

Model/Minority Veteran

The Queer Asian American Challenge to Post-9/11 U.S. Military Culture

LONG T. BUI

This chapter considers the way gay Asian American veterans challenged U.S. military policy and culture in the post-9/11 period, unearthing issues of discrimination within a state institution to which they committed their lives. Many scholars have written about the “War on Terror” as a pivotal experiential moment for South Asians and LGBTQ+ people, but less discussed is how queers of Asian descent were at the forefront of challenging the world’s most powerful military force.¹ As individuals facing multiple forms of marginalization, there is a double bind faced by those seeking to serve their country while defending themselves against the oppressive conditions they meet in such capacity.

In her work on martial citizenship, Lucy Salyer argues for more work on Asian Americans in the armed forces as exemplars of “citizen soldiers,” since military service offered one mechanism for Asians to naturalize and gain acceptance in a country that excluded them as sexual deviants and perverse subjects.² Simeon Man observes that during the Cold War, “bad” Asians were the targets of war, whereas the “good” ones were funneled into the military, but inclusion was partial.³ Margot Canaday documents how gay men in particular were routed from military service due to their perception as potential communist agents and usurpers of the family and nation.⁴ This kind of discrimination flies in the face of the U.S. military’s credo that all soldiers are treated the same when they put on their uniforms. Whereas the dominant archetype of the good soldier has not traditionally included sexual minorities or people of color, the good minority, or “model minority,” has been used to first construct Asian Americans and later gays and lesbians as passive beings who do not need to fight (or know how to).⁵ Through a critical juxtaposition of the queer and Asian, I also scrutinize the figure of the model/minority veteran in order to expose ongoing political struggles related to those terms.⁶ In doing so, I recognize the queer veteran of color as “a product of this contradiction between individual agency and collective racialization.”⁷

In the following, I profile media cases that speak to the tense predicament of Asian gays as duty-bound model soldiers and obedient model minorities.⁸

The chosen examples involve controversies surrounding conscientious objection to preemptive war and gays serving in the military. My critical inquiries interrogate GIs' resistance to and complicity with state power, indexing their treatment as voluntary enlisted participants in an environment where difference is not always fully tolerated and where one must always obey the command of superiors.

Conscientious Dissenters and the Memory of Internment and Colonialism

The post-9/11 moment ushered in a new era of U.S. imperialism, pushing some military personnel to consider how the U.S. liberal affirmation of egalitarianism is “at once contradicted by the larger context in which that affirmation is advanced.”⁹ First Lieutenant Ehren K. Watada found instant notoriety when he became the first military officer in the country charged with “public dissent” since 1965. Watada refused his deployment to Iraq in June 2006 as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The Japanese-Chinese American was the only commissioned officer at the time to relinquish his duties because he believed he had a personal duty to oppose an “immoral” war that would make him responsible for war crimes if he joined. Upon arrest, he said, “I think they will do their best to make an example of me.”¹⁰ Even though he did not think at first his was a case about race or racism, he found it curious the majority of soldiers who voiced their support for him have been nonwhites. In an interview, he says, “Whether they see me as giving a voice to minorities in the Army or simply fighting for minority rights I don’t know.”¹¹ Framing his protest as a form of service to country, Watada weighs in on his status as a model/minority soldier when he claims to follow the legacy of Nissei men who contributed to the U.S. war effort during World War II while their people were interned: “My decision brings honor to vet-eran JAs. Instead of perpetuating war crimes and a war of aggression, I am actively trying to put a stop to it. Instead of being the ‘quiet, obedient Japanese,’ I am fulfilling my oath to protect my soldiers and this country from our government.”¹² As a former Eagle Scout and university graduate with a bachelor’s degree in finance who needed no assistance from the army for his education, Watada presents a good Asian gone bad, but he is also trying to be the best soldier that he can be despite going rogue.

