

The Role of Asian American Studies within Asian Studies and the Liberal Arts Curriculum: A Midwestern Perspective.

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Whither Asian American Studies in U.S. Liberal Arts Education?

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Twelve million Americans of Asian Pacific ancestry live in the United States today. Up from 7.3 million in 1990, 2.4 million in 1970, 500,000 in 1940, and 76,000 in 1900, they constitute the second-largest U.S. ethnic minority. By 2020 there will be 20.2 million Asian Americans, and by 2050, Asian Americans will constitute 10.7% of the U.S. population.¹

The Chinese, the first Americans of Asian-Pacific ancestry to immigrate, fled poverty and chaos at home to seek their fortune in California during the Gold Rush. They later played a significant part in building America's railroads — until nativist fears over jobs precipitated the Chinese Exclusion Law of 1882. Between 1882 and 1941 Japanese,

Filipinos, Koreans, and Asian Indians arrived as contract laborers. After Pearl Harbor, 110,000 Japanese Americans were placed in relocation camps, and in 1943, as a result of the Sino-American alliance in the Pacific theater, discrimination laws against the Chinese and other Asians were lifted, thereby opening America to more Asians and Pacific Islanders. The Immigration Reform Act of 1965 unleashed a flood of well educated and highly skilled middle-class Asian newcomers. Since 1975, thousands of Southeast Asian refugees, escaping the retributions of the Vietnam War, have received asylum in America. Once concentrated on the two coasts and Hawaii, Asian Americans now populate the entire land.

By 1990, Asian Americans were hailed as a “model minority” helping to fuel the engine of America's economic growth in an increasingly globalized marketplace. More Asian American professionals were earning over \$50,000 annually than any other demographic group. And Asian American entrepreneurship was double that of other minorities. Asian Americans were also seen as America's indispensable bridge to Asia, increasingly the center of the world's economy and America's

largest trading partner in the newly-dawned “Asian Century.”²

Asian Americans prize higher education as the key to their success in America, and since the late 1980’s they have been flocking to U.S. universities. In the fall of 1990, for instance, more Asian Americans than Caucasians entered UCLA, and by 1999 Asian Americans constituted 21% of the student bodies of New York University (up from 10% in 1990), 19% of the University of Pennsylvania, and 17% of Columbia.³

Asian Americans currently make up between three and nine percent of U.S. college students. They enroll in the very courses about Asia which, beginning around 1800, were intended to prepare future American missionaries, diplomats, and business people for the challenges of a rapidly-changing Asia and increasingly-vital U.S.-Asia relationships. Ironically, efforts to integrate these courses into the liberal arts core during the inter-war years were impeded by a “new curricular conception called ‘liberal education’ or ‘general education’ . . . focused on Western civilization . . . [which] ensured the exclusion of Asia from [the mainstream of] university and college curricula.”⁴ Yet government patronage of area studies programs to prepare Americans for three wars in Asia as well as the Cold War catapulted Asian Studies into the heart of the course catalogue.

As increasing numbers of Asian Americans enroll in liberal arts colleges, they partake of a rich harvest of Asian Studies courses across many disciplines. By 1994, these courses were offered at 147 of the 154 colleges in the Carnegie listing of Category I liberal arts colleges (many of which are ASIANetwork members.) Seventy-six of these colleges provide an Asian Studies “concentration” or its equivalent and maintain co-curricular programs to promote student-faculty collaborative research, study in Asia, and internships.⁵

Yet many of the Asian Americans who bolster student enrollment in these courses and enhance campus diversity discover that they are, in fact, “MIH [Missing in History].”⁶ Knowing about their ancestral lands and cultures is simply not enough; they want to identify themselves as **both Asian and American**. According to Evelyn Hu-DeHart, chair of ethnic studies at the University of Colorado, these students, feeling “visible and invisible at the same time,”⁷ are increasingly restive in traditional “Asian American” courses. These courses were created during the late 1960’s when youthful Asian American activists, inspired by the civil rights and anti-war movements, demanded curricular offerings on 1) the economic and political forces which brought their parents to the U.S. but which also kept them on the American periphery; 2) Asian American race, class, and gender relationships to European Americans; and 3) Asian America’s contributions to U.S. life.⁸

