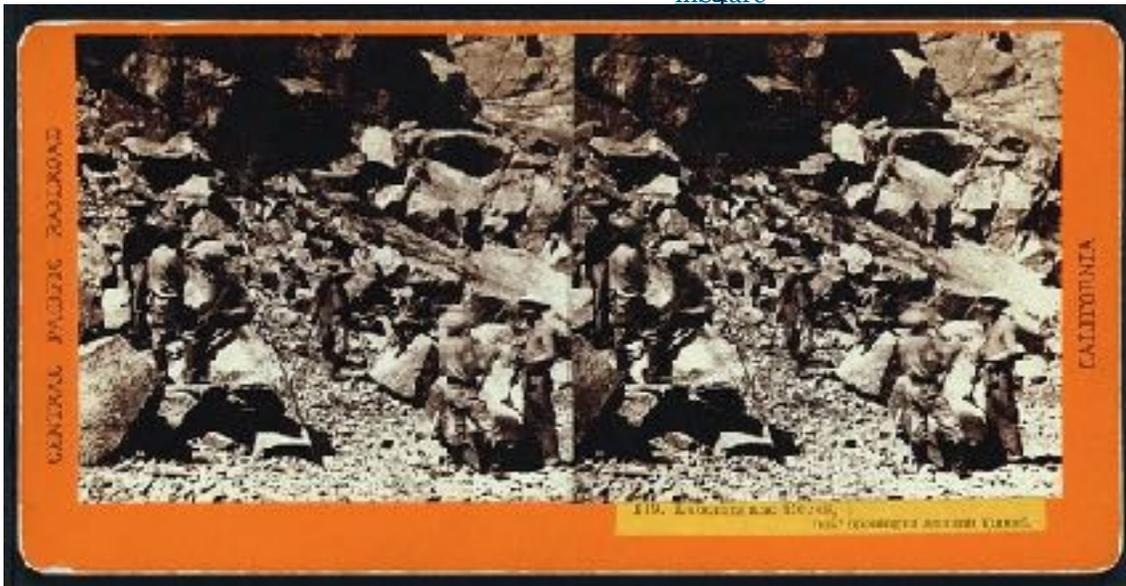


When to Use Ethnic Slurs: A Guide

Is it ever acceptable to say "Chinamen"?

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Chinese laborers blast a tunnel in California in the late 1860s. (Alfred A. Hard/Library of Congress)

When is it permissible to say the word “Chinaman”?

Recently Bob Beckel, a pundit and Democratic operative best known for engineering Walter Mondale’s 49-state presidential defeat in 1984, got himself in trouble for saying on Fox News that “Chinamen” have become America’s greatest threat.

Critics here and [abroad](#) jumped on Beckel’s casual slur, and many found his [un-apologetic](#) apology unsatisfying. I was among them. But I had to think about it a beat longer. You see, I’m the author of a new book about being Chinese American in this tension-filled age of China and America. It’s called *A Chinaman’s Chance*.

The Beckel flap prompted me to spell out my intuition and instinct about when the use of the word “Chinaman” could be okay. Which now leads me to offer the four following rules of engagement for words that may be construed as ethnic slurs:

Rule 1: Am I a member of the group that the word is sometimes used to slur? If yes, go to #2. If no, go to #3.

Rule 2: Am I aware that the word has a derogatory use? If yes, go to #3. If no, go to #4.

Rule 3: Am I mocking a slur by reappropriating it? If yes, as one recent and provocative entry in the six-word “Race Card Project” put it, “I can say it; you can’t.” If no, go to #4.

Rule 4: Am I speaking with intent to praise or to damn the group that the word targets? If to praise, I am out of touch even if I’m not malicious, and I’m possibly still a racist. If to damn, then I am probably both malicious and racist—and will certainly be taken to be.

To put these rules into practice, consider the use of “Chinaman” in the title of my book. The phrase [originated](#) in the 1850s when Chinese immigrant laborers were given the most dangerous and thankless tasks in building America’s railroads and mining its mountains, such that their chances of survival were often slim to none. It entered into the lexicon like “Indian giver” or “Welshing on a promise”—colorful ways to couple undesirable behavior and undesirable ethnicity.

It’s been a long time since the phrase was in common usage. But I myself am what used to be called a “Chinaman” (Rule 1). I am aware that it’s been used a slur (Rule 2). And I am indeed mocking the slur by reappropriating it and using it about myself (Rule 3).

More precisely, I am using it with irony and paying homage to my immigrant father’s ironic sense of humor. Chao-hua Liu was a sponge for American idiom and slang when he came here in the late 1950s. Somewhere along the way he learned this phrase, realized it was to be used against him and his kind, and decided to defang it by applying it to trivial everyday situations: “The Yankees have a Chinaman’s chance of coming back in the ninth inning,” he’d say when I was a kid. Or if it was almost closing time at Shop-Rite, “You have a Chinaman’s chance of getting there on time!” He taught me how wit can neuter malice—how new Americans can repurpose the language, taking control of words meant to control.

I recently was told another such story about [Wing Luke](#), the first Asian American elected to the Seattle City Council (or to any office in the entire Northwest) in 1962. When he was running, a white politico told him he didn’t have a Chinaman’s

chance of winning the election. Luke replied, without missing a beat, “On the contrary—I am the *only* one with a Chinaman’s chance.” That’s how you upend a racist.

In a similar vein, consider that the ABC network recently [greenlit](#) a sitcom for 2015 called *Fresh Off the Boat*, based on the irreverent memoir of celebrity restaurateur, chef, and television personality Eddie Huang. As Huang was aware when he wrote his book, “fresh off the boat” or “FOB” has long been used by native-born Americans to [insult](#) new immigrants who seem crudely unassimilated. But among some Asian Americans, it’s also used sarcastically, even playfully.

So Huang now [reclaims](#) “FOB” to make light of the way it has been used. That nuance may be lost on some who will watch the sitcom. But this is how race talk evolves. And as Ta-Nehisi Coates has [written](#) perceptively about “[nigger](#),” the fact that some people will miss the nuance of how a community reclaims a word about itself is no justification for barring the community from using the word.

Still, even by the standards of such reappropriation, I know that “a Chinaman’s chance” today can still discomfit. One interviewer told me she felt sheepish saying the name of the book to me. But context matters. So does intention. Speaking with intent to exclude is fundamentally different from speaking with intent to include or to claim inclusion. Most of all, power matters. Slurring down at people with less power than you is reprehensible in a way that slurring sideways or up isn’t.

In this light, Beckel’s manifestly hostile use of the phrase was clearly wrong. He meant to damn, using a most outmoded and mean-spirited word to achieve its original demeaning purpose—and, worse, blurring lines between the Chinese of China and Chinese Americans, as if we were one indistinguishably hostile mass.

A final example: the “Redskins” NFL franchise owned by Daniel Snyder. Snyder isn’t a member of the group (Rule 1). He is most certainly aware that the name is a slur (Rule 2). He is using it in earnest, not as winking reappropriation (Rule 3). He and his defenders can’t plausibly claim to be praising Native Americans (Rule 4).

All of which leads to a possible **Rule 5**: If I am intending neither to praise nor to damn, am I simply dug in and too prideful to change?

If so, I’m headed for the dustbin of American history. With what we can call a very slim chance of rehabilitation.