

## ISSUE NO. 14

# Race and Resistance Amid Feminism, Priming, and Capitalism: The (surprisingly-globalized) Visual of an Asian American Woman Activist

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(<https://adanewmedia.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/korn-Screen-Shot-2018-10-16-at-7.38.38-PM.png>)

## Introduction

See that photo above of the three Asian Americans holding protest signs? I am the feminist Asian American ciswoman in the right corner supporting the yellowish-green sign. This picture has circulated on Chicago television programs, various print newspapers, and international news webpages. But why was this photo the one that became associated with this particular protest? In this article, I use critical autoethnography, informed by critical race theory and intersectional feminist theory, to examine the origin, selection, and circulation of the above visual of this protest and how this photo is related to race, feminism, activism, and resistance.

## Origins: Brutality and Protest

On Monday, April 10, 2017, Dr. David Dao, a 69-years-old, Vietnamese American physician based in Kentucky, was forced off of his overbooked United Express flight, after he was requested to give up his seat to a United Airline crew member on Flight

3411 from Chicago, Illinois, to Louisville, Kentucky. Chicago airport police officers employed brutally physical means to remove him from his seat, dragging him off of the plane and resulting in a serious concussion, bloodied face, broken nose, damaged sinuses, and two-tooth loss. Dr. Dao had refused to relinquish his seat because he had patients relying upon him the next morning, a fact to which witnesses testified. The brutal behavior was captured on cell phone video and shared across online social media, garnering hundreds of millions views globally. Dr. Dao was also reported initially as Chinese, instead of Vietnamese. Anger in China was immediate, vocal, and immense about discrimination against Asians, with reports of one site in China showing 600 million views and another Chinese site displaying 770 million views of the videos. When the (racist) mistake of ethnicity was corrected, wrath in Vietnam called for a boycott of United Airlines (Demonstrators at O'Hare Airport protest 2017; Do 2017; Hollingsworth and Zheng 2017; Phillips 2017; Roberts 2017; Velasco 2017).

On Tuesday, April 11, 2017, twenty-five individuals, mostly from Asian and Middle Eastern communities, gathered at Chicago's O'Hare International Airport to protest United Airlines. As a member of the Chicago chapter of one of the organizing associations, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, I was notified via Facebook about collective action in what Dan Mercea (2012) calls "digital prefigurative participation" or interaction with content and individuals through computer-mediated communication that precedes engagement in offline protests. Through online social media, I learned that a protest had been planned for the next day after Dr. Dao was brutalized. Because I am an activist scholar, I knew from earlier experiences with protesting to create a poster for the event. As a Thai American (Korn 2016), my mood was indignant and matched the anger expressed by those in China, Vietnam, and other Asian countries that viewed the brutality against an individual that read as an Asian man as racial discrimination against one of our own. The injustice that occurred to him could have happened to any Asian American, ethnicity notwithstanding. I had the privileges of time and energy to spend at a protest, and I did not take those opportunities for granted. With my poster in hand, I joined the other protesters.

### **Critical autoethnography: Visual content and intentional omissions**

Arguably the most prominent form of communication as a protester is the poster. Because the poster may say anything, the protester may link other causes to the present event. Posters tend to be dominated by handwritten words over images (Philipps 2012); the choice to use hashtags continues to emphasize words over images. In the last

decade, it has become commonplace to see physical posters that utilize digital hashtags to connect the activist message to a larger conversation happening online. The hashtag on a poster may also serve as a voluntary description of the event, protest, or the activist. Symbolically, the poster represents an adjective to the body of the activist attending a protest.

