

Episode 44: Daniel

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This transcript is non-verbatim.

F:

What does it mean to be a British male of Chinese and Vietnamese descent? In this episode, Daniel shares his journey of becoming a dancer, actor, and creator of arts. His story is about finding pride and joy in expressing his identity in different spaces.

I'm Fumi, this is #OUR_racism, and this is the story of Daniel.

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D:

My name is Daniel Phung. I am a British-born Eastern Southeast Asian, specifically Chinese and Vietnamese. I am a dancer, I'm an actor, I'm an "artiste" [laughs]. I'm a person who loves to create as much as possible, simply because I can't sit still. I think that's my biggest problem. And my biggest defense mechanism is, I like to make jokes! [laughs]

So I was born in London, and I moved over to Sheffield when I was seven. The thing about London is that it's so multicultural that it's just a boiling pot of different ethnicities and cultures coming together. So naturally... like, I grew up with a Congolese friend and an Arab friend and that was very normal. And then I moved to Sheffield, where it's predominantly British White. And one of the first weeks, I remember immediately feeling like the "other" person, you know. And that wasn't necessarily like "outright racism", it was more so someone making me feel different and it being not okay. You know how you have those equal opportunities forms and you tick the "other" box because you don't have your category? Like, mine would be "Vietnamese", and I [would] have to tick "other" because it's not there. It almost feels like that, in a sense that I'm on the outside looking in, and this is an exclusive club that I've not been invited to. Yeah, so I experienced that at seven or eight years old. Again, that wasn't like an outright racism thing. It was more so, "I'm different."

And then, throughout school and secondary school – or high school to others – I've experienced certain things, like the obvious, "Where are you from?", "Oh, can you tell me something in Chinese?" With Vietnam, "Where's that? Oh, so your parents were in, you know, whatever?" They have happened quite a lot during my teenage years. And I think, for me, *because* of those experiences, I... maybe it's a very Asian thing, but I don't like to generalize too much. But like, my parents told me to assimilate, but also [to], "Look after yourself" because there might be a time where I might have to fight, you know, [so], "Protect yourself as much as possible." And so I had to.

But because of that... I am not a fighter. Like, I am so weak, it's unreal. But like, my thing is, for me is, *because* I wanted to assimilate so much, I really focused on trying to fit in to the crowd, I guess to my White counterparts and my White friends. That was very important to me. And so like I said before, I like to make jokes to icebreak the relationships I have with people. And if they don't laugh at my first joke, I'm like [to myself thinking], "Okay, this is going to be quite hard for me to become friends with you." But, you know, that's just one of my things that I learned as a kid actually.

And I'm just going to fast forward a little bit because there was a moment that I spoke to my friend about this not too long ago about how I... I was one of the very, very few East Asians in the school. I think I was one of three at the time. In my year, I was like the only one. But there was this mainland Chinese girl that came during sixth form, which is like 16 to 18 years old. And she came over, she was

like very Chinese, extremely Chinese... whatever that ["extremely Chinese"] means. And at my school, we were quite artistic. There's this whole festival of different cultures and stuff. And so, the Black community would do their thing, the Asian community would do their thing, and East Asians would do our thing. And me being a person who was so focused on assimilating, was very worried about what would happen.

And so, mainland-Chinese girl comes along and performs a Chinese dance. And me being an absolute... I'm quite embarrassed because it's quite sad, actually, but like, I essentially said... she was performing this amazing Chinese dance, I don't even know what it's called, but she was doing it. And the thing is, it was very impressive. However, I said to my friend, "Oh, god, she's so embarrassing." And as soon as I said it, I knew that I shouldn't have said that. However, I still said it because I was waiting for my friend's reaction. And that was a very interesting moment for me because that was the moment where I realized, "Oh, I *depend* on other people's approval of my own existence." Like, I've been minimizing my identity for the longest time... even today, there are times when I have to minimize myself.

And it felt like at that moment, I was... it felt like, because she was performing a Chinese dance that was impressive and people were impressed... *I* was just not impressed. I mean I was, but I was too embarrassed to be impressed because it felt like by her performing, I became a human target or to be ridiculed, if that makes any sense. The thing is, my friend enjoyed it. And I vaguely remember him saying – I was so insular – I vaguely remember him saying like, "You shouldn't say that," or whatever it was, and just me being so conflicted of like, what to believe, you know? And this was like, 16, 17 years old, quite influential years, I would say, impactful years for sure.

