

# Exactly Who Is An Asian American?

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The words "Chinese" and "Asian" are often used interchangeably when describing Americans of Asian descent. This broad stereotyping occurs despite growing evidence of the varied spectrum of cultures that fall under the umbrella group, Asian American.

In a recent [study by the Committee of 100](#) that was designed to gauge attitudes about Chinese Americans, non-Asian respondents generally failed to differentiate between Chinese Americans and all Asian Americans. As a result, stereotypes toward Chinese Americans and Asian Americans were nearly identical.

The idea that all Americans of Asian descent are "Chinese" may be rooted in the fact that, just three decades ago, 96 percent of all Asians in the United States were Chinese, Japanese or Filipino.

The latest data from the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 87.5 percent of the Asians in the United States are now comprised of six different ethnicities, however, making the question, "Are you Chinese or Japanese?" an outdated conversation piece to pose to Asian Americans.

Filipinos, who now number 1.9 million in the United States, are the second largest Asian group in the country, followed by Indian Americans at 1.7 million. Vietnamese Americans are the fourth-largest Asian community at 1.12 million. Americans of Korean descent number 1.1 million and are the fifth-largest group, while those of Japanese descent are the sixth at 797,000.

The Chinese-American community remains the largest U.S. Asian group at 2.4 million.

Ignorance about the diversity of the Asian-American community is often attributed to the absence of a prominent advocacy group for Asian Americans. One reason often cited for the lack of a vocal public presence is the reluctance in Asian cultures to create confrontations.

But a more concrete factor for the absence of a salient advocacy group could be the lack of a unifying identity in the Asian-American community, which makes the prospect of mobilizing the wide range of cultures a near impossibility.

According to Ada Lio, the guide for Asian American Culture, an online site that discusses Asian-American topics, "a lot of people don't realize the division and strong sense of identity among the different Asian cultures." Lio said there are long-term political tensions between different Asian groups that have been carried over to Asian groups in the United States.

Nevertheless, some contend Asians in the United States should simply be referred to as Americans. Many that post their opinions on the Asian American Culture forum Lio

hosts say that to differentiate between those of Japanese, Filipino or Korean descent might "create a divisive environment and where you begin focusing on the differences rather than the commonalities," she said.

At the same time, even Asian Americans who grew up in suburban America probably have been influenced by faraway Asian traditions.

An overwhelming majority of Asians in the United States are foreign-born, according to Saul Gitlin, vice president of strategic marketing services and new business development at Kang & Lee Advertising, based in New York City. While 79 percent of the U.S. Vietnamese population was born overseas, the same is true for 69 percent of the Korean and Chinese populations in the United States. This means that the parents of a hefty portion of Asian Americans were immigrants who carried over cultural values from Asian countries.

"Asian kids who are born here have to deal with the fact that their parents have very different values from them," said Lio, who is the child of Chinese immigrants. "But Asian Americans have assimilated to Western culture, so to equate them as having the same ideologies as those Asians outside the country is unfair."

Nevertheless, there is a persistent idea among non-Asian Americans that Asian Americans [aren't really Americans](#), and this has colored negative feelings toward the group, according to Lio. "In America, the mentality is that Asian Americans and Asians are the same," Lio said.

The Committee of 100 study found that 32 percent of Americans felt Chinese Americans are more loyal to China than the United States and 46 percent felt there is a problem of Chinese Americans passing secret information to the Chinese government.

It is also not commonly recognized that Asian Indians and those of Pakistani and Bengali and South Asian descent fall under the category of Asian Americans as well. The number of Asian Indians has doubled over the past decade, however, meaning their presence will greatly shape the identity of Asian-American culture in coming years.

Just as the concept of what constitutes a white person has evolved over decades from meaning primarily Anglo Saxons to eventually including those of Italian, Irish and Jewish descent, Lio said "the concept of Asian Americans will continue to evolve as well."