the point that there is a wrongful tendency to hypostasize the nation, or an identity, as a permanent universal. Thus, even though identity is built through history, it does not have one finite definition.

Stuart Hall (1996), likewise, states that identities are always developing and never complete. Like Anderson, Hall agrees that even though identities have a basis in a historical past with which they continue to correspond, identities are really about the “process of becoming rather than being” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Hall accepts that identities are never unified, are

increasingly fragmented and fractured, and multiply across different constructed discourses and positions. Identities are constructed *within* discourse, not outside of it (Hall, 1996). Because of its constant process of development, identities do not have a settled meaning, and they do not even “signal [the] stable core of the self” (Hall, 1996, p. 3). That is to say, the concept of identity cannot succumb to essentialism.

Stanley Aronowitz, in critiquing Locke’s earlier dialectical theories of socialization, offers the notion that identity is based on relationships (Aronowitz, 1995). Identity is the socialization of the self. The construction of identity does not only rely on “innate principles” or “unique substances” (Aronowitz, 1995, p. 112). Instead, identity is largely conditioned by a person’s environment. The environment is not merely comprised of the material, but also the ideas of others. William James argues further that a person has as many “social selves” as there are individuals who place on the person an image from their own minds (Aronowitz, 1995, p. 113). Identity construction that has been hampered by the dominant cultural ideology of the West may result in a diminution of Asian American racial group identity, and negative racial stereotypes portend a “gradual assimilation into mainstream, white America” (Junn & Masuoka, 2008, p. 730). To damage one of these images is to damage the person him or herself.

In analyzing the role of race and racial stereotypes in identity construction and marginalization, it would also be necessary to look at gender and class, as Black feminist theorists argue they cannot be mutually exclusive categories of analysis (Crenshaw, 1989). These aspects of identity cannot be divorced from each other since they all play an integral role when articulating identity. Thus in regards to intersectionality, I will be looking at the roles of gender and class, along with race, in the blog’s discourse on marginalization and identity.

It is important to make the disclaimer here that I use “race” according to Stuart Hall’s (2009) definition that race is a social construct. One cannot essentialize race. Essentialism is the practice of regarding identity as having a universal quality instead of being a social construct (Monceri, 2009). Race is a discursive category of identity as a whole. Hall speaks of race as a floating signifier, a signifier that has meaning in culture. Race, Hall (2006) explains, is subject to constant redefinition and appropriation. It is not a fixed construct (or biological) because race cannot function as a guarantee that certain things are true about race and objects pertaining to race. For instance, if an Asian American produced a work of art and it is expressive and considered good, all works of art by Asian Americans may not be considered so. Some works of art may be bad, but still created by an Asian American. So in this sense, race cannot have a fixed meaning.

Taking race as an ongoing, ever-changing construct, it would be wise to look at the intersection of gender along with race, specifically the female voice. To subsume Asian American women under the broad stroke of “Asian American identity” would render them even more invisible and voiceless. In one study, for instance, researchers Guofang Li and Gulbahar Beckett (2006) found that Asian American females have a difficult time gaining credibility, recognition and voice in professional and higher education settings. Li and Beckett discovered that there were shared sentiments of feeling like strangers, perpetual newcomers, and “outsiders within the academy” (2006, p. 2) These challenges suggest that gender has as much to do with marginalization and identity discourse as race alone.

Shirley Hune (1997 & 2002) also looks at aspects of voice for Asian American women scholars. Hune (2002) contests the popular view of the “model minority,” noting that Asian Americans have yet to achieve equality in institutions for higher learning. In her research, Hune

(2002) finds that Asian American women increasingly earn degrees at bachelor's, master's, and professional level programs, but continue to fall behind their male counterparts as they are underrepresented in doctoral programs and faculty positions. Asian American women often hold junior ranks and have one of the lowest tenure rates in the academy (Hune, 2002). Hune's work argues that Asian American women in the academic setting often face stereotypes of the "model minority" and are treated as outsiders and strangers, but these stereotypes and discriminations are largely ignored and not seen as a problem (Hune, 2002). Nevertheless, they hamper Asian American women's academic, personal, and professional development.

For Asian Americans, academic achievement and successful integration into American culture is tied to class status (Wing, 2007). Out of this close association, the "immigrant striver" and "model minority" myths came into being. V. S. Louie (2004) connects the image of the Asian immigrant striver to the image of Asian Americans as the model minority (Lee, 1994; Zhang, 2010; Zhou & Lee, 2004). Both terms suggest either attempting or achieving upward mobility in America by immigrants who should be a model for all minorities. Thus, Asian Americans are more than likely assumed to be well off, educated, and model citizens. The U.S. Census, however, stated that Hmong, Cambodian, and Laotian Americans have a lower household income (\$35,621) compared to Japanese, Chinese, and Korean Americans (\$70,708), with about 60% of the Hmong and Laotian American population having less than a high school education (Taylor et al., 2005), and the poverty rate for Asian Americans is still considerably higher than that of the white population (Suzuki, 2002).

In analyzing Asian American discourse, I am not making the case that only Asian Americans can speak about their identity. Rather, I am making the case that because this community has been traditionally marginalized, the *Deadly Viper* study and discourse on Soong-

Chan Rah, Kathy Khang, and Eugene Cho's blogs can be used to enlighten researchers on issues related to Asian American identity construction, as well as new perspectives to take in the future. I argue that to even begin to build an identity, Asian Americans must first collectively build a voice. And so, theorists have been looking to cyberspace as an outlet for marginalized voices.

#### *2.4 Cyberspace as Platform of Resistance and Subaltern Counterpublics*

In conventional forms of media, the marginalized have to struggle to be heard, with the center drowning out the voice of the marginalized (Mitra & Watts, 2002). With the pervasive use of cyberspace, however, there is a fundamental shift occurring with respect to the distribution of power between the center and the margin (Mosco & Foster, 2001). The center is challenged by the way the marginalized, who have traditionally been dominated because of their lack of technological advantages and capital, use cyberspace to claim their voice (Mitra and Watts, 2002). In a "placeless" cyberspace, discourse can be heard from anywhere.

As Mitra and Watts (2002) note, in cyberspace, "power structures are more closely tied to the ability to create voice than in real life where other factors such as geographic location, military superiority, and financial capital could become the sources of power" (p. 487). So in discussing voice, there is an implicit assumption that speaking takes place somewhere and the "where" has relations to power (Mitra, 2001). However, the center is difficult to locate in cyberspace because voices can virtually be heard simultaneously. Thus, if there is no defined center, there is no defined margin.

With the marginalized breaching dominate conversations and creating discursive spaces to talk about their own identity, the Internet, in general, can be used as a potential site of resistance. So long as stereotypes are not repudiated, and so long as the subordinate group remains quiescent to misrepresentations placed upon them, these identities will be invulnerable

to critique. Subsequently, many theorists have viewed cyberspace as a platform of resistance, with the Internet as a platform for the marginalized to speak (Jones, 1997 & 1998; Mitra, 2001 & 2002; Nakamura 2002). Media outlets such as discussion forums, websites, and chat rooms constitute a new public space where “group identities can be asserted, disseminated and rethought, without the physical proximity formerly associated with conceptions of civil society” (Parker and Song, 2009, p. 588). Identities can be articulated away from dominant messages and under new terms of engagement.

A growing number of scholars have looked into the Internet’s praxis of resistance (Aouragh, 2008; Downey and Fenton, 2003; Ismail, 2009; Kahn and Kellner, 2004; Koerber, 2001). For instance, in Miriyam Aouragh’s (2008) work on Palestinian activism on the Internet, she notes that Palestinians are little referred to in the sphere of traditional media (print, television, radio), and that their voices are absent in the construction of knowledge and ideas about Palestinians. Aouragh states, “The appropriation of new technology by oppressed communities as part of their everyday resistance made the Internet an influential tool” (2008, p. 110). In her study, Aouragh described how the Internet mobilized local and transnational pro-Palestinian activism, which she termed *cyber intifada*, to counter media bias and stereotypes of Palestinians as either the terrorist or the victim, post-9/11. This research shows that for marginalized and oppressed groups who have difficulty accessing traditional, dominant forms of media, the Internet has become a significant platform.

The Internet allows for marginalized social groups to exist and develop in parallel arenas to the dominant discourse. For instance, researchers David Parker and Miri Song (2009) examined the content of British Chinese Internet forums to explore how second generation Chinese in Britain talk about their identity. They found that web-based dialogue is formative to

British Chinese identity and their ability to connect with other British Chinese in light of the relative absence of their voices in public culture. Parker and Song (2009) analyzed two key Internet sites and discovered that the reflexive racialization, a self-critical sensibility, and rearticulating rather than simply reiterating cultural inheritances were prevalent in their discourses. Along with these conclusions, Parker and Song found that the most visible impact of the online interchanges was the offline events they produced, signifying that online discourse is only the start of paradigm shifts when talking about identity.

