



# Me, Asian?!

An event series exploring Asian identities in a European context

Judi Mesman

What happens when you open up the University for young adults with an Asian background living in a European city to discuss what it means to be Asian in Europe? This is what a team of Asia enthusiasts at Leiden University College The Hague set off to find out when they started the event series 'Me, Asian?!' in September of 2018. Little did they know that seven evenings was all it took to create a multi-ethnic Asian community that is too legit to quit.

## Event series Me, Asian?!

The Dutch city of the Hague historically has many Indo-European inhabitants, has a vibrant China Town, is home to a large community of Hindustani-Surinamese people, houses many international students from Asia (e.g., Indonesia, India, Bangladesh), and hosts the embassies of all the largest Asian countries. A significant part of these Asian populations consists of young adults ready to make their mark on society. Nonetheless, there is very little public discourse about the position of Asians in the Netherlands, or even in Europe. As per the stereotype, most Asian minority groups quietly go about their business without causing much of a fuss or drawing attention. And if on rare occasions Asian minorities are the focus of attention, it is often through the eyes of the majority rather than through their own. The event series Me, Asian?! was conceived to provide a platform for expressing their points of view of life in a Dutch world, and to lay the foundation for the co-creation of agendas for community action and research with respect to Asian cultural identities in the European diaspora.

The organizing team consisted of LUC academics whose work and personal histories tie them to Asia: Minjung Cho, Ajay Gandhi, Jay Huang, Jyothi Thrivikraman, Maja Vodopivec, and myself. Dutch writer of Indonesian descent Gustaaf Peek was invited to moderate the events, adding a

provocative perspective to the series. Each event centered around a specific theme related to the 'Asianness' framed within larger topics such as cultural memory, cinema, literature, visual arts, mindfulness, and parenting. The events were announced in higher education newsletters, social media, and through Asian cultural organizations, and each was attended by about 30-50 people. The participants were mostly of the target group of young adults with an Asian background, but also some young-at-heart older Asian participants, and some non-Asians with an interest in Asian themes. Across the series that ran from September 2018 to May 2019, a total of more than 150 people participated in one or more of the events.

## Stereotypically Asian?

The series title 'Me, Asian?!' was intended to reflect the wide variety of Asian identities that people might experience, including variation in the extent to which they identify as Asian in the first place, ranging from not at all or hardly (Me, Asian?) to very strongly so (Me, Asian!). Indeed, identities were at the core of many of the discussions. During the first event, as a fun warm-up, we engaged the audience in a tongue-in-cheek 'How Asian are you?' test, featuring elements that actually or stereotypically distinguish Asians from others. Test items addressed things like rice and spicy food consumption, math abilities,

physical height, the ability to do an 'Asian squat', and collectivistic interpretations of pictures. With a great deal of hilarity, but also a healthy dose of competitiveness, the participants rose to these challenges. When discussing the test scores, it became clear that most participants had hoped to score high on 'Asianness'. Some test items reflected certain Asian regions more than others, and these sparked some (light-hearted) objections in those who clearly felt more Asian than their test scores showed. The test items served as a fertile breeding ground for discussions about what Asian is and what it is not, and illustrated the heterogeneity of Asian populations.

Interestingly, once those discussions about differences between Asians had taken place during that very first event, commonalities rather than disparities were discovered and emphasized. Across the events that

followed, a keen sense of kinship developed between individuals from very different Asian backgrounds. Shared experiences came to the fore when we discussed cultural memories in small groups. The importance of language, family, and food in cherished memories that are tied to cultural heritage were unanimously acknowledged. Touching, funny, and sometimes painful memories were shared that each in their own way reflected what an Asian heritage means to people. Questions about the intergenerational transmission of Asian cultural identities were raised in various discussions. How did our own parents give us a sense of being Asian? And to what extent do we want to pass on our Asian heritage to our children? Why do we sometimes care more about preserving our distinctiveness while we sometimes just want to blend in?

