

The Nebulous 'Asian'

Are Indians Asian? What about Filipinos? Technically, yes, they are Asians. But what type of Asian? Why does the term Asian (or Oriental for you brits) usually mean those who are East Asian? Is this an incidental grouping or is it just racism? Are Mongolians East Asian? Geographically, maybe, but they share more with others in the steppes and the northern tribes of Siberia. Those tribes likely share a commonality with Inuit cultures, so does that mean that someone like Korra is technically Asian? Korra is a Western creation and still jammed into an ostensibly Asian world. Also if Mongolia is geographically East Asian, but not culturally so, then why is Vietnam not grouped in East Asia even though it is a Confucian country?

Is Moana Asian? Polynesians in Oceania may not appreciate being blanket labeled as Asian. So now we are making a stretch of we say yes. Is Raya Asian? Few would disagree. Raya is clearly meant to be southeast Asian...but what does it mean to be southeast Asian, especially compared to being East Asian? Interestingly there's a good chance that Raya and Moana would have been able to verbally communicate due to a shared set of Austronesian vocabulary. Wait, then why is Vietnam in the list of countries that inspired the story of Moana, when Vietnam neither has an Austronesian, Tai-Kadai, or Polynesian connection? To be fair, Vietnam does have an Austroasiatic language which is in the same family as Khmer. Yet, the languages groups don't really have a strong correlation with culture in Asia. Vietnamese is mutually unintelligible with Khmer and is also heavily Sinicized.

To the Westerner, we are all 'Asian' to some varying degree, but also subject to an essentially arbitrary grouping due to U.N. geographic border designations. Why do we rally together in the West as a political group? For example, surely the model minority stereotype is a cultural phenomenon rather than being some manifestation of critical race theory, but we are always making everything about race rather than culture. If many Asians suffer from this stereotype, isn't it a problem of poor categorization rather than simple racism? If that's the case, why do we go along with the Western conception of what Asian means?

If the U.N.'s designation is for simple statistical convenience, then why do so many people have class associations with East and Southeast Asia ('City Asians' vs 'Jungle Asians'). What does Asian even mean in that context? Why do so many people get angry when Vietnam's connection to East Asia is found? So much so that many Wikipedia articles involving East Asian culture actively have individuals trying to erase Vietnam from their references, from both 'East Asians' and 'Southeast Asians,' sometimes even by Vietnamese people themselves!

Why do so uncritically accept the Westerner's designation of 'Asian,' and why do we treat it so seriously even though the designation is just skin deep, as if a temporary team color now has some fundamental cultural and political relevance? Do all dark-skinned peoples share some fundamental characteristics, either cultural or psychological?

Let's dispel the fog by introducing important concepts.

1. Greater India, Oceania (South Asian, southeast Asian, and pacific islanders)
2. East Asian Cultural Sphere (Han, Jo, Wa, and Kinh)
3. Mongolia, Siberia, Inuit (North Asian)
4. Turkic world (Western Asia)

U.N. designations and Western ignorance have unfortunately been adopted into racial and classist attitudes among Asians in both the East and West.

Vietnam's exclusion from modern descriptions of East Asia is a very strange phenomenon. In matters political, economic (see trading partners), cultural (see Confucian history), Vietnam is solidly within the East Asian realm. Articles about Southeast Asia are always careful to mention Vietnam's lack of similarity, while Articles about East Asia, especially from a modern western perspective conspicuously avoid Vietnam, often for unclear reasons.

So, we can see that racial groupings are inaccurate and remain broad for political reasons. This low resolution picture is more problematic than its utility in being a useful approximation. This is because this approximation is based fundamentally on the wrong thing: skin color and botched geography rather than culture. It's sad, but the reason why the description continues to have relevance is because it

happens to touch on something genuine related to culture (Eastern, to Asian, to Cultural spheres), but remains far enough that there is always something uncanny about it's characterization. Essentially, 'Asian' is in the uncanny valley of a description of people.