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AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community

Title

Reflections on the Formation and Future of Asian American Studies

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/01j0n4h0>

Journal

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 14(2)

ISSN

1545-0317

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Publication Date

2016

DOI

10.36650/nexus14.2_117-128_Võ

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Peer reviewed

Practitioner Essay

Reflections on the Formation and Future of Asian American Studies

Linda Trinh Võ

Abstract

The ongoing demographic growth of the Asian American population enhances foundational support for Asian American studies; however, it also poses complex challenges for the formulation and direction of the field. Asian American studies has been shaped by transnational and regional economic and political conditions, as well as by the receptiveness and limitations of the academy, which has led to uneven disciplinary and institutional manifestations. This essay specifically analyzes what impact the transforming Asian American population has had on the formation of the field of Asian American studies and how the projected demographic growth will shape its future academic trajectory.

Introduction

The ongoing demographic growth of the Asian American population enhances foundational support for the field of Asian American studies and extends its research trajectories; however, the increasing population raises complex and critical questions about the configuration of the field. Asian American studies emerged from the civil rights and power movements that strove for social justice and racial equity during the tumultuous late 1960s and early 1970s, which was simultaneous with the feminist, gay liberation, antipoverty, and antiwar movements that altered the nation. Confrontational campus protests demanding the inclusion of students of color and the incorporation of ethnic studies into the curriculum, most notably the Third World Liberation Front Strikes at San Francisco State University as well as at the University of California campuses at Berkeley and Los Angeles, were instrumental in creating the field. Since the establishment of Asian American studies, colleges and universities across the country are offering courses; hiring faculty; launching concentrations, minors, and

majors; creating programs and departments; and starting centers and professional associations. The field is shaped by the larger economic and political context, as well as by systematic constraints within the academy, which has led to vastly uneven disciplinary, regional, and institutional manifestations.

In the last couple of decades, there has been a steady incline in the growth of Asian American students on college campuses, both public and private. However, the justifications for Asian American studies classes or programs should not be based on a critical mass argument and do not need to correlate with the number of Asian American bodies on a particular campus; rather, they should be premised on intellectual explications. The study of Asians in America is fundamental to an inclusive American history that must be contextualized within global transformations and should be the hallmark of a comprehensive university curriculum, irrespective of the campus or national demographics. The Asian American population is projected to expand from 20.5 million in 2015 to 35.7 million in 2040, an increase of 74 percent, and this demographic growth will increase the number of Asian Americans in the educational system at all levels, as well as broaden their influence in every sector of the society (Ong and Ong, 2015). They will continue to restructure the economic, political, and social landscape of America, so there continues to be multiple imperatives for incorporating Asian American studies into the university curriculum. This essay specifically analyzes the impact that demographic transformations have had on the formation of the field of Asian American studies and how this will affect its future development.

Formation and Professionalization

Institutional structures vary with some Asian American studies divisions being housed in Asian studies, American studies, or ethnic studies units, while others have stand-alone Asian American studies programs, departments, and centers (Chan, 2005). Whereas, at one institution, a single or several Asian American specialists may be hired, another will employ faculty in clusters, some in joint appointments, and house them in different units across campus. Presently, Asian American studies has reached maturity with multi-generations of scholars, from faculty at all ranks to graduate and undergraduate students, simultaneously contributing to and advancing the field. Pioneering scholars who created the field are retiring, with some passing away who are leaving enduring imprints on the field. Scholars trained in Asian American

studies are receiving their PhDs in a range of theories, subjects, and institutions, with imbalances in some disciplines producing more scholars, as well as variations in interrogating how sexuality, gender, and power intersect in reframing Asian American studies.

In addition to the paucity of faculty positions, which sometimes forces promising scholars to find temporary lecturing positions or switch to alternative careers, there are numerous instances when junior faculty are denied tenure at both public and private institutions. The cases vary, and admittedly some decisions may be warranted, yet noticeable is the vulnerability of faculty who select an area of specialization that is unfamiliar to many in academia. It seems that those denied tenure tend to be predominantly Asian American women, and there are instances in which faculty denied tenure have a book published by a university press, once regarded as a guarantee of being granted tenure. Campus administrators have been forced to reevaluate their dismissiveness of the field, and in some situations have reversed their decision, but only after faculty appealed their cases and staunch protest was mobilized. As a result, the East of California association and the Association for Asian American Studies have made concerted efforts to boost their mentoring activities to support graduate students, junior faculty, and mid-career-level faculty. Contentious policies to undermine the tenure process and academic freedom, such as the recent University of Wisconsin decision, make it easier for institutions to fire tenured faculty whose ideologies are contrary to administrators or donors. Another tactic is to use the cloak of fiscal conservatism to devastate underrepresented units and faculty governance in the academy.