Many websites and discussion forums create dialogue openings for minority and/or dissenting voices. In December of 2011, *Mashable*, the largest independent news source covering digital culture, social media and technology, documented nine of the year's biggest stories of activism and uprising organized through social media (Fox, 2011, December 7). The latest in this new type of activism was the "Occupy Wall Street" movement, targeting U.S. financial institutions, which began with one *Twitter* post in July 2011. *Adbusters Magazine*, an ad-free international magazine for activists, tweeted the message: "Dear Americans, this July 4<sup>th</sup> dream of the insurrection against corporate rule #occupywallstreet" (Wasserman, 2011, October 27). Since then, the hashtag<sup>8</sup> has been copied and reposted – to say the least – an innumerable amount of times, taking on a life of its own and moving through international borders.

Online rebellions and grassroots movements spurred by the Internet are examples of what theorists such as Richard Kahn and Douglas Kellner (2004) believe to be an ever-evolving sense of the way the Internet may be deployed in a democratic manner by the global citizen. Kahn and Kellner (2004) put it this way:

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<sup>8</sup> A hashtag is a word or phrase that has the # symbol fixed before it. The hashtag is used as a form of metadata tag to make searching for information with the tag easier to find.

Whether by using the Internet to take part in a worldwide expression of dissent and disgust, to divert corporate agendas and militarism through the construction of freenets and new oppositional spaces and movements, or simply to encourage critical media analysis, debate, and new forms of journalistic community, the new information and communication technologies are indeed revolutionary. (p. 93)

Kahn and Kellner (2004) believe that Internet subcultures are creating transformations in everyday life with the aid of cyber technologies and new media, arguing that the Internet has become highly politicized in recent times as well.

Kahn and Kellner (2004) refer to blogging, specifically, as a key form of media activism and resistance. Web logs, or blogs, are relatively easy to create and maintain, even for the amateur web user, promoting democratic self-expression. The Internet, Kahn and Kellner (2004) state, is about forming a “global network of interlocking, informative websites,” and blogs, specifically, centralize the “idea of a dynamic network of ongoing debate, dialogue and commentary” (p. 91). Blogs have the capacity to keep conversations in progress, as they happen. Kahn and Kellner (2004) refer to the example of one of the biggest international activist blogs, Indymedia ([www.indymedia.com](http://www.indymedia.com)). Indymedia uses teams of activist contributors to inform one another of news stories, events, and issues of the day both locally and globally. This centralization greatly aids the interpretation and dispersal of alternative information.

Blogging is one way cyber citizens disseminate alternative information. Thus, the author of a blog and the blog commenters can be classified as Nancy Fraser’s (1990) “subaltern counterpublic” in the sense that they are engaging in identity construction away from dominant groups. In subaltern counterpublics, “members of subordinated social groups can invent and circulate their counter discourses based on oppositional identities, interests, and needs” (Sahoo, 2006, p. 6). The distinctive character of subaltern counterpublics is their ability to transform orientation – reconstructing norms and patterns, rather than reproducing exact copies, and

breaking away from norms, taken for granted as reality, in order to break the status quo (Miloni, 2009). Because of the critical role of the Internet in modern democracy, scholars such as Dimitra L. Milioni (2009) are looking into online counterpublic spheres.

Subaltern counterpublics are comparable to what Alexander Kluge (1972) termed “proletarian public spheres,” where various marginalized groups are able to carve out space for themselves in the political arena (Sahoo, 2006, p. 2). In the Habermasian perspective, the public sphere is universal and belonging to the *bourgeois* middle class, where literate people have the monopoly over producing public opinion (Sahoo, 2006). Habermas believed that the proliferation of multiple and competing publics, such as the various marginalized counterpublic groups found online, were deterrents of democracy (Fraser, 1990). Online counterpublics are fragmented and isolated, Habermas conjectures, but Milioni (2009) argues that certain features of the Internet cannot be overlooked – such as the integrating functions of connectivity and networking that counterbalance fragmentation.

With this new discursive space, however, the idea of authenticity comes into question. Mitra and Watts (2002) offer authenticity as “a multi-dimensional construct that includes notions of truth, accuracy, eloquence, and an ontic connection with lived experiences” (p. 490). Traditionally speaking, the idea of authenticity has been associated with mass media strongholds of power and cultural capital (Mitra & Watts, 2002). For instance, CNN could be considered authentic solely because it is CNN. In cyberspace, though, legitimizing power has become more complicated seeing as how there may be little connection between speaker, place, and power. Instead, gaining widespread acceptance is based critically on the eloquence of the speaker. The speaker, according to Mitra and Watts (2002), must speak eloquently to appear trustworthy, and the reader must be able to assess the rhetorical strategies of the speaker.

Of course, Mitra and Watts (2002) state that, ideally, citizens of the Internet should only speak when they can defend their voices ethically. While overtly offensive voices are easy to judge and call out, though, it is not always an easy task to decipher authenticity in voice. Mitra and Watts (2002) argue that discursive power cannot be taken for granted because of the “persistent seeping of traditional sources of power into the Internet” (p. 490). Instead, we must stick to the notion that web users have to be vigilant in judging the authenticity of voice in the slew of information online. Likewise, the speaker has an obligation to be genuine towards the reader, maintaining responsibility for what he or she writes. Mitra and Watts (2002) summarily explain the relationship between speaker and reader as a process of negotiation “where power is not a commodity held by either of them” (p. 491). The relationship between speaker and reader should be honored, Mitra and Watts (2002) explain, because of “the fundamental human need for acknowledgement” (p. 493). One must take the necessary gamble in responding to a call for acknowledgement because giving acknowledgement is a “life-giving force,” whereas ignoring the presence of another is close to “committing social murder” (Mitra and Watts, 2002, p. 493).

Previous studies have pointed out that Asian Americans lack presence in mainstream media, or when Asian Americans are represented, their characters are one-dimensional (Lee & Joo, 2005; Sun, 2003). The *Deadly Viper* controversy, as talked about on certain blogs, highlights on-going discussions of deeper issues that Asian Americans still face today. Through blogging, and producing feedback through commenting on blogs, Asian Americans create a new discourse that resists that of the dominant group. Asian Americans endeavor to speak about identity and related issues on their own terms, in lieu of dominant discourses. Few studies look at how Asian Americans attempt to articulate their identity, and in what ways they attempt to resist dominant discourses about identity and related aspects. I believe that in examining more cases of

online resistance, we can analyze issues of marginalization and identity, as well as strategies of resistance.

### 3 THEORY AND METHODOLOGY

This thesis is situated within the fields of postcolonial and subaltern studies. My research on the *Deadly Viper* controversy looks at how Asian Americans have resisted the *Deadly Viper's* conceptualization of themselves within the blogs of Rev. Dr. Rah, Kathy Khang, and Eugene Cho. I also look at how the dominant, hegemonic notions of Asian American identity may have been reinforced through discourse. While subaltern studies *generally* addresses subjects that have been erased from the discursive space and questions the hegemonic structures that participate in silencing the subaltern subject (Guha, 1997), this paper *specifically* explores the marginalization of Asian Americans and how they are, or are not, reclaiming the process of their identity construction. Subaltern studies creates a discursive space for marginalized voices by questioning the locations of power. This theoretical perspective suggests that there is a political aspect to discourse between dominant and marginalized groups – political in the sense that discourse is motivated by a person's belief, thus highlighting the importance of how discourse is carried out between the two.

This study used critical discourse analysis (CDA) to explore what is being said and *not* said in regards to Asian American identity construction and marginalization. I examined themes, patterns, and anomalies from within the three bloggers' postings and user comments to reveal how they articulate their own identity and issues of marginalization, as well as other related aspects of Asian American representation. I also looked at the roles of gender and class, along with race, in the blog's discourse on marginalization and identity.

CDA sees “language as social practice” and considers the context of language use to be crucial (Wodak and Meyer, 2009, p. 1). According to Teun A. van Dijk (2001):

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) is a type of discourse analytical research that primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced, and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context. (p. 352)

Dominant ideologies make their way into discourse, and researchers frequently look at ways they are enacted and reproduced by text and talk. In the *Deadly Viper* case study, blog comments reiterate dominant, traditional understandings of Asian American identity, but marginalized, resistant speech also makes its way into the conversations. Norman Fairclough (Chouliaraki & Fairclough, 1999) suggests that CDA starts with the perception of discourse (how discourse is understood), or more generally, semiosis (the process of giving meaning to language), as a component of social practices. The blog discourse both shapes and is shaped by other elements. There are both dominant and subversive thoughts happening. Van Dijk (2009) further states that scholars who use this theory and method are interested in the way discourse produces and reproduces social domination, *and* “how dominated groups may discursively *resist* such abuse” (p. 63). Both dominance and resistance need a critical look. For this reason, CDA is an appropriate method to use in looking at how dominant ideologies are resisted through blog comments, as well as reinforced.

An important point here is that CDA is most frequently used as a method to reveal how discourse is used to maintain those in positions of power and the dominant ideology (Martinez, 2007). This study emphasizes analyzing the discourse of people outside of the dominant ideology. However, Dolores Martinez (2007) argues that discourse is constructed through the interaction of “linguistic agents” in the “complex of the social structure” (p. 126). Blog commenters are the linguistic agents in a given cyber community. Thus, they are the ones

creating the discourse. Martinez (2007) goes on to say that what really matters in discourse is not the isolated role of each member, but relationships with the other participants.

