

Across the Divides: Beyond School, Nation, and the 1965 Immigration Act in the History of Asian American Education

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The importance of education for Asian Americans looking to fight race-based discrimination, create a sense of community, and reclaim and establish an identity is well documented. In 1884, Mary and Joseph Tape, Chinese immigrants living in San Francisco, sued the San Francisco Board of Education and the principal of the Spring Valley Primary School—Jennie Hurley—after Hurley denied their daughter, Mamie, admission because she was “Chinese” (though born in the United States). The Superior Court ruled in favor of the Tapes, but in 1885, the School Board appealed the decision to the Supreme Court of California where justices upheld the lower court’s decision. Though Mamie would not be able to attend Spring Valley after the School Board successfully pushed for state-wide school segregation legislation, many “white-only” institutions began to admit Chinese American children after the Tape case.

Forty years later, Chinese Americans living in southern states found themselves ensnared in the black-white world of Jim Crow segregation. In the Mississippi Delta, state law prevented Chinese merchant Gong Lum’s daughter Martha from continuing to attend the white school she and her older sister had been enrolled in since the previous year. Lum and his lawyer appealed the school district’s decision to the US Supreme Court in 1927, arguing that Martha was not white, but ethnically Chinese and therefore unfit to attend the “colored” school. Unlike the Tapes, the Supreme Court refused to rule on Lum’s case and Martha went on to attend school in nearby Arkansas, where she studied alongside white pupils. The parents

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who fought and either lost or won their battles did so not only for their children's opportunities but to protect their identities as nonwhite, yet also not black.¹

Scholars have extensively studied these topics, but their work results in lingering questions. What were the experiences of Martha Lum, Mamie Tape, and others with their schools, their curriculum, or their teachers? What did they study and why? These questions highlight a lack of in-depth exploration of the practice and impact of education in Asian American history and represent divides in a promising subfield.

In 2001, historian Eileen H. Tamura highlighted the dearth of books and essays dedicated to understanding the full experience of Asian American educational history in a 2001 article in this journal.² Tamura drew attention to a number of inadequacies in the subfield, including the fact that there was no central approach to the topic within the larger body of work on Asian American history. While the historiography of Asian Americans had grown since the 1980s, there lacked a correlating increase in the number of works focusing on education. Rather, when discussed, education was generally tied to a larger context of ethnic and immigrant educational history without an appreciation for the unique experiences of Asian Americans.

In fact, compared to scholars in other disciplines, historians have been slow to study Asian American education. Social scientists have produced books and essays on the educational experiences of Asian immigrants who arrived after race- and nation-based quotas were lifted in 1965, but a historical approach to the subject is lacking. As Tamura explains, "Social science studies are important, [but] cannot substitute for historical works that offer both contextual understanding and the perspective of time."³ Without foundational works on the history of Asian American education prior to 1965, it is impossible to look at changes over time—a crucial component of any historical exercise. And without in-depth studies of the inner and outer workings of Asian American education, it is impossible to know what exactly *has* changed over time. If social scientists are busy at work researching and

¹For more on these examples, see Mae M. Ngai, *The Lucky Ones: One Family and the Extraordinary Invention of Chinese America* (Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 2012); Adrienne Berard, *Water Tossing Boulders: How a Family of Chinese Immigrants Led the First Fight to Desegregate Schools in the Jim Crow South* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016); and Stephanie Hinnershitz, *A Different Shade of Justice: Asian American Civil Rights in the South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

²Eileen H. Tamura, "Asian Americans in the History of Education: An Historiographical Essay," *History of Education Quarterly* 41, no. 1 (Spring 2001), 60–61.

³Tamura, "Asian Americans in the History of Education," 65.

gathering data on curriculum, the impacts of class and gender, and the interplay among teachers, students, and their parents, few historians have done the same.⁴ Tamura's work is foundational in establishing this subfield and, nearly twenty years later, many of her critiques remain unaddressed.

