

Asian/America¹: A Search for Belonging

Seminar Co-Leaders: Liana Shallenberg '19 (Psychology major & Mandarin minor) & Rebecca Chang '19 (Cities major & Spanish minor)

Faculty Adviser: Shu-wen Wang (Assistant Professor of Psychology)

Born in the 1960s, an era of activism and protest, Asian American Studies emerged out of the desire to examine the histories, legacies, and experiences of Asians living in the United States. Previous to its inception, there was a dearth of academic literature focused on the complex experiences of individuals navigating several layers of Asian/American identities -- both self-identified and as defined by others. Asian/American individuals in the United States have had a complicated history, nonlinearly and repeatedly experiencing near invisibility, discrimination, elevated status and privilege as a “model minority,” and continuous misrepresentation. To further complicate the matter, the label of Asian is often used to broadly categorize what is in fact a rather diverse population of individuals who face vastly different experiences. Though Asian American Studies remains a relatively small field today, it is growing rapidly as more and more individuals invest time and effort into thinking about its nuanced history, current climate, and dynamic identities. The roots of Asian American Studies lie in history, but the importance and relevance of the topic extend through the present and have critical implications for the future as its population continues to grow.

Due to the seminar leaders' academic experiences, we plan to approach the seminar using a dual-perspective of psychology and history. We, Liana and Rebecca, were motivated to create this seminar due to the dearth of Asian American Studies classes in the Tri-Co and a desire to bring our experiences from Asian American Psychology and Global Histories of Asian American Labor, respectively, to other students who did not have the opportunity to take them. We are also excited to learn more from the experiences and thoughts of our peers, as we want to emphasize that we do not want to act as the gatekeepers of knowledge in the course.

While we are approaching the topic through historical and psychological lenses, the seminar will appeal to a variety of majors. Students of those aforementioned fields, history and psychology, will find this to be an opportunity to study specifically Asian Americans and see the complementary nature of the two approaches. Our class will be very tied to other social sciences, namely anthropology and sociology, because of our discussions of societal power structures and hierarchies. Students of political science will also find their prior studies to be relevant to this course because of the role played by the State in immigration and other policies affecting Asian/American communities. Students studying Cities will be interested in discussions about ethnic enclaves and the social structure of communities. Students of computer science

¹ We chose to use a slash between Asian and American to echo a statement from David Palumbo-Liu's [introduction](#) to *Asian/American: Historical Crossings of a Racial Frontier*--“Asian/American marks *both* the distinction installed between “Asian” and “American” *and* a dynamic, unsettled, and inclusive movement.”

and statistics will take interest in discussions about disaggregation of data relating to Asian American communities and how they can be used to mask or provide much-needed support for its most marginalized members. Excerpts from personal memoirs and graphic novels will be a part of our reading which will interest students studying English, Creative Writing, and Visual Studies. We will also be viewing documentaries and movies, which will interest students of Film Studies. Students in other STEM fields (biology, chemistry, physics, math) may find interest in critically examining the politics of Asian and Asian American representation in their fields in comparison to the humanities and social sciences. Students in the Peace, Justice, and Human Rights concentration will be interested in our discussions on Japanese internment during World War II and refugees during the Vietnam War, two pivotal points in Asian/American history. Education students will find interest in discussions on affirmative action and mental health in the context of education. Students of Gender & Sexuality Studies will be interested in gendered experiences of Asian/Americans as a result of Asian cultural practices and imposed white American stereotypes. Students of Latin American, Iberian, and Latino Studies; Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies; and Africana Studies would be interested in finding intersections between the experiences of Asian Americans and other minority groups as well as issues of migration and assimilation. Students of East Asian Languages and Cultures will be interested in learning about the ways in which East Asian individuals and cultures shift and stay the same in the context of the United States. Students of Philosophy will be able to consider the meaning of belonging, how it can occur, what barriers may arise, and the power of labels (both self- and other-assigned) in this process.

More broadly, students will be interested in this class due to an opportunity to explore the histories and experiences of a minority group that has a much more complex background and struggle of identities than is often portrayed.

***As a disclaimer, this class is not intended to create a fully comprehensive understanding of Asian American Studies, history, nor psychology as it is a multidisciplinary, complex field that has emerged quite recently and continues to grow. As a result, we hope this seminar serves as the entry point for interested students to learn about the field of Asian American Studies through a number of angles and enables them to find additional future resources on their own.