In recent years, Professor Hu-DeHart observes, Asian American students have been recommending a more sophisticated approach to their history in this post-civil rights, post-Cold War, post-colonial, postmodern, global-

izing world.⁹ Journalist Somini Sengupta notes: “Once primarily focused on the history and literature of Americans of Chinese and Japanese ancestry on the West Coast, courses are now as likely to explore the history of Indians in Britain as they are to study the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.”¹⁰ Moreover, David Palumbo-Liu, professor of comparative literature at Stanford, believes that the curricular focus should now be on examining “the forces that provoke immigration, how they work in both directions, how people go back and forth.”¹¹

According to the Association for Asian American Studies, there are now 43 undergraduate programs (twice as many as a decade ago) offering minors and a few majors in Asian American Studies. These are offered primarily in universities by a new generation of interdisciplinary-minded faculty pioneering new publications, websites, and documentaries which incorporate transnational geographies, cultural anthropology, and ethnography into the time-honored disciplines of history and literature.

Yet a debate still rages as to the proper departmental home for Asian American Studies. Some scholars argue that there is no longer a “pure” Asia which can be examined in isolation from the interchange with its diasporic extension. Hence, they claim, Asian Studies offers a “big tent” for Asian American Studies. Other academics reject this approach as curricular double vision. And many Asian Americans themselves believe that the Asian Studies base reinforces the stereotype of Asian Americans as foreigners in their U.S. homeland.

A handful of universities like Princeton have recently begun to teach about Asian America under the banner of American Studies. But many Americanists believe ethnic studies bifurcate the syllabus. Others argue that “with technological advances connecting Asian Americans both to Asia and the many countries where Asians have settled, its scholars no longer seem overly concerned with study of the United States.”¹²

Still others believe the topic should be considered a subset of “diasporic” studies. But, Sengupta notes, opponents of this view counter that focusing on diaspora “can blur the distinctions between people of . . . [Asian] extraction living in difference countries”¹³ And Professor Arif Dirlik of Duke believes the “whimpering preoccupation with the location of home can ultimately create fertile grounds for racism.”¹⁴

Well-endowed universities have the wherewithal to find some solutions to these dilemmas. Recently, for example, a group of concerned alumnae/i contributed a million dollars to support Asian American studies at Columbia. Yet the situation is quite different for America’s liberal arts college. Although they constitute only five percent of America’s higher educational institutions and encompass merely two percent of U.S. college students, these institutions have been an ideal environment for Asian Studies. Their residential nature, student-faculty collaboration; interdisciplinary instincts; study abroad, service learning, and internship programs; entrepreneurial administrators committed to multiculturalism and to preparing “Asia Hands”; foundation support; and non-Asianist

faculty eager to develop new courses incorporating Asia-related components—all this has provided fertile ground for fostering the growth of Asian Studies.¹⁵

But can these colleges do the same for Asian American Studies? As Asian American communities keep growing in every corner of America and as Caucasian enrollment continues to decline, colleges are recruiting Asian American students in greater numbers than ever before. But will they be able to develop the curricular and co-curricular infrastructure needed to retain these students, prepare them to serve their communities, and ready them for the “Asian American Century”?¹⁶ In the face of slender budgets, will administrators seek to retool from within to promote Asian American Studies, and will existing faculty be willing to garner expertise in Asian American Studies as they have done so brilliantly for Asian Studies?

In the presentations which follow, my panel colleagues address these and other issues from the perspective of the Midwest, where long-settled Asian Pacific immigrants and the far more numerous Southeast Asian newcomers are now the region’s fastest-growing ethnic group. Asian-Midwesterners are profoundly enriching life in America’s heartland.

Chia Ning, Professor of History at Central College, Iowa, reflects on her challenges as a classically-trained Asianist in understanding and teaching the richness and diversity of the Asian experience in America. Like so many of us, she encounters an increasing number of Asian American and other interested students seeking to understand and appreciate Asian America.

