

Recent titles in  
Contemporary American Ethnic Issues

Native American Issues  
*Paul C. Rosier*

U.S. Latino Issues  
*Rodolfo F. Acuña*

Notice  
This material may be  
protected by copyright  
law (Title 17 U.S Code)  
San Francisco State University

# ASIAN AMERICAN ISSUES



MARY YU DANICO AND FRANKLIN NG

*Mary Yu Danico and Franklin Ng  
"Asian American Studies Program"  
in Asian American Issues.  
Westport: Greenwood 2004*

Contemporary American Ethnic Issues  
*Ronald H. Bayor, Series Editor*



GREENWOOD PRESS  
Westport, Connecticut • London

---

## ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES PROGRAMS

Asian American studies is an interdisciplinary field that examines the different aspects and experiences of Asian Americans. This includes the history of Asians in America, from the Filipinos or Manilamen, who came to Louisiana in the eighteenth century, to the Southeast Asians, who arrived after the end of the Southeast Asian conflict in 1975. It also includes topics that relate to contemporary Asian American communities, such as the issues of immigrant adjustment, bilingualism, religion, generational changes, employment, education, and community building. Furthermore, there are issues of social problems such as hate crimes, poverty, sexism, and homophobia in the Asian American communities to consider, as well. In addition, there is the matrix of race, ethnicity, gender, and class issues that relate to such matters as interethnic and interracial relations, interethnic marriage, mixed ethnicity identity, gender relations, and different sexual orientations. At the present time there are almost 50 universities and colleges with Asian American studies departments or programs throughout the United States, with another 11 offering Asian American studies courses.<sup>1</sup> And the number keeps growing. The first Asian American studies programs were founded in 1969 at San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, but today there are programs at elite private universities such as Stanford, Cornell, and New York University. Liberal arts institutions such as Loyola Marymount University, Oberlin College, Pomona College, and Occidental College offer instruction in Asian American studies. Public colleges and universities have responded to student interest, and there are now programs at institutions

such as the University of Washington, the University of Illinois, the University of Michigan, the University of Wisconsin, and the state universities in California. Even some high schools, such as Berkeley High School, Milton Academy, and Brookline High School, have offered classes on Asian Americans to their students.<sup>2</sup>

### BACKGROUND

Asian American studies programs emerged as a result of the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, which gave rise to the ethnic studies movement that included African American studies, Chicano and Latino studies, and Native American studies. It also encouraged an interest in the role of race and ethnicity in America and facilitated the development of Women's studies. The civil rights movement sparked not only the desire for racial equality in society, but raised concerns about equity and racial and ethnic representation in high schools and colleges around the nation. The question of whether schools and universities should reflect the diverse multicultural makeup of the nation's population emerged. Moreover, should not the curriculum foster understanding about this social reality and provide an education that might be relevant in addressing problems and issues in Asian American and other ethnic communities? San Francisco State College, now called San Francisco State University, gave birth to the ethnic studies movement. Community activists, scholars, and students had organized to demand an educational program that recognized the voices and history of their communities. They sought a Third-World college that could respond to the need for education about people of color and help to solve the problems that these communities faced.<sup>3</sup> In 1955 at the Bandung Conference in Indonesia, countries freed from colonial powers attempted to form a "third world" model through a policy of nonalignment with the United States and Soviet Union. The ethnic studies movement, like other liberation movements, chose this model demanding a college education free from oppression, such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and colonialism. They pushed for self-determination and equality whereby students could be educated about their true history in the country through the development of autonomous programs that reflected the needs of each respective community.<sup>4</sup> The students' demands were not warmly received, however; in fact, students were forced to resort to acts of civil disobedience, such as protests, hunger strikes, and rallies. In response to this, "The authorities [in San Francisco] deployed up to ten thousand armed men almost every day for more than two months to crush the Third World strike, but the students prevailed—and Ethnic Studies was born."<sup>5</sup> As time passed, other campuses on the West Coast and on the East Coast joined the

fight to demand courses that spoke to the experiences of ethnic minorities. The absence of these courses symbolized to many the lack of interest or concern about groups who had helped to shape the history and economy of the United States. While traditional departments such as anthropology, art studio, dramatic art, economics, English, film studies, history, political science, psychology, and sociology had offered courses on various minority groups, they often referred to them in the margins and not as the focal point of study. Consequently, students often received a disjointed picture of the experiences of Asian Americans versus a holistic picture of their experiences and their communities. Asian American studies programs, which had developed with other ethnic studies programs, were a response to remedy the situation. Asian American programs were devised to offer courses from many disciplines, but the courses dealt with Asian Americans as the central theme of study. Asian Americans would not be marginalized and confined to a single lecture or a passing remark.

The momentum of Asian American studies was drawn from student activists, many of whom were introduced to activism through their participation in the civil rights movement and protests against the Vietnam War. Inspired by the Black Panthers,<sup>6</sup> the American Indian movement,<sup>7</sup> and the Young Lords,<sup>8</sup> students of color criticized what they discerned to be the elitist universities' support of White supremacy on college campuses. As a broad coalition of students from different backgrounds—Asian Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and European Americans—they were "people of color" who had enlisted in the campaign to correct the situation. Activists of color saw the ethnic studies movement as part of the bigger picture to transform the racist educational system from the ground up. As a united front, a coalition of different ethnic groups demanded an education that reflected the struggles for racial justice at home and abroad. They also fought for programs that would encourage student and community organizing and welcomed the idea of interdisciplinary scholarship for and by people of color.<sup>9</sup> These programs included faculty and students working with community organizations and members, as well as conducting outreach to the community. In the 1990s, university campuses witnessed displays of activism by both students and faculty to establish new programs and sustain older ones. For example, between 1996 to 1998, students at Princeton, Northwestern, Columbia, Stanford, and the University of Maryland, to name a few, demanded institutional support for Asian American studies. They showed their concerns through sit-ins, occupation of administrative buildings, hunger strikes, and other public demonstrations.<sup>10</sup>