One could also use Mitra and Watts (2002) to argue that, in a discursive space, power structures are closely associated with the ability to create voice, as opposed to in real life where power structures are associated with other factors such as geographic location or capital, to name a few. Thus in cyberspace, speaking power is nontraditional in the sense that anyone with technological means can create it. Mitra and Watts (2002) note that “using the perspective of voice it is possible to claim that the centrality of any voice is always open to challenge in the hypertextual spatial construction of the Internet” (p. 487). Thus, I believe that CDA is an appropriate, if not underused, method in analyzing *both* dominant and resistant speech.

Furthermore, I use CDA according to the suggestions of Fairclough (1995). That is to say, CDA “aims to systematically explore often opaque relationships of causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations and processes,” and it seeks to “investigate how such practices, events and texts arise out of and are ideologically shaped by relations of power and struggles over power” (pp. 132-133). Fairclough (1992) believes that discourse not only reproduces, but also transforms societies.

CDA, according to Fairclough (1995), tries to analyze discourse on three different and interrelated dimensions: a) the actual text; b) the discursive practices (that is, how the text is produced and received by the audience); and c) the larger social context that governs these practices. Using CDA, I look for themes and patterns, even anomalies, within the three different and interrelated dimensions Fairclough suggests. By analyzing discourse on blogs, I will be

looking at the larger social context that governs these practices, and how dominance and resistance take place.

In line with this, Thomas Huckin (1997) provides practical steps in approaching CDA, which I will use in my analysis. Huckin (1997) recommends approaching the text in an uncritical manner, refraining from deciphering the text word by word, and, instead, categorize the text by its genre (news article, public speech, academic paper, etc.). In looking at the text as a whole, one should analyze what perspective is being presented by looking at how the details are framed (what headings are used, what keywords are used, what's being left out or kept vague, how topics are diverted, etc.). After examining these macrostructures, Huckin (1997) suggests going deeper by looking at sentences, phrases, and words to look for microlevel rhetorical techniques that include: a) topicalization, or what sentences are placed in the topic position that influences readers; b) the portrayal of power; c) omission; d) presupposition; e) insinuations; f) connotations; g) tone; and h) register, or the level at which language is used to convey formality or status.

CDA does not belong to one single theoretical framework, van Dijk (2003) explains, because it is derived from several different theoretical backgrounds. However, as Martinez (2007) explains, scholars who use CDA adhere to the claim that “every theory is determined by practical research goals” (p. 126). Using these strategies to look at the discourse surrounding the controversy, we can begin to understand how a community's knowledge and beliefs play into what they are saying, as two key principles of CDA are that what we say and write is not arbitrary, and that language reflects ideology.

Teun A. van Dijk (2001) explains that while the critical analysis of any type of genre or context is different, they have a common perspective and general aim. CDA asks questions about

the way specific discursive structures are organized in the reproduction and resistance of social dominance (van Dijk, 2001). Previous discourse studies in relation to ethnic and racial inequality have gone beyond the images of the “Others” and probed more deeply into the linguistic, semiotic, and discursive properties of text and talk to and about the Others. This work focuses on everyday conversation, among other genres (van Dijk, 1995).

So, using a critical discourse perspective, I analyzed the blog postings and comments posted on the three bloggers’ sites. In van Dijk’s (1995) work on *Discourse Semantics and Ideology*, he notes that linguistic semantics is an abstraction from a broader cognitive semantics of discourse that accounts for representations involved in meaning production and comprehension. Essentially, meaning comes out of our perception of the world.

I looked at the conversations on the three key Asian American bloggers’ websites. In particular, I used the Rev. Dr. Rah’s blog because he brought this controversy to light in the blogging realm. With Rah being a leading voice in and for the Asian American Christian community (Chen, 2010), this allowed for access to a wider array of comments. In addition, I used Kathy Khang’s blog because she had a prominent role in voicing concerns with the *Deadly Viper* authors and Zondervan, as well. Khang’s blog made the most notable headway on discussions of gender as well as race. Lastly, I used Eugene Cho’s blog because he also blogged frequently on the controversy, has a large following, and was part of the team that talked with the authors and publisher directly. I believe it is most fitting to look at these blogs because I am looking at the specific perspective of how Asian Americans address issues of marginalization and identity.

I chose the *Deadly Vipers* controversy for analysis because it is a recent event that sparked conversations in the Asian American community, especially in the blogging realm, about

whether or not the marginalized can even speak. Because events and issues concerning Asian American identity rarely receive public attention, this event created a discursive space for the issue to be addressed. I performed a critical discourse analysis of the relevant blog postings and comments during the time of the controversy. The controversy spans from November 2, 2009, when the *Deadly Viper* book was first mentioned on Khang's blog (though the issue gained momentum on November 3<sup>rd</sup>, when Rah posted about it), to November 23, 2009, when Rah put aside the issue because of a general sense of resolution (www.profrah.wordpress.com, 2009, November 3-23).

Because the blog postings are numerous and the response comments are even more copious, I uncovered major themes from the discourse about Asian American marginalization and identity using Huckin's practical method of critical discourse analysis. In examining this case study, I sifted through every relevant post pertaining to *Deadly Viper* on each of the three bloggers' websites. For the Rev. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah, there were a total of 11 postings. For Kathy Khang, there were a total of 10 postings. For Eugene Cho, there were 5 postings. I analyzed the texts from a macro-level, analyzing the perspectives being presented, as a whole, and how details were framed. From there, I focused on micro-level aspects such as omission, insinuations, tone, and register.

By using CDA to examine the blogs, I looked at the location where voices that are typically silenced are allowed to speak up, where the marginalized can speak and wrestle with their identity. This is not to essentialize Asian American identity. Rather, using CDA to uncover relevant themes will add to ongoing discussion about Asian American identity.

The question "Can Asian Americans speak about *their* own marginalization and identity?" is not used to highlight a sense of "Otherness," although I realize that it is a potential

consequence. What I want to emphasize with the italicized word, though, are the differences in marginalization specific to Asian Americans. For instance, to use an example from Eugene Cho's (2009) blog, he poses the question, "Can you imagine the media letting Miley Cyrus go had she painted her face brown or black and mimicked caricatures of an African American?"<sup>9</sup> Cho implies that there would be a greater uproar if the offense were done to African Americans. Because of the "model minority" stereotype, Asian American discourse on marginalization is seen as invalid.

A critical discourse analysis can raise awareness about and legitimize what was previously denied or seen as negative. This type of analysis opens up a space for the marginalized to speak up and assert their own identity. In this sense, it operates for change as a form of empowerment (Wodak and Meyer, 2009). However, it has also been claimed that discourse analysis that is intended to empower may ultimately have the opposite effect. The suggestion is that "studies of oppressed groups may end up locking them within different restrictive discourses" (Taylor, 2001, p. 327). Ien Ang (1992) notes that a "fixation on one's own marginality can easily degenerate into inordinate self-righteousness, where the face of being marginal itself is used as unproblematized source of comfortable resentment toward the centre" (p. 317). These are limitations in this approach, but also reminders of the dynamic and on-going nature of the process of construction, critique, and counter-construction of identity.

#### 4 RESULTS AND ANALYSES

*Deadly Viper Character Assassins: A Kung Fu Survival Guide for Life & Leadership* is a book on maintaining character and integrity in leadership positions, namely in Christian

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<sup>9</sup> This question is in reference to a controversial picture of Miley Cyrus and friends pulling a 'slant-eye' pose. The photo can be seen at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1135507/Pictured-Miley-Cyrus-pulling-slant-eye-pose-upset-Asian-fans-Hannah-Montana.html>

leadership positions. Using themes of marital arts and Kung Fu, authors Mike Foster and Jud Wilhite describe seven different “assassins” that will attack one’s integrity and character.

“Chapter One: The Assassin of Character Creep” talks about how making small compromises in leadership can chip away at integrity and character and possible lead to bigger disasters. In “Chapter Two: The Assassin of Zi Qi Qi Ren,” the authors discuss how pride and unwillingness to display frailties and weakness lead to lies – lying to others and lying to oneself. “Chapter Three: The Assassin of Amped Emotions” talks about letting unhealthy emotional states get the best of a person and lead to toxic decision-making in leadership roles. “Chapter Four: The Assassin of The Headless Sprinting Chicken” discusses having balanced, sustainable priorities instead of working until exhaustion. “Chapter Five: The Assassin of Boom Chicka Wah Wah” addresses integrity and character in relationships, particularly in marriage, while in leadership roles. “Chapter Six: The Bling Bling Assassin” addresses the differences between money and worth, and how a person of true character does not need to own flashy objects to show worth. Lastly, “Chapter Seven: The High & Mighty Assassin” discusses issues of pride and arrogance among leaders, and how these issues can diminish one’s integrity and character.

