



because mental illness remains a taboo topic in Asian American cultures, the stories about the experience of mental illness are often left untold. Filmmaker Pearl J. Park's "Among Our Kin" is the first national feature documentary about mental illness among Asian Americans. iaLink talks to the director about her historic effort to examine and explore the emotional experience of Asian Americans living with psychiatric disorders.

This is the first documentary about mental illness among Asian Americans. Why do you think this issue hasn't been explored before in media?

The topic of mental illness is still very taboo, particularly in the Asian American community, so many people are embarrassed to talk about it openly. Even among educated, progressive Asian Americans, there seems to be a strong reluctance to raise the issue in the same way one might speak about physical illnesses, like cancer or heart disease. Because of the stigma surrounding mental illness, it is and was very difficult to find Asian Americans with mental illness willing to share their lives on camera. And to make things even more challenging, we searched to find not just an Asian American with mental illness, but someone whose family was also willing to participate in a documentary of this nature. This was a long and arduous process. We are still searching for a second subject, a female Asian American with a mental illness and an interesting story to share. Initially, [one of the documentary subjects] Can's mother and sister did not want to participate. Later they agreed after I went to Dayton, Ohio and met them. Coming forward and talking about the mental illness of a loved one is a lot to ask of any family. Mental illness is something most Asian Americans would go to great lengths to conceal. The fact that they are revealing this publicly is remarkable. Can and his family are quite courageous in this regard.



Pearl Park with director Greg Pak
(Photographer: Corky Lee)

What do you hope to achieve with this film?

I hope to defuse the taboo power of this issue in Asian American communities by presenting beautiful stories of people with mental illness. Simply instigating the dialogue in communities would be an achievement from my perspective because there is so much denial and shame around the issue. Someone in the Asian American mental health field told me that my film would probably save lives just by raising the issue publicly. Wow. I was so blown away

by that comment; it sent chills down my spine. I would be honored if this film, even in the tiniest way, could help spawn some kind of cultural change in our attitudes toward mental illness. In our culture, a person with mental illness feels tremendous shame; the shame itself is debilitating and that compounds the problem. She or he has to endure it alone because there aren't many safe spaces to share this vulnerability and feel supported. And the last thing that a person with emotional problems needs is isolation. Someone as loved, respected and accomplished as Iris Chang, the Chinese American writer and historian, could not bear to tell her friends about her mental illness because she felt so ashamed. Iris' mother has said publicly that her tragic death might have been prevented had the family been open about her mental illness, because they probably would have found support among their friends and relatives — some of whom came forward after her death to reveal their own struggles with mental illness.

Tell us a bit about Can Truong, the first subject of the documentary.

He is an incredibly strong and likeable person. He has persevered through many painful life experiences and still hangs on to hope. Having bipolar disorder is a day-to-day ordeal and sometimes it's a matter of life or death. Nearly 20% of people with bipolar disorder attempt or commit suicide. He's had suicidal thoughts on many occasions and was even hospitalized at one point as a suicide risk. Over a 12-year period, Can has been hospitalized six times, tried 20-30 different

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Asian children growing up in Dayton, he had experienced a lot of racism and this really scarred him. He had to leave the University of Chicago where he was pre-med and it took him nearly 11 years to finish college. He lost a friend with bipolar disorder to suicide. He doesn't feel emotionally supported by his family. Like many Asian Americans raised in the US, he no longer speaks his first language very well, and can hardly communicate with his mother who only speaks Vietnamese. That's a big stressor, not being able to connect with your parents. Yet, he believes in recovery and has become a voice in mental health circles. As one of the few Asian American mental health advocates in this country, he serves on numerous committees, University of Pennsylvania Rehabilitation Research and Training Center, the Ohio Mental Health advocates board, and the people in recovery committee of the United States Psychiatric Rehabilitation Association (USPRA). Last year he represented the U.S. consumer movement at the World Federation Mental Health Congress in Cairo, Egypt. He exemplifies the kind of courage, strength and dignity that many people with mental illnesses have.

How difficult was it to closely follow and document his life considering the sensitivity of the issue?

We have only filmed about less than half of his story; we are trying to raise more money to finish filming. The process was challenging on many different levels, culturally, linguistically, financially and psychologically for all of us involved. I couldn't find Vietnamese English bilingual crew which would have been ideal because I wanted Can's family to speak whichever tongue that they would naturally in their home without our presence. Because I had little money, I hired local Wright State University film students who knew little of Vietnamese culture nor of mental illness. Given the subject matter, I had to prep them to make sure that they wouldn't make any of our subjects feel uncomfortable. I had to acclimate them to Asian American culture and ask them to be as non-judgmental and compassionate as possible in all situations. And they were.



**Among Our Kin documentary subject
Can Truong**

Filming a person with mental illness did require us to be extra sensitive and diligent. We had to make sure that Can had emotional support in place before we started shooting in the event that overwhelming feelings came up for him. We consulted with a psychologist regarding how we could best approach production. We wanted to videotape him without creating unnecessary stress. But some things were necessary for the documentary. We dredged up and probed all of his personal and psychiatric history from 12 years ago, much of which was probably painful for him and his family. We agreed to stop shooting if anyone requested us to stop.

Obtaining informed consent from subjects with mental illness – consent that could be supported ethically and legally -- was of concern to me so we did a lot of research about the law and ethics pertaining to this issue. Per the advice of an experienced producer who had done documentaries featuring subjects with mental illness, I taped a verbal consent in addition the written one. As additional protection, we also provided Can with the option to leave the project for any reason up until the rough cut stage.

How did your interest in this topic come about?