Some would argue that the Asian American studies movement in particular and the ethnic studies movement in general have transformed the academic

culture. It has done so by redefining and reshaping the curriculum by including the histories and contemporary issues of the diverse Asian ethnic groups, by changing the nature of scholarship by researching the historical and contemporary issues and experiences of Asian Americans, by employing a more hands-on approach to the practice and methods of research, and by engaging communities through the use of interviews, oral histories, and extensive field and participant observation. However, the pursuit of creating more Asian American studies programs on high school and college campuses can be undermined when educators and administrators cling to the "model minority" myth of Asian American educational success. The myth obscures Asian American interest in struggles for social justice. It gives the appearance, particularly when compared to African Americans and Latinos, that Asian Americans as a group are only concerned with maintaining the status quo, not making waves, and working diligently to achieve the American dream. If university administrators receive this false impression, they may act in ways that are detrimental to Asian Americans. Thinking that Asian Americans are assimilated and have no interest in ethnic programs, they may divert those scarce resources away from Asian American programs. Some may argue that there is no need for a major or a program in Asian American studies, since different disciplines may cover Asian American issues and experiences. For example, some would argue that in history classes, Asian American history is treated as a part of U.S. history, rather than being a field of its own. Moreover, in sociology courses, Asian Americans are often mentioned in race relations classes, but they are only examined briefly with other groups. The complexities of the group are overshadowed, with little attention paid to aspects of Asian history and how homeland developments affect the lives of Asian Americans. All too frequently, the efforts to establish an Asian American studies program is often confronted by barriers put up by more established programs, which see a new program as a threat to their resources and territory. Instead of recognizing a new program as filling a void in the curriculum, established programs view Asian American studies programs as a threat that will compete with them for new faculty, classrooms, and other needed resources in colleges and universities.

There are questions as to whether ethnic studies programs in general, and Asian American studies programs in particular, have remained true to their original goals. Are these programs still rooted in community organization and activism, or have they become more professionalized and institutionalized into the ivory tower by being more concerned about theory and scholarship? While race and ethnic concerns have been addressed, what else has been ignored in the field? What about issues of gender, sexuality, and class? Are these issues reflected in Asian American studies or ethnic studies for that

matter? As Asian American studies develops as a discrete field of academic inquiry, it is making important educational and intellectual contributions to American higher education, both in terms of pedagogy and in terms of research. However, some question the viability of specific ethnic programs. Does it promote an understanding of diverse Asian American ethnic communities or does it in fact create rifts and competition among these ethnic groups? While the battle for Asian American studies programs continues across the nation, there are still debates regarding whether these programs are really necessary. These are some of the propositions related to the viability of Asian American studies that are being discussed:

1. With Asian Americans drawing attention as the second fastest growing ethnic population in the nation, it is desirable that people should have a better understanding of Asian American communities.
2. Much has been omitted from U.S. history regarding the important role of Asian American men and women in the development of the United States. The history courses treat Asian American history as part of U.S. history, but they neglect aspects of Asian history and fail to show how homeland developments affected and continue to influence the lives of Asian Americans.
3. Asian American studies classes help students to acquire usable skills and to develop a sense of social responsibility. Since its founding, Asian American studies has placed great emphasis on training students to be of service both to their ethnic communities and to the larger society. Thus, educating all students in Asian American studies helps students to learn usable skills and to foster a sense of social responsibility. In addition, the program will help students prepare for employment in a multiethnic society.

### SHOULD PEOPLE HAVE A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE RAPIDLY GROWING ASIAN AMERICAN POPULATION?

For

Asian Americans are the second fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. For example, the 1990 census showed that California is now the nation's most racially diverse state with the largest percentage of Asian Americans (9.6% of the total California population). The state also has the largest percentage of Latino Americans (25.8%) in the country and the second largest number of African Americans (2.2 million, second only to New York's 2.9 million). Its population of Native Americans (242,164) is second only to Oklahoma's 252,420. Almost 3 million persons of Asian ancestry, representing about 40 percent of all such persons in the United States, live in California today. However, there are significant increases across the United States. Nationwide, Asian Americans consistently represent the second fastest growing

ethnic population. With the increasing number of students leaving their home state for college, and graduates relocating to different states and sometimes different countries, it is important to address the experiences of this growing ethnic population. Given this demographic reality, students graduating with an interdisciplinary knowledge of Asian Americans, as well as with knowledge about other ethnic groups, will be well prepared for employment in many occupations. This could be business and management, education, social services, the health professions, law, high-tech industries, and other lines of work that involve interaction with coworkers and clients from diverse backgrounds.

Given the increasing visibility of Asian Americans in all walks of life, all students graduating from a college or university, and not just those of Asian ancestry, should know something about the history, communities, and cultures of Asian Americans who are an integral part of American society. Students who take classes in Asian American studies programs will have a better understanding about Asian American communities and experiences. Consequently, they will learn to see Asian Americans as active participants in the United States instead of subscribing to the various stereotypes of Asian Americans as "others" or foreigners.