Throughout the entire book, as well as in promotional material and advertisements, Asian themes, motifs, caricatures, and designs are used. The book is vibrant and colorful, with famous and inspirational quotes interjected every so often. Comic strips serve to illustrate examples of how “assassins” play out in everyday conversation, with ninjas and martial artists being used as the cast of characters. The authors also interject “Wisdom From a Master” sections throughout the book – these are short interviews with real-life leaders who answer questions about how they conduct life and decision-making with integrity and character. The final chapter of *Deadly Viper* is titled “People of the Second Chance” – this chapter promotes a movement, one that revolves

around three core ideas. 1) People of the Second Chance (POTSC) received second chances in own lives; 2) POTSC are individuals who forgive those that have wronged them; and 3) POTSC advocate for the vulnerable and fight for equality for the poor, the prisoner, and the voiceless. This last chapter rallies readers to be part of “People of the Second Chance.”

After the publication and promotion of *Deadly Viper Character Assassins* was made known, a few Asian American bloggers chronicled the controversy as they attempted to reach out to the authors and Zondervan, the publishing company. Again, I specifically concentrate on the blogs of Soong-Chan Rah, Kathy Khang, and Eugene Cho. Their audiences are predominately Asian American, though non-Asians contribute to discourse as well. It is evident that all three bloggers have Asian and non-Asian followings on their blogs. Many of the White/non-Asian commenters during the span of the *Deadly Viper* controversy did, however, reach Rah, Khang and Cho’s blogs through the authors’ website. Commenters admit to “stumbling upon” the Asian American bloggers’ sites because of references to them on the *Deadly Vipers* website (now titled *People of the Second Chance*).

#### 4.1 *Soong-Chan Rah’s Blog*

On the front line, Soong-Chan Rah spearheaded the controversy with his first blog on the issue, “Kung Fu fighting as a means to sell Christian books,” on November 3, 2009. While mostly Asian Americans (both self-proclaimed and assumed) commented, there were also a number of non-Asians in the audience. Comments began with pointing out the negative use of stereotypes and misappropriation of several different Asian cultures by two White authors. Rah stated in his first blog post, “I guess I was hoping against hope that [*Deadly Viper Character Assassins*] was the story of an Asian-American Christian rather than another example of Asian culture being pimped out to sell products” (“Kung Fu fighting,” 2009, November 3). This

statement implies that Asian culture is often times used as a selling point, an important aspect of identity whittled down into a mere commodity, for the pleasure of others. In this sense, Asian culture is not taken seriously, but recurrently used for profit, as Rah suggests that he was “hoping against hope” that this was not the case this time.

This incident prompted Rah and commenters to speak out against various stereotypes and misappropriations by the authors. From the start, commenters called out offensive stereotypes on the blog. In Rah’s third blog post, written as a letter to Zondervan, the blogger lists examples of glaring and egregious offenses in the *Deadly Viper* book and promotional material (“An open letter,” 2009, November 3). For instance, Rah and commenters protested the use of a video clip on the authors’ Facebook page that advertised the book using a voiceover of a non-Asian doing a faux Asian accent, mocking the way certain Asian languages sound and emphasizing the “foreignness” of Asians in America. Rah also lists other offenses in his blog, “An open letter,” such as “the confusion and conflation of Chinese and Japanese cultures,” implying that all Asians are the same when, in fact, they are two very different ethnicities and people groups (2009, November 3). Chinese characters and kanji were used in a nonsensical manner on the cover and throughout the book (this was confirmed by several commenters fluent in the language), suggesting that the authors co-opted the language with no regard to its true meaning, objectifying traditions, cultural artifacts, and icons. By speaking out against these stereotypes and misappropriations, Asian Americans were resisting dominant constructions of their identity.

A few women, both Asian and non-Asian, also spoke out against the stereotypical, hyper-masculine motif used by the *Deadly Viper* authors. The authors do not mention anywhere in the book that the leadership material was for men only. *Deadly Viper* was meant for a wide audience, specific to Christian leaders, but not specific to anything else. However, the images,

tone, and word choice reflect a sense of hyper-masculinity. As part of the marketing for *Deadly Viper*, the authors created online videos that answered questions sent in by fans and supporters. The website was called “Online Man Cave: Manswers on Life & Leadership.” The book also had objectified images of Asian women in seductive poses, placed in the chapter about sexuality and remaining faithful in relationships.

Women commenters on Rah’s blog mentioned that overt machismo and hyper-masculinity were offensive. One commenter, Makeesha (2009), said, “The whole package is offensive...but not only to Asians.” As a woman, she was “annoyed by the tough guy Jesus absurdity and the man cave/manswers crap that’s on the website.” Female commenters, both Asians and non-Asians who were sympathetic to the argument, and a few male commenters agreed that hyper-masculinity was rampant throughout the book and promotional material, but the issue was not as high on the list of priorities. When Rah posted Zondervan’s public apology, one White female commenter stated in bold lettering, “I do hope they remember the *women* who were equally hurt, dismayed, and broken by the book’s language” (Hanson, 2009). In bolding the letters and making this statement, the commenter suggests that she does not want the gender issue to be forgotten and lost in the midst of the racial controversy. Asian American women attempted to resist dominant constructions of their identity, however sparingly, but the conversation still needs more attention.

Not only did Rah and commenters speak out against the stereotypes that all Asians are the same and the caricaturing of Asian people, language, and artifacts, many Asian Americans, and about half as many who sympathized, collaborated on a list of specific things they wanted to see happen as a result of the controversy (Rah, “An open letter,” 2009, November 3). 1) They asked the authors to issue a public apology on the *Deadly Viper* website; 2) remove the offensive

material from their online advertisements and promotions; 3) drop the entire martial arts theme; and 4) consult with different leaders in the Asian American community and discuss ways to increase sensitivity. Resistance shown here demonstrates Asian American agency. Asian Americans contributing to the blog not only pushed back against stereotypes, but also wanted to attempt to define who they are and be the ones to lead the conversation.

Comments made about stereotypes quickly steamrolled into conversations about systemic racism and White privilege that permeated throughout Rah's blog posts. In particular, when Rah posted an e-mail exchange he had with Foster, one of the *Deadly Viper* authors ("Response from one of the authors," 2009, November 3), many Asian American commenters took note of the defensiveness and dismissiveness about the issue from Foster and commenters who agreed with him. Commenters attributed defensiveness and dismissiveness to systemic racism and White privilege because these types of comments most likely came from people who often "do not recognize, or raise our voices, when the co-opting of other cultures is taking place" (MacPherson, 2009). In other words, the dominant culture did not know any better. Paul Sun (2009) writes, "I feel like we are re-living the era of the Blackface during the 19<sup>th</sup> century...I believe [the authors] have great intentions but executed horribly and ignorantly." Venus (2009) also writes:

I agree that it was not a smart move by the authors to use another person's culture and symbols as a metaphor for the idea they want to get across. However, I can't help but feel a little sorry for the authors. I'm sure they meant no harm by it and it probably never even occurred to them that it would offend anyone. Many white people rarely think about race or offending someone of another culture.

These two comments, along with many others, indicate that the use of stereotypes, though terrible, were done out of ignorance. The comments further suggest that it is not the authors'

fault for offending people of another culture because they probably were not aware that anything was offensive in the first place.

Many commenters essentially “pardoned” the authors for being unaware of the implications of producing such a book. LT (2009) writes, “I honestly think that they had no intention of being offensive, and this I will ‘grant’ them. However, they remain ignorant on the issue and, quite simply, need to be educated.” Irene Cho (2009) stated in a comment directed toward the authors, and presumably other members of the dominant culture:

It is your response to the issue that’s making me upset. In your ignorance as Caucasian males, you could have easily not foreseen the hurt that your use of imagery could have caused; I get that. But it’s your absolute refusal to try and begin to understand the people you’ve offended that causes me to stop and scratch my head.

These comments imply that they understand how stereotypes fell through the cracks, given that the authors are White males. This suggests systemic racism and White privilege are understandable because they are attributed to perpetuated ignorance. The on-going offense, however, was not the actual use of stereotypes or a culture being misappropriated, but that of the dominant culture dismissing Asian American voices and their vocalization about marginalization once something was said. Helen Lee (2009b) comments, “Although it’s bad enough that they didn’t consider their material to be racially insensitive and offensive, the question is, now that they are becoming aware of this, how will they respond?” Dismissiveness, to the offended party, represented a lack of understanding or even wanting to understand, and it does not lessen the pain of the marginalized. In addressing systemic racism and White privilege, Asian Americans attempted to pinpoint a core issue – resistance, much less mutual discourse, is futile if the dominant culture is not willing to recognize the problem.

One Asian American commenter pointed out that though he was saddened over the *Deadly Viper* controversy, he was not shocked. “What do you expect from people who went to white, upper-class Presbyterian churches? How does understanding happen if the dominant culture, even our most educated, are so blind?” (ericsohn, 2009). This comment implies a few things. First, being part of the White, upper class makes one blind to the cultural understanding of minority groups. The commenter assumes here that the authors are Presbyterian, and the classification of “white, upper-class Presbyterian” thus signifies privilege. In the authors’ place of privilege, they have learned from and perpetuated systemic racism, whether it was intentional or not. This comment also suggests, ironically, that people in a place of privilege – those that are educated – should be the ones cultivating understanding between dominant and marginalized groups to eliminate this very dichotomy. This comment reflects a theme that, for the most part, has been overlooked in Rah’s blog – how socio-economic class status affects articulations of identity. In the *Deadly Viper* case study, Asian Americans are attempting to resist dominant articulations of their identity. The implication is that the “most educated” should know better.