Watada’s insurrection against hegemonic systems was preceded by an-other API veteran whose form of dissension could not be interpreted so nobly. Marine reservist Lance Corporal Stephen Eagle Funk was the first U.S. veteran of any rank to publicly object to the war. The noncommissioned officer made news appearing railing against the war, and pundits took note

of his “strange” ethnic roots (Pilipino) and Funk’s “second way out” of active-duty deployment after he admitted he was gay in violation of the military’s standing “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy. Failing to report to duty, the reportedly “soft-spoken” man completed a half-year sentence in a military prison for desertion, punishment for the fact that he did not pursue the “smartest way” to get dissenter status, since one must show up to work first to claim it.¹³ As a mixed race working-class queer, the Pinoy pacifist did not hold the same social status commonly associated with middle-class Japanese Americans like Watada, embodying instead a “bad” brown Asian of the Global South.¹⁴ In his official public statement against the U.S. invading Iraq, Funk says this: “I could not remain silent. In my mind that would have been true cowardice, having a chance to do some good, but playing it safe instead . . . You don’t have to be a cog in the machinery of war.”¹⁵

Mainstream publications like *The Guardian* felt it necessary to mention that Funk had dropped out of classes at the University of Southern California, while working part-time in a pet shop.¹⁶ The example of Funk sheds light on the plight of a “duped” derelict youth who joined the military for the wrong reasons and later admitted “there are so many more ways to get money for school.”¹⁷ As Robyn Rodriguez explains, Funk communicates the difficult experience of queers in not only the U.S. nation-state but in the Filipino diasporic nation, where heterosexual youth are venerated as the good example for poor immigrant communities aspiring toward model minority excellence.¹⁸ In an interview for the leading gay magazine *Advocate*, Funk says his decision to become a conscientious objector was related to being a gay man in a military regime that is inherently immoral.¹⁹ Meanwhile, ethnic media sources like *Filipinas* recognized Funk became politicized only after witnessing the people’s power in ousting the Philippines’ president Joseph Estrada, demonstrating how “Filipinos in all walks of war” can link the global “War of Terror” with domestic violence in the former colony of the United States.²⁰ Both Watada and Funk are gaysians who joined the military right after 9/11 only to reject warmongering, but Funk’s case cannot be read as fully analogous to Watada since the two men inhabit different social strata and even ideological orientations. The latter’s higher rank, ethnicity, and class privilege made him a cause célèbre of the antiwar left, whereas the former’s “queerer than queer” image and decision to step back from the limelight—due to public pressures on his precarious personal life—demonstrate how the media “play an integral role in maintaining the norms of good from bad subjects, and [how] the subjects under its gaze not only consent to, but even participate actively in, the policing of this boundary line.”²¹

These twenty-first-century examples of social containment dredge up the Cold War legacy of the model minority myth, which Robert Lee discusses as originally revolved around anxieties related to communism, race-mixing,

and homosexuality. In such agonistic contexts, “accommodation would be rewarded,” and “militancy would be contained or crushed.”²² In the delimitation of transgression, certain Asian groups like the Chinese and Japanese came to be seen as domesticated model minority types (though they resisted this label), while other groups like Southeast Asian refugees signified the unruly anti-model minorities that had to be corralled into the military due to their lower socioeconomic status and “violent nature.” Here, we might ask how other “bad Asians” like gay Koreans upend the heteronormative racial order and “resist the status quo because they have already been excluded from it or oppressed, silence, or limited by it.”²³ The next section turns to the issue of gays serving in the military to further explore this.

“Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” and the Asian American Closet

One of the most divisive policies in the U.S. military is the longtime ban on gays and the policy of “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” (DADT), where one can be gay but is discouraged from publicizing it. LGBTQ+ activists have lambasted this policy for years and accused the military of enforcing a mandatory closet for all queer soldiers. DADT found its biggest public opponent in Lieutenant Dan Choi, a Korean American member of the National Guard who admitted, “I was afraid people would find out [I’m gay], and I thought the military would be a great way to hide.”²⁴ Before Choi launched his invective against this military rule and outing himself in the process, another queer Asian received publicity for being terminated under DADT. Sandy Tsao, a Chinese American second lieutenant in the U.S. Army who is also a lesbian, sent a letter on the Chinese New Year to President Obama days after his inauguration. The letter was published in the *Windy City Times* as a cover story.²⁵ Tsao was discharge under the DADT implemented in 1993 under President Bill Clinton, which “tolerated” gays only if they do not tell or show anyone they are gay; any admission or revelation of a homosexual lifestyle provides grounds for immediate discharge. Coming on the heels of Tsao’s announcement, Lt. Dan Choi became the poster child for the movement to end DADT (even though other veterans contributed) after publicly coming out on the popular TV news program *The Rachel Maddow Show*, and proclaiming that the law forced veterans to lie to their own officers, thus violating the military’s own code against dishonesty. Choi was terminated right after appearing on the show. Like other gay servicemen found in specialty occupations, Choi was one of a few Arabic language experts. Despite their critical importance, fear of queer bodies and their potential disruption to the homosocial “unity” of combat units superseded the demand for talent

and skills, which disrupts the American myth of meritocracy and education as the great leveler of social inequality.²⁶

As an open test to the discriminatory policy, Dan Choi went to a recruiting station to rejoin the U.S. Army—a request that was rejected.²⁷ After his discharge, the lieutenant became the most visible campaigner against DADT, performing public stunts like taping his mouth or chaining himself to the front of the White House fence. As a main spokesperson for the Knights Out organization, Choi led marines, sailors, soldiers and those in the air force to demonstrate against the Democratic National Committee fundraiser. He began a hunger strike, declaring it would last until Obama repealed DADT and added a nondiscrimination policy to the military code. The strike ended in a week after a federal judge ordered the Department of Defense to stop enforcing the policy. Following its repeal by Congress, Choi was invited to President Obama's signing of the bill on December 22, 2010. It seemed gay equality had arrived, especially in the same period that saw same-sex marriage rights and more LGBTQ+ representation in popular culture. Leading gay magazine *Out* featured Dan Choi in their list of one hundred "People of the Year," placing him prominently on their 2012 cover of celebrities. As the only Asian face and only member of the armed forces within this Hollywood lineup, Choi epitomizes a minority (Asian) within a minority (gay) within another minority (vet). He queers the model minority sense of Asians as weak and invisible (pointing up their absence in white gay media), even if he might shore up what Jasbir Puar calls "homonationalism" and the production of gay patriots.²⁸

Choi's battles with institutional homophobia appear unrelated to those of race, but these issues were not mutually exclusive. In an interview, the Korean American makes the following comments linking the gay closet with the "Asian American closet."²⁹ As he admits, "Being Asian American can be isolating at times . . . I experienced it at West Point and in the army; many times, I was the only 'openly Asian' member of my team. It is isolating and stressful. Racism hurts the entire team."³⁰ Choi's ardent fight for acceptance as an out gay member of the armed forces posits the dangers of being out as an Asian American. Choi's speech act stresses that racism and homophobia is harmful to teamwork. In this manner, Choi is hoping to reform or change the military, not entirely undermine it.

As the quagmire of Iraq and Afghanistan turned into the longest wars for the United States, the demand for higher recruitment numbers turned urgent. A push for diversity added to what Melani McAlister calls "multicultural militarism" and the need to conscript minorities to fight wars around the world.³¹ Under the agenda of global counterterrorism, model/minority veterans like Choi provide a safeguard against the queer racialized foreign threat found everywhere.³² The model/minority vet buoys the U.S.

empire as it seeks to expand external borders and reorganize its domestic order to reconfigure the insider-outsider dyad through “inclusive excellence.” Recognizing Choi’s complicity with power does not deny his bravery but instead forces recognition of the mainstreaming of identity politics vis-à-vis geopolitics. Though gay rights advocates made little mention of his Asian background, touting Choi as a new hero of the LGBTQ+ movement, the coastal guardsman often evoked the racial language of the model/minority vet as he stated in one API magazine interview: “When you are a stigmatized minority in the military, you put yourself in a mindset that says, ‘I’m going to just show everybody that I’m the best at this.’”³³

