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Please send all correspondence to: The Asian Reporter
 922 N Killingsworth Street, Suite 1A, Portland, OR 97217
 Phone: (503) 283-4440, Fax: (503) 283-4445

News Department e-mail: news@asianreporter.com
 Advertising Department e-mail: ads@asianreporter.com
 General e-mail: info@asianreporter.com
 Website: www.asianreporter.com

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Publisher **Jaime Lim**
 Contributing Editors

Ronault L.S. Catalani (Polo), Jeff Wenger
 Correspondents

Ian Blazina, Josephine Bridges, Pamela Ellgen, Maileen Hamto, Edward J. Han, A.P. Kryza, Marie Lo, Simeon Mamaril, Julie Stegeman, Toni Tabora-Roberts, Allison Voigts
 Illustrator **Jonathan Hill**
 News Service **Associated Press/Newsfinder**

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MY TURN

■ **Dmae Roberts**



Retiring phrases

In my career as a writer, performer, and media producer, I've learned to talk about race and to be someone people can talk to about race. It wasn't easy at first, but I got used to it. Addressing cultural differences and similarities became important in my work because of my family's experiences with racism and isolation. I found the more I educated myself about history and the language of race, the more I could have conversations that weren't about accusation and recrimination, but about potentially learning to understand. Even when discussing race within a racial group it can sometimes become polarized, so I always turn to the historic backdrop, especially regarding the way certain words are used. Whether they can accept that context and move on from there depends on the person.

Race often comes up when I'm teaching, particularly when I reveal my biracial identity. I say "reveal" because most people assume I'm white until I tell them about my roots and family history. Recently in my media classes at Mt. Hood Community College, I played pieces about Asian-American history from my radio series *Crossing East*. An African-American student asked, "What are those hats they used to wear?" He made a gesture to dramatize a cone-shaped hat. An Asian-American student said they were called "rice hats." There was a definitive pause in what had been a lively discussion until then.

I'm used to that pause. It's the moment when people ponder, wondering if there will be an awkwardness that could potentially lead to a negative confrontation.

I told a story I heard while working on the *Crossing East* series. In it, I revealed that during the building of the railroad, some people believed the white workers would often call the hats "coolie hats" because that's what they called the Chinese workers. Through the series I learned from my lead scholar, Judy Yung, a professor emeritus at University of California, Santa Cruz, that "Ku Li" (comprising two characters) is an Indian or Tamil term meaning "bitter strength." She explained that was how the term "coolie" evolved to mean the contract workers who came to build the Transcontinental Railroad. I told the students how that descriptive term for a hard worker became a derogatory name applied only to Asians. Over the course of history, this has happened to many words and phrases relating to race.

Words are so important because often what is said is the first sign of racism. Even something as seemingly complimentary as "amasian" — a word

combination in the urban dictionary that originally meant "amazing Asian" — singles out people because of their race. The word was widely discussed and debated when National Basketball Association (NBA) player Jeremy Lin had his breakthrough season in 2012. Why couldn't he just be amazing? Sportscasters also ran headlines like "chink in the armor." Some people defend that phrase because it isn't intentionally used to denigrate Asians. That explanation doesn't really take away the sting; I still cringe watching Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with the word used four times in one of the scenes to describe the "chink" in the wall.

The word "chink" could have developed from the word "Qing," as in the Qing Dynasty. The origin of the phrase "chink in the armor" can be traced back to the Middle Ages when suits of armor were worn. Enemies would look for a vulnerability in the armor — a small hole — that could be penetrated. Today, the expression is used to describe a small character flaw that might cause problems for a person. But always the usage of the word "chink" is offensive.

Another phrase that has always bothered me is "Chinese fire drill," which refers to a prank in which a car stops at a traffic light and then everyone runs around the car to change drivers. The phrase is intended to describe something crazy and confusing. The term allegedly originated from the early 1900s, when British officers in Asia were trying to teach a Chinese crew how to start a bucket brigade if a fire occurred on their boat. Not speaking each other's language, the British couldn't explain the fire drill, so there was confusion. I'm all for retiring that phrase as well as "Chinese whispers" (a kid's game of telephone), "Chinese wall" (lawyers use it to describe a code of silence), and "Chinese water torture," which began with a Harry Houdini escape act.

Even when people don't intend to be racist, when they use those phrases, it's hurtful. The most recent example is Comedy Central's Stephen Colbert. He used the phrase "Ching Chong" in a skit to mock Washington Redskins owner Dan Snyder. An out-of-context tweet drew the ire of activist Suey Park and her followers who saw a post on Twitter referring to the skit. The full tweet was: "I am willing to show #Asian community I care by introducing the Ching-Chong Ding-Dong Foundation for Sensitivity to Orientals or Whatever."

That led to the Twitter hashtag "#CancelColbert," which trended for several days and sparked much debate. Yes, the tweet was taken out of context.

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