Bamboo is constantly exposed to the wind,
Bending in every direction,
But remains erect,
Staying true to its character

A Vietnamese-American,
I, too, am exposed to external forces,
Pulling me from opposing directions,
Hoping that I may stand erect,
Like bamboo in the wind

In a political science classroom on the campus of the University of Colorado at Boulder, a student debates the constitutionality of the USA Patriot Act and its implications for the civil liberties of American citizens. Outside of the classroom, a person is overheard on the phone saying “yo, we finna swoop you in a minute, homie.” What is the difference between these two people? The simple answer is there is no difference, really, as these two situations are presented by the same person: me. Even so, there are differences the world over when we begin to examine the duality brought forth by my acculturation as an Asian-American person. These differences are constantly at odds with one another, shaping me into who I am as a person, and will continue to do so as I struggle to find my proper place in society.
There are a variety of reasons—both societal and cultural—as to why I have found myself in between two different worlds in a single culture. The societal and cultural explanations for my duality are not mutually exclusive; however, they are inextricably linked. Asian-American culture and American society as a whole have worked together in developing two very different worlds to which I belong. Since the two factors work concurrently to create a divide between the singular Asian-American culture, I will examine the two together as they pertain to my situation.

Throughout my life, there has been a constant struggle between my educated, articulate, and well-spoken identity and my slang-speaking, convict and gang-affiliated identity. This is further perpetuated by the notion of the model minority and my attempt to simultaneously conform to and dispel this notion. Asian-Americans are often labeled as the model minority because we are perceived to be upstanding citizens who strive in school and achieve perfect grades as a result of our cultural values. Indeed, many Asian immigrants choose to come to the United States to pursue the opportunity of a good education, strongly adhering to the value of education. Yet, there is another side to the story.

Many of my Asian-American friends have not been afforded the same opportunity that I have of a college education for various reasons, often pertaining to institutional barriers as a result of our differences in socioeconomic standing. My mother came to the U.S. by herself as a 16-year-old, non-English speaking immigrant and followed the path of the model minority, leading her to a Masters’ degree and rather stable economic success. Many of my Asian-American friends’ parents were not able to achieve the same, for whatever reason, and many of my friends in turn will not be college graduates. Instead, most have been in gangs, gone to prison, are in prison, are on a pending case, or on probation. This duality that I personally have
found in the Asian-American culture is a persistent source of strife for me as I attempt to find a middle ground between two very different worlds in the same culture.

The opposing identities I experience are a culmination of societal and cultural influences, and I will now begin to examine what I will call my ‘educated identity’ through the framework of societal and cultural expectations. The aforementioned notion of the model minority is a widely held belief in American society regarding Asian-Americans and our cultural values, demonstrating the link between American society and Asian-American culture. Society’s characterization of Asian-Americans as the model minority has affected me greatly as I have attempted to conform to this notion to some degree. I feel I must present myself to be an articulate and well-studied individual in various settings such as the academic world, and this has contributed to my dual identity. Of course, this notion must be a product of some truth, which is where Asian-American culture comes into play.

For as long as I can remember, my conversations with my mom most often dealt with my education, and education in general. Education is the key to success. Education will afford you opportunities unheard of elsewhere. Without education, you have nothing. These are the types of assertions that I heard time and again growing up and still do to this day. As a three-year-old, I had to learn to write my name before receiving any dessert (I’m not sure what standards for kids are these days, but this was quite a feat for me at that age!). Without my parents’ insistence of the importance of education, I do not believe I would have made it this far. Now I too value education as much as my parents do, despite the constant nagging I endured as a teenager. Consequently, the value my parents and I place on education has translated into a commonly held belief that Asian-Americans are all mathematical geniuses who will all unquestionably become successful because of our model minority status. However, American society and
Asian-American culture have concurrently created a totally different reality for most other Asian-Americans who do not fall into the category of the model minority. This reality is one I also belong to.

