

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

history courses and other courses with Asian content have consistently attracted significant numbers of Asian Americans. While Asian American students have always been active in the Asia Club, today they dominate in numbers and increasingly assume positions of leadership. In the past, their interests gravitated more toward participating in programs and events that highlighted the wonders of traditional Asian cultures. But this past February they initiated something new and in the future I will encourage their celebration, both Asian American as well as Asian.

As visible as the Asian American students were that evening in February, Asian America has been invisible in our curriculum. We've known for years that there was demand for Asian American courses, and the mission statement for the ASLC includes Asian America. The ASLC has sponsored Asian American programs and workshops for years, but not courses. And so my sabbatical for Spring 2005 will focus on the creation of an Asian American history course and related activities.

While CSB/SJU is clearly not cutting-edge in this regard, its orientation reflects the general trend across the United States. Asian American students, much sought after and flocking to America's campuses in ever greater numbers, have discovered that they are absent from the curriculum. And they are demanding change. Of the 43 undergraduate Asian American Studies programs, the one at the University of Minnesota began in 2003. The growth has been such that American colleges and universities are hiring a record number of scholars specializing in Asian American subjects. But as with African American History in the '60s and '70s, there are not yet enough Asian American specialists—and certainly not enough Asian Americans—to meet the demand. To quote from a recent article, "And with the increased demand for scholars to teach the new courses, some institutions are hiring adjunct professors without advanced degrees, or academics who once specialized in Asian subjects like postcolonial Indian literature..."² Why not someone like me, well versed in the American setting, experienced in researching and teaching American immigration history and U.S. race relations, and deeply interested in Asian and Asian American studies? Certainly small liberal arts colleges like ours will once again have to find ways to serve our students in the absence of the kind of resources the University of Minnesota has. The only question, it seems to me, is this: Will Asian American studies be housed in departments, Asian Studies programs, ethnic studies programs or somewhere else? It is, in fact, not a question of "if," but "when" and "where."

¹For an overview of the ASLC, see Lynda Fish, P. Richard Bohr, and David Bennetts, "Asia Beyond the Classroom: The Asian Studies Learning Community at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John's University," *ASIANetwork Exchange*, 10.2 (Winter 2002):22-25.

²Somini Sengupta, "More Students Increase Demand for Scholars," *The New York Times*, June 9, 1999.

The Asian American Experience and Asian Studies: Viewpoint from My Life Journey **Chia Ning** **Central College**

The separation of Asian American studies from Asian studies has the potential to create an uncomfortable place for Asian Americans. My life of twenty years in the United States explains this well. Today, if I need to decide whether my experience belongs in Asian American studies or in Asian studies, I tend to struggle with the "choice" and often see no hope for a resolution. The struggle seems as if I have to divide myself culturally in order to fit into one of two academic fields; defined as *either* "American" or "Asian."

Twenty years ago, I came to the United States from Beijing as a graduate student in history. After completing my Ph. D. at The Johns Hopkins University in 1991, I began teaching Asian studies courses at Central College, a Midwest liberal arts college. When I teach Chinese culture, I feel that I am teaching a culture of my own. My teaching pedagogy, however, is American. Such a combination has laid the foundation for my teaching career in U.S. higher education. From a foreign student to a permanent resident, and then a U.S. citizen, I place my life experience in both Asian Studies and in American studies. Only when I find myself included in both fields do I find my heart at ease from this struggle to choose.

From my observations in the classroom, second generation Asian American students still play an active role as Asian culture "insiders" in many cases. When we learn about Confucian culture, for example, students from Taiwanese, Vietnamese, and Laotian families, many of which are of Chinese origin, usually treat Confucian culture as their own. They place themselves in that culture voluntarily and use their family relationships when speaking of Confucian principles. They appear to the American students as an existing cultural model, and their comments are recognized as authentic and convincing. Whenever I have one or two of these students in a classroom which is otherwise overwhelming populated by Anglo-American students, I find the teaching and learning that occurs is more effective because Eastern and Western perspectives are both alive in comparison and in dialogue. This class observation has proven to me that the life of both first and second generation Asian Americans can add much to the teaching and learning of Asian culture, even though these students' life experiences are exclusively American. If Asian American and Asian studies were clearly separated, and the Asian American experience was treated only as "American," a fundamental part of their life experiences, based on their Asian origin and culture, would be marginalized.

The last twenty years of my life journey in the United States has been accompanied by a dramatic change in the larger picture of U.S.-Asian connections. As a result of rapid globalization, more Asian people are participating