While posters may be analyzed for their meanings as an observer (Philipps 2012), I am able to share the impetus behind the words selected for my poster featured in the picture above through the method of critical autoethnography. As a critical autoethnographer (Korn 2017a; Steele and Korn 2016), I pay special attention to race, gender, power, and additional social difference in examining my reflexivity and positionality as a protester participant (Boylorn and Orbe 2014; Hanson 2004). The method of critical autoethnography is particularly useful in understanding the process of production of the poster. I am able to speak to the motivations behind the words chosen and words omitted from the poster I created. For example, I had considered writing a specific action regarding the CEO of United Airlines, Oscar Munoz, such as “Fire Munoz” on my poster, based on his email to United employees containing his immediate blaming of Dr. Dao as “disruptive and belligerent,” offering no apology or compassion regarding the brutality Dr. Dao had received (Associated Press 2017; Rosoff 2017; Zhang 2017). While such a message would have been appropriate, and while I was disappointed and angry over Munoz’s callous response, I did not want to center my activism on Munoz; instead, I chose to keep my poster focused on Dr. Dao.

Dr. Dao’s injuries were numerous and grave enough to rush him to the hospital after he was violently yanked from his seat. Watching the blood run down his Asian face made me think of the faces of my own Asian father and brother. That is what happens when we see Asians and Asian Americans in the news as hurt physically by figures imbued with authority: we identify with that pain, wondering how easily we could have been the ones receiving that brutal treatment. Thus, the main message of my poster became “Stop brutality.” Dr. Dao was brutalized. The entities enacting brutality included United Airlines and O’Hare officers. I did not specify those parties; I chose to keep the imperative open to ambiguous audiences. While I presumed that those at the protest would realize that my message was centered on Dr. Dao, the photo might be interpreted differently, if devoid of context. Now, I see that without specifying Dr. Dao as part of the poster’s message, the image may be seen as a broad message of activism against brutality in general.

From earlier experiences with activism for social justice, I knew that one practice of the visual discourse of protest posters was to include popular hashtags related to the activism of the event for the wording on the poster. As tweets use hashtags to connect to a larger conversation held online (Korn 2013, 2015a), posters that employ hashtags represent tweets materially; posters made out of paper are held above or in front of a person's body, making visible a short message intended for a public audience. The choice to include #UnfriendlySkiesChi was taken from an existing digital activist movement in advocacy of Dr. Dao. Using Twitter, I found that Asian Americans Advancing Justice had designated #UnfriendlySkiesChi as the organizing key term for online protest related to our physical protest at O'Hare. Protesters used the hashtag to upload photos taken at the event. Like Veronika Novoselova (2016), I choose to see digital and in-person activism as imbricated, instead of polarized; the hashtag of #UnfriendlySkiesChi became the connector between our physical and digital sociopolitical actions, creating spaces for debate and information offline and online (Fernandez-Planells, Figueras-Maz, and Pàmpols 2014). While my poster's message of "stop brutality" was general, #UnfriendlySkiesChi provided a specific context to my message by denoting the location of "Chi," which is an abbreviation for Chicago, for stopping brutality. In addition, #UnfriendlySkiesChi identifies the source of the brutality of the "UnfriendlySkies," which is an explicit criticism of how United Airlines chose to make air travel the direct opposite of its slogan, "Fly the friendly skies."

The hashtag #ActivistAsian was my own act of personal resistance. My earlier research (Korn 2015b) had found that Asian Americans were battling the stereotype that we are apathetic about politics by producing digital discourse that emphasized the identity of Asian Americans as activist. In resistance against dominant discourse, I decided to add #ActivistAsian to my poster to draw attention to my personal embodiment, a body that reads as both Asian and femme (Korn 2017a). I was participating in an intentional act of individual racial formation: showing up and being visible at political events is how I wanted to change what it means to be Asian American (Korn 2017b). I did not choose to use #ActivistAsians (with an "s") because I did not want to speak for or characterize all Asians as activist (because we are not). To keep the hashtag short (and alliterative), I did not use words within the hashtag that referenced gender. I expected the hashtag would imply instruction to the reader to view my body for "confirmation" of my race by introducing race explicitly on my poster and in tweets; through ocularcentrism (Korn 2015b), a person that looked at my embodiment in person or at my photo online would read me as an Asian femme woman (Korn 2017a). I identify as a feminist in my work, and the majority of protesters at this event were Asian American women. Here, I would