Diane Clayton, Professor and Co-Director of the Bush Library at Hamline University, is a trained South Asianist and teaches a first-year symposium on Minnesota immigrants. This unique course offers curricular and programmatic connections to the 171,000-strong Asian-Minnesota community, which includes the world’s largest concentration of Hmong people.¹⁷

Finally, David Bennetts, Professor of History at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University, specializes in the history of U.S. immigration and race relations. He considers the challenges of the non-Asianist endeavoring to develop a course on Asian Americans, to which task he is devoting his spring 2005 sabbatical.

Our panel’s exploration of the role and future of Asian American Studies will continue at next April’s ASIANetwork conference in Whittier, California, where ASIANetwork faculty will be invited to offer insights and suggestions gleaned from their experience of teaching Asian American Studies in the liberal arts milieu.

The findings of this roundtable discussion will, in turn, be incorporated into an ASIANetwork-sponsored faculty development grant proposal entitled “Asian Communities: Origins and Migrations to the Americas.” The proposed multi-year project, to begin in 2007-08, will involve ASIANetwork faculty in developing new curricular materials and pedagogical approaches by making an interdisciplinary exploration—through field trips, seminars, and other for-

mats—of the homeland roots and the U.S. communities of Asian Americans. Project participants will be introduced to the growing body of bibliographic, Internet, film, music, and other materials related to Asian Americans; inventory academic, community, museum, civic, advocacy, arts, and other Asian American resources; and disseminate their curricular and pedagogical innovations on their campuses, the ASIANetwork website, and subsequent ASIANetwork panels as well as in such publications as the *ASIANetwork Exchange*, *Teaching About Asia*, and *The Asian Diaspora and the Undergraduate Curriculum*. The latter is a book to be published in a new guidebook series sponsored by ASIANetwork and the Association for Asian Studies.

¹For these and other important data on Asian Americans, see Lan Cao and Himilce Novas, *Everything You Need to Know About Asian-American History* (New York: Penguin, 1996), “Introduction” and Harry H. L. Kitano and Roger Daniels, *Asian Americans: Emerging Minorities*, third ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.: 2001), “Introduction.”

²Kitano and Daniels, *Asian Americans*, pp. 1-9

³Somini Sengupta, “More Students Increase Demand for Scholars,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 1999.

⁴Samuel Hideo Yamashita, “Asian Studies at American Private Colleges, 1808-1990,” in Suzanne Wilson Barnett and Van Jay Symons, eds., *Asia in the Undergraduate Curriculum: A Case for Asian Studies in Liberal Arts Education* (Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 2000), p. 29.

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 23. See the other contributions to this volume for a comprehensive overview of Asian Studies in U.S. liberal arts colleges.

⁶See Lee Pao Xiong, “Preparing Higher Education for Asian-Minnesotans,” Keynote Address at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University (CSB/SJU) Fall Residency on “Higher Education and Asian-Minnesota: Developing a Bridge Building Agenda,” November 14, 2001. See also Bruce P. Corrie, “Higher Education’s Role in Building Economic Bridges to Asia,” Keynote Address at the CSB/SJU Spring Residency on “Preparing CSB/SJU Students for the Pacific Century: The Economic Nexus,” April 10, 2002.

⁷Quoted in Sengupta, “More Students.”

⁸William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), pp. 1-10.

⁹Evelyn Hu-DeHart, ed., *Across the Pacific: Asian Americans and Globalization* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), “Introduction.”

¹⁰Sengupta, “More Scholars.”

¹¹Quoted in *ibid.*

¹²Quoted in *ibid.*

¹³Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁴Quoted in *ibid.*

¹⁵See the essays in Barnett and Symons, *Asia in the Undergraduate Curriculum*.

¹⁶For an exploration of the concept of the “Asian American Century,” see Warren I. Cohen, *The Asian*

American Century (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press), 2002.

¹⁷Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans and Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy - Minnesota Chapter, comps., *Asian and Pacific Islander - Minnesota Profile* (St. Paul: Council on Asian-Pacific Minnesotans, 2003).

