

A SQUIB IN THE WORLD

YOU DON'T
BELONG HERE

FELICITY FIELDS

THE HIGH COST OF ASIAN STEREOTYPES IN MAGIC

BY FELICE LING



*Hello- Felicity here. From the beginning I never wanted to be the only writer of **A Squib in The World**. As much as I am passionate about inclusion and diversity within the world of magic I know I cannot write about everyone's experience. As I've explained before a Squib in the world of Harry Potter is someone who is born to magical parents with no magical abilities. In reality a Squib is a small explosion, if used in this way it is a spark that can ignite a much larger flame. Today I am giving control of the squib that is this column to a wonderful magician! Felice Ling is a street performer, who performs mostly in the northeastern United States; she has entertained audiences throughout the world at various International Fringe Festivals. Felice received her masters in Anthropology from the University of Chicago, where she focused her studies on street performers' impact in public spaces. She is the founder of *The Magic Lab*, a brand-new open mic for magicians held once a month in Boston. You can follow her on Instagram @just.felice.*

Until Next time..

Over the phone, 23-year-old Kwon Hyuk (pronounced hee-yeok) was articulate and thoughtful. He paused often, but when he spoke, he spoke with the force and confidence of someone who had thought deeply about the issues I was asking him. In the first of two conversations, Kwon recalled for me his journey to America from South Korea as an 18-year-old idealist, driven to meet his heroes:

"I taught myself the English language, crossed the ocean... traveled from coast to coast. I slept in IHOPs with my suit on because I didn't have any place to sleep. I did all of that because I love magic, and I wanted to pursue my dream, and I wanted to perform at the Magic Castle."

At the time, Kwon Hyuk believed in the "**brotherhood of magicians**" – that "if you were into magic, it doesn't matter how old you are, what gender you are, or what your skin looks like. We can all be friends."

But five years of interactions with magicians and laypeople in the United States, and that

idealism has all but vanished. Chatting with an Uber driver as they drove past the Strip in Las Vegas just a few weeks ago, Kwon let slip the following words: "Ah, I hate magicians. They're the worst." Why did he say that? What happened in those five years? What did he experience in this country of ours that turned this idealist into a cynic?

Magic has a long history of yellowface. Think blackface – but for Asians.

You'll find it in our props, where Asian cartoon have been painted on with slanted eyes, strange clothing, and funny hats used to mimic traditional garments. You'll find it on performers: both historical (and modern-day) individuals who, as one Asian Canadian magician described it, "put on thick glasses, insert buck teeth, and wear a skull cap, to portray the laughing-stock cartoon of a Chinese magician." These artifacts and images are a very real – and, to people of Asian descent, a very upsetting – part of our history.

Julie Eng, the executive director of *Magicana*, a Canadian-based arts organization dedicated to the advancement of magic as a performing art, explained: *"You have to understand why this is upsetting to me: because it's a caricature. You are making fun of who I am without even knowing who I am."* But as Eng rightly notes, this certainly is not a magic-only problem. She used the example of Breakfast at Tiffany's— where makeup and prosthetics were used on actor Mickey Rooney to transform him into a caricature of a Japanese person: *"That was the 60s. That's not long ago at all. So it's not one of these things that we see just in magic."*

Personally, Eng feels "the privilege of being born in Canada" and being raised in a magic family, so she has never had other magicians "throw stereotypes" in front of her, but Kwon Hyuk has experienced outright racism on several occasions. In one instance, at the Magic Castle, an acquaintance approached him when he was with some guests, slanted their eyes and said, out of the blue, "Ching chong ching chong." In another instance, someone photoshopped slanted eyes onto a photograph of one of Kwon's magic idols, posted it online, and tagged him.

Since the COVID-19 outbreak, these types of blatantly aggressive incidents are unfortunately on the rise. But far more frequently, it is the more subtle stereotypes that people of Asian descent deal with, day-to-day, that are the most draining. As Kwon describes it:

"The first perception of me is: This is an Asian kid. He probably speaks broken English. He probably is good at math. All these assumptions are a double whammy. People have certain ideas... about what a magician is. Now I'm a young Asian magician. To spend twenty minutes trying to break their prejudices and win them over? I think I've been successful in many occasions, but it is so draining."

It is draining to watch other performers crack jokes at the expense of Asian volunteers on stage.

It is draining to face the same questions everyday about where you're from – "Where are you really from?"

It is draining to spend time on stage convincing people that you are an individual, not a stereotype.

These comments and questions, often innocent, always ignorant, seem minor at first. But they add up over time, and they all have the same underlying message: You don't belong here – whether you are someone who moved to the US five years ago, or someone like myself, born and raised in South Jersey.

To combat stereotypes – to fit in – Kwon Hyuk started going by the name "Ed Kwon" (because he was inspired by the work of Ed Marlo, and because when he told people his real name, they would chuckle). He learned to speak English perfectly, and when others told him, *"We thought you were born and raised here. Your English is so flawless,"* he at first treated the comment as high praise.

At the same time, he noticed other performers of Asian descent in the US "cracking jokes about their Asian heritage, in an undignified way." Examples he gave were instances where people played into stereotypes without challenging them, using "self-deprecating humor to please the white crowd.... [and subsequently] perpetuating such stereotypes. There's this

white male voice we must adapt."

In changing his name to "Ed," Kwon Hyuk realized that he, too, was emulating a voice that wasn't his. "Now I make a deliberate effort to introduce myself as my real name. If people can pronounce Tchaikovsky, they can learn to pronounce my name." Unfortunately, when he announced online that he would use his Korean name, and that he was proud of his heritage, he immediately got sent a message: "Ching chong." He described the incident as "hurtful," but insisted on embracing his identity: "It did not discourage me for a second."

Not all of his experiences have been bad. He told me the story of a well-known magician at a magic convention who started a conversation with him, when nobody else bothered. This conversation became a session where others gathered around to see Kwon Hyuk's magic. And this person ("he's been an uncle to me") understood Kwon's financial situation at the time, understood that he mainly slept on couches at conventions, and booked a room with two beds and offered him the spare one since "it was the only room left, and there is an empty bed anyway."

It was moments like these that helped Kwon Hyuk hold onto his faith in the magic community. But for him, the obstacles that transformed this once optimistic young magician into a cynic have driven him away. "While I still think about magic and pick up a deck of cards every now and then, I have decided to walk away from the magic community. I love the art. I just don't like the people involved in it."

So what can we do? How do we, as a magic community, ensure that people of all backgrounds feel welcome? How do we remind ourselves to treat minorities as individuals, instead of as stereotypes? Challenging our own unconscious biases (as mentioned in previous articles) or being a good friend sometimes requires stepping out of our comfort zones. It's not always easy. But communities that are welcoming, build a foundation for diverse thought and innovation: Just ask Julie Eng in Toronto. Communities that aren't welcoming lose out on new talent and fresh ideas. As Kwon Hyuk put it: "We have a lot that we can offer."



PHOTO: Kwon Hyuk