Asian Americans were also accused of being in a place of privilege. One commenter (who later made a similar comment on Eugene Cho’s blog) said to Rah:

Sir, this is matter of you not being able to get beyond your ivory tower to understand some of us enjoy challenging people to Christ. Perhaps you and your far-east Jesus friends need to get off your Jesus ass’s and lead people to Christ instead of joining the history of book burners. (J.R., 2009)

The term “ivory tower” is a pejorative term used to describe intellectuals who are disconnected from the real world and are in a state of privileged seclusion. This comment implies that Rah and his supporters are detached from the real issue at hand – “challenging people to Christ,” or leading people to know Christ. This comment may suggest that Asian Americans are acting passively in their “ivory towers” instead of doing the aggressive work of leading people to

Christ. “Challenging people to Christ” is the real work at hand and taking a book off the shelves is not. In another example, commenter Ben, whose race is unknown, said:

Once again the body of Christ misses the point that we’re all connected with a central goal. Hopefully we can stop focusing on all of our differences and keep the focus on the one thing we have in common. It’s not about Asians or white guys, it’s about Jesus.

These two comments seems to imply that Asian American Christians, who are voicing concerns about *Deadly Viper* and its conceptualization of Asian American identity, are not doing anything useful by complaining about the book and its implications.

Whether J.R. and Ben are Asians or non-Asians, their comments seem to imply that being a Christian should take precedence over matters of race, and that Asian American Christians should not complain about injustices when there are bigger things to think about, such as leading people to Christ. In this sense, J.R. and Ben imply that Rah and other Asian Americans need to stop talking about marginalization and racial injustices because they are of less importance than the larger picture of leading people to Christ. These either-or comments use Christianity as a tool to attempt to silence Asian American voices using guilt and shame as motivators. In a sense, Rah and other Asian Americans who claim to be Christian are not being “good” Christians. It is also possible that J.R. and Ben could also be using these comments to ward off further criticisms of Asian Americans as an attempt to keep the peace, accommodating to the dominant culture. As the blogs indicate, many Asian American contributors to the blogs identify strongly as Christians, an aspect that cannot be separated from their identity as a whole. The *Christian* Asian American identity poses a conflict in the sense that commenters, such as J.R. and Ben, do not view marginalization and stereotypes – that are harmful to identity – as important as the larger *Christian* identity. Concerns voiced by Asian Americans who feel offended by *Deadly Viper’s* conceptualization of their identity are therefore null and void.

There were many commenters, both Asian and non-Asian, who stated that conversations about marginalization and identity were very important, especially in the context of Christian brothers and sisters who strive to keep each other accountable in words and in actions, and who desire cross-cultural peace and understanding. Commenter daniellui (2009) wrote:

Props to everyone involved, showing us how to engage in racial dialogue in a Godly manner. I hope this will be formative in the construction of an Asian-American Christian voice that does not settle for silence and saving face, but values speaking up with maturity and confidence for the sake of the multicultural Church and the Kingdom.

This comment implies that the Asian American Christian voice has yet to be heard, or is still too quiet. Engaging in the dialogue about race and injustice cannot be separated from Christian identity; rather, it is necessary in the multicultural Church and Kingdom.

J.R.'s comment in regards to Rah being stuck in an "ivory tower" might also assume that Rah is over-educated, thus spending too much time in the books rather than in the real world. Though this comment is not directly related to class, it implies that Rah has access to higher education and perhaps upward mobility. It is evident, though, that class has little salience to Asian Americans' concept of their identity, according to the lack of comments addressing class.

After the uproar against the e-mail exchange and Foster's response, several different leaders from the Asian American community and the authors of *Deadly Viper* got together on a conference call, including Rah, Khang, and Cho. In Rah's blog, "A Joint Statement from the teleconference yesterday" on November 5, 2009, Rah posts reflections made by him, Kathy Khang, and the authors. All reflections concluded with acknowledging the need for continual dialogue about identity and race matters. Khang writes, "I heard what I believe many of us wanted and hoped to hear: "We're sorry. We didn't know. We want to learn. How do we do that?" And then Mike and Jud listened. We start right there, and we hope to continue." The

authors, Foster and Wilhite, commented that they hope to “continue to have conversations about this topic offline, continue to learn and continue to grow.” And Rah finished with saying that he was thankful to be able to “engage in a direct conversation over what has become a highly charged issue” (“A Joint Statement,” 2009, November 5). He then thanked the authors and audience for their “commitment to continue on this journey.” These statements reflect the need for on-going conversations about such matters, and commitment to dialogue even when it is uncomfortable or painful. The statements also imply that, in the end, it was necessary to take the conversations offline and have more direct communication. Most Asian American commenters were in agreement that while starting this conversation online was a necessary step to shedding light on the controversy, future dialogue should be more personal.

In regards to Zondervan, the publishing company, Rah called upon his audience in a blog post to send letters and e-mails to the Vice President of Public Relations and Communication.

Brian C. (2009) writes:

I don't have any idea how books get published and how much the authors give input on the production and art within the book and everything, but after looking through the first 2 chapters on the Zondervan site, it seems clear that there is a lack of awareness and understanding of what is appropriate and not.

Commenter cayce (2009) also wrote in saying that there is a “need for a broader spectrum at the table during the editorial process...a watchgroup or even advocacy group would be valuable in this situation.” These comments in regards to Zondervan express concern about systemic racism on a higher level of production. Asian Americans called out for greater accountability when there was little to none. Rah updated this post a few hours later, informing the audience that Zondervan scheduled a conference call with him. This desired result suggests that blogging as a form of resistance helps rally the marginalized. The marginalized have a greater voice and

platform on which they can be heard, and it also garners publicity effectively for a faster outcome.

After Rah received notice from Zondervan about scheduling a conference call, he posted another blog – “Immediate reflections to an ongoing story.” Rah addressed several different matters that, in large part, had to do with electronic, public communication as opposed to direct, personal communication. Many of Rah’s commenters, both the offended and non-offended parties, questioned and/or criticized his decision to post a private e-mail exchange between himself and Foster. In an earlier post, commenter Charles Lee (2009) writes, “It’s pretty clear why many are upset over this book...Regardless, I’m not sure that you posting a private email in a blog is that appropriate.” Matt LeClair (2009) also writes, “In publicizing his private concerns, Professor Rah is doing nothing helpful, just as he feels that the writers of this “offensive” material are failing to be positive in their marketing of their own material.” These comments suggest that whether the *Deadly Viper* material is offensive or not, publicizing private e-mail exchanges was not the way to start a conversation. A majority of the time when an Asian American voiced concerns about publicizing the conversation, the statement was prefaced or followed with the assurance that he or she still found the *Deadly Viper* material to be offensive, regardless of how it was brought up.

Foster in an earlier blog pointed out that he communicates a certain way through e-mail, especially e-mailing through his iPhone. “[My] emails were short and quick and direct...that is how i communicate through private emails on my phone... however, it seems that my private emails between myself and Prof Rah have lead to simply more division, arguments, and anger...” (foster, 2009). Here, Foster is addressing the issue that his initial response to Rah was curt, but it was curt because of the devices used to communicate. His comment also suggests that

using the blog as a discussion forum and as a means to facilitate conversation makes it impossible to facilitate anything healthy or constructive.

Rah also reflected on the pace and tone of online communication, stating that there wasn't a "strategy" to this thing:

Things sort of developed and with the added speed of communication and the capacity for viral postings, they develop very, very quickly. I would assert that the level of passion reflected in the fast and furious postings (mostly from the Asian American community but from across the spectrum) opposing the material really came from a deep sense of alienation that many Asian-American Christians (and many other people of color) feel. (2009, "Immediate reflections...")

Here, Rah addresses questions about the appropriateness of revealing the controversy on his blog and the effects of doing so. This statement implies that he is aware of how "fast and furious" online communication can come across, but he also suggests that it is necessary and even "okay" for Asian Americans to do so because "our voices have often been ignored or silenced" (2009, "Immediate reflections..."). Helen Lee (2009) writes, "Thanks for being a great example of an Asian American who won't just quietly accept the egregious behavior that is culturally insensitive and inappropriate." Her comment reinforces the stereotype that Asians are typically passive and quiet, but should not be, especially when situations like this arise.