There are varying models for how Asian Americans courses, such as emphasizing particular ethnic groups or focusing on specific themes, have been incorporated into institutions, which is oftentimes dependent on the resources available (Hirabayashi, 1998). While some universities provide a few scattered courses, others have a concentration or minor, and others offer a major. However, while lower division course enrollments may be robust, with some introductory courses filling large lecture halls, Asian American studies majors or minors have fluctuated and not increased dramatically and, in some cases, show a decline. Competition with traditional majors, some of which have more perceived earning potential and status, which immigrant parents often prefer, and economic downturns influencing selection of majors have contributed to the dwindling numbers. In some public institutions, such as the California State University system, there is more pressure or in-

ducements to teach online courses, and Asian American studies classes are now being offered through this mechanism, with varying levels of success. Additionally, while there are benefits to ensuring that Asian American studies courses fulfill multicultural diversity requirements, this can inadvertently result in positioning the unit as primarily a teaching and service one without intellectual rigor and diverts its scarce faculty resources away from achieving their research agenda.

While ethnic studies and people of color have experienced hostile environments on university campuses, what has compounded these barriers are the recent budget cuts that have stagnated or starved units, especially those in public universities, making it difficult to consistently offer Asian American studies courses, run programs, or hire new or replacement faculty. There are limited numbers of Asian American scholars who have moved into high-level administrative ranks and who are able to implement foundational changes that can advance the field, which necessitates Asian Americanists educating administrators, regardless of their scholarly background, on the merits of the field. Units with Asian American studies alumni are often relatively young and small, so this means being creative when cultivating the alumni base, which can be a vital resource, as supporters, advocates, or funders for endowed chairs, fellowships, scholarships, and other research and programmatic needs.

Transformations and Transnationalism

The 1965 Immigration Act, which prioritized family reunification and occupational preferences, along with refugee arrivals at the end of the Viet Nam War in 1975, led to major shifts in the composition of the Asian American population in terms of its gender, socioeconomic, and ethnic characteristics (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center, 2011). Foundational scholarship pivoted narratives of Asian American history on labor migration of Asians, which evolves around the railroad, agricultural, or fishing industries, especially those from China and Japan and smaller numbers who came from Korea, India, and the Philippines. A wider lens not only focuses on capitalism, but is also more attuned to the larger context of U.S. empire building, foreign intervention, militarization, and warfare that shaped migration and settlement patterns. For example, U.S. colonization projects, including a protracted civil war in Southeast Asia, contributed to massive displacements that forced Cambodians, Laotians, and Vietnamese from their homeland and their eventual migration to America. Certain histories are still marginalized or treated as an afterthought in Asian American studies

and, when they are included, the range of their generational, ethnic, religious, and class backgrounds are glossed over, but new scholarship is reformulating the epistemological and pedagogical narratives of the field.

The expansion of the Asian American population can be traced to U.S. military occupation in Asia, which is generating new subfields and enlarging the research and literature produced within Asian American studies. Since the Cold War era, transnational, transracial adoption from Cambodia, China, India, Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Viet Nam has increased dramatically. New scholarship not only examines how adoptees are being incorporated into Asian America, but also critiques the political ideologies and procedures involved with these international adoptions, including U.S. foreign intervention in Asia that produced orphan populations, U.S. rescue narratives that popularized the adoption of overseas babies, and unethical baby-selling practices in the global adoption system. U.S. militarization in Asia also led to the migration of Asian women entering the United States as war brides, military brides, and international brides. The offspring from these interracial relations, along with the children produced from domestic interracial relations, has enlarged and made more multifaceted the contemporary multiracial Asian American population. Those identifying as Asian multiracials are surpassing the size of the largest ethnic groups, Chinese and Filipino, and mixed-race populations are fundamentally impacting our conceptions and research on racialization, community building, and identification processes.