Educating students about Asian Americans will sensitize them to diversity and cultural issues that often may impede interactions in everyday life. Furthermore, it will allow students of Asian ancestry to have a better understanding of their own history and culture, thereby promoting pride in their ethnic identity. One way in which students gain a sense of pride and belonging is by having faculty members who serve as role models. While students in four-year institutions regularly have Asian American faculty members in science, engineering, and math classes, they rarely see Asian American faculty members in the social sciences or humanities. As a result, those disciplines that serve as the core of general education do not present students with the opportunity to meet and establish relationships with faculty of Asian descent. Asian American faculty, besides being an asset to Asian American students, also provides an important source of mentorship for other ethnic minority and White students. While education is often gained in the classroom, meetings and social interactions outside of the classroom provide opportunities for informal learning. In fact, some may argue that students gain additional insight through these venues for advising and one-to-one meetings.

In addition to the classroom experience, there are growing efforts to make various Asian American businesses and retail centers more accessible to non-Asians. For example, the Los Angeles Koreatown has recently made efforts to make their commercial industry friendlier to non-Koreans. Many argue that signs written in the Korean language deter many potential customers from coming to their restaurants, retail stores, and other businesses. Instead

of alienating non-Korean-speaking from Koreatown, there is a push to make it more accessible to all racial and ethnic groups. Asian American studies can help to promote a better cross-cultural and interethnic understanding. Knowledge of Asian Americans is essential in communities where Asian American populations are flourishing. However, it is just as important in areas where Asian Americans are a smaller percentage of the community. As more people recognize that America is a multicultural society, populated by people of different ethnic and racial backgrounds, it is essential that there be an attempt to acknowledge, recognize, and understand something about all those who live here. While there has been much written about the European American role in history, politics, and society, relatively little has been said or written about that of Asian Americans. This void in understanding and knowledge only makes Asian Americans distant objects rather than real people who are contributing to the vitality and dynamism of America today. The role of Asian American studies is integral to these efforts. In summary, not only is this field interested in educating students about both the historical and contemporary Asian American experience, but it also works closely with community organizations and groups. Through research and hands-on involvement, Asian American studies can reach out to both students and ethnic populations to strengthen the links between the universities and their neighboring communities.

### Against

The 2000 U.S. Census highlights the fact that Asian Americans are a fast growing population in the United States. In almost every state, the public and the media are becoming increasingly aware that Asian Americans are an important part of the American mosaic. With this rapid demographic growth, there has been an accompanying expansion of university and college courses and programs in Asian American studies. Started at only a few colleges and universities in the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American studies today has its own professional organization, the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS). The AAAS was founded in 1979 to advance excellence in pedagogy and research in the field of Asian American studies. The association also strived to promote better understanding between and among the various Asian ethnic groups who are studied in Asian American studies: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Hawaiian, Vietnamese, Hmong, Cambodian, Laotian, South Asian, Pacific Islander, and other groups. In addition, the association promotes the scholarly exchange among teachers, researchers, and students in the field of Asian American studies. Housed institutionally at Cornell University, the national organization has an Internet Web site, a national

board and officers, a newsletter, and a publication entitled the *Journal of Asian American Studies*. Before the journal took form, the organization published an annual anthology, often with papers and essays drawn from its annual meetings at different sites across the country. As interest in Asian American studies increased, an East of California organization was formed "in the fall of 1991 on the campus of Cornell University, where representatives from twenty-three colleges and universities resolved to establish the network. Its purposes are: (1) to institutionalize Asian American studies; (2) to develop regional-specific research and publications; and (3) to provide mutual support to individuals and programs."<sup>11</sup> It meets twice annually, in the fall at a member campus and in the spring at the annual meeting of the AAAS. As a result of the East of California organizational efforts, the AAAS developed a directory of its members, as well as of universities with Asian American studies programs, certificates, and classes. Asian American studies has indeed prospered since its initial beginnings when it was taught at only a few institutions of higher learning.

While it is certainly desirable that the public should have a broader understanding of Asian Americans in the United States, it is less certain that Asian American studies is the proper vehicle for this purpose. In other words, it may not be that Asian American studies is the best mode of disseminating information about Asian Americans, for in many Asian American studies courses, the focus is on the largest Asian American populations. They concentrate predominantly on the Chinese and the Japanese. Perhaps this was because of the popular perception that these groups had arrived in this chronological order, and so the studies of these two groups are the most abundant. But it has meant that there is less attention to the Filipinos, Koreans, Asian Indians, Pakistanis, and Bangladeshis. The Southeast Asians who arrived at the end of America's war in the former French Indochina receive even less notice. The Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, Iu-Mien, Cham, and others are marginalized in Asian American studies. Groups such as the Thai, Malaysians, Indonesians, Singaporeans, Bhutanese, Nepalese, and Tibetans are in a similar predicament. In addition, there is little focus on Pacific Islanders and mixed Asian Americans or *hapas*.