The reason I brought up that conversation is because I did a project recently, where it was to talk about Vietnamese heritage, but more specifically *our* heritage, who I was performing with. And so we were three British Vietnamese artists: one was a poet, one was a digital artist, and myself, who is a movement artist. And we spoke about our kind of upbringing, whatever. The thing about Vietnamese heritage is, it's revolved around trauma, it being controlled by America or China or France or whatever. And so, Vietnam post-American war didn't really have much of an independency. So yeah, like my parents are refugees, for example. And so the whole show is about navigating *our* story, but being so influenced by our parents' journey because of where they've come from, what they've been through, their struggle, but also the big question mark of what *they've* been through because actually, that's a conversation that is quite traumatic, it is quite problematic for a lot of people.

And so, it's not really spoken of in a way because maybe it's too much for people to talk about. And so this whole show was, rather than making it about, "This is what our parents went through," [we made it about], "This is actually what *we've* been through as British-born Vietnamese artists, and what that means being from an Eastern or Southeast Asian household, but in a predominantly White country." Because that is a whole thing to talk about, being a third culture kid, being torn between the two cultures. Because I personally, I only speak Cantonese, I don't speak Vietnamese, but also like, it's very basic Cantonese. So it almost feels like in East Asia, I'm kind of too White, but in the UK, I'm too Asian. And so there is this third culture of, you know, where people like myself where we can kind of like connect together as a third culture kid, and I think that's so important for me.

F:

Daniel shares how his journey to dancing and making creative work began and evolved over time.

D:

I started when I was around 12. I was fairly overweight. I have an older brother. I wasn't overweight. I was just a bit chubby. My parents owned a Chinese restaurant, like a Vietnamese restaurant. So like, what can I... you know? Anyway, my mum and my brother made a plan of getting me to dance class. My brother was training at the time – he's still training. And I did it [dancing]. And I hated it because I

was bad at it. And also, I kind of resented my family for making me do this. Because all I wanted to do was just play, *Final Fantasy* on my PlayStation. That's all I wanted to play, you know? And then... it's kinda bad, but I realized that, "Oh, I'm attracted to girls now." [And then], "Oh, girls like dancers." [And then], "Oh, it's cool to dance." So then I took it seriously. Then I started to get good. "Oh, I have a girlfriend now!" [laughs] This is so bad. But no, yeah, in reality, I did start because it was cool. It was a cool thing to do.

But then I also got like, I had really good teachers, two teachers. Nathan Geering who was my breakdance teacher. He basically was like, "Keep going," basically, "Keep going. You're getting good at this, you can see the improvement." And, you know, this was in a very community center where it's like, predominantly ethnic minorities. There were Blacks, Asians, there were also Whites, you know, and people from all over, people from France as well, which is cool. But it was a community center. So then I did it in school where I had this teacher called Miss Lee, and she actually didn't teach us any dance. However, she taught us how to be inspired by dance. And she basically said to my mum, "Daniel could pursue a career in dance if he wants it." And Asian parents do Asian parents things. And yeah, so that happened. And then I... in the end, I decided: I'm going to be a dancer.

And so I took contemporary classes. I did what I could to try and get into whatever schools. I didn't get into the schools I wanted, and so I went to university, which, like, you have conservatoires which are regarded as very high class, and then you have universities which are regarded as just like, you get it just for the degree, which to be fair, was what I was trying to do for my parents: to get a degree. And then I learned a lot on my uni course. Uni course was so good. At Leeds, at the time, Leeds Metropolitan, I studied contemporary dance. And the whole time I was so inspired by what dance could be and how it can be presented in theater or outside, on buildings, inside a room, you know, all different locations and disciplines and whatever. And I basically decided to kind of combine my hip-hop-ness with my contemporary-ness, and do *this*...

Okay, I have two hands right now. In my left hand, I have hip-hop. In my right hand, I have contemporary. And I'm clenching my hands together. And that essentially is like *my* thing. I love this hybrid form of dance, of contemporary and hip-hop, right? And because of *this*, naturally, people who are on either side of those, who are, I guess, quote-unquote, "purists", would find that problematic, like, "That's not hip-hop. That's not real hip-hop," and, "That's not contemporary, that's hip-hop." And it's just this... again, that kind of reflects me as a human being, right? I'm so interested in blurring the boundaries, breaking those conventions, and all of those things. That's just been me.