The growth of ethnic subfields is related to selective immigration and refugee policies, which enlarged arrivals from certain Asian countries and led to the revitalization, creation, and concentration of ethnic communities in urban and suburban sites. Scholars are broadening their research on subgroup variations, as well as advocating for the further disaggregation of data not just between ethnic groupings but also within. Major health, political, and other opinion surveys rarely include Asian Americans, and when they are included, relatively few have sizeable ethnic breakdowns and even fewer delineate internal distinctions within an ethnic grouping, which can provide more in-depth differentiation that can be beneficial for policies on resource redistribution. As smaller Asian American groups, some that have had long-term but limited presence, while others are newly formed, become more numerically substantial, this will produce critical scholarship on these ethnic groups, for example, immigrants and refugees from Bangladesh, Bhutan, Burma/Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, and Thailand (Vang and Trieu, 2014) and

well as Asian migrants arriving from Africa, the Caribbean, or Latin America. Global displacement, along with U.S. foreign intervention and immigration policies, will continue to impact the formation of these ethnic groups and redefine the development of the field.

Additionally, the U.S. Census, nonprofit sector, and academy are incongruent in sometimes merging Asian Americans together with the growing Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI) population. In some cases, this merging is intended to deliberately create manageable categories, enlarge their numbers, or emphasize shared consequences of U.S. militarization and racialization. Yet in other circumstances, some of these entities also demarcate clear distinctions between these disparate groups, given the politics of settler colonialism and sovereignty movements, and these inconsistencies will continue to characterize the directives of activism and fields of studies. Some programs combine Asian American and Pacific Islander studies, in some instances tokenizing the latter, essentially subsuming Pacific Islander studies within Asian American studies, whereas other programs counter the conflation of the two fields and hire specialists specifically trained in Pacific Islander studies under the ethnic studies or American studies rubric. In some instances, Filipinos align themselves as Pacific Islanders and, in other situations, they reposition their affiliations with Mexican Americans or Latinos because of their similar histories of Spanish colonization, common labor struggles, or geographical proximity in urban spaces. Ethnic groups within the combined South Asian American category are affected by the rise of Islamophobia and persistent xenophobia and racial profiling and, as a result, are oftentimes misidentified as Middle Easterners or Muslims. However, by choice, they have also co-opted such affinities and politicized these troubling predicaments.

From its inception, Asian American communities have been a transnational one, interlinked with homelands through family and kin networks, as well as through global cultural, economic, and political interconnections, which are further facilitated with modern ease of travel and communication. Within the academy, disassociations between Asian studies and Asian American studies in certain circumstances continues to be a vexing, strategic, political choice, often utilized in an attempt to avoid conflation of the interrelated fields. This distancing posture is often adopted by advocates of Asian American studies, particularly when university administrators erroneously or purposefully argue that Asian studies can serve as a substitute for Asian American studies in order to undermine the latter. Noticeable is that on a number of campuses, includ-

ing California State University ones, Asian and Asian American studies are forced into one unit, which is in contrast to the University of California, Berkeley's recent move to voluntarily add "and Asian Diaspora" to the title of their Asian American studies program.

Countering this interchangeability is a delicate balancing act, given that the majority of Asian Americans are currently first generation, so there are undeniable, tangible linkages to the Asian diaspora. The increasing numbers of Asian Americans living and working in Asia and the reverse migration of Asians studying and working in the United States, along with the remittances that Asian immigrants in the United States send to their homeland or the direct investment of Asian overseas capitalists in U.S. economic ventures, highlight these crisscrossing, transnational exchanges. American universities are intensifying their outreach efforts to recruit international students from Asia, whose tuition can boost university budgets and offset major funding cutbacks. With the ongoing immigration and continuing influx of students from Asia, this requires a more nuanced understanding of porous, transnational connections and how these newcomers are incorporated and interact with those whose ancestors emigrated from Asia generations ago. Whether they arrive as first-generation immigrants or refugees or as international students who will remain after their studies are completed, these newcomers will contribute indirectly and directly to the diversification of the population, as well as to the intellectual development of the field. The foreign born who become Asian American studies scholars will invariably shift the perspective of the field and the topics being researched. The impulse to disaffiliate from the "perpetual foreigner" perception has to be delicately tempered with capturing the pragmatic intricacies of being a predominantly first-generation population.

