

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

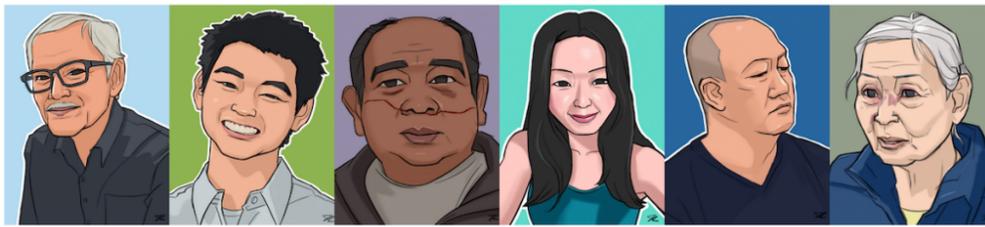
[Asian in America: Interconnected Histories and Distinct Experiences](#)

written by Kathleen M. Pike, PhD
January 26, 2022

Five *on*
Friday

Musings on Mental Health

Michelle Alyssa Go died last weekend after being pushed onto the subway tracks in Times Square. A 40-year-old Asian American woman, her life was tragically cut short. The portraits below, illustrated by Jonathan D. Chang, depict a few out of the many Asian American individuals who have been hurt, attacked, or killed in recent years.



Vicha Ratanapakdee (84) Christian Hall (19) Noel Quintana (64) Ee Lee (36) Yong Zheng (46) Nancy Toh (83)



Juanito Falcon (74) Pak Ho (75) Ngoc Pham (83) Than Htwe (58) Yao Pan Ma (61) Younghee Choe (75)

AAPI Portraits, by Jonathan D. Chang (@jdschang)

I had a chance to talk with Rayna Wang to learn how this most recent tragic event is reverberating through the Asian American community - in NYC and beyond. Rayna identifies as a 1.5 generation Chinese American immigrant and works as the Communications and Publications Coordinator with our Center. She is also a licensed social worker and provides psychotherapy to Asian American children and families in Queens.

1. There was a vigil held in Times Square following Michelle Alyssa Go's death. We don't know if this act of violence was motivated by racism, sexism, severe mental illness, or some combination of factors. What impact has this tragic event had on the Asian American community? It's complicated. Seeing another Asian American woman being killed hurts a lot, for a community that has been scapegoated and discriminated against for centuries. I could put together a lengthy list of policies, practices, and rhetoric showing how Asian Americans have long been blamed for plagues (in San Francisco and in Honolulu), targeted for "taking away jobs" (murder of Vincent Chin), and accused of espionage or terrorism (Japanese Internment Camps, McCarthyism/Red Scare, post 9/11 violence towards South Asian Muslim and Sikh Americans, and Trump-era rhetoric of Chinese spies in academia). The rise in discrimination and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic is an unfortunate reminder that this history also lives in the present day. Even if this incident is not classified as a hate crime, it is painful and traumatic when another member of the community dies due to an act of violence. At the same time, it's important to focus on prevention too, since we know that people experiencing homelessness and mental illness have also long been marginalized and deserve to have consistent and holistic support.

2. While working as the Communications and Publications Coordinator for our Center at Columbia, you've also continued to work in the community as a clinical social worker. How has the pandemic impacted the Chinese American clients you work with and their mental health? What stands out to me most is the economic impact. While I got to keep my jobs and work remotely, most of my clients, or my young clients' parents, lost their jobs because restaurants, taxi services, nail salons, and retail stores shut down or were operating with reduced staff for over a year. Many of my counseling sessions were over the telephone, and it's hard to do any sort of "therapy" when clients have \$20 left in their wallet and are extremely stressed because they don't know where they will sleep the next week. For those who have financial and housing stability, we talk about anxiety, fear, anger, uncertainty, racism, and various types of loss. Many sources report that Chinese Americans - on average - are high-income earners, or highly educated, but it is problematic to rely on the "average" datapoint. There is tremendous variation in employment, income, education, language abilities, and access to services, including mental health services, within the Chinese American community and the broader Asian American community.

3. What has this stretch been like for you as a Chinese American social worker serving individuals in

the community? It has been exhausting. It is incredibly frustrating to me when I think about the systems that are not adequately supporting people's basic needs. Sometimes I feel pretty helpless and depleted since I'm not in a role to have influence or power to change systems, but I've been fortunate to have supervisors at my clinic who have been very supportive and remind me to recharge and take time off when needed. I have also found nourishment from my peers and colleagues at the [New York Coalition for Asian American Mental Health](#). As a group of Asian American therapists, we meet regularly to vent and to process our own emotions. We've reflected on how our training in Western, Eurocentric models of talk therapy is not always a good fit for Asian American clients, and we talk about how mental health can be strengthened through creative initiatives that place community-building at the center (e.g. documenting the resilience of generations past and present through a [digital story-telling website](#), or playing a bilingual game of [Parents are Humans](#) with family members). The NYCAAMH community has been really special to me, as an early-career social worker and in general as a human being during the COVID-19 pandemic.

4. We see terms such as "Asian, Asian American, Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI), Asian Pacific Islander Desi-American (APIDA), Asian American Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander (AANHPI)" - what's correct to use? There is no "correct" answer because language is not perfect and history is complicated. The term "Asian" or "Oriental" was used historically by White people for purposes of exclusion. The term "Asian American" arose in the 1960s, as advocates and academics united and ethnic groups joined together to fight for social justice. The term is useful but also vulnerable to stereotyping, as Alex Dang captures in his [slam poetry performance](#). Various subgroups and ethnic communities have diverse languages, cultures, customs, and histories (e.g. Pacific Islander and Native Hawaiian communities experience militarization and colonialism in very distinct ways compared to communities on the US mainland). While it is powerful to collectively advocate against exclusion, racism, and discrimination, there is no perfect acronym that can capture the experiences of 20 million Americans who speak over [100 languages](#) and whose heritage spans across [40 countries](#).

5. What can people do if they want to support those around them who identify as Asian American? It would be really meaningful to me if people could ask themselves some challenging questions and engage in self-reflection. For example, "What did I learn in school about Asian American history or Asian American mental health, and, if it was only discussed minimally, why? If I ask a stranger 'Where are you from?' - what assumption led me to ask this question in the first place and what assumption do I make based on their reply? What parallels do I notice between Asian Americans and other groups in the US who have been marginalized, excluded, and discriminated against?" These systemic and interpersonal experiences can be traumatic and can negatively impact mental health and wellbeing - no matter the group. They are also things we can change.

We may never know the extent to which being Asian American triggered the violence that killed Michelle Alyssa Go. We do know that the Asian American community has been scapegoated, excluded, and discriminated against in our society, and these pernicious forms of violence continue. The mental health costs are profound. The life and death costs are incalculable. For us all.