I've always been interested in psychology, and more specifically the contrast between traditional Asian thought and Western psychology. This film gives me ample opportunity to delve deeper into this. I am Korean American and there were mental health issues in my own family. But the impetus for this film came from meeting some extraordinary Asian Americans with mental illness and learning about what they had endured and overcome. Their stories were compelling, but they refused to be in the film! But I felt that I had to do this film anyway. I also had heard many stories about Korean-American families either concealing or abandoning a family member because of their mental illness. The stories were overwhelmingly sad and tragic, but I knew of no news stories, films, or books in the media about this issue. Roughly 6% of the general population and the Asian American population have a major mental illness like psychosis, bipolar disorder, major depression, etc., but this topic is rarely talked about in Asian American circles. With all the thousands and thousands of documentaries out there— sometimes about the most obscure subjects —no documentaries on this topic existed. And there is clearly a social need to address this critical health issue.

Why are Asian American less likely to seek treatment for mental illness compared to other ethnic groups?

Primarily because of the cultural stigma and differing beliefs about the origins of mental illness. In traditional Asian society, having mental illness, or any kind of disability for that matter, in the family mars the family's social standing. It jeopardizes marital opportunities for the other members of the family. Families hide the mental illness out of a moral obligation to protect the other family members from ostracism. In Korean, it's calling maintaining "chae-myun," which loosely translated means family pride, face or honor. People will attribute the illness to bad karma, "evil spirits" or family issues, which will be passed on to the next generation. There's a sense that if one member of the

or deny that a member of the family has an emotional problem. Because nearly 70% of Asian American population is foreign born, there a lot of carry-over of this Asian thought.

Study after study has shown that Asian Americans show up in the mental health system when they're at the point of acute breakdown and crisis. Typically, their families try to take care of them using traditional healing modalities like herbal medicine or acupuncture first. Though Asian Americans overall have about the same rates of mental illness as the general population, they significantly underutilize mental health services compared to all the other racial groups.

Also there are fundamental philosophical differences. In most Eastern medicine paradigms, the concept of mental illness doesn't exist as modern psychiatry would define it. Firstly, the view of illness is not divided into the physical and the mental because no such discrete line exists between the mind, body and the spirit. It's a holistic view of health – an imbalance of energies. So it's no wonder that Asian Americans typically somaticize their emotional distress. In some Asian languages, there is no word for “depression” and on the other hand, there are no English-language equivalents for many psychopathologies frequently cited in some Asian cultures like “hwa byung,” which in Korean, means “anger sickness.” In many Asian cultures, mental illness is a spiritual matter. As you will see in the film, Can's mother attributes his mental illness to negative karma. She says that he must live an honorable life so that he can be reborn into a better life the next time around.



Tell us about the people working on the documentary. How did they get involved?

I found most of the production crew through recommendations from other filmmakers and people in the business. I recruited the advisory board members by calling them up and telling them about my project. DJ Ida, Executive Director, National Asian American Pacific Islander Mental Health Association, was really enthusiastic about the project from the start and was supportive of our efforts immediately. She is a terrific, energetic person whose heart

is in everything she does. I initially emailed Bill Lichtenstein, the producer of *West 47th St*, a documentary about people recovering from mental illness, and asked him for advice. Because he himself has bipolar disorder, Bill really understands things from the perspective of both a producer and a human being who has experienced mental illness. Now he's an advisor to the project.

How did you get into documentary filmmaking?

I worked in the world of corporate production as a graphic artist. Then I worked briefly in corporate video production, which to me was very exciting and interesting. I looked for ways to apply those skills to advocate for social issues. I've always been a politically progressive artist/activist at heart and have always loved documentaries before they were considered mainstream fare. So the choice of documentary as a medium came quite naturally for me. I began taking documentary classes about seven years ago and began the process of learning the craft then.

Do you encounter any difficulties being an Asian American filmmaker?

I think being an independent filmmaker in general, regardless of ethnicity, is very difficult unless you're wealthy. Taking on an stigmatized very complex Asian American social issue as your first project is very hard. I don't think that being an Asian American filmmaker is inherently difficult. But because my interests lie in undercovered, complex social issues, mostly about marginalized peoples, I'm doomed to have some level of difficulty. I think if I wasn't Asian American, I probably wouldn't be aware of this social problem. This awareness of the stigma came from living in Asian American culture. What I did find difficult was when white Americans who had experiences with mental illness confronted me and told me that the stigma of mental illness existed in their culture too, as if I was discounting the stigma in their culture. It was awkward in that I found it very difficult to explain how the stigma of mental illness differed from mainstream Euro-American culture, because my knowledge is experiential. It's difficult to explain culture in a paragraph or two. Much of culture is unconscious. Being “crazy” is pejorative in both Euro and Asian American cultures. I think that in mainstream popular culture, a person can say aloud that he or she is in therapy without being looked at strangely. But I think if an Asian American said openly that he/she is in therapy amid some groups of Asian Americans, it would be considered “weird” and totally inappropriate. Also in some Asian families, it would be considered appropriate, in some cases, to exclude a family member with a disability of any sort from attending a family wedding or social function where outsiders might judge the social status of the family. In contrast, this is probably something that would be considered cruel or unthinkable in Euro-American culture.

As a true grassroots effort, Among Our Kin depends upon grants and the generosity of supporters. You can help complete this very important documentary by donating to the project. For as little as \$25, you'll be helping to shed light on a social issue that affects each and everyone of us, and increase public understanding of mental illness, an illness that 47% of the general population will experience during their lifetime, according to psychiatric epidemiologist, David Takeuchi, PhD. Please visit www.amongourkin.org/donate.html to donate.