And so yeah, in the theater world, it's changing a lot now which I'm so thankful for because people like me can exist now. But prior to this, it was very much controlled by – understandably, by the way – by White people. But it was also seen like... art was seen through a White lens, or White perspective. And I think with that, if you're a person of ethnic minority and you're trying to *make* work, you are kind of expected to bring up all your traumas. Like, "I should receive this funding because I'm a Person of Color that has experienced so much problems." And I'm only restricted to those problems now. Whereas I cannot make work revolved around, let's say... I don't know... sitting on this floor being interviewed by you, you know, like anything random, whatever it is. And so that is... Yeah, it's a weird system that we have in the UK that we have to tick these certain boxes for us to receive funding.

And yeah, it's gotten to the point where in auditions as when I was just dancing, that if there was another Asian male in the group, or even Asian in general, I naturally would be against that person, simply because if they were to hire both of us, it would immediately be a piece about being Asian, or it would be a piece about Asian struggles, or whatever. And quite clearly, that's problematic because that then means that we're against each other, you know, which is kind of odd. And you know, if you were to flip it on to the majority side or the White side – God that sounds so bad – but of White people, a White female and another White female would not be compared against each other. They of course

would, in different senses, but when we're talking about ethnicities and getting the job, two White females would get hired on a job, 100%. But two Asian males would not. This was my experience when I was auditioning. I don't audition anymore in the dance world, but that was the case.

That's... I figured that out quite... well, not actually quickly. I thought for a while that it was fairly equal because we're artists, but I realized maybe halfway through my dance career, that actually it's not the case because that's when I started to *make* work. You know, people were asking me to make "Chinese work", make "Vietnamese work". And I got *very* confused by that because I *am* Chinese Vietnamese. But what do you mean by me "making *that* work"? What are you expecting? So then for London, there was a period of time where I didn't label myself as a British East or Southeast Asian artist, because I realized that people were expecting me to do, I don't know, martial arts or whatever, something stupid, right? What were they expecting? You know? And so yeah, during that time, I decided not to label myself as that.

And that did me okay, I, you know, I still made work. The thing is, I made work about trauma and stuff. Wow, that sounds traumatic. It really wasn't as dramatic as it sounds. But it derived from that. But then I got connected to the Vietnamese artistic community, which by the way, I never thought existed because my Vietnamese side of my family were very much against anything artistic because it didn't make money. You know, they were quite traditional, my whole family have been part of the Vietnamese Army type thing. They were very headstrong. And yeah, so I connected to this Vietnamese community and they all basically said, "You *are* Chinese Vietnamese. You *are* British born. You *are* those things. There's no running away from that." And it's very much like, "Look, you can label yourself as whatever, but in reality, you don't *have* to make what people expect you to make. You can make whatever *you* want to make." And I didn't realize that.

The thing is, people have said that to me *so much*. But it only made sense when people who I closely identified with said it to me. And I think it's... it just made so much more sense. My good friend, Tuyet Van Huynh, who's London-based – she's a producer-director – she basically was like, "You *are* Vietnamese. You make work that's good. And it's not like Vietnamese culture, but you're Vietnamese. And you make Vietnamese work. That's just you." And it just clicked. The coin just dropped, and I was like, "*Oh yeah*. Why have I not been doing this already?" You know? And there's so much to unpack there about like fitting in and wanting to be accepted by "the gatekeepers of the art world" or whatever.

F:

Daniel shares his take on where to draw the line between cultural appropriation and appreciation.

D:

Like I said before, I'm a dancer. And so I come from a predominantly working-class background. And with that, I grew up around hip-hop and I started in hip-hop dance, *breaking* specifically. And with that, B-boys and B-girls are so strong on where it came from, especially when I started anyway. And there will always be these few people that would say, "Keep it real. This is where hip-hop came from. Never forget that and..." Purists, I guess. And one thing I've learned from hearing about the foundations or the pillars of hip-hop, is that, it's all about spreading love and positivity. That's probably *the* most important thing. And I think when it comes to cultural appreciation, it's about learning where it came from, learning what it means...

Obviously, things are going to get confused over time because we as humans are very bad at communicating. However, I think it's important to know the culture behind something, behind... okay, if I'm wearing I guess, "hip-hop clothing", it's like, that's just what we used to wear for battles. You know, that was the thing. But I think it becomes a problem when people are wearing it, but wearing it as like a form of mockery, you know. Because you can wear it and you can wear it and not know where

it comes from and still feel beautiful or handsome or whatever. But if it's a form of like, "I'm doing it because..."