Continuing up until Zondervan's response, Asian Americans rallied together in an effort to put pressure on the publishing company. Ken Fong (2009) wrote in saying that he was a silent lurker in past instances of injustice, letting "the powerful believe that you [Rah] were just one annoying pest, not one consistent voice from amidst a ROAR... This time, however, I am adding my voice to yours...." These types of comments suggest that the image of passivity is something that Asian Americans must confront. Commenter mishael53 (2009) points out that Asian Americans come from a "culture that has been predominantly compliant and quiet about such things [racism] but the upcoming generation is finally starting to say 'no more' and perhaps this

is what's coming as a surprise to you." Helen Lee (Lee, 2009) argues that the only way the authors/majority culture will begin to recognize that Asian Americans are frustrated and offended by their use of stereotypes is for Asian Americans to make their opinions known. Alan Chusuei (2009) also added in, "If I may say so, I think many of us Asians, by our general temperament, have actually backed away from arguments like this because of our tendencies toward submissiveness." These statements reflect that Asian Americans acknowledge their traditionally passive and submissive nature. Asian Americans acknowledge that they may have even *reinforced* the dominant cultural articulation of Asians as being passive and submissive. When there is a glaring, egregious offense in the public realm, however, Asian Americans are encouraging each other to resist letting the dominant articulation of their identity take over and let their voices be heard. The "rising voices" may be startling to hear, but "gentleness probably won't elicit change in this scenario" (Brian, 2009). Asian Americans must resist the reinforced stereotype of passivity in order to elicit change.

One of the more heated discussions throughout Rah's blog was in regards to Rah having a certain "agenda." Commenters insinuated that Rah was only trying to push his own agenda by raising the issue on his blog and calling out for Asian Americans to put pressure on the authors and Zondervan to rethink the *Deadly Viper* theme and remove the book. It was unclear as to what exactly commenters meant by using the term "agenda." Marq Hwang (Hwang, 2009) comments that the term "agenda" has typically been used in derogatory and histrionic terms, and, in this regard, is still being used in a critical and exaggerated way. One self-proclaimed White commenter questioned whether Rah was simply trying to expose the mistakes of Whites and asked if Rah was demanding an apology from the White population (Adam, 2009). Other self-proclaimed White commenters accused Rah of attacking White America (Grammatico, 2009)

and making it an “us versus them thing” (Reed, 2009). These comments suggest that one cannot attack White America in the sense that White America has done nothing wrong.

These comments suggest that Rah and the Asian American contributors to his blog have an agenda against White America, rather than Asian Americans having a valid point of contention with marginalization. Having an agenda implies that Asian Americans are harping on non-existent marginalization for the sake of “attacking White America.” One commenter, Babies Cry Less (2009), stated in a comment directed at Rah, “If I offended you, get over yourself, the narcissist is the one who takes offense when the intent was never malicious.” Matt LeClair (2009) commented saying, “To all of those who so quickly play the race card, knock it off.” The race of these commenters cannot be assumed. However, comments like these suggest that Asian Americans are being too sensitive about the race issue or are using the race issue to support an agenda. Playing the race card “so quickly” seems to suggest that it is a convenient and easy excuse for Asian Americans to exploit racism for their own advantage. If Asian Americans made these comments, it would suggest that some Asian Americans do not want to draw attention to themselves and are telling those who are raising their voices to “knock it off.” Marq Hwang (2009) goes on to respond to some of these comments by saying, “It’s not really an us-versus-them thing. It’s about spreading understanding that some actions hurt-even if it’s unintentional.” The majority of Asian American contributors on Rah’s blog state that they just want their voices heard and concerns legitimized in order to promote understanding cross-culturally.

Who is allowed to talk about a culture and identity? eliseanne (2009) commented, “It is highly offensive to portray a culture illegitimately when you are outside of that cultural group. It comes across as mocking, regardless of intent.” Marq Hwang (2009b) commented that he hopes whatever the authors appropriate, “they do so understanding where those traditions come from,

rather than assuming things from a cursory scan, as it appears these writers did.” These comments assume that one has to either be in the culture, or understanding of cultural traditions, to be able to talk about the culture at all. One commenter compared the authors using the Asian motif to finding Australian cooks in the kitchen of an authentic Mexican restaurant (Ben, 2009). These remarks suggest that there needs to be authenticity and authority over a given culture. The commenters on Rah’s blog are attempting to resist having the dominant culture speak for and about Asian Americans.

In a later post, dubdynamite (2009) posed a few questions for the sake of clarity – “Is the issue that two writers appropriated Asian cultural references badly? Or is it that two white-guy writers appropriated Asian cultural references badly. Had an Asian writer written this book, would we be having this same conversation?” Frequent responder Marq Hwang and several other commenters (Cho, 2009; Dunham, 2009; Hwang, 2009) claimed that the issue is not that the authors are White, but that these writers, regardless of race, misappropriated cultural references. Had they done their research, perhaps consulted with Asian Americans who could be used as resources, there would be a greater likelihood that ethnicities would not have been conflated and the mocking tone would have been dropped. Here, Asian American commenters are saying that speaking for and about Asian Americans is not off-limits, as long as research has been done adequately and respectfully.

#### 4.2 *Kathy Khang’s Blog*

Kathy Khang blogged nearly as much as the Rev. Dr. Soong-Chan Rah did on the *Deadly Viper* controversy, following the events and chronicling the journey on her website. On November 2, 2009, Khang blogged her first thoughts about the *Deadly Viper* controversy, one day ahead of Rah, in a post titled, “What in the World?!?! Please Tell Me This Is a Joke.” Khang

briefly stated her disbelief and ended with the question, “Who thought this wasn’t going to tick people off?” There were no response to comments made on her first blog. In general, Khang’s blog receives less user traffic, as most of her blogs only receive a handful of comments. Asian Americans make up the majority of her audience. “The Unseen Privileges” (Khang, 2009, November 18) received the greatest response, with a total of 32 comments, eight of which were her own comments in response to others. This particular entry was in regards to gender issues revealed through the *Deadly Viper* controversy. The general lack of response, however, may also imply that Khang’s voice, as an Asian American female, does not have as much “authority” as Rah’s voice.

Two of her more pointed posts were aimed at unveiling gender stereotypes and the “unseen privileges” of men, in general, both Asian and non-Asian. In “To Be a Gracious But Angry Christian Asian Woman,” Khang and her commenters voiced specific concerns in *Deadly Viper’s* portrayal of women, and in this sense, attempted to resist the dominant articulation of female identity, as well as an *Asian American* female identity. They point out that there is a sense of “hyper-masculinity” in the *Deadly Viper* movement that creates a false dichotomy between the feminine and masculine, with all things related to strength, integrity, and leadership relating to hyper-masculine terms. Kung-Fu warrior talk, for instance, is pitted against images of “schoolgirls with plaid skirts” (Foster & Wilhite, p. 11), implying that all things “girly” are equivalent to wimps and the weaker sex. Battle terms and men with bulging muscles against a smiling geisha (p. 82) show the stark contrast between strong, aggressive men and sexualized women. The use of terms such as going “balls out” (p. 21) also reflect overt machismo. Khang and her female commenters, both Asian and non-Asian, note that the authors never suggest that *Deadly Viper*, a book on leadership in the church, is for men only, but it seems that way. Khang

ends one of her posts with the question, “Is anyone else bothered by this hyper-masculinity?” By raising the question, she challenges the stereotypes and gender profiling.

In both “The Unseen Privileges” and “To Be a Gracious But Angry Christian Asian Woman,” many of the Asian American female commenters admitted to feeling like they had to ignore or “put aside” their feelings about the hyper-masculine marketing of the book in an effort to unite on the racial identity front. One Asian American female commenter on Khang’s blog said that she feels as if she has to choose between race and gender (alice, 2009). Khang specifically addresses the issue of having to navigate her identity between being Christian, Asian, and American, as well as being a woman. Khang writes, “I often feel like I’m choosing first to be Christian Asian American and put the “Woman” on hold” (Khang, 2009, November 4). This comment suggests that identity connected with being a Christian is expected to come first, or that it supersedes being Asian American and being a woman. Khang and her Asian American female commenters imply that they can be both gracious *and* angry as Christian Asian women. The title of Khang’s blog, “To Be a Gracious But Angry Christian Asian Woman” suggests that Christian Asian Women are often times only seen as gracious, passive, and soft-spoken. In her blog, Khang and female commenters wrestle with the notion of being able to be angry as well. Thus, Christian Asian women take a stance about having a more assertive voice.

Khang and many of her commenters, male and female, agree that Asian American women had to choose which issue to take up – racial injustice or gender injustice. As the more “prudent” choice, and in looking at the big picture, Khang and others felt obligated to argue the *Deadly Viper* controversy from a racial standpoint. There is also a dichotomy between the male voice speaking up about gender issues and being seen as an “advocate” of the cause, and the female voice speaking up about gender issues and being called “whiny and bitter” (Khang, 2009,

“The Unseen Privileges”). As one commenter noted (Paul, 2009), “civil rights movements and racial reconciliation issues have been historically centered on men or White women, with women of color being excluded. I think dialogue on Asian American gender identity needs to find a place in the conversation.” In this sense, sexism is also a systemic issue. This comment implies that women of color are doubly overlooked when it comes to issues on marginalization. “Finding a place in the conversation,” so to speak, implies resistance and the need to be heard. These sentiments show that, while Asian Americans are gaining ground in terms of discourse on racial identity and voicing concerns about marginalization, there is still much to explore in terms of gender.

