



# Zooming in . on post-Virginia Tech stereotyping

## Students affected by backlash against Asian-Americans

by Steffi Lau  
editor in chief

Just a day after the Virginia Tech shootings bloodied the campus and rocked the nation with grief, the identity of the shooter was revealed. It was in a hotel room on the border of Arizona and Nevada that senior Chris Lo and a group of his friends turned on the TV to see the angry face of Seung-Hui Cho flashing across the screen. "Dude, if you shaved off your hair, you'd look just like him!" one of Lo's friends joked to him. Lo and his friends burst out into laughter. Among the group, it seemed hilarious and even ridiculous that anyone would ever mistake the Chinese-American Lo for a socially reclusive shooter, much less for a Korean one. This group of friends did not know that to the outside world, the statement was all too true.

On April 16, Seung-Hui Cho, a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, gunned down 32 students and then shot himself in the worst school massacre in US history. As news of the tragedy spread across the nation, some reacted with tears, some with outrage, and others simply asked themselves, "Why?" Meanwhile, some looked at the photograph of Cho in their newspapers and reacted with the shame of being the same race as him. Thoughts of hate crimes against Asian-Americans or Korean-Americans—much like those that Muslims and those of Middle Eastern descent experienced after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks—seemed all too possible.

Lo and his friends traveled to the border of Arizona and Nevada on April 17, over spring break, on a trip to visit Yosemite. Having left the day after the shootings, they were unaware of the identity or ethnicity of the shooter, not to mention what awaited them outside the comfortable Asian-populated bubble of Cupertino. On the morning of April 18, Lo and his friends left their room to eat breakfast in the hotel.

It seemed that their group of three Chinese-Americans and one African-American was receiving unusually long stares from the predominantly white guests, but it was not until they entered the buffet that they realized why. There, Lo was told by the cashier to put his bag on the side of the room though all the other guests had their bags at their tables. "Is it because I'm Asian?" Lo asked. The white cashier responded, "No, we're just making sure."

"I think he thought that I had weapons or explosives in my backpack," Lo said. "My friend, who is black, was asking him, 'Do you have a problem with people of color?' The cashier replied, 'Well, stuff just happened at Virginia Tech. The country's in turmoil right now. We're just trying to be safe.' Then the manager came out and we told him, 'We don't like being discriminated against because of our skin color. Just because some random person at Virginia Tech did the shooting doesn't mean it has anything to do with us.' After that, they kind of gave in by letting us sit with our bags and treating us nicely."

Over spring break, senior James Kahng had a similar experience. He and seven other people, all Asian, went down to Santa Cruz to celebrate his brother's birthday.

"We were sitting outside of this restaurant eating dinner when this white man walked by," Kahng said. "He let out a little laugh, like, 'Ha!' A really contemptuous laugh. Then he

said, 'Are you guys shooters, too?' Some people heard him say, 'I'll shoot you too.'" For Kahng and his friends, it took a while for it to sink in. "We were watching basketball on TV," he said. "So we thought he was talking about basketball and someone said, 'Yeah, we shoot basketball.' It was only until after he walked away that we realized what he meant. It was strange. We started to wonder if the other people in the restaurant were scared of us. And then I began to feel really scared."

Previous to his experience, Kahng hadn't thought about his connection to Cho. "He's Korean, I'm Korean," Kahng said. "I saw a lot of articles about how ashamed Koreans were after the shooting, but I hadn't connected it with myself before then."

It is incidents of stereotyping and discrimination like the ones Kahng and Lo experienced that have left the Asian-American community in outrage. After the shooting, various hate groups began to pop up on networking sites such as Facebook, with titles like "I thought Asian kids were supposed to help you with your math homework, not blow your head off" and "Who was shocked that the Asian kid done the massacre at Virginia Tech?"

In response, other groups were created, many of them joined by MVHS students, such as "Seung-Hui Cho does not represent all Asians" and "Yeah, I look like someone else. Is that a crime?" Kahng said that some of his friends have said things like, "Stupid Korean guy, making us all hated."