This essay assesses the current state of Asian American educational history and uses Tamura's insights to reflect on how the field has developed and where it can go. Of primary importance here are two of Tamura's observations and critiques. The first is the tendency of existing works on Asian American educational history to concentrate "on one particular ethnic group," primarily Japanese Americans.⁵ The second is that "we need more historical studies of the pre- and post-1965 periods to illuminate the diversity of experiences as well as the common patterns in Asian American education."⁶

Delving into the experiences of various ethnic groups will undoubtedly highlight the need for an in-depth study of the history of Asian American education as a whole. As Tamura explains, articles and books on Japanese Americans dominated the scant scholarship on Asian education that existed at the end of the twentieth century. The reasons for this are clear: "Among the groups migrating before World War II, they have the distinction of arriving primarily during a particular four-decade period, from 1885 to 1924, with a sizeable number of children born from 1910 to 1930."⁷ This "distinctive generational pattern" makes studying the impact of education on this particular group accessible.⁸

From public to private schools, Japanese Americans make up a significant population with multiple avenues for inquiry. For example, Anne Blankenship's most recent book is not dedicated solely to studying educational systems within Japanese American internment camps;

⁴For more on social science studies on Asian American education, see Yoon K. Pak, Dina C. Maramba, and Xavier J. Hernandez, *Asian Americans in Higher Education: Charting New Realities*, ASHE Higher Education Report (San Francisco: Wiley, 2014), 1–136; Clara C. Park, Russell Endo, and A. Lin Goodwin, eds., *Asian and Pacific American Education: Learning, Socialization, and Identity* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing, 2006); Festus E. Obiakor and Ying Hui-Michael, eds., *Voices of Asian Americans in Higher Education: Unheard Voices* (Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing, 2019); and Heather Kim, Laura Rendon, and James Valadez, "Student Characteristics, School Characteristics, and Educational Aspirations of Six Asian American Ethnic Groups," *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26, no. 3 (July 1998), 166–76. The work is exhaustive and Tamura's article should be consulted for more examples.

⁵Tamura, "Asian Americans in the History of Education," 69.

⁶Tamura, "Asian Americans in the History of Education," 71.

⁷Tamura, "Asian Americans in the History of Education," 69.

⁸Tamura, "Asian Americans in the History of Education," 69.

her look at religion and culture touches on education patterns and how the process of incarceration shaped them.⁹ Similarly, Shelley Sang-Hee Lee's analysis of the Japanese American community in pre-World War II Seattle provides descriptions of Nisei experiences with public schools and "Americanization."¹⁰

However, Seattle was home to a variety of ethnic Asian groups during the early twentieth century, including Chinese and Filipinos. Although Japanese Americans had the largest number of American-born children and, by extension, the largest number enrolled in schools, comparisons with Chinese and Filipinos would go a long way in creating patterns for historians to study. Exploring this methodology requires historians to search local records as well as those housed with historical societies and university special collections to gain a sense of what courses were offered, who taught at the schools, and the overall structure of educational institutions.

Oral histories—those either conducted by historians or held at archives—also provide rich sources for accessing individual reactions to and memories of school. Historians could use the above methods to reconstruct educational experiences of ethnic groups in other West Coast cities or in the East, Midwest, and South. The experiences of the Chinese in Mississippi are well documented in both the archives and, increasingly, in literature from educational scholars taking a historical approach.¹¹ These could serve as models for historians and reveal regional patterns as well.

Developing a well-rounded and comprehensive view of Asian American educational history also requires scholars to go beyond the classroom and the divide between the private sphere of family and home and the public school setting. When writing on the history of Native American education, K. Tsianina Lomawaima calls on historians to devote "more attention to Indigenous educational philosophies and practices in Indigenous contexts, that is, *education . . . outside*

⁹Anne M. Blankenship, *Christianity, Social Justice, and the Japanese American Incarceration during World War II* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2016).

¹⁰Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *Claiming the Oriental Gateway: Prewar Seattle and Japanese America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2011).

¹¹For more on Chinese and Chinese education in Mississippi, see Sieglinde Lim de Sánchez, "Crafting a Delta Chinese Community: Education and Acculturation in Twentieth-Century Southern Baptist Missionary Schools," *History of Education Quarterly* 43, no. 1 (Spring 2003), 74–90; Kit-Mui Leung Chan, "The Chinese-Americans in the Mississippi Delta," *Journal of Mississippi History* 35 (Feb. 1973), 29–35; and James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between White and Black* (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, 1988).

of the walls of (usually colonial) *schools* [emphasis in original].”¹² Responding to the disciplinary or “academic silo-ization” of the study of Native American education, Lomawaima argues that historians should press beyond the archives—often collected and maintained by the oppressive state—to understand how Native Americans created their own educational experiences.¹³ The goals and structure of Native American–led schools did not necessarily fit the model of state-sponsored education. What does education and learning look like when rooted in tribal communities or in the home? How does education extend beyond public or private schools? Historians can also use these approaches and questions to create a more complete understanding of Asian American educational history.