Although it may be true that it is possible to become successful in America through hard work, regardless of where you begin your life, it is not always plausible. There are tremendous institutional barriers, for any race, if one’s life begins in poverty. Hard work sometimes just is not enough. I was lucky enough to be born into a family that eventually prospered, allowing me to attend good public schools. Many of my Asian-American friends’ families did not achieve the same degree of economic success my family did, and they in turn attended schools that presumably were not as well funded. The difference in the school systems was quite obvious, demonstrated by my high school’s attitude in presuming that most graduates would attend college. The curriculum highly emphasized pre-requisites for college, providing for a better foundation once students got to college. On the other hand, my friends’ schools did not have as tough of a curriculum. This seemed to be a product of the belief that many students would not attend college after high school, let alone graduate. With this in mind, I found that my friends’ schools often emphasized vocational training, rather than pushing students to go to college. The nature of my friends’ public schooling created tremendous disparities between my education and theirs. As a result, many of my friends did not excel in school. Instead of utilizing education for social mobility, my friends often resorted to a life of crime. The dominating socioeconomic and class structure, and the consequent structure of the American education system, is not the lone culprit in creating Asian-American criminals, however. Asian-American culture itself also bears a degree of responsibility for the phenomenon of Asian-American gangs and criminals.
Now we must look through the lens of Asian-American culture to understand why it is that Asian-Americans are prone to the influences of gangs, thus creating a duality that I have found myself combating. As newly arrived immigrants, parents of first-generation Asian-Americans often worked long hours to support their families. Many of the jobs that these immigrants held were rather low-paying jobs. My father was a factory worker for many years, while my mother had worked hard in school to receive a Masters’ degree and eventually became a high school teacher. It was through my mother’s education that my parents were able to build enough capital to invest in various ventures. Many other Southeast Asian immigrants similarly worked vigorously to build capital, allowing them to open various kinds of businesses. So in the case of my parents and some other Southeast Asian immigrants, upward social mobility was realized. On the other end of the spectrum, many Southeast Asian immigrants did not have the education or necessary building blocks to do the same. Regardless of whether or not a given Asian-American family achieved upward social mobility, the same conditions of hard work often led to the product of neglected children, to various degrees.

The dedication of many Southeast Asian immigrants to provide for their families created a by-product of kids that did not have much else to confide in other than their peers. Already a minority in the United States, Asian-American kids, like other minorities, found solace in each other’s company. Combine this with absent parents working hard to provide for their families and the result is tight-knit groups of kids who are similar to each other in many respects. When this is combined with the prevailing socioeconomic structure of American society, a gang seems inevitable.

The early years of my life, and much of my siblings’ lives, began in the lower class. We eventually moved to the suburbs; however, this did not hinder my relationships with my Asian-
American friends who did not move out of the lower and lower-middle class. In fact, I sought out those who were not as fortunate as I. To me, these friends were more humble, more understanding. The kids at my high school were privileged, but did not seem to understand this, in my opinion. The wealthy WASPS that constituted roughly 90% of my high school did not relate to me, and I did not relate to them. Instead, I enjoyed the cultural similarities I shared with other Asian-American kids, even though we lived in different neighborhoods. However, resulting from their socioeconomic standing, these Asian-American friends were prone to criminal activities and gangs. Although I enjoyed the luxuries of an upper-middle class livelihood and a good education, my bond with my cultural-similaris created a different identity from my intellectual, well-spoken identity I exhibit in school. At school, I feel I must present myself to be articulate, in turn perpetuating the notion of the model minority. Outside of school, with my friends, I do not present myself as an intellectual, as I feel it sometimes seems condescending. I am often teased by my friends as a result of my education, garnering remarks like “Oh, Boulder (referring to CU-Boulder) doesn’t teach you that, does it?” when I am unable to perform some technical task that they themselves do with ease. Thus, I exhibit my ‘educated-identity’ in school, and I speak my slang and disguise my education in the streets.

My duality as a Vietnamese-American is a dilemma that I do not see myself resolving any time soon. Each identity is as important as the other. Without an education, I cannot realize my aspirations of contributing to a better society. Without my relationships with my Asian-American peers, I would have lost a connection to my Asian-American culture. My educated identity will provide me with an opportunity to become a successful member of society, while my slang-speaking identity continues to remind me of where I came from. In the end, this
duality is not so much a duality after all, but a necessary coexistence between two seemingly conflicting forces that have shaped me into a person that I am truly proud to be.

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