ask whether my activism, in physical or online formats, must contain the word “feminism” to be considered feminist by others. Because I have been consistent about self-labeling as feminist in my professional work and as a personal identity, and because I view the current gender system as unjust and believe that feminists should work together to enact change (Liss and Erchull 2010), especially in a time when all women, regardless of feminist identification, believe that feminists are viewed negatively (Ramsey et al. 2007), I believe my activist choices are feminist, even if I do not choose to add the word “feminist” explicitly on to a poster.

### **Circulation considerations: Priming and capitalism**

The exact image above has circulated widely on traditional news media webpages with professional photographers and journalists, which is the focus of this essay. It has been found in *The Chicago Tribune* (Zorn 2017), *The Christian Science Monitor* (Velasco 2017), Slovakian newspaper *Dennik N* (Shemesh 2017), *The Japan Times* (Otake and Aoki 2017), *Korea Times Chicago* (2017), *The San Francisco Chronicle* (Koenig 2017), *South China Morning Post* (Hollingsworth and Zheng 2017), *USA Today* (Demonstrators at O’Hare Airport protest against United Airlines 2017), and *The Washington Times* (Kelly 2017), among at least 140 news outlet webpages.

But before you saw this image, when was the last time you saw a picture consisting entirely of Asian American activists? A scarcity exists in mainstream news of images of Asian Americans as activists. As I mentioned in the above section, Asian Americans are depicted by dominant media as disengaged politically (Korn 2015b; Nakagawa 2012; Ono and Pham 2009; Sathish 2015). Rarely do mainstream outlets choose to include images of Asian Americans at civic rallies, voting sites, polling places, or volunteer booths, even though we are at all those areas. The distinction here is that the victim and the protesters shared the same race of Asian American. Photojournalists for dominant media outlets were primed to look for Asian protesters to photograph after being informed that the victim was Asian and after seeing the widely-spread video via online social media of Dr. Dao as a battered Asian. The priming of different races influences the visual perception and detection of faces (Chiao, Heck, Nakayama, and Ambady 2006). In this case of activism, photographers expected Asians to rush to the aid of another Asian, so capturing images of Asians engaged at this particular protest was rendered normal. A reason that this particular photo has been propagated within media outlets extensively is due to priming.

Another factor in selecting images to run in newspapers is the consideration for how such images might impact that source's profits. For example, if *USA Today* had chosen to run a poster with a message in English to "Fire Munoz," the newspaper could be accused of taking a political side against United Airlines, which could result in a loss of sales of its newspapers and newspaper advertisements by those that support United Airlines specifically and are part of the aviation industry generally. Choosing not to feature photographs containing overtly political messages that might impact a news outlet's profits is considered good economic practice in capitalist society because the continued existence of a news producer hinges on selling its product to its audience as consumers (McQuail 1997; Richardson 2007; Schudson 1989). Related, the evaluation of a photograph divorced from its text might be prudent for a company that prioritizes its profits over a different balancing of fairness and coverage. The choice to circulate the above photo could be judged "safe," even if an individual did not take the time to read the text accompanying the image because a message of reducing brutality of humans in general is not likely to offend (any thoughtful person).

## Conclusions

For this study of the visuals of protest by traditional news media webpages, I have taken one image in which I was a protest participant as an Asian American and traced the evolution of that photograph from its inception and manifestation, to its representation and circulation. This photo of protest against the brutal mistreatment of Dr. David Dao was taken in Chicago and became transnational in its propagation via 140+ traditional news outlet webpages across countries. Among the issues I have raised are the ability to self-label actions as feminist without writing "feminist" explicitly on protest posters, the tendency for the press to depict Asian Americans in apolitical terms, and external constraints upon the news to use images that preserve, rather than endanger, their profitability. Resistance continues to be racialized and gendered, digitized and embodied, concurrently.

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