Some Asian American studies programs also include coverage of Pacific Islanders and label themselves as Asian Pacific American studies programs. But this label of "Asian Pacific Americans" or "Asian Pacific Islanders," which is also sometimes used, has some difficulties. First of all, Pacific Islanders are a diverse population, encompassing Hawaiians, Samoans, Fijians, Chamorros from Guam, Tongans, Tahitians, and others. With the Asian American population itself being so diverse, it is uncertain that Asian American studies programs possess the capability or expertise to delve into the subject of Pacific

Islanders. Moreover, much of the attention might be devoted to Native Hawaiians, who have been linked to the Asian immigrant experience in Hawai'i. Second, if Asian American studies programs examined the Pacific Islander experience, it probably would be done in a limited fashion. Resources and attention probably would be focused first on the major East Asian American groups, such as the Chinese, Koreans, and Japanese and then second to Filipinos, South Asians, and Southeast Asians. For that reason, Pacific Islanders might well have reservations about programs that dubbed themselves Asian American/ Pacific Islander studies programs with such limited coverage of the Pacific Islander populations. Furthermore, some Native Hawaiian studies scholars and activists would argue that their experiences are more closely related to Native American experiences than Asian Americans. While Native Hawaiians have interacted with Asian Americans due to the role of the plantations and Asian laborers, their culture and traditions nonetheless resemble more of Native Americans. Therefore, the label with the words "Pacific Islander studies" would not describe the orientation of the program or department, and it would be misleading to students and others.

With so many Asian American groups represented in the American kaleidoscope, what should one do? How does one synthesize the information? Should there be a risk of academic division into smaller mutually hostile units? If Asian American studies courses take on a chronological approach, does that not mean that there will be greater coverage upon the Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Asian Indians, at the expense of the groups that arrived after the immigration changes of 1965? These are the many dilemmas that Asian American studies is still facing as it tries to be representative of its constituency and yet be educational in its objective. With Asian American studies bound by its activist roots in the Asian American movement struggles of the 1960s, and still wrestling with identity politics, perhaps the traditional academic disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, history, and political science, can impart a more objective and impartial understanding of the role and place of Asian Americans in the United States.

#### DO ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES CORRECT PAST OMISSIONS BY CLAIMING A PLACE FOR ASIAN AMERICANS IN U.S. HISTORY?

For

Ignorance, some say, is bliss. When race relations are discussed in the United States it is generally easier to not know about the experiences of groups with oppression, discrimination, racism, and even their successes. That way, the problems or successes of other ethnic groups are simply ignored.

Such is the case of those without knowledge of Asian American history. So many youths and young and old adults know very little about the history of Asian Americans in the United States. Unfortunately, it is not only non-Asians who can use "ignorance" as an excuse for being uninformed about Asian Americans. All too often, Asian Americans themselves are also not fully aware of the role that Asian American men and women have played in the building of modern America.

How is it that the accomplishments of Asian Americans in building railroads, developing the agricultural landscapes across the nation, fighting in wars involving the United States, and contributing to the success of the American nation are ignored or forgotten? Much of this has to do with the lack of education that is provided to students about the history of Asians in America. When we examine Asian American history, it is clear that the early Chinese laborers came to the United States with the intention of returning home. They were the sojourners who came to the United States in hopes of making it financially so that they could provide for their families in China. Wedded to their Confucian values, many believed that being away from their parents and family would not allow them to fulfill their family obligations and responsibilities. However, the economic reality caused many to realize that they would not be able to return home financially secure. In many ways, the early Chinese laborers recognized that it was more financially beneficial for their families at home if they remained in the United States, and sent money back to them. Many Asian immigrant workers, who followed the Chinese, encountered similar experiences. They met with racial and economic barriers in their path so that it was difficult to return home as a financial success. Instead, many stayed in the United States and managed to adapt so that they could help their families back home, while making just enough to sustain themselves.

While immigrants of European ancestry initially had a difficult time assimilating in America, their physical appearance allowed them to blend in with the dominant northern European groups. The Italians, the Jews, and the Irish, for example, endured discrimination and harsh working conditions because of their ethnicity. However, subsequent generations lost their accents and were able to integrate themselves into the fabric of White racial identity. For Asian Americans, assimilation was not an option. In fact, despite the second and later generations of Asian Americans losing their accents and undergoing religious and cultural changes, they were still seen as foreigners. Many of these perceptions had to do with racist ideologies that were prevalent prior to the civil rights movement. Antimiscegenation laws did not allow people of color to marry Whites in many states. Moreover, the laws of the United States prohibited first-generation Asian Americans from naturalizing

to obtain citizenship. Not until World War II and after was it possible for immigrant Chinese, Filipinos, Asian Indians, Koreans, and Japanese to receive U.S. citizenship. Unfortunately, World War II also saw the removal of the Japanese from their West Coast communities and their forced removal into concentration camps euphemistically called war relocation centers.

The historical record shows that with so many legal restrictions and obstacles put upon them, Asian Americans could not participate in the everyday life of America. Not only could Asian immigrants not vote, but even their American-born children were instead regarded as foreigners. Predictably, such treatment and attitudes led Asian Americans to maintain close relationships with their families and friends back in Asia. But this, too, became the target of attack, as hostile critics argued that they had misplaced loyalties to Asia instead of America. As immigrants, they could work in the United States, but if they maintained ties with their homeland in Asia then they were seen as potential spies or threats. Asian Americans were in an unenviable position. Even if they tried to assimilate or acculturate in the United States, they were regarded as aliens and foreigners. And if they sought to maintain their filial ties to families back in their ancestral homeland, that only confirmed how alien and foreign they were.

Things changed for Asian Americans and other ethnic minorities in the United States after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. This measure permitted families divided on two sides of the Pacific Ocean to be reunited in America. The provisions of this act permitted a larger influx of Korean, Filipino, South Asian, and Chinese immigrants. While the pre-1965 immigrant groups had helped build the agricultural economy of the United States, the post-1965 immigrants were catalysts for transforming U.S. racial and ethnic relations. No longer could race relations be seen as a Black and White issue, for now it was obviously a matter of multiethnic/race relations. The growing numbers of Asians and Latinos entering the country signaled that a new era in racial and ethnic relations was opening in America.