Before entering the spotlight as a model veteran gone bad, Choi was already ruled to be undisciplined, like when in 2005 he punched a platoon sergeant in the chest. His slowness in getting promotion respective to peers made him an anti-model minority, one unable to perform well under pressure or listen to orders. Amid railing against DADT, Lt. Dan Choi was admitted to the psychiatric ward due to mental breakdown and anxiety attacks.³⁴ Such events give the impression that Asian queers remain pathological, falling apart at any minute. Yet these personal “failures” are teachable moments to zoom into societal norms and expectations that never fully congeal within the individual.

Conclusion

The provocative opposition posed by gaysians against military dogma reposes the eternal question of who is a loyal citizen-subject and who is bad subject, something that has always haunted Asian Americans and queer people. While Choi’s wish for a gay-friendlier military came true even as the battle for transgender rights heated up, his liberal stance still begs the question of how particular minoritarian subjects are subordinated to the larger system of power that unevenly interprets them as model/minority veterans. In the end, the ideological work of gay rights advocacy within the military must tackle the larger underpinnings of hypermilitarization that conscientious dissenters obviate.³⁵ Demands for minority civil rights and social justice coincide with the global call to arms within an expanding American war machine. This modern expansion of “freedom with violence,” as Chandy Reddy calls it, urges attention to the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, and even gender (e.g., cisgender gay men as political visible actors and activists compared to lesbians and others).

In telling a specific story about racial and sexual identity formation in the new millennium, my analysis complicates the model minority descriptor often attributed to gays and Asian Americans by examining it in conjunction with the trope of the good soldier.³⁶ At a time when increasing

demand for equity, dignity, and personhood is matched by a disregard for the lives of so many communities of color, the queer Asian GI's complex rendering within policy and public discourse transacts a critical prism through which we can discombobulate matters of bigotry, democracy, empire, heroism, failure, and ethics. Insofar as the post-9/11 milieu intensified conversations about cultural belonging, the political work of gaysian veterans illustrates what it means to be inside and outside, and how perhaps to think beyond that duality.

NOTES

1. Jasbir Puar and Amit Rai, "The Remaking of a Model Minority: Perverse Projectiles under the Specter of (Counter) Terrorism," *Social Text* 22, no. 3 (2004): 75–104.

2. Lucy Salyer, "Baptism by Fire: Race, Military Service, and US Citizenship Policy, 1918–1935," *Journal of American History* 91, no. 3 (2004): 847–876. For general overview of the incorporation of Asian "aliens" in U.S. military, see Cara Wong and Grace Cho, "Jus Meritum: Citizenship for Service," in *Transforming Politics, Transforming America: The Political and Civic Incorporation of Immigrants in the United States*, edited by Taeku Lee, Karthick Ramakrishnan, and Ricardo Ramirez (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2010).

3. Simeon Man, *Soldiering through Empire: Race and the Making of the Decolonizing Pacific* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2018).

4. Margot Canaday, *The Straight State: Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

5. Stewart Chang, "Is Gay the New Asian: Marriage Equality and the Dawn of a New Model Minority," *Asian American Law Journal* 23 (2016): 5–38.

6. Critical juxtaposition is a method of analysis from Yen Le Espiritu, *Body Counts: The Vietnam War and Militarized Refugees* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014).

7. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, "'Look, an Asian!': The Politics of Racial Interpellation in the Wake of the Virginia Tech Shootings," *Journal of Asian American Studies* 11, no. 1 (2008): 45.

8. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

9. Chandan Reddy, *Freedom with Violence: Race, Sexuality, and the US State* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 245.

10. Hal Bernton, "Officer at Fort Lewis Calls Iraq War Illegal, Refuses Order to Go," *Seattle Times*, June 7, 2006, <https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=20060607&slug=nogo7m>.