The increase in the number of foreign-born Asians who are of child-bearing age will result in more U.S.-born children, and they, along with the youth whose families have been here for multiple generations, share commonalities in how they are socialized and politicized within the U.S. context. This numerically substantial peer group can shift Asian American sensibilities, opinions, and agendas, which are already noticeable in presidential election polls that indicate the younger generation gravitates toward progressive politics, compared to their conservative-leaning immigrant parents. Moreover, this demographic momentum can potentially increase the number of native-born college students who can engage in direct action to bolster the field on campus and participate in domestic social justice policies and praxis.

Representation and Advocacy

There is now an expansive body of interdisciplinary scholarship on Asian Americans, with an assortment of scholarly publications providing novel interpretations and analyses on arts and cultures to urban and electoral politics (Schlund-Vials, Võ, and Wong, 2015). In addition to journals that focus on Asian American studies, a number of university presses have well-established Asian American studies series. Recent publications include an increasing number of co-edited anthologies or textbooks on Asian Americans from literary criticism to psychology, which signifies a rising market for their incorporation into college courses. However, the book publishing industry, including university presses, is experiencing its own restructuring and cutbacks, with a decline in the publication of printed books and journals and a steady increase in online formats, which limits the venues for traditional academic publishing.

The influx of information shared on alternative platforms, such as through social media and the Internet, which are constantly evolving, allows for Asian American scholars to disseminate their research to audiences once unreachable and has the potential to provide more equitable access to knowledge. Online collections emanating from museums, university libraries, national archives, and historical societies are also facilitating research possibilities and teaching agendas, allowing facile access to interviews, images, photographs, documents, and videos, a number that are being collected, preserved, managed, and shared by scholars. Geographic information system or other technologies can capture and manipulate spatial or geographical data, which can be used to display connections, patterns, and trends related to Asian Americans. It allows empirical and applied research to be circulated at a rapid pace and facilitates scholarly collaboration with community organizations and other forms of grassroots organizing. Using available tools, Asian American scholarship can have a direct influence in shaping broader policies and politics; however, this depends on the objective of scholars in the field and whether scholars are in a position to utilize their resources and expertise beyond the walls of the university. Additionally, within this context, how these written, oral, and visual products will be evaluated by university merit and promotion committees can be inconsistent, so this means educating institutions on valuing this form of academic labor. Undoubtedly, there is remarkable potential for how new platforms can refashion information sharing, so this means skillfully incorporating new technologies in order for the range of our scholarship and voices to have far-reaching impact.

There are a number of scholars or researchers who are Asian nationals, Asian Americans, and non-Asians who publish research reports, journal articles, and books on Asian Americans, but are tangentially connected to the field. They may be unfamiliar or unconcerned with the larger vision of the field or existing scholarship, but they are capable of, to some extent, making worthy contributions to the field. However, the “Tiger Mom” controversy highlights how a scholar, who may identify as Chinese or Asian, but lacks credentials in the subject matter, can hijack the discourse on Asian Americans. Instead, these individuals use sensationalized methods and rely on skewed data, superficial knowledge, or personal experiences to make uninformed generalizations and misleading claims. They may become popular pundits with the media because they reinforce and perpetuate popular stereotypes or tired tropes, even ones routinely and soundly contested or discredited by scholars in the field. Some think tanks and national research centers have also been misguided in their surveys, misinterpreted their findings, or unwittingly used selective data to present distorted conclusions that garner mainstream media attention. The danger occurs when these individuals or institutions influence policy makers who are implementing programs that can potentially have negative consequences on Asian Americans. How to access the most effective means to highlight our research and how to shift or transform the public perception and discourse on Asian Americans continues to be an ongoing dilemma for the field.

Some resourceful scholars are actively engaged in advocacy work in the public sphere, including on public policy agendas, legislative projects, artistic or cultural productions, and social justice struggles, using their skills beyond the campus in order to contribute to transformative, societal changes. A new generation of scholars is assuming the role of public intellectuals and bringing visibility to the field by highlighting their research through media outlets to clarify Asian American viewpoints about hot-button topics, such as affirmative action, racial profiling, and immigration reform. There are few scholars able to speak in the required sound bites to translate academic jargon and distill their research findings to the general public. They have to garner the attention of print, radio, and television news outlets, but they also have to be technologically savvy with employing new social media to shape national dialogues and debates.