Goals

- To have a basic understanding of pivotal events in Asian/American history and their relation to psychological phenomena
- To think critically about representation (including misrepresentation and lack of representation) of Asian/Americans historically and today
- To gain a more nuanced understanding of the diversity of the “monolith” Asian/American population and Asian/Americans in relation to other minority groups
- To understand and critique past and current policies that affect Asian/American communities and to generate possible ideas for changes or new future policies

Potential Field Trips

- Asian Arts Initiative (organization's Fall 2018 semester calendar has not been released yet)
- PAAFF (Philly Asian American Film Festival) (takes place during the fall semester every year, but the lineup and films has not been released yet)
- Center for Asian Health at Temple University
- Asian Family Health Resource at Chinatown Medical Center
- Cambodian Association of Greater Philadelphia

Potential Guest Speakers

- Thi Bui, cartoonist and author of *The Best We Could Do* and other works focusing on the experiences of Vietnamese refugees and their descendents. [More information.](#)
- Monica Trieu, Associate Professor of American Studies & Director of Asian American Studies at Purdue University. Research interests include “international migration; post-1960s immigrants and refugees; 1.5 and second-generation identities [with an emphasis on Midwest Asian American experiences]; transnational ties.” [More information.](#)
- Hum Cam Thai, Sociology & Asian American Studies Professor at Pomona College, Chair of Asian American Studies. Research interests include “Transnational families, globalization, qualitative research methods, Southeast Asian Americans, urban life, monetary flows.” [More information.](#)

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Tentative Seminar Syllabus

Week 1: What is Asian America?

Asian/Americans are often portrayed or thought of as a “monolith” group reflecting East Asian origins, but this is far from the truth. In this class, we hope to deconstruct this myth and explore what the many meanings of Asian America and the communities under its umbrella. We will talk about the origins of Asian America from both a national (US) perspective and a transnational (global) perspective that considers world conditions contributing to migration. We also will talk about the Model Minority Myth, which originated during the Civil Rights Movement as a way to utilize Asian/Americans as a wedge between other minorities. Lastly, we will talk about the perpetual foreigner syndrome, described as a tendency for Asian/Americans to be perceived as foreigners despite if they were born in the country or were in the country for many generations.

Selected readings:

- ❑ Bald, Vivek. *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America*. Harvard University Press, 2015. (selections)
- ❑ Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America*. Simon & Schuster, 2015. (selections)

- ❑ Rodriguez-Operana, Victoria, et al. “Disentangling the Myth: Social Relationships and Filipino American Adolescents’ Experiences of the Model Minority Stereotype.” *Asian American Journal of Psychology*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2017, pp. 56–71.
- ❑ Zia, Helen. *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000. (selections)

Weeks 2 & 3: How do specific events shape the direction of Asian American communities?

During Weeks 2 and 3, we will be taking a look at significant historical events that have been instrumental in shaping Asian/American communities, starting from early migrations of Chinese and Japanese laborers to the recent protests surrounding the case of ex-officer Peter Liang’s killing of an unarmed black man, Akai Gurley. Given that there are a number of events and their psychological repercussions that we would like to focus on, we chose to split up the histories into two sections: pre-Vietnam War (including events such as the Chinese Exclusion Act, Japanese internment, and the 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act) and post-Vietnam War (Vietnam War, the murder of Vincent Chin, the L.A. Riots, 9/11, and the case of ex-officer Peter Liang). Some of the questions that we will investigate during these two weeks are: What are the reverberations of these events on the collective consciousness of Asian/American communities at that time and in the years afterwards? How do these events bring together or create different versions of Asian America?

Week 2 selected readings:

- ❑ Chinese Exclusion Act: Jung, Moon-Ho. *Coolies and Cane: Race, Labor, and Sugar in the Age of Emancipation*. Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006. (selections)
- ❑ Japanese Internment:
 - ❑ Nagata, Donna K. “The Japanese American Internment: Exploring the Transgenerational Consequences of Traumatic Stress.” *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, vol. 3, no. 1, Jan. 1990, pp. 47–69. ([link](#))
 - ❑ Choose one of the two:
 - ❑ *More Perfect - American Pendulum I*. ([link](#))
 - ❑ Okubo, Mine. *Citizen 13660*. University of Washington Press.
- ❑ 1965 Immigration and Nationalities Act: Espiritu, Yen Le. “Contemporary Asian America: Immigration, Increasing Diversity, and Changing Resources.” *Asian American Women and Men: Labor, Love, and Laws*, Sage Publications, 1997, pp. 61–85. ([link](#))
- ❑ Supplementary/Optional: Minkoff-Zern, Laura-Anne, et al. “Race and Regulation: Asian Immigrants in California Agriculture.” *Cultivating Food Justice*, edited by Alison Hope Alkon and Julian Agyeman, The MIT Press, 2011, pp. 65–85.

Week 3 selected readings:

- ❑ Vietnam War:
 - ❑ Bui, Thi. *The Best We Could Do: An Illustrated Memoir*. Abrams Comicarts, 2017.
 - ❑ Carlson, E. B., and R. Rosser-Hogan. “Mental Health Status of Cambodian Refugees Ten Years after Leaving Their Homes.” *The American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, vol. 63, no. 2, Apr. 1993, pp. 223–31.