The post-1965 women along with men entered the workforce. Asian American women in many instances had an easier time finding jobs in assembly lines, in computer companies, garment districts, and as domestic workers. In contrast, many Asian American men, who had professional degrees, had a more difficult time finding jobs for which they were qualified. Institutional barriers made it more difficult for the early immigrants to find positions they were qualified for. Their Asian accents, combined with how people viewed Asians with accents, contributed to their struggles. Specifically, the anti-immigrant sentiments expressed in the United States makes it difficult for anyone who is not "American" to establish themselves. Women, on the other hand, were hired for their "dainty" fingers being able to assemble small parts

and components. Thus, sexism played a part in getting the women hired in the U.S. economy. This is one chapter in the labor history of Asian Americans, but many of the accomplishments and struggles of Asian Americans are still missing in U.S. history books. The glaring omission of a significant group of people who helped shape the U.S. economy, race relations, and culture has affected not only Asian Americans, but has helped to perpetuate the old stereotypes and fears about Asians as foreigners who do not truly belong in this country. In short, ignoring the role of Asian Americans in the curriculum only helps recycle racist ideologies that infer that America was founded and built by European Americans, and all others merely worked under their supervision.

### Against

As one of the goals of the Asian American movement, Asian American studies has played an important role in showing how Asians played an important role in the history of the United States. *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, which was published by the UCLA Asian American Studies Center in 1971, was a pioneering anthology. In a single volume with contributions from many scholars and students, it gave coverage to Koreans, Filipinos, Chinese, Japanese, Hawaiians, and Asian women.<sup>12</sup> In the years that followed, other anthologies, compilations, and books followed to emphasize that Asians in America were not passive victims, but independent actors who charted new paths for themselves and their descendants. In the process, Asian Americans helped in the building of the economy of the United States, particularly in Hawai'i and the American West.

But a number of new developments have demonstrated that Asian American studies has limitations that have kept it from maintaining its pioneering stance of its early days. First of all, in the desire to claim America, to proclaim that Asians in the United States were Americans too, the field of Asian American studies failed to recognize the diasporic and transnational orientation of Asian immigrants. Publications by Asian American scholars and activists in the 1960s and 1970s were intent on proving that Asians were here to stay in the United States, despite arguments to the contrary. At the present time, scholars of immigration accept the position that many immigrants to the United States in the past were sojourners who stayed temporarily in the United States, with the hope of eventual return to their homeland. Other immigrants were sojourners who moved back and forth to several sites. Still other immigrants hoped to travel to their homeland, but were unable to make the trip due to various reasons, such as a lack of funds, a fear that they could

not return to America, or a gradual realization that life in the United States offered the prospect of a better life.

Second, in their attempt to distinguish Asian Americans from Asians, the practitioners in the young field of Asian American studies of the 1960s and 1970s emphasized that they were interested in Asians in the United States, not Asians in Asia. At the time, they were trying to demarcate Asian American literature as different from Asian literature and trying to separate Asian American history from Asian history. But by arbitrarily separating Asian Americans from Asia, these early activists and scholars were missing the opportunity to show the complex relationships linking Asian Americans, Asia, and the United States. The fact that many of the activists and scholars of the era were not able to use Asian languages in their research probably contributed to this desire for separation. But, unfortunately, several decades later, in the twenty-first century, the situation has not changed very much. Asian American studies still focuses almost preponderantly on writings and literature in the English language by Asians in the United States. Writings by those Asians who reside in America as residents or citizens of the United States are ignored because of the lack of familiarity with Asian languages. By not being able to read Asian-language newspapers and publications in this country, or even to see and comprehend Asian language programs on television, many students in Asian American studies do not know what is happening in the immigrant or refugee communities. Chinese-language newspapers in the United States, for example, often have commentary about how Japan has failed to make amends and to apologize for its aggression during World War II.

Finally, Asian American studies still carries a great deal of its historical baggage from its activism of the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>13</sup> Formed out of an era when many were critical of America's involvement in the Vietnam War, suspicious about American capitalism and business, and distrustful of government, Asian American studies seems to be trapped in a time warp. For example, Asian American studies does not examine the history of Asian Americans in the military, although that is an important chapter in the experience of Asian Americans. Except for the obligatory reference to the participation of Japanese Americans during World War II, despite the removal of the Japanese on the West Coast to internment camps, there is little research on the participation in other wars, or the military experiences of other groups, such as the Filipinos, Chinese, Koreans, and Asian Indians. Related to this is a failure to study the history of Asian Americans, and this is not only the pioneers and leaders, in business, science, technology, and education. Only if there is the specter of discrimination and prejudice, such as a "glass ceiling" restricting the mobility of Asian Americans, is there some treatment of science and technology. Only if women are exploited in a garment factory or workers are



joining a union is there any examination of Asian Americans and the economy. By having ideological blinders from its early origins, Asian American studies has missed the opportunity to have a more complete understanding of the role of Asian Americans in the history of the United States. Because of its stance on activism and resistance, Asian American studies fails to appreciate those Asian American men and women who have been pioneers and leaders in the military, in business and industry, in science, technology, and education, and even religion. By failing to move beyond its origins, Asian American studies is contributing to the omission of Asian Americans from many facets of American history.

### BY EMPHASIZING SERVICE TO COMMUNITIES, DO ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES PREPARE PEOPLE FOR LIFE IN A MULTIETHNIC SOCIETY?