By using oral histories; historical collections gathered and maintained by ethnic communities rather than those created by local, state, and federal governments; and other cultural sources, like literature or the arts, historians can re-create educational programs offered at traditional language schools or other local organizations. Additionally, what kind of cultural education might Asian American children have received at home in terms of either maintaining or loosening cultural ties to the homeland? How did religion or culture intersect with the education of Asian American children beyond their classrooms? Addressing these questions might reveal patterns that are crucial for reconstructing an image of Asian American educational history that restores agency to these groups.

The need for more pre- and post-1965 studies of Asian American educational history is also essential for fully developing this field and reaching across the existing chronological divide. Following the Immigration Act of 1965, Asian immigrants from more diverse backgrounds began to arrive in the United States. While not entirely new, more Southeast Asian immigrants—particularly from India—came to the United States on new work-based visas. With the limitations on Asian immigration lifted, those from more traditional immigrant nations, including China, Japan, and Korea, arrived in larger numbers, but their experiences with resettlement were arguably different from those who arrived earlier. Additionally, Filipinos—people formerly colonized by the United States—and later refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos fleeing the wreckage of the Vietnam War

¹²K. Tsianina Lomawaima, “History without Silos: Ignorance versus Knowledge, Education beyond Schools,” *History of Education Quarterly* 54, no. 3 (Aug. 2014), 350.

¹³Lomawaima, “History without Silos,” 349.

experienced a different reception after arriving in the United States, as they fell outside of the “model minority” stereotype.¹⁴

Social scientists have produced most of the studies on post-1965 Asian American educational experiences. In many ways, they have engaged with the questions and approaches that historians have failed to use in their own work. From analyzing curriculum to interviewing teachers and students, scholars—including sociologists, psychologists, and ethnographers (among others)—have added to our understanding of the crucial role of education in family and community dynamics. However, as Tamura indicates, since the literature on pre-1965 Asian American history education is limited, few earlier examples exist with which to compare or contrast this phenomenon.

Addressing this gap requires historians to explore different methodologies. Here, historians would go far in exploring the research tools social scientists use in their studies on more recent immigrant groups. Similar to scholars who use large collections of interviews as qualitative data, historians could apply the same method in compiling oral histories or even life stories of the first or second generations of post-1965 immigrants. Conducting oral histories with those who remember their educational experiences after they arrived or even those of the second or third generation would provide an opportunity to compare and contrast experiences across groups and—if more studies on the pre-1965 period are created—across time. Interviewing administrators, teachers who have worked with these groups, and, in the case of refugees, perhaps former case workers would create a fascinating and nuanced portrait of Asian American education.¹⁵

Once the time frame of Asian American education history expands to encompass pre- and post-1965 groups, historians will

¹⁴For more on post-1965 immigration generally, see Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2015); and Jane H. Hong, *Opening the Gates to Asia: A Transpacific History of How America Repealed Asian Exclusion* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

¹⁵For more examples of using interviews and oral histories, see Bic Ngo and Stacey J. Lee, “Complicating the Image of Model Minority Success: A Review of Southeast Asian Education,” *Review of Educational Research* 77, no. 4 (Dec. 2007), 415–53; Amy Liu, “Critical Race Theory, Asian Americans, and Higher Education: A Review of Research,” *Interactions: UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 5, no. 2 (June 2009), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/98h4n45j>; Heather Kim, Laura Rendon, and James Valadez, “Student Characteristics, School Characteristics, and Educational Aspirations of Six Asian American Ethnic Groups,” *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development* 26, no. 3 (July 1998), 166–76; and Maxine Schwartz Seller, “Immigrants in the Schools—Again: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives on the Education of Post-1965 Immigrants in the United States,” *Journal of Educational Foundations* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1989), 53–75. This is only a limited representation of the existing literature.

