

# The Asian Reporter

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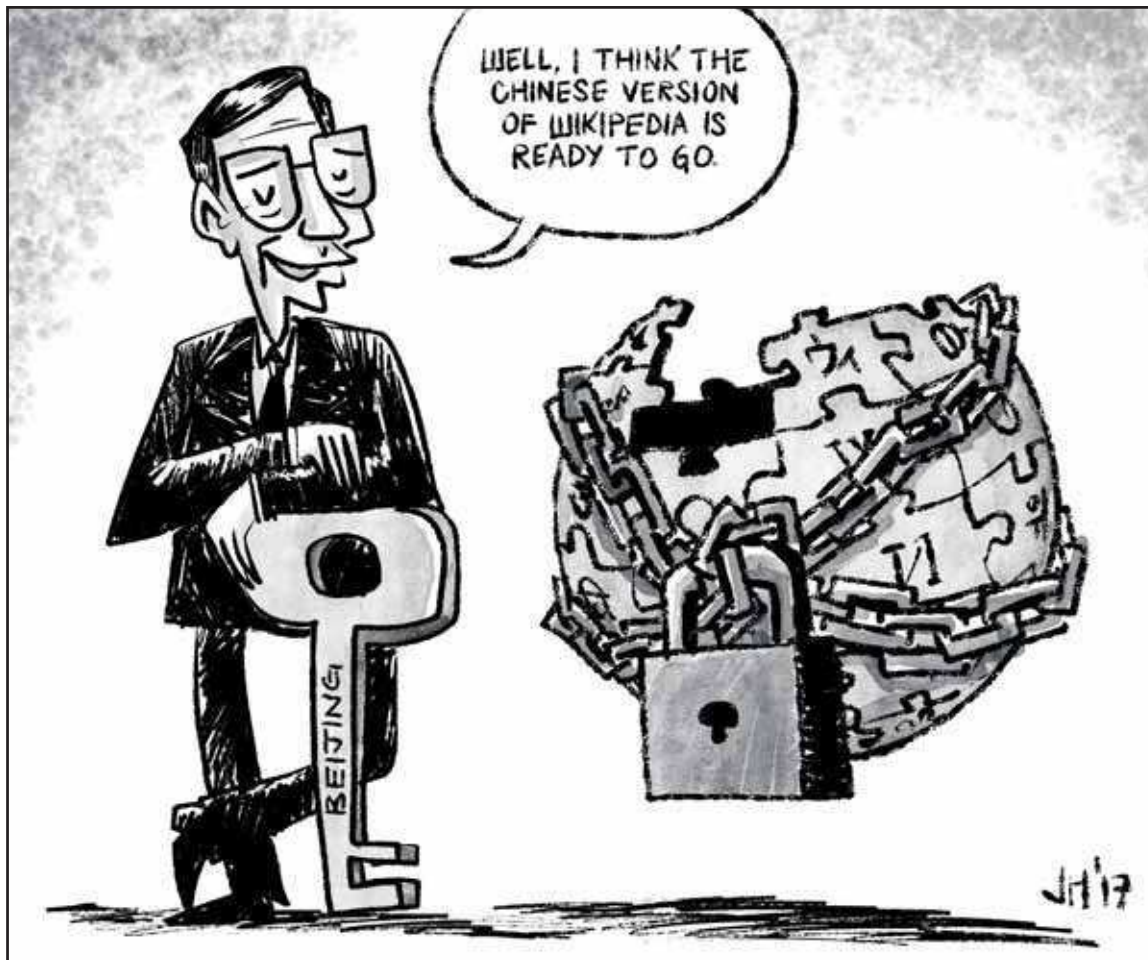
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**MY TURN**

■ **Dmae Roberts**



## Relations

From the late '60s to this day, a mythology referred to as the "model minority" has been prevalent in the Asian-American community. It emerged from stereotypical beliefs that Asians are hard working, quick to assimilate, and able to succeed in the pursuit of the American Dream. The myth quickly became a way to pit Asian Americans against other minority groups, particularly African Americans. It came into play most dramatically during the 1992 Los Angeles riots, known as *Sa-I-Gu* — literally April 29 in the Korean language — when Korean businesses were looted and burned following the acquittal of police officers in the Rodney King beating. That riot was a precursor to current police-involved shootings and the rise of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement.

For more than a year, I've been working on a radio documentary called *Relations* for the celebration of the 10th anniversary of the Crossing East series. The documentary focuses on the historic relationship between Asian Pacific Islanders (APIs) and African Americans. I've spoken with community scholars and activists locally and around the country about black and Asian tensions and how both communities can better support each other.

Portland activist and writer Scot Nakagawa, a senior partner at Change Lab, has written extensively about the model-minority myth. Nakagawa explained that the characteristics lauded are those that make a group of people "perfectly exploitable," discouraging complaints or protests. In effect, the model-minority myth labels Asian Americans as "good team players with technical skills and proficiency." APIs are encouraged to be quiet and cooperative, allowing their identities to be "subsumed within the goals of the group." He says this perception has been used against blacks as a way to show how they too should be a model minority.

While there are many times African Americans and Asian Americans have worked together to fight discrimination and injustice, Nakagawa says they are exceptions. He believes there are people challenging the model-minority myth, "particularly a new generation of Asian-American activists [who are] rising into leadership." He says the focus of the new activists is to show that kind of stereotyping contributes to racial inequality and the dehumanization of Asian Americans.

I talked with Anirvan Chatterjee, the co-creator of <www.blackdesisecrethistory.org>. The website traces the early history of South-Asian and African-American solidarity dating back to the 17th and 18th centuries during the time of slavery,

through the civil-rights movement when Martin Luther King Jr. travelled to India in 1959 to learn about non-violent protest from Ghandi, to present-day actions by South Asians For Black Lives.

Chatterjee explained that for more than a century, South Asians and African Americans have stood with one another. He said the "cultures of resistance" that emerged are the "very best of our tradition" and something that should be taught and shared. He is hopeful that for younger generations of South Asian Americans, it's a tradition they too can step into.

I also interviewed Bay Area activist Malkia Cyril, a member of the Black Lives Matter network and founder and executive director of The Center for Media Justice. Cyril, the daughter of a Black Panther activist mom, remembers when her "auntie" Yuri Kochiyama came to meetings at her mother's house in Harlem. She said Kochiyama "understood very deeply" that the model-minority stereotype was "built on the back of a criminal [African-American] stereotype and the two stereotypes can only exist in relationship to one another." Cyril has nothing but praise for the Asians For Black Lives (A4BL) groups who have put their "freedom on the line" for Blacks Lives Matter actions.

Ellen Choy is one of those A4BL activists in the Bay Area. She told me A4BL "purposely" puts their bodies on the frontline as shields against police for BLM demonstrations and protests. She doesn't believe "it's just the responsibility or the obligation of black folks to defend their communities and their lives." Choy said the group also works to counter "anti-blackness by Asian folks" at events in the Asian community.

Also recorded were people participating in Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon (APANO) workshops. It was inspiring how young APIs fully embraced the idea of African-American and API unity. Lexa Machinski, a student at Wilson High School who attended APANO's "Rolling Tides" convention, said younger generations are trying to find solutions collectively. "I personally think I have a big understanding of the importance of Black Lives Matter ... I do believe that we, that all the communities, all minorities, have the capability to get together and just fight .... One at a time. Baby steps. But yes, I do believe."

These stories are just a few included in Crossing East: *Relations*. The one-hour documentary airs Tuesday, May 30 from 11:00am and noon on KBOO Community Radio (90.7 FM). I hope you can tune in!