For

Asian American studies was developed with the philosophy of using activism to help and to promote social change in ethnic communities. It was part of a vision that Asian American studies would serve its ethnic communities and the larger society. In the 1960s and 1970s, many ethnic studies programs initiated and supported innovative community organizing projects. These projects included cooperative garment factories, farmworker organizing, and fights for low-income housing. The Asian American studies programs also provided support for the protests against the Vietnam War and tried to advance the cause of civil rights.<sup>14</sup>

Today, some critics find fault with Asian American studies programs for losing sight of their original goals as they became professionalized and more academic in orientation. These critics argue that programs like Asian American studies are no longer connected with their grassroots constituencies, but rather have immersed themselves in the ivory tower. They formulate interesting theories about gender, sexuality, and racial hierarchies, but theories have little real impact on the lives and concerns of Asian American communities. While ethnic studies programs were once a part of an idealistic and service-oriented crusade, they have now become sites for professional jobs or careers. This is quite a turn of events, for initially Asian American programs welcomed student participation in governing, planning, and teaching. To have students intimately involved with Asian American studies programs was one of the basic assumptions of community activists. Today, however, few faculty members are closely involved with community organizations or ethnic community activities. The absence of Asian American faculty participation in community affairs gives credibility to the charge that the culture on college

campuses perpetuates elitism and frowns upon community and grassroots organizing. However, these Asian American studies programs are still an avenue for political activism among people of color. Students continue to look to ethnic studies programs as the cornerstone of radical education change.

On college campuses, students of all ethnic backgrounds are often surprised to learn about the lack of exposure that campuses provide on ethnic minority experiences. This surprise often turns into frustration and anger as they realize that they are deprived of opportunities to learn about different segments of the American population. Consequently, in recent years, students of color have led mass protests, sit-ins, and hunger strikes at universities such as Washington, Maryland, Princeton, and Indiana. Some actions have been of a defensive nature to protect the integrity and viability of programs. For example, they have protested the issues of unfilled faculty positions, budget cuts, tuition hikes, the end of affirmative action, attempts to end remedial education, and the firing of popular teachers. Other battles have been offensive in nature. This includes fighting for the establishment of new ethnic studies programs, demands for the recruitment and retention of students and faculty of color, and for the establishment of gay-lesbian-bisexual support centers. For instance, student protests at Rutgers University in 1995 culminated in the takeover of the basketball court at the halftime of a televised game. The demands of the United Student Coalition were reminiscent of the 1960s. They asked for the resignation of the president; the rollback of tuition from \$4,500 to \$1,350 per semester; the elimination of SAT scores from admission requirements; the restructuring of the Board of Governors to a democratically elected board that reflects the student population; and the inclusion of minority and women's studies programs as part of the university's core curriculum. In 1996, Columbia University students organized the largest protests on that campus since the Vietnam War. They occupied a building and staged a 14-day hunger strike, demanding that Latino and Asian American studies be created to complement the existing African American Studies Center.

As students learn more about the Asian American experience and communities, they become more invested in the idea of serving as agents of social change. They learn how to build coalitions, organize meetings, present public statements, and work through the politics of the university system. These tools not only help in revealing the truths about the state of Asian American studies to the larger community, but they provide students with hands-on skills and the knowledge of how to ask, demand, and/or challenge the power elites for what they desire.

Besides political activism, students who are fortunate to have thriving Asian American studies programs on their college campuses have the opportunity to learn about communities in which they are likely to work, live, and have

relationships. For the vast majority of students in the United States, it is inevitable that they will have professional, personal, and everyday interactions with Asian Americans. Despite the long legacy of Asian immigration, few people, including Asian Americans themselves, understand the complexities of this group. Understanding Asian American history and contemporary issues, as well as learning about the culture, will only enhance the relationships that are established and built among Asian Americans, as well as between non-Asian Americans. Given this demographic reality, students graduating with an interdisciplinary knowledge of Asian Americans, as well as with knowledge about other ethnic groups, will be well prepared for employment in many occupations—business and management, education, social services, the health professions, law, high-tech industries, and other lines of work that involve interaction with coworkers and clients from diverse backgrounds. They will also benefit by being prepared to participate and interact with their peers in a diverse and multicultural society.

Since its founding, Asian American studies has placed great emphasis on training students to be of service to both their ethnic communities and to the larger society. Asian American studies has always recognized and, wherever resources permitted, tried to strengthen links to Asian American communities. This includes attempts to develop students' language skills, both in English and in Asian languages. For by being bi- or multilingual, scholars can do community research, and students, as future social service providers, can learn how to offer more culturally sensitive services. In some Asian American courses, students have participated in community-based internships or learned to write funding proposals for projects that might help an Asian American constituency. Students are encouraged to think critically not only about the world around them but also to consider how that knowledge is generated, validated, or revised. Asian American studies faculty is very concerned about doing research in a socially responsible way to address the needs of American communities. Faculty members frequently ask themselves, and teach their students to ask, such pertinent questions as: For whom and for what purpose is this research being done? Who will benefit from the findings and in what ways will they benefit?

### Against

From its inception, Asian American studies has sought to bridge the university and the community and to link scholarship to action. Given the context of the 1960s and the 1970s, when the United States saw heated debates about the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the development of a counterculture, it is understandable that Asian American studies should have

this concern. After all, Asian American studies was formed out of the struggle by students and community members for more relevant education that could address the issues in Asian American communities.<sup>15</sup>

Taking Asian American studies courses can help students gain useful skills and develop a sense of social responsibility. But students can also acquire the same skills and sense of purpose by taking courses in social work, health sciences, criminology, education, sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics. At the present moment, many universities are emphasizing voluntarism and service learning, the idea that students should learn to contribute to their society. By engaging in such community activity, the students can earn credit from their colleges and universities. And by participating in such course work, educators hope to restore what many feel is an ebbing sense of civic mindedness and to instill a willingness to volunteer for the social good of the community.