Gender identity clearly took a backseat to racial and ethnic identity in the Asian American identity dialogue. Kathy Khang notes that this could be true in most Asian cultures, in general. The role of gender, for women, was not talked about as much in the *Deadly Viper* controversy because of the patriarchal nature of Asian culture. In most Korean American churches, Khang notes, men are in the positions of power, authority, and influence, and women have supporting roles. A few Asian American men, however, pointed out that though men have positions of power in Asian churches, there is still a lack of power, or presence, being an Asian American man in the majority, White culture. It is evident that within the Asian American culture, dominant articulations such as passivity and women being submissive are still prevalent; thus these articulations of their identity have been reinforced. Asian Americans are challenging each other to step out of this traditional reinforcement, to speak out, so that marginalization is not perpetuated.

One male commenter on Khang’s blog stated, “I am sincerely excited but admittedly a little scared at what it will mean for me to commit to the journey of gender reconciliation – how

I'll have to repent and how I'll have to find new ways of relating, speaking and leading” (andkim, 2009). Another male commenter stated, “It looks like the men of Christ have something to apologize for as well” (Josh, 2009). These types of comments show Asian American women are able to resist the dominant articulation of their identity, at least to sympathizers who contribute to the blog. These comments suggest that the male audience, whether Asian or non-Asian, are willing to learn from past mistakes.

Many of Khang's blog posts and user comments also addressed the issue of dismissiveness by the authors, voicing concerns about systemic racism and White privilege. The Asian American community on Khang's blog attempted to resist having Asian cultures be co-opted for the sake of marketing and profitability. elderj (2009) observes on Kathy Khang's blog that there is an American cultural fascination with all things Asian. He states, “It's decoration to them: adding a varying “cool” Asian accouterment to anything to make it trendy” (elderj, 2009). Khang, along with many of the commenters, noted that the authors, in their place of privilege and lack of awareness, reproduced common stereotypes, though the authors *assumed* they were respecting the culture (Cho, 2009; Chung, 2009; Sun, 2009, Venus, 2009). Thus, the authors exhibit White privilege by assuming these stereotypes were acceptable and non-harmful to Asian American identity. Asian Americans are growing weary of their cultures being used as objects, and they are attempting to resist their cultures being co-opted by the dominant culture.

On November 3, 2009, Khang posted a blog titled “An Example of Leadership and Apology...Deadly Viper, Take Note.” Khang wrote this in response the *Deadly Viper* authors' non-apology apology, stating that the false apology made it seem as though Asian Americans were too sensitive and it was their fault for finding offense to an important work on character. Mike Foster, one of the authors, stated, “I certainly apologize for any offense that was taken

through our work (*Deadly Viper*) that seeks to use Asian culture as a framework for the important conversations of character, integrity, and grace. Certainly it was never our intent to cause pain or to disrespect a culture” (foster, 2009). Asian Americans argued that this type of response from the dominant culture shows the lack of understanding.

In one of her last posts regarding *Deadly Viper*, Khang wraps up the saga in a post titled, “Softening My Skin in a Mud Bath” (2009, November 24). In this post, she addresses commenters who said Asian Americans were being too sensitive about the *Deadly Viper* material, and commenters who told Asian Americans to have “thicker skin.” This post was, in a sense, written in defense of being called “too sensitive.” Khang writes that perhaps “people who thought nothing of the initial outcry never paid much attention because maybe they never had to,” referencing, again, the dismissive tone of the authors and members of the dominant culture (2009, November 24, “Softening My Skin in a Mud Bath”). Nonetheless, Khang and commenters voiced resistance to these accusations and probed the issue further saying, “Thick skin will just keep us from going deeper.” This comment suggests that being sensitive to issues of race and gender, power and privilege, is what keeps conversations going and is what keeps people engaged in discourse.

#### 4.3 *Eugene Cho’s Blog*

Eugene Cho’s first blog post jumps right into defending Asian Americans against accusations of being “over-reactive” in regards to the *Deadly Viper* material. Cho wrote his first blog as a response to comments he was seeing on Rah’s blog, as well as from other bloggers. He references and affirms Soong-Chan Rah’s list of egregious offenses found in the book and promotional material – the video clip with a non-Asian doing a faux Asian accent, the conflation of Chinese and Japanese cultures, insensitivity and mocking of the Chinese language, furthering

caricatures of Asian cultures, and so on. Cho writes that the marketing of *Deadly Viper* is indeed offensive to many Asian Americans, even if the dominant culture or a handful of Asian Americans do not understand why it is offensive (2009, November 4, “deadly vipers, mike foster, jud wilhite...”). One commenter states, “It bothers me greatly when people attempt to criticize victimized parties for not being nice enough in their critique of oppression. The criticism of the offended can only be done from a position of power and privilege” (Klug, 2009). Sentiments on Cho’s first blog imply that whether or not the dominant culture can *empathize* with marginalized parties, the marginalized should be able to speak about their concerns and articulate their own identity in a safe space without being blamed for their own victimization.

A handful of Asian Americans made it a point to say that they were not offended by the marketing of *Deadly Viper* or movies such as *Karate Kid* and *Kung Fu Panda*. For instance, one commenter on Cho’s blog said, “I feel for those who have been offended by this. I myself wasn’t offended before...and am not offended now. but apparently, I may be the only chinese person out there that’s not. \*shrugs\*” (Jenni, 2009). There was a slight uproar to these types of comments. Irene Cho (Cho, 2009b), for instance, made the point that just because something was done in the past, does not make it acceptable to do today. Cho also writes, “It also doesn’t make it okay if there are some Asians who don’t feel offended with what the authors have done” (2009b). gar (2009) responded to Jenni saying, “It’s fine if you’re NOT offended. I would just hope that by publicly saying so, you’re not implying that Asian Americans who ARE offended are somehow less entitled to their right to be offended because you’re Asian (Chinese) and your opinion differs.” These types of comments imply a few things. First, Jenni’s line of thinking may inadvertently reinforce the notion that Asian Americans need to be passive and not stir up trouble. By voicing that she may be one of the only Asians not offended, and then adding a

virtual “shrug,” she is saying that these offenses are not really a big deal. The responses to her comment reaffirm the fight for Asian Americans to differ. Irene Cho and Gar show that Asian Americans do not speak with one voice and should not be expected to. This shows that Asian Americans are attempting to resist the stereotype that all Asians are the same by showing diversity in their voices and opinions.

The portrayal of Asian Americans as being overly sensitive also tied in with another theme – the theme of Asian Americans feeling the need to “shout” their concerns. Eugene Cho’s first blog (2009, November 4, “deadly vipers, mike foster, jud wilhite...”) points out that majority culture may not have known that *Deadly Viper* was offensive, which is why it came out in the first place, but now they know. And they may not have known because Asian Americans did not speak out or speak *up* about it often or in widely known venues. Now that Asian Americans have voiced concerns en masse, they seem to be shouting. Cho poses the question, “how else will people listen especially when hardly anyone fears or respects the voice of Asians and Asian-Americans?” (Cho, 2009). This comment implies Asian Americans do not have a voice in discourse on marginalization, thus there needs to be a collective push to speak up. However, when they do, because of historical assumptions and practices of passivity, “speak up” may be construed as “shouting.” Cho (2009) states that the Asian American “image of passivity is something we collectively as Asian Americans must confront.” He acknowledges that Asian Americans have been silent for so long, and in this sense, have reinforced the dominant articulation of passivity and submissiveness as part of the Asian American identity. Marginalization is self-perpetuating, and thus, to be able to be heard means to find a voice that is loud enough to speak. Cho notes that there is a common, collective identity of passive Asian

Americans, so when the marginalized speaks up in this case, the voice seems to be “over-reacting” because the dominant group is not used to hearing them.

In Cho’s last two blogs related to *Deadly Viper*, Cho posted Zondervan’s official press statement on his blog, a statement that pulled the *Deadly Viper* book off shelves, and a joint statement from members of the Asian American community who took part in the conference calls with the *Deadly Viper* authors and Zondervan (Ken Fong, Helen Lee, Kathy Khang, Soong-Chan Rah, Nikki Toyama-Szeto, and Eugene Cho himself). Cho received a torrent of comments from both Asian American and non-Asian readers on both of these blogs. Many Asian American, as well as self-proclaimed non-Asian, commenters thought Zondervan’s response was a step in the right direction. They voiced approval of the action, saying comments such as “Big props to Zondervan for making such a big move” (Deng, 2009), and “This is great news. My thanks to Zondervan for willing to admit mistake and making needed corrections” (lowe, 2009). There were a lot of comments supporting Cho in his efforts in being a voice for the marginalized (Asian Americans), and there were many comments commending the authors and Zondervan for doing the right thing – apologizing, taking the book out of bookstores and removing offensive promotional material, and, most importantly, taking the time to listen and learn.