11. Caroline Aoyai-Stom, "Exclusive: One on One With 1st Lt. Ehren Watada," *Pacific Citizen*, August 30, 2006, http://news.newamericamedia.org/news/view_article.html?article_id=0c13ccb6d447675317a9fb2094973a96.

12. Ibid.

13. Ji Hyun Lim, "APA Conscientious Objector Says He Couldn't Kill; Funk Warns Recruits about the Morality of Joining Military," *Asianweek* 24, no. 34 (2003): 7.

14. Eve Oishi, "Bad Asians: New Film and Video by Queer Asian American Artists," in *Countervisions: Asian American Film Criticism* 174 (2000): 221.

15. Stephen Funk, "Stephen Funk's Statement," in *Dissent: Voices of Conscience*, edited by Ann Wright and Susan Dixon (Kihei, HI: Koa Books, 2008), 152–153.

16. Duncan Campbell, "Marine Who Said No to Killing on His Conscience," *The Guardian*, April 1, 2003.

17. After he left the marines, Funk eventually enrolled in a city college before transferring to Stanford in 2005, working toward a degree in international relations. Funk used his position as the chapter president of the San Francisco Iraq Veterans Against the War organization to challenge educational barriers for many who may not know how to get into "elite" schools like Stanford University, where he eventually matriculated.

18. Robyn Rodriguez and Nerissa S. Balce, "American Insecurity and Radical Filipino Community Politics," *Peace Review* 16, no. 2 (2004): 131–140.

19. *Ibid.*

20. Vivian Araullo Zalvidea and Emmily Magtalas, "Filipinos from All Walks of War," *Filipinas* 12, no. 133 (2003): 28.

21. Sylvia Shin Huey Chong, "'Look, an Asian!'" 4.

22. Robert G. Lee, "The Cold War Construction of the Model Minority Myth," in *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*, edited by Min Zhou and J. V. Gatewood (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 469–470.

23. Eve Oishi, "Bad Asians," 221.

24. "Lt. Dan Choi Talks Being Asian and Gay in the Military," *Nuasian*, January 20, 2012, <http://nuasian.wordpress.com>.

25. Tracy Baim, "Obama Responds to Lesbian Soldier's Letter," *Windy City Times*, May 6, 2009, www.windycitymediagroup.com.

26. He was also an active participant in international affairs like participating in a gay pride march in Moscow that turned violent in a country hostile to LGBT rights.

27. Jessica Green, "Gay Soldier Dan Choi Re-enlists in US Army," *Pink News*, October 20, 2010, www.pinknews.co.uk.

28. Jasbir K. Puar and Amit Rai, "Monster, Terrorist, Fag: The War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots," *Social Text* 20, no. 3 (2002): 117–148.

29. Jean Shin, Jean, "The Asian American Closet," *Asian Law Journal* 11 (2004): 1–21.

30. Mark Footer, "Dan Choi: The Gay-Rights Activist and Former US military Officer Tells Mark Footer about His Fight for the Right to Tell the Truth," *South China Morning Post*, January 8, 2012, 14.

31. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East since 1945* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

32. Keith Aoki, "Foreign-ness and Asian American Identities: Yellowface, World War II Propaganda, and Bifurcated Racial Stereotypes," *UCLA Asian Pacific American Law Journal* 4 (1996): 1–61.

33. "Lt. Dan Choi Talks Being Asian and Gay in the Military."

34. Susan Donaldson James, "Gay Activist Dan Choi Hospitalized for Breakdown," *ABC News*, December 16, 2010, <https://abcnews.go.com/Health/gay-activist-dan-choi-hospitalized-nervous-breakdown/story?id=12413069>.

35. Choi's supported the whistleblower actions of transgender soldier Pvt. Chelsea Manning, who was arrested for leaking sensitive classified U.S. documents containing embarrassing revelations to the open online source WikiLeaks.

36. George H. Quester, "Demographic Trends and Military Recruitment: Surprising Possibilities," *Parameters* 35, no. 2 (2005): 27–40.