When Asian American studies was formed in the 1960s and 1970s, it was a new frontier and a new field. Drawing from many disciplines, the pioneers advancing this field of study were collecting bibliographies, generating new syllabi, and researching topics about Asian Americans, which had received little attention in the past. Challenging institutional apathy, if not resistance, by colleges and universities that did not embrace a new field of study, Asian American studies was born out of struggle and adversity. But the determination and commitment of early Asian American activists and scholars achieved success after several decades. Today Asian American studies programs, departments, and courses are available on many university and college campuses. Students, whether undergraduate or graduate, can enroll in Asian American studies courses. Scholars and faculty in other disciplines can elect to research or focus on subjects that are related to Asian Americans. Their university and community libraries also contain books, reference works, and other materials that are specifically about Asian Americans. The very success that Asian American studies attained has meant that the traditional disciplines have incorporated content about Asian Americans into their scholarship and instruction.

This acceptance of the validity of scholarship and instruction of Asian Americans as a legitimate subject for study and investigation has led other disciplines to focus their modes of inquiry and methodologies on Asian American topics. In many cases, they have developed more specialized knowledge about Asian American communities. As an illustration, students in social work may take courses that acquaint them with pressing issues with Southeast Asian Americans and how to assist with community-sensitive and culturally appropriate modes of intervention. Or, to take another example, students in nursing, psychology, and the health sciences can draw upon research from medical

anthropology and cross-cultural psychology that has been focused on Asian American populations. To extend this further, political science courses can offer detailed analyses of the political behavior of Asian Americans as compared to other groups in the United States. Sociology courses can examine how Asian Americans are similar or different from other ethnic or racial groups in American society. They may even highlight the contrasting situations of Asian Americans in the continental United States with those who reside in the state of Hawaii.

The Asian American activists of the 1960s and 1970s deserve accolades for their determination and farsightedness in laying the foundation for Asian American studies. The momentum achieved by the formation of Asian American studies programs and courses generated important scholarship, community activism, and a broad awareness about Asians in the United States. The success of Asian American studies has meant that its insights and scholarship has been broadly disseminated and recognized. The victory that was won has meant that many of the agendas and concerns of Asian American studies have now been incorporated into other disciplines. As a result, it is no longer the only field in colleges and universities that can share information and knowledge about Asian Americans. Service learning that involves Asian Americans is now more readily available in other fields of study, so that the service component that was associated with Asian American studies is no longer unique and distinctive.

Undoubtedly, taking Asian American studies courses can still help students to be more prepared for life in a diverse, multicultural society. But students should also take courses to learn about other groups, such as African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, and European Americans. An overemphasis on one group to the exclusion of others can lead to ethnocentrism, a bias in favor of one group over other groups. As American colleges and universities become much more multiethnic in their composition, hopefully students can become much more knowledgeable about their peers who are of diverse backgrounds. After all, much of a college education comes from outside the classroom when students engage in a dialogue with other students. But it also raises the interesting issue of whether ethnic studies programs, American studies programs, or programs in comparative American cultures should be the primary focus for universities and colleges. Instead of separate Asian American studies, African American studies, Native American studies, and Chicano/Latino studies programs, perhaps there should be an emphasis on multicultural, multiethnic programs that acknowledge the full diversity and complexity of American society. Many disciplines give attention to a broad range of racial and ethnic groups in the United States, unlike Asian American studies, which is primarily devoted to Asian American communities.

## QUESTIONS

1. How fast is the Asian American population in the United States growing? As diversity in American society increases, what role can Asian American studies programs play?
2. Do specific ethnic programs like Asian American studies create rifts between ethnic groups or create more understanding? Explain your answer and discuss the implications on students if they did not have an ethnic specific program.
3. The civil rights movement was the catalyst for much change. However, has the movement progressed? Has the education system remained true to the initial vision of the civil rights movement or has it sold out to silence the few who still voice a desire for equality?
4. Students who major in Asian American studies will most likely be asked what they can do with that major. How would you answer this question?
5. Is it necessary to learn about Asian American communities in the new millennium? What are the advantages and disadvantages of taking courses on Asian American studies when interacting with people on a personal, professional, and social level?
6. What is Asian American studies and what is its focus?
7. How large is the Asian American population when compared with other ethnic groups in the United States? Which state has the greatest percentage of Asian Americans? Is this likely to be a trend with the other 49 states? Why or why not?
8. How might Asian American studies assume a greater significance because of population changes in the United States?
9. How has Asian American studies expanded as a field of study since the 1960s and 1970s?
10. What is the range of Asian groups in the United States that are included in Asian American studies programs? Have they been able to give comparable coverage in their courses to all these groups? Why or why not?
11. Should Asian American studies programs include coverage of Pacific Islanders in their courses? Why or why not?
12. Immigrants often face difficulties initially in adjusting to life in the United States. What differences or similarities were there for immigrants of European ancestry and those of Asian ancestry?
13. Were the activist roots of Asian American studies beneficial to its immigrant and ethnic constituencies? Has this led to Asian American studies ignoring or omitting important aspects of the Asian American experience? Explain.
14. Some critics have charged that Asian American studies has lost sight of its original goals of being closely connected to grassroots constituencies. Is that claim valid or not? Why?
15. How might Asian American studies prepare students for service in ethnic communities and in the larger society?
16. Are students in other disciplines without exposure to Asian American studies

likely to be just as successful working with immigrant and ethnic groups? Discuss.