There were, however, many negative comments in Cho’s last two blogs, namely accusations of Asian Americans playing the “race card” and having some kind of agenda in vilifying the authors and the *Deadly Viper* material. For instance, Billy commented that he was glad to have bought the book before it was pulled from shelves, adding, “I hope the publicity you [Cho] gained with playing the race card was worth losing the people who were seeing the love of Christ displayed...” (Billy, 2009). This comment implies that Cho had the agenda of gaining publicity through turning *Deadly Viper* into a racial controversy and by exploiting racism. It also

suggests that Christian unity should trump matters of race. Billy, as an Asian American, suggests that he holds his identity as a Christian higher than other aspects of identity, and other Asians should as well. It also suggests that the commenter does not view marginalization or systemic racism as worthy of raising a fuss. In this sense, Billy implies that the *Deadly Viper* issue is not worth rocking the boat and uses Christian identity as an appeal to other Asians to accommodate to the dominant culture. Although Christian unity may be held in higher regards, Billy's statement attempts to use Christianity to silence Asian Americans. By appealing to Asian Americans' faith and the prospect of losing people as Christians, Billy's comment implies that Asian Americans should continue to keep silent about their concerns.

One commenter asked Cho, "Eugene, And while you're at it, can you answer this question: What truly is your agenda?" (Jeff, 2009). In response to this question, one commenter answers, "I don't claim to be the mouthpiece for Pastor Eugene, but anyone who follows his blog knows his heart for the gospel of Jesus Christ and the ministry of love, grace, and reconciliation." Though accusations of playing the race card and having an agenda require Asian Americans to have a defense, it is evident that Asian Americans, as well as non-Asians who sympathize, are still able to use the blog as a site of resistance being that the very existence of the blog helps people engage in these types of discussions.

## 5 CONCLUSION

Asian Americans contributing to the blog both resisted and reinforced dominant cultural articulations of their identity. By speaking out against systemic racism, Asian Americans attempted to pinpoint a core issue – resistance, much less mutual discourse, is necessary if the dominant culture is to recognize the problem. In addressing systemic racism, appropriation, and co-optation, Asian Americans were able to speak out against marginalization. Raising awareness

about perpetuated, systemic issues was vital to the conversation so that Asian Americans can articulate their own identity.

My research also revealed that Asian Americans attempted to resist common stereotypes and caricatures of their identity. Commenters on the blogs agreed that Asian Americans have, in the past, reinforced passivity, submissiveness, and silence as part of the Asian American identity, but they now see the need to speak up and be the dominant voice in articulating their own identity. The bloggers and commenters plainly listed glaring and egregious offenses and stereotypes with the *Deadly Viper* material. By doing so, they were able to explain what was offensive and why it was offensive. Thus, Asian Americans contributing to the blog also used the sites to attempt to define who they are by breaking down restrictive portrayals of who the dominant culture thinks they are.

The model minority stereotype, however, was both resisted and reinforced in dialogue. There were a small number of Asian Americans who said they were *not* offended by the publication and use of Asian themes in *Deadly Viper*. This was an uncommon deviation, albeit a notable one. Asian Americans who made these comments implied that they did not want to stir the pot. Their effective assimilation into the dominant culture has allowed them to look past, and perhaps become blind to, stereotypes and marginalization. The non-offended Asian Americans wanted to assure the majority culture that not all Asians are “overly sensitive.” Asian Americans who were offended pointed out that just because the *Deadly Viper* marketing did not offend a small number of Asian Americans, this does not mean that the entire controversy is moot.

Systemic sexism was also discussed, albeit the theme was not as salient to Asian American identity. A majority of the dialogue about gender and sexism occurred on the blog of Kathy Khang, one of the few women who blogged on the subject at all, and one out of two

women who had a place in the final conference call with the authors, Foster and Wilhite. Asian American women, as well as a few men, were able to voice concerns about gender stereotypes, attempting to resist dominant articulations of their identity. Many of the commenters, however, felt that they had to choose between two issues – voicing concerns about racial identity and marginalization or voicing concerns about gender issues such as the sweeping hyper-masculinity that resounded in the marketing of *Deadly Viper* and portrayal of weakness attributed to females in the book. The lack of discourse on gender stereotypes and sexism, and the pressure of having to choose between race and gender, shows that gender identity among Asian Americans still needs to find a way into discourse.

Discussions about class were also largely ignored, even amongst Asian Americans. This shows that class identity is even less salient than gender identity. When class was referred to directly, it was used in reference to the upper-class White culture perpetuating systemic racism, or the over-educated Asian American who spent too much time in the “ivory tower.” Both references insinuated that being part of the upper echelon of society makes a person one step removed from understanding systemic racism. Class identity was essentially invisible in the conversation, however. This aspect of identity was not as salient as race and gender.

Asian American contributors to the blog struggled with how their identity as Christians intersected with their race, gender, and class. This part of their identity was inseparable from their identity as a whole. In some instances, commenters, both Asian and non-Asian, voiced that Christian identity should supersede any other aspect of identity. Thus, for the sake of the greater purpose of leading people to Christ and unity as Christians, Asian Americans were expected to put aside disputes against *Deadly Viper* and its portrayal of Asians. From my research, I found that Christianity serves as another form of hegemony, as it was sometimes used as a way to

silence Asian American voices from speaking up about marginalization. With the contributions of this study, further research can be done on how and whether Christian identity plays in the role of dominant and marginalized relationships.

Many Asian Americans, however, also acknowledged that their identity as a Christian is important, emphasizing forgiveness, but that they should still be allowed to speak up about injustices done unto them. Christianity does not supersede other facets of identity, but encompasses all intersections of identity. Many Asian American Christians stated that *because* they are Christian, marginalization and identity issues should be addressed for the sake of keeping each other accountable to actions and words. Speaking up about stereotypes and marginalization, being able to articulate their own identity, was not to take away from their identity as Asian American *Christians*, but to foster understanding cross-culturally.

Many commenters also pointed to the fact that the whole controversy took place on virtual public forums. Some commenters argued that these conversations should not have taken place on a blog because meaning can get lost in the translation of online text. “Voices” in virtual public forums that are “heard” at the same time can feel like an attack on the party that is being called out. Other commenters felt that these kinds of public forums are conducive to conversation for marginalized groups, as in the Asian American community, who would not have been heard otherwise. These sentiments address issues of safety and visibility in having a place to speak.

Many Asian Americans, and those that sympathized, argued that it was necessary to blog about the controversy from the start. Rah addressed the commenters who had issues with posting private emails and continuing the dialogue online, stating that he has tried his best to keep the conversations direct and private, but because the authors were not responding to Rah’s emails, he

decided to go with more drastic measures posting the conversation online (profrah, 2009). Marq Hwang (Hwang, 2009) asks, “If not here, then where would such issues be raised? What venues are there for this sort of thing?” These comments suggest that blogging was a necessary means to have Asian American voices be heard, otherwise their voices would go unnoticed. Blogger Kathy Khang writes in one of her posts that the authors created a movement online – a virtual community of *Deadly Viper* character assassins (Khang, 2009, November 2, “I don’t want to hear I’m sorry if...”). With this in mind, she points out that blogging and social media contribute to raising awareness, thus providing a platform of resistance.

Foster and Wilhite wrote to Rah, which Rah posted on his blog, saying that they are glad to have started a positive conversation and hope to continue, but also added that they’ll “continue to have conversations about this topic offline” (“A Joint Statement,” 2009, November 5). A key takeaway from this case study is that although this controversy was brought to light through a blog, and that the marginalized had a public space to voice concerns, the issue should carry on offline to sustain validity. Systemic racism and White privilege are hardly the center of in-depth mainstream analyses and are rarely seriously discussed (McIntosh, 2003), and while blogging about such issues gives advantage to marginalized voices, more direct, personal conversations need to take place to further understanding and cultivate relationships.

In exploring the discussions of marginalization and identity among Asian Americans on blogs, I found that questions such as “What’s the big deal?” and “Why are you so angry?” minimize identity formation for Asian Americans. These responses portray Asian Americans to be harping on nonexistent marginalization, blaming them for their own victimization. I believe one exchange sums up the point that many of the Asian American readers wanted to get across, and it also contributes to progress and a new direction for this conversation. One commenter,

Ryan Grammatico (Grammatico, 2009) asks, “Did you ask Pat Morita and Ralph Macchio to apologize for making *Karate Kid* or the hundreds of other orient conjuring films?” After some debate and conversation, Grammatico apologized on his own personal blog, admitting that though he does not completely understand the offense and “wrong-doing,” he is aware that Asian Americans were offended. Grammatico, as part of the “White culture,” could not fully empathize. Asian Americans pointed out that even if the dominant culture cannot empathize, Asian Americans still want their voices to be heard on issues of identity and marginalization.

This is not to say that only Asian Americans can talk about all things Asian. In a joint statement between the authors of *Deadly Viper* and Chris Heuertz, Soong-Chan Rah, Kathy Khang, Eugene Cho, and Nikki Toyama-Szeto, all parties noted that this is not the end of a dialogue, but they hope that conversation about these issues would continue (Rah, 2009, November 5, ‘A joint statement...’). It was important to all parties, all cultures, not to essentialize racial identities and issues surrounding race, but to create dialogue, to have a voice and not perpetuate stereotypes and marginalization, and promote understanding.

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