Capacities and Challenges

The Asian America population will only become more diverse in terms of its migration process, ethnic composition, socioeconomic sta-

tus, religious affiliations, ideologies, and settlement patterns, and these multiple variations will create unique challenges for Asian American studies. As the fastest-growing group in the nation, with nearly one in ten Americans expected to be Asian in 2040, the study of Asian America lends itself to exciting research possibilities, unforeseeable during its early formations; however, it also requires scholars to stretch and deepen their analysis and perspectives to demarcate the collectivity, as well as to dissect the multilayered and multigenerational divisions and differences.

Beyond an idealized Asian America, studies will have to decipher the multiple array of racialization processes that groups experience according to these permutations. The growth of the Asian American as well as Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander populations should translate into political power and greater representation for the respective groupings. While Asian American studies and Pacific Islander studies are interconnected in terms of histories of colonialism and contemporary predicaments, they are distinctive disciplines; nonetheless, there are opportunities for intellectual collaborations and advocating for community resources. Furthermore, the number and outspokenness of Asian multiracials incentivizes the field to reconsider boundaries, identities, and interracial relations in both theoretical and pragmatic ways. This necessitates further comparative research projects that also examine how Asian Americans are shaped by and are shaping the American political landscape, in addition to their positionality building coalitions with communities of color.

With the rapid growth of U.S.-born Asians, including third-generation youth, Asian American college students have the ability, along with the alumni, to proactively support ethnic studies and Asian American studies projects. However, these efforts or demands will be limiting without the support of key administrators who are cognizant of the Asian American studies project and can use their clout and resources to give it sustenance, instead of tokenized support. As universities place more emphasis on metrics and return-on-investment frameworks, which privilege measurable outcomes to meet funder demands and generate more income, this can place nontraditional fields in a precarious position. With some institutions focusing their resources primarily on narrowly defined workforce preparation, this often neglects how ethnic studies courses can prepare students to live in a more racially complex and interconnected workplace and world.

The reality is that the majority of American universities fail to offer Asian American studies classes and existing ethnic studies and

Asian American studies units are vulnerable because they are still mistakenly perceived as nonessential or divisive. In some ways, having a large Asian population in the region where the university is located, or even nationally, can lend particular forms of indirect validation of the field. However, if this enlarged population is unwilling to mobilize its resources to reinforce the field or actually vocalizes opposition to the field, having a sizable population may have a neutralizing or detrimental effect. Additionally, many first generations invest their resources and expertise overseas, rather than locally on domestic struggles for social justice or educational equity, so it requires concerted effort to redirect their energies. At opportune moments, the field should be malleable enough to advance its educational mission of generating critiques and interventions within the university setting, as well as delivering resources and interferences on pertinent matters that resonate with and have relevancy to Asian American communities in general.

Asian American studies does not develop in isolation, but is contoured by larger political struggles over equitable and accessible education, election, employment, health care, housing, immigration, and social service policies. The professionalization of the field, and the trajectory of certain disciplines, has led to disconnections from larger Asian American communities, and concerted efforts need to be made to reimagine how Asian American studies research can impact and contribute to social change in the future. For example, in terms of public policy models, there were two major legislative bills passed in California in 2016 that involved Asian American scholarly input and in which their expertise can be crucial in the implementation phase: AB 1726, which directs the Department of Public Health to break down demographic data it collects by ethnicity or ancestry in order to capture accurate data to address health disparities, and AB 2016, which instructs the State Board of Education to develop a model ethnic studies curriculum to be implemented at the high school level. Since the formation of Asian American studies, there are pivotal moments in American history, among them the Viet Nam War, Vincent Chin murder, culture wars, HIV/AIDS crisis, Los Angeles Uprising, Proposition 209 and 187, 9/11 and the War on Terror, and #BlackLives-Matter, that prompt the larger Asian American community and field to reflect, rally, and redirect. The backlash against racialized populations and immigrants and refugees mutates; therefore, this mandates that our theoretical interpolations and direct engagements must evolve too. Ultimately, the protection of Asian American studies and assurances of its expansion are premised on its ability to be characterized as part of a

comprehensive, meaningful education for all students, regardless of their background or major.

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