Hm. I may backtrack on this. I'm unsure. This is a big question mark and I think you may feel the same but... I guess it's more of a question [of], "Is it appropriation?" Because the word "appropriation" is subjective, right? Not everyone has the same level of tolerance when it comes to cultural appropriation. And so for *me*, I guess I can only speak on my behalf. I'm thinking out loud. Okay, this is what I'm going with: I feel like if you are doing something that is of, say Black culture, because hip-hop came from Black people, but you're doing it... if you're doing it really well, if you're doing it – like, specifically dance – if you're doing it really well and people are loving it, I feel like you can't tell the person you're appropriating their culture or whatever because you've done the research, you've gone through a *long* time of training to be at this level. Whereas, and this is where it *can* get appropriated: if you do one class, and then say, "Oh, I'm going to teach the world that this one class that I did, 'Oh, yeah, I'm a professional now.'" This is where it becomes a problem because you're... this is very much appropriation. That's very much so.

And I can go into the whole dance politics but it's a whole thing. And [so] I won't do that because it will be another conversation. Actually, you know what, it's about racism. It's a thing. Okay, so [here it goes]. You think of ballet: it's high art. You think of breakdancing: it's working-class art. You would *never* get a person who learns ballet one time and say they're a professional ballerina, or do one class and just teach the world. However, for some reason, there's this thing of you would learn breaking, *one* class, and then you would teach the world this *one* class that you've done, and say that you're a B-boy now. And, you know, ballet mostly comes from White art, or "high arts" or whatever. And this is where I feel like there's a thing....

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F:

Daniel recently started acting. He shares his journey towards acting.

D:

The reason I chose dance is because I was very afraid to speak words. I was very afraid to show myself. You know how I was saying earlier [that] I was very good at minimizing myself? The only time I didn't minimize myself was when I was performing. But because I was bad with words, I could only move. And dance was the thing I could do. So I just danced. That's all I did. That's all I did. Because I would love to perform. I loved to embody a character that wasn't myself. Because I did battling, I did compete a bit, but I wasn't very good at it. And I realized it's because I just wanted to perform. Performance was my thing. And yeah, so never really good with words.

And then I think just three years ago, I decided, "I'm good at talking now. I know what I'm talking about. I know... I like the sound of my own voice." [laugh] I don't. But I like talking a lot. And I think at that stage, I was ready to... I was emotionally ready. My confidence was at a good place where I felt like I can speak and perform and that's okay, and I'm not as worried about being ridiculed. Of course, there's technique and whatever. But at the core of it, I know that I *can* do it, because I think that was a big barrier as a kid: I wasn't able to perform.

Like I remember, I actually took theater studies, which is like an acting class for my GCSEs¹ when I was like 14 to 16, and I remember during the first class, they asked me to do an exercise where I'm pretending to be at a bus stop and waiting for a bus. And I remember my heart racing the whole time. I didn't say anything. This was pure movement. But there was no script or anything. But the fact that I felt like I was in an acting class, like I held it to such a high pedestal. And then I felt like I was doing bad.

¹ General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) is an academic qualification pursued in the UK.

I felt like no one's liking it. I felt like nothing. And then the following day, I quit. I decided I'm not going to do that [and] I quit. And I was like, "I'm just gonna keep dancing because I enjoy dancing." So then yeah, like now... I can do the bus stop scene if you want me to, you know?

And I... the thing is, I owe it to *Crazy Rich Asians* too, and I owe it to this show: *My Neighbor Totoro*. Very good, by the way, in London, Barbican. Yeah, so shows like that, shows like *Crazy Rich Asians*, shows that I saw people who I identified with were on TV and film. I was like, "Yes. Okay. If *they* could do it, *I* can do it. The doors have been opened for me." Because for the longest time they were closed. And so I decided, "Yeah, I want to act." And so I did a bit of training, and I was like, "Okay, maybe I'm actually quite good at this now." Got an agent. And then here we are. I am currently in *Romeo and Juliet* which is fun. And I've done *Raindogs* which is a TV series on BBC and HBO. And I want to do more. You know, I want to do more.

F:

Daniel reflects about representation within pop culture.