Asian-Americans have also responded by condemning the repeated identification of Cho as "South Korean" by media outlets, instead protesting that his race has nothing to do with his actions and emphasizing that Cho had been living in the US since the age of eight. Among the race-driven questions, is the speculation, "But what if it hadn't been an Asian?" "If it was any other minority, there would be a backlash," Kahng said. "If it were a white guy, it would just be a tragedy."

He speculated, "People create assumptions of other people and when they come true a few times, they think it's true all the time. I guess it has something to do with hatred. They're angry at [Cho] and they need someone to take it out on... and we look like him."

Though his experience was brief, it has left Kahng contemplating. "It makes me think more about how other Asians might feel in areas that aren't like Monta Vista, he said. "Maybe they're the only Asian in their school and they experience stuff like that everyday.

For me, that was my first sincere experience with racism."

Even though Lo and Kahng both felt angry after their respective brushes with racism, Lo tries not to lay the blame on anyone. "I guess it's just how people grow up," Lo said. "It depends on what you're surrounded by. If you're sheltered, it's weird seeing someone of a different skin color. I moved to San Jose recently and there are a lot more Hispanics and blacks there. So whenever I walk to the gym, I tend to get stared at. If you're different, it gives people cause to think you're strange."

While the nation has mostly moved on after the shootings, the incident has left a slew of speculations within the Asian-American community. "It makes you realize that there's racism out there," Kahng said. "It's not over. There's a lot of hatred left in the world."



photo illustration by Samika Savanur

From left to right: freshman Yang Yang Shi, senior Alton Ng, freshman David Wang, freshman Christian Lee, junior Richard Wei, junior Kevin Yeh, junior Hermes Huang, junior Andrew Kahng, sophomore Joseph Hoang, senior Evan Pu, junior Tim Fong, senior Chris Lo, Seung-Hui Cho, responsible for the massacre of 33 students at Virginia Tech, senior James Kahng, senior Kuangyi Chen, junior Kevin Lim, senior Layne Miao, senior Lonny Cheuk, junior Benjamin Lin, junior Matthew Le, junior Kenta Akaogi, freshman Kevin Nguyen, junior Jason Tsao, junior Charles Tseng, junior John Vo

## Silent Treatment: Asians often unwilling to openly address mental illnesses

After Virginia Tech shooter was revealed to be mentally ill, Asians question the taboo mindset towards mental diseases

by Steffi Lau  
editor in chief

While the Virginia Tech incident has dealt a shocking blow to Asian-Americans, causing many to be stereotyped as shooters, it has also been a catalyst, forcing them to reexamine stereotypes within their own communities. After the shooter Seung-Hui Cho was revealed to be mentally ill, many speculated whether his failure to be

treated was due to the typical refusal of Asians to acknowledge mental illnesses.

"In Korean culture, when people hear of mental illnesses, it's not attention that deserves special attention. It's more like a curse, like 'they're crazy,'" Korean-American junior Lauren Bahng said. "It's treated as a personal weakness. There's a more critical view than a sympathetic view."

Though there are disturbing signs that Cho had one or more mental illnesses, he

was never officially diagnosed. His mother was said to have unsuccessfully sought counseling for him from Korean churches.

Coming from a family with a long history of mental illness, Korean-American senior James Kahng is no stranger to the Asian treatment of mental sicknesses as taboo. "It's the old hide-your-weakness thing," he said. "My grandpa, dad, and cousin had depression, but I only found out about it two years ago. It's not talked about."

Bahng said, "It's a lot about family reputation. The whole honor thing."

"A lot of times when someone feels like they have disease, when they tell their family, the family will say it's not true," Kahng said of the Korean attitude.

"I feel like part of it is okay," he continued. "That whole determination side, wanting to take care of things yourself. But in terms of mental illness, that stubbornness could lead to undiagnosed people like Cho."