Developing a Course on Asian America
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I want to begin by confessing that I am neither trained as an Asianist nor have I ever taught an Asian American course. I have attended the last five ASIANetwork meetings to learn from the expertise and experience of the many fine presenters. I fully expect to be more the “student” than the “teacher” here today. I hope I can contribute a little to our conversation.

With that apology and warning, perhaps you will bear with me while I tell you a little of how I got to where I sit here today, because I think that in a larger sense, my personal and professional voyage says something about the present state of Asian American studies.

I received my Ph.D. thirty-plus years ago with a concentration in U.S. history and a particular interest in the history of race relations. Those of you who were around in the mid-1970s remember that this was a time when universities and colleges across the country were establishing African American studies programs and rather frantically trying to find qualified faculty to teach in them. You will also, no doubt, remember that there were not many other jobs out there for young U.S. historians. I naturally applied for all of the African American history positions. While most of the schools would have probably preferred an African American Ph.D., I was able to secure a job teaching African American History at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University (CSB/SJU). This was my primary responsibility for two years and an important component of my course load for ten years. But by the mid-1980s, the climate had changed, at least in central Minnesota. Our enrollment of African American students had plunged, along with the availability of federal scholarship funds and with that the student demand for African American history courses. African American Studies programs were going under all across the country, including some that I had interviewed with, and my superiors at CSB/SJU were making it clear that they had new priorities for the use of my time. My African American offerings were relegated to the occasional January Interim course.

I fought this for a time, but my concerns were put to rest largely by the growing realization that my colleagues—many of them, like me, schooled in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement—had incorporated into their offerings much of the content of my African American History courses.

And I had always believed that this, ultimately, was the end goal for African American Studies—integration of the African American experience fully into the American Experience.

In recent years I have felt a sense of *déjà vu*. Fifteen years ago, I began to get involved in Asian Studies at CSB/SJU. Though still a U.S. historian and a novice in things Asian, I am presently co-director of the Asian Studies Learning Community (ASLC)¹ and I have directed several study abroad programs in Asia. To be honest, I now read and think more about Asian history than I do American history. More importantly for our purposes here today, I am beginning to feel not unlike that young man who found his first academic position teaching African American history.

Last February, the annual Asian New Year Celebration was held on our campuses. This event is sponsored by the student Asia Club, and over the years has attracted as many as 1,000 guests. It has been a celebration of Asian culture, complete with student performances of traditional Asian dances and songs, a fashion show of traditional Asian attire, and, of course, a meal of traditional Asian dishes. During its early years, the Asian New Year was largely orchestrated by our Asian international students, who also provided most of the entertainment.

When I walked into the traditionally-decorated hall this year, I expected more of the same. So, too, did many, if not most, of the familiar patrons in attendance. But, to the surprise of most and the dismay of some, what we experienced that evening was a celebration of Asian America—especially young Asian America.

Except for a traditional performance of Okinawa dance, all of the “entertainment” was what I would call “contemporary Asian American.” It included an Asian American rap group, Asian American poetry readings and an Asian American comic. Most of the entertainment had a powerful message of alienation. By the time the comparatively but not entirely traditional fashion show began, half of the audience—virtually everyone over 40—had left. The next morning, I began to receive complaints from the “Old Guard.” Like them, I had experienced some uneasy feelings during the celebration—perhaps more caught-off-guard than uncomfortable. But, as I always do, I stayed to help the Asia Club kids clean-up the hall; and it was so obvious that they were thrilled with the evening that I had to remind myself that it was **their** Club and **their** night.

This year's Asian New Year at CSB/SJU was, I think, a wake-up call for those of us in the ASLC. I'm not sure why I was so surprised, except that our Asian American students have never been as assertive or as “visible” as they were that night. Still, I shouldn't have been surprised. Asian American students are a significant majority of our so-called “students of color” population. I teach in a state where the Asian American population more than doubled between 1990 and 2000 and continues to grow. In a short time, Minnesota will welcome 2,000 or so new Hmong refugees from Thailand, and the percentage of Asian Americans living in Minnesota already well exceeds the national average. Our Asian