D:

Mainstream media is always reflective of the society that we live in. What I mean by that [is], in India, they have Bollywood. They will cast Indian actors and make Indian-style movies because they have Bollywood: their audience is of Indian descent. America is very multicultural. And... I think America is a very specific place, but representation for *me* is like, you either get it or you don't. And it's tricky because you have movies like the Marvel Cinematic Universe. I fucking love Marvel. However, some of the movies have been such tick-boxy, and it feels like you're doing it for the sake of doing it. And it feels a bit awkward when you're doing it. Whereas you get movies like *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, where it's like, perfect, like, *so good*.

And talking about *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, that movie was so great because it was telling a story that was relatable to everybody. And this family just happened to be Chinese. They *happened* to be Chinese. They didn't *have* to be Chinese. They just were. And they were telling a story that was not to do with ethnicity. Yeah, they spoke Chinese, but it wasn't to do with their ethnicity. It was about this multi-dimensional universe. And it was amazing. It was so good. It's one of my favorite movies.

But I feel like the reason why tick-boxy films are happening at the moment is because we're at a stage in our lives where people are demanding change. People are demanding that they see themselves on TV and whatever. And if I'm honest, I think it's great. How it happens is down to the producers of the companies, the production companies and writers and whatever, they have a responsibility to write good work that represents communities that I guess needs to be seen, but in a... I guess this is the whole cultural appropriation appreciation thing, you know, where is the line for some people? So these decisions are being made, and yeah... I don't really have a constructive opinion on it. However, I do feel like it is happening.

And thankfully I'm benefiting from it because I'm a performer. And I'm interested to see what else happens. Because I am noticing that certain Asian roles are being made but I almost feel like it's a certain type of typecast that's happening. A lot of casting calls nowadays are looking for like – or what *I* feel anyway – are looking for K-pop type people. And... I'm not that, you know. And so that's very interesting. Because it's... K-pop is massive. It's so big. It's... I feel like what K-pop is doing at the moment is bigger than what *Crazy Rich Asians* did to the Asian community. Like, in terms of popularity, it's just wild how big it is.

F:

Daniel shares how emerging actors can navigate this field.

D:

I was speaking to casting directors about this. As an actor, we have agency to say "yes" or "no" to these jobs. But as an actor who maybe hasn't got any credits or whatever, I think it's probably good that we do say "yes" to those jobs because it gives us credits. It gives us credentials to say, "We've done the job, we can do the job. Yes, it was under this specific type of role, but we still did it." And this is from an actor's growth career standpoint. It's important that we say "yes" to these jobs because we can prove ourselves that we can do the jobs. *Then*, however many years or how many times you've done the specific typecast, you can then say, "No." And that's okay. But at least you proved to the world that you can do that job. But I mean writers and producers, they have their role in this conversation, right?

F:

Against the background of his experiences, Daniel has the following to say on what it takes to be anti-racist.

D:

What does it take to be anti-racist? In my opinion, it's being aware of your own life. And regardless of your ethnicity, your color or gender or sexuality, whatever, any "otherness", be aware of that. Be aware of who you are, and be aware of how society perceives who *you* are versus other people. Just be aware of those things. And I don't know, I feel like because of that, I've been able to understand people's experiences as, let's say a woman, what that means, you know? And I think I haven't been specific to be an anti-racist, but being anti- anything, or anti, anti... oh god, brain fart, you know what I mean.

But to be that, to be better, I guess is to be aware of your own perspective of yourself and see how... what your presence and how much your presence takes space. You know, how, like, you know how I was talking about minimizing myself? One of the reasons why I minimized myself is because I didn't want to be seen, whereas now it's like, I'm aware of, if I maximize myself, that minimizes other people's space. And so, there's this balance between taking space and giving space, and I think that's okay... that was such an artistic response. I didn't mean for it to be so like that. But it did. It happened. We [artists] move. We move.

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F:

You can find more information about typecasting, as well as other articles, books and videos Daniel recommends people to take a look at on racism, on our website, www.ourcontexts.org.

You can also find the transcript of this episode on our website in English, French, German and Italian.

If you have a personal story to share, reach out to us on our website, Instagram or Twitter – you can find us by typing in #our_racism.

This is Fumi and #OUR_racism. See you next month, on January 1st!

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This episode was produced and edited by me, Fumi.

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A warm thank you to Daniel for his time and energy in going down memory lane for us, and sharing with us invaluable and timely reflections on this issue.