- ❑ Loo, Chalsa M., et al. "Adverse Race-Related Events as a Risk Factor for Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Asian American Vietnam Veterans." *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, vol. 193, no. 7, July 2005, pp. 455–63.
- ❑ L.A. Riots: Ridley, John. *Let It Fall: Los Angeles 1982-1992*. 2017. (selections)
- ❑ 9/11: Rana, Junaid. *Terrifying Muslims: Race and Labor in the South Asian Diaspora*. Duke University Press, 2011. (selections)
- ❑ Peter Liang & Akai Gurley: Kang, Jay Caspian. "How Should Asian-Americans Feel About the Peter Liang Protests?" *The New York Times*, 23 Feb. 2016. *NYTimes.com*. ([link](#))

Week 4: Representation & Misrepresentation / Relationships with Other Communities

Media and visual representation of Asian/Americans has been marked with cases of yellowface and stereotypes such as—but certainly not limited to—the character of Apu Nahasapeemapetilon in *The Simpsons*, I.Y. Yunioshi played by Mickey Rooney in *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, Madame Butterfly and its later iteration of Miss Saigon, and Scarlett Johansson's playing of the main role in *The Ghost in the Shell*. In examining these (mis)representations, we also believe it is extremely important to discuss their intersections of gender, sexuality, and socioeconomic class: Whose narratives are shown? What are the consequences of these narratives, whether positive or negative? Some questions we hope to discuss are: How has representation of Asian/Americans changed over time, both of themselves and by others? How do Asian Americans see themselves? How do these (mis)representations affect the relationships between Asian/Americans and other groups? How are these relationships in turn represented in the media we consume?

Selected readings:

- ❑ Choose 1 of the 2:
 - ❑ Hess, Amanda. "Asian-American Actors Are Fighting for Visibility. They Will Not Be Ignored." *The New York Times*, 25 May 2016. *NYTimes.com*. ([link](#))
 - ❑ Levin, Sam. "'We're the Geeks, the Prostitutes': Asian American Actors on Hollywood's Barriers." *The Guardian*, 11 Apr. 2017. ([link](#))
- ❑ Paulson, Michael. "The Battle of 'Miss Saigon': Yellowface, Art and Opportunity." *The New York Times*, 17 Mar. 2017. *NYTimes.com*. ([link](#))
- ❑ Phi, Bao. "Power Rangers Brings Asian American Poverty Front and Center." *The Nerds of Color*, 24 Apr. 2017. ([link](#))
- ❑ Tawa, John, et al. "Triangulated Threat: A Model of Black and Asian Race-Relations in a Context of White Dominance." *American Multicultural Studies: Diversity of Race, Ethnicity, Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Sherrow Pinder, Sage Publications, 2013, pp. 229–47.
- ❑ Supplementary/Optional
 - ❑ Enjeti, Anjali. "Ghosts of White People Past: Witnessing White Flight From an Asian Ethnoburb." *Pacific Standard*, Aug. 2016. ([link](#))
 - ❑ Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics & Society*, vol. 27, no. 1, Mar. 1999, pp. 105–38. *SAGE Journals*.

Week 5: Current practice and policy

In this week, we will talk about current issues facing Asian/American communities, with a focus on data disaggregation, mental health, and professional representation. The first, data disaggregation, refers to ongoing efforts to disaggregate census and other types of quantitative data related to Asian/American communities by ethnicity in order to highlight the disparities in education, income, and other socioeconomic factors. Some questions for this week include: How can policies be used as a tool to better support Asian American communities? How do different cultural experiences affect understandings of and access to health and mental health? How can we examine the complexity of Asian/American professional representation, such as in STEM fields, in relation with to phenomena such as the “bamboo ceiling”?

Selected readings:

- ❑ Fadiman, Anne. *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2012. (selections)
- ❑ Fuchs, Chris. “California Data Disaggregation Bill Sparks Debate in Asian-American Community.” *NBC News*, 26 Aug. 2016. ([link](#))
- ❑ Tung, Wei-Chen. “Cultural Barriers to Mental Health Services Among Asian Americans.” *Home Health Care Management & Practice*, vol. 23, no. 4, Aug. 2011, pp. 303–05.
- ❑ Yang, Jeff. “Harvard Lawsuit Is Not What It Seems.” *CNN.Com*, 24 Nov. 2014. ([link](#))
- ❑ Choose 1 of the 3 below (three different cases analyzing Asian/American mental health):
 - ❑ Ho, Karen. “Jennifer Pan’s Revenge.” *Toronto Life*, 22 July 2015. ([link](#))
 - ❑ Richtel, Matt. “Push, Don’t Crush, the Students.” *The New York Times*, 24 Apr. 2015. *NYTimes.com*. ([link](#))
 - ❑ Rong, Xiaoqing. “Confronting Mental Health Issues at Stuyvesant.” *Voices of NY*. ([link](#))