## Status of the Other

Identity questions were also prominent in the four events that included panel discussions, with Asian filmmakers, Asian writers, Asian parents, and Asian visual artists. These events were among the more popular ones in terms of both attendance and rating in the online evaluation survey that was sent to all participants after the sixth event. The success of the panel-based events was at least partly due to the interactive nature of these events, and personal stories shared by the panel members. These stories clearly resonated with the audience, and sparked lively discussions aimed at digging deeper into the nature of Asian identities. Various panel members reflected on the ways in which the ethnic majority imposes identities on the Asian minority that are sometimes perceived as ill-fitting and insincere. One writer raised an issue of making a compromise between what she would like to write about, and what her publisher thought the readership wanted. She related how her publisher had asked her to just write about her migrant past, suggesting that readers would only be interested in that part of her experience. Another writer decidedly rejected any possibility of making such compromises. One Asian visual artist objected to frequently being asked why she used her Asian heritage in her art, whereas, for example, a Dutch artist would never be asked this question. Another artist questioned the entire identity formation process, and suggested destroying identities rather than forming them. Where is the boundary between proudly carrying the Asian identity and exploiting the Asian identity as an artist, and perhaps reproducing in such a way certain stereotypes about what it means to be Asian? When others have already decided what is Asian, how to assert our own definition what is Asian in the face of stereotypes and prejudice?

The Asian identity was also often linked to a sense of having to be better, to do better, to prove oneself. This feeling fits with the stereotype of Asian tiger parenting, with its highly demanding and sometimes harsh

approach to raising children ('for their own good'), focused on achievement. Even though these elements were recognized by the panel of parents as well as by many participants, there was also appreciation for the support and love that – even if not expressed in words – was experienced as underlying the strict parenting practices. Needing to achieve and be better than others is not only related to an Asian upbringing, but to the often vulnerable status of being an immigrant and a minority as well. As one of the visual artists said: "you can be a loser in your own country, but not in another country". As a 'guest' one has to prove worthiness, show skill and ability so that the host country is willing to accept one's presence. Even if you are not technically a guest, but born in the Netherlands, the sense of being regarded as a guest is often palpable, most clearly reflected in the question 'where are you really from?' that many of us have all heard uncountable times. Our Asian appearances in the European context invariably make us the Other who is regarded at best as interestingly exotic, and at worst as unacceptably alien. The status of Other was experienced as painful by some participants, but as a source of pride and activism by others, with the latter approach providing an inspiring perspective to those expressing the former.

## Sharing food, creating community

Exchanges of perspectives and openness to seeing things from different points of view was a central feature of the series. An open and accepting atmosphere created by the organizers was crucial to the process of sharing feelings and opinions and was established almost from the get-go. This was certainly also due to the socializing opportunity after each event, with free drinks and delicious Asian snacks in our student-run bar at Leiden University College. When we entered the bar after the first event, and people saw and smelled the Asian foods, one of them exclaimed 'I was expecting bitterballen, but this is much better!' (bitterballen are a very Dutch snack commonly served at social events). During food and drinks, participants socialized and met new people. In fact, the online evaluation survey showed that the vast majority of participants had met new people during the series. Indeed, people who had come in alone ended up talking to others over sushi, and duos becoming foursomes over dumplings. The importance of sharing food for the creation of a community can not be overestimated.

The event series ended up exceeding our expectations and inadvertently led to the founding of an informal Asian community empowered by familiarity and recognition. The comforting feeling of being 'amongst ourselves' and not having to conform to what it means to be Asian through European eyes was frankly liberating. The sense of kinship that so readily developed between individuals from a diversity of Asian backgrounds was uplifting and created a feeling of strength and agency that deserves to be fostered. Accordingly, there is great enthusiasm for a follow-up, both among the participants and the organizers. Inspired by the success of Me, Asian?!, we predict that the question mark will be dropped from the follow-up series title.

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## Me, Asian?! at ICAS11

A short documentary about the Me, Asian?! series will be presented at the ICAS preconference event at Leiden University College in the Hague on Monday 15 July 2019. To register for this pre-event, please go to <https://tinyurl.com/ICAS11pre-event>

During the ICAS week (16-19 July) there will be a public exhibition of the 'Me Asian?! Visual Archive' at the IAS offices on Rapenburg 59. The exhibition will be opened by Belle Promchanya on 16 July, 11:00-11:30. <https://www.instagram.com/measianluc>