

MOVIE REVIEW: *VINCENT WHO?*

*Directed by
Tony Lam and Produced by Curtis Chin, 2008*

By Yeon Me Kim

On June 19, 1982, two white autoworkers killed Vincent Chin, a Chinese-American man whom they mistook as Japanese at the peak of anti-Japanese sentiments in Detroit. The American auto industry was going through a severe recession; Japan, its competitor, was blamed for the countless layoffs of U.S. autoworkers as Japan's auto industry was growing while the American auto industry was in a severe recession. Vincent Chin was brutally bludgeoned to death with a baseball bat during a night out when he was celebrating his bachelor's party. Because of this hate crime, Vincent's life ended at the young age of twenty-seven.

Ronald Ebens and Michael Nitz, Vincent's murderers, pled guilty to manslaughter and were sentenced to three years of probation and a \$3,720 fine. Judge Kaufman said that imprisoning a man who has committed to the same company for 17–18 years would not do any good for the society. This lenient ruling outraged Asian-Americans and galvanized them to organize a protest movement. Lisa Chan, an attorney, initiated "The American Citizens for Justice," to help publicize the incident. Publication led to rallies and public outrage eventually became the drive for the 1984 federal civil rights case against the defendants. The jury gave Ebens a twenty-five year sentence and found him guilty of violating Vincent's civil rights under 18 U.S.C. Section 245(b)(2)(F). Nitz was acquitted of all charges. Eben's case was overturned on appeal, however, because the trial court had refused to admit certain evidence. On retrial in Cincinnati, Ohio, a jury acquitted Ebens of all charges.

The documentary "Vincent Who?" directed by Tony Lam and produced by Curtis Chin, examines how Vincent Chin's case has influenced the Asian-American community especially with regards to the recognition of their civil rights. The documentary focuses on a national town hall meeting memorializing the 25th anniversary of Chin's death. "Vincent Who" includes interviews of Asian-Americans involved in the case and Asian-American civil rights activists sharing their stories and reflections. The documentary suggests that the pan-Asian-American movement emerged after the murder. The biased court ruling for the defendants became a watershed event for Asian-Americans to recognize the need to call for protection of their civil rights.

The Asian-American community was outraged by Chin's murder. Not only was he killed because of his outward appearance, but the defendants' sentences for his murder were unfairly lenient. One of the interviewees, Ms. Nhung Truong, a District Representative for California Congressman Adam Schiff, described her outrage when she heard the story for the first time. A person selling "V. Chin" t-shirts at a local festival told her about the murder. The case changed her life and motivated her into politics and community activism. She became an agent for preventing the abuse of Asian-Americans' civil rights by seeking to raise the Asian-American voice in the American political

system. Ms. Truong expressed that Chin would have been alive if he were not Asian-American. She said that the ruling for Chin's murderers would not have come out so unfairly if he were not Asian-American.

The outrage of Asian-American community forced them to come together and fight for their rights. The documentary suggests that the murder brought the Asian-American community together. The stark injustice perhaps tapped into a grudge subconsciously harbored for feeling as outsiders in the American society. The interviewees in "Vincent Who?" were amazed at how the murder fired up a local Asian-American movement that eventually sparked a national pan-Asian-American civil rights movement.

Dale Minami, a civil rights attorney featured in the documentary, explained that the race issue in the U.S. is always framed as a dichotomy between black and white. "Asian-American" is not part of the discussion of civil rights under the Fourteenth Amendment. This is partly because the immigration history of Asian-Americans is short, especially compared to that of African-Americans. Minami theorizes that, unlike African-Americans, Asian-Americans are still influenced by the culture of their country of origin. Often, people regard Asian-Americans' lingering ties to their country of origin as being disloyal to the U.S. This view may lead people, like Chin's murders, to view Asian-Americans with suspicion. The autoworkers expressed their anger against the Japanese auto industry toward Chin, who they assumed was a Japanese-American.

This documentary suggests that the pan-Asian-American civil rights movement rejects the view that Asian-Americans are necessarily tied to their country of origin. They also reject the view that these ties reinforce the gap between Asian-Americans and the majority of U.S. society. Although some Asian-Americans have cultural ties to their country of origin, this is not unique within U.S. society.¹ The U.S. has traditionally been a melting pot of immigrants, who have always brought new cultures to this country.² Yet, these cultures have been assimilated into the mainstream. Relative to other immigrant groups, Asian-Americans are late arrivals to U.S. society.³ They are now going through the transition of full-fledged integration into society, as other immigrants did in the past.⁴ Thus, they should not be discouraged from melting into the U.S. mainstream.⁵ Once Asian-Americans become citizens, they should be treated equally in every aspect; origin or culture should not be grounds for discrimination.

"Vincent Who?" describes an important historical landmark served by Vincent Chin, an unintended martyr. The discrimination against Asian-Americans during the Chin trials inspired the pan-Asian-American civil right movement which continues to address the problems of discrimination. Through the efforts of this movement, realization of the Fourteenth Amendment's Equal Protections Clause rights will become whole by rendering equal rights to every American citizen.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Fundamentals of Identity and Culture, Asian American Alliance, <http://www.asianamericanalliance.com/The-Fundamentals-of-Identity-and-Culture.html> (last visited 3/16/09).

² 'Melting pot' America, BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/4931534.stm> (last visited 3/16/09).

³ Asian American History Timeline, <http://www.cetel.org/timeline.html> (Though very early Asian immigrants came to the U.S. continent in the 1600s, a large number of Asian immigrants started coming to the States in the 1800s.) (last visited 3/16/09); *see also*, Immigration History and Statistics, Asian American Alliance, <http://www.asianamericanalliance.com/Immigration-History-and-Statistics.html> (last visited 3/16/09).

⁴ SRILATA BHATTACHARYYA, FROM "YELLOW PERIL" TO "MODEL MINORITY": THE TRANSITION OF ASIAN AMERICANS. 7-8 (2001), http://eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/19/db/ec.pdf (2001).

⁵ Asian American Alliance, Advancing Equality: Stopping Prejudice against Asian Americans, *available at* <http://www.asianamericanalliance.com/Advancing-Equality.html> (last visited 3/16/09).

National South Asian Summit

Founder's Celebration

April 24th – 26th, 2009

The 2009 South Asian Summit is hosted by the South Asian Law Students Association at the American University Washington College of Law & South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT).

The Summit provides an opportunity for South Asian organizational leaders, community members, and students to engage with policymakers in DC; to learn about issues of concern; and to strategize around best practices and future collaborations.

This will be a great opportunity to meet lawyers, advocates, students, professionals, service providers, and non-profit staff members from around the country.

The event is FREE for WCL Students, Faculty, Staff, Alumni, and Affiliates.

A Quick Look at the Agenda

- ▶ **Friday, April 24th/10AM–4PM:** Briefing to and from Congress, meetings with Congressional members, briefings with Administration officials, and DC site visits
- ▶ **Friday, April 24th/7PM–9PM:** ChangeMaker Awards Reception (K&L Gates – 1601 K St. NW)
- ▶ **Saturday, April 25th/9AM–8PM:** Discussions and workshops on issues affecting the South Asian community as well as skills-building trainings (American University, Washington College of Law), followed by a reception (6:30–8PM)
- ▶ **Sunday, April 26th/9AM–12:00PM:** Regional Breakouts, Open Space, Closing Session (American University, Washington College of Law)

Register using this link: www.wcl.american.edu/secl

For more information: visit www.saalt.org or email summit09@saalt.org