### NOTES

1. Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles, *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity and Change in the 21st Century* (San Francisco: AsianWeek, 2003), 206.
2. Ibid.
3. Bob Wing, "Educate to Liberate!": Multiculturalism and the Struggle for Ethnic Studies," *ColorLines* 2, no. 2 (1999). [www.arc.org/C\\_Lines/CLAArchive/story2\\_2\\_01.html](http://www.arc.org/C_Lines/CLAArchive/story2_2_01.html).
4. Third World Forum, <http://www.thirdworldforum.org/>.
5. Ibid., 1.
6. Black Panther Party, <http://www.blackpanther.org/>.
7. American Indian Movement, <http://members.aol.com/Nowacumig/backgrnd.html>.
8. "The Young Lords Party 13-Point Program and Platform," *The Sixties Project*, [http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML\\_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Young\\_Lords\\_platform.html](http://lists.village.virginia.edu/sixties/HTML_docs/Resources/Primary/Manifestos/Young_Lords_platform.html).
9. Ibid., 1.
10. Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles, "Introduction," in *The New Face of Asian Pacific America*, ed. Eric Lai and Dennis Arguelles (San Francisco: AsianWeek and UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 2003), 1.
11. Association for Asian American Studies, [www.aaastudies.org/statement/statement.html](http://www.aaastudies.org/statement/statement.html).
12. Amy Tachiki et al., *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971).
13. John M. Liu and Lucie Cheng, "A Dialogue on Race and Class: Asian American Studies and Marxism," in *The Left Academy: Marxist Scholarship on American Campuses*, Vol. 3, ed. Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff (New York: Praeger, 1986), 139–163.
14. Wing, "Educate to Liberate!"
15. Karen Umemoto, "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–69: The Role of Asian American Students," *Amerasia Journal* 15 (1989): 3–41.

### SELECTED WORKS

- Chang, M. J., and P. N. Kiang. "New Challenges of Representing Asian American Students in U.S. Higher Education." In *The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education: Continuing Challenges for the Twenty-first Century*, ed. W. A. Smith, P. G. Altbach, and K. Lomotey. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Chang, Mitchell J. "Growing Pains." *Journal of Asian American Studies* (June 1999): 183–206.
- Hirabayashi, L. R., and M. C. Alquizola. "Asian American Studies: Reevaluating for the 1990s." In *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s*, ed. K.A.-S. Juan. Boston: South End Press, 1994.

- Hsia, J., and M. Hirano-Nakanishi. "The Demographics of Diversity: Asian Americans and Higher Education." *Change*, November/December 1989, 20–27.
- Hune, S., and K. S. Chan. "Special Focus: Asian Pacific American Demographic and Educational Trends." In *Minorities in Higher Education*, ed. D. Carter and R. Wilson. Vol. 15, 39–107. Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1997.
- Kidder, William C. "Situating Asian Pacific Americans in the Law School Affirmative Action Debate: Empirical Facts about Thernstrom's Rhetorical Acts." *Asian Law Journal* 7, no. 29 (2000): 43.
- Lai, Eric, and Dennis Arguelles, eds. *The New Face of Asian Pacific America: Numbers, Diversity & Change in the 21st Century*. San Francisco: AsianWeek, 2003, 206.
- Liu, John M., and Lucie Cheng. "A Dialogue on Race and Class: Asian American Studies and Marxism." In *The Left Academy: Marxist Scholarship on American Campuses*, ed. Bertell Ollman and Edward Vernoff. Vol. 3, 139–163. New York: Praeger, 1986.
- Orfield, G., and D. Whitley. "Diversity and Legal Education: Student Experiences in Leading Law Schools." In *Diversity Challenged: Evidence on the Impact of Affirmative Action*, ed. G. Orfield and M. Kurlaender. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group, 2001.
- Osajima, Keith. "Pedagogical Consideration in Asian American Studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* (October 1998): 269–292.
- Suzuki, B. H. "Asians." In *Shaping Higher Education's Future: Demographic Realities and Opportunities, 1990–2000*, ed. A. Levine. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989.
- . "Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype: Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Higher Education." In *Working with Asian American College Students*, ed. Marylu K. McEwen, Corinne Maekawa Kodama, Alvin N. Alvarez, Sunny Lee, and Christopher T. H. Liang. New Directions for Student Services, no. 97. San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002.
- Tachiki, Amy, et al. *Roots: An Asian American Reader*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971.
- Takagi, D. Y. *Retreat from Race: Asian-American Admissions and Racial Politics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1992.
- Takeda, Okiyoshi. "One Year after the Sit-in: Asian American Students' Identities and Their Support for Asian American Studies." *Journal of Asian American Studies* 4, no. 2 (2001): 147–164.
- Trueba, H., L. Cheng, and K. Ima. *Myth or Reality: Adaptive Strategies of Asian Americans in California*. Washington, DC: Falmer Press, 1993.
- Umemoto, Karen. "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968–69: The Role of Asian American Students." *Amerasia Journal* 15 (1989): 3–41.
- Wang, L. Ling-chi. "Asian American Studies." *American Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1981): 339–354.
- Wing, Bob. "Educate to Liberate!": Multiculturalism and the Struggle for Ethnic Studies." *ColorLines* 2, no. 2 (1999). [www.arc.org/C\\_Lines/CLAArchive/story2\\_2\\_01.html](http://www.arc.org/C_Lines/CLAArchive/story2_2_01.html).