then have opportunities to examine the interactions of various ethnic and racial groups. Tamura suggested in her article that historians take into account opportunities that existed before and after 1965 for different Asian ethnic groups to share the same space and interact with one another. One area where this occurred throughout the twentieth century was on college campuses. The Asian American movement was largely the work of Asian American students—those from the more “traditional” groups and more recent arrivals—as activism grew throughout the 1960s. Gary Okihiro, Sang-Hee Lee, Moon-Ho Jung, and Daryl Joji Maeda highlight these interactions from the late 1960s through the 1970s.¹⁶ Asian American students cited their own ethnic challenges and identities as inspiration for their activism and drew from the strategies of Black students in reclaiming the term “Asian American” as a political and social identity.

Interethnic and interracial student movements grew from these trends on West Coast and East Coast campuses.¹⁷ Such interethnic campus connections also expanded beyond the ivory tower and included interactions with larger Asian American communities. Yen Le Espiritu noted the influence of interethnic student movements on community organizations. Using their academic and organizing knowledge, students formed or assisted these nonprofit agencies designed to address the health, economic, and social needs of underserved populations such as recently arrived refugees or elderly Filipino bachelors.¹⁸

But interethnic connections can also be extended further into the late-nineteenth and early and mid-twentieth centuries. These panethnic movements based upon shared educational experiences were not solely the product of a post-World War II social movement or milieu; they were connected to an earlier legacy of organizing among college

¹⁶For more on the Asian American movement, see Gary Y. Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams: Asians in American History and Culture* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Shelley Sang-Hee Lee, *A New History of Asian America* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Moon-Ho Jung, *The Rising Tide of Color: Race, State Violence, and Radical Movements Across the Pacific* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Daryl J. Maeda, *Chains of Babylon: The Rise of Asian America* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009); and William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994).

¹⁷More work remains to be done on these movements in other regions, including the Midwest and the South. Andrew Urban wrote a useful article on a Korean student in the South during the late nineteenth century. See Urban, “Yun Ch’i-ho’s Alienation by Way of Inclusion: A Korean International Student and Christian Reform in the ‘New’ South, 1888–1893,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 17, no. 3 (Oct. 2014), 305–36.

¹⁸Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

and high school students. Scholars like Sarah Griffith studied Christian-based organizations on the West Coast during the early twentieth century to understand how ethnic groups bonded in response to a new identity as “yellow” given to them by white Americans.¹⁹ Shared experiences with discrimination on and off campus and the almost ready-made networks based on Christianity (the students in these studies identified as Christian and received financial and logistical support from organizations like the YMCA for their education) allowed a panethnic movement—a nascent one—to emerge as early as the 1920s. Students advocated for better representation on their campuses in the form of curricular reform and cultural events.

Historian Liping Bu’s work on the legacy of international students who studied at colleges and universities across the country is also useful in broadening the scope of Asian American experiences on and beyond campus.²⁰ These were certainly not the same networks seen later in terms of membership, activism, or socioeconomic status (many of these students were more elite), but understanding the educational experiences of these groups helps in comparing and contrasting themes cross time and regions.

Finally, when discussing the educational experiences of Asian Americans in the United States, historians should acknowledge the transpacific approach to the study of Asian American history. From labor to adoption, transnational studies of the Asian American experience that are not limited to one nation or region push the boundaries of the field in new directions.²¹ The same can be said for historians who

¹⁹Sarah M. Griffith, *The Fight for Asian American Civil Rights: Liberal Protestant Activism, 1900–1950* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2018). See also Stephanie Hinnertshitz, *Race, Religion, and Civil Rights: Asian Students on the West Coast, 1900–1968* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2015).

²⁰See Liping Bu, “Confronting Race and Ethnicity: Education and Cultural Identity for Immigrants and Students from Asia” *History of Education Quarterly* 60, no. 4 (Nov. 2020), 644–656. For more on foreign students in the United States, see Liping Bu, *Making the World Like Us: Education, Cultural Expansion, and the American Century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2003); and Liping Bu, “Education and International Cultural Understanding: The Elite American Approach, 1920–1937,” in *Teaching American to the World and the World to America: Education and Foreign Relations since 1870*, ed. Richard Garlitz and Lisa Jarvinen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 111–134.

²¹Arissa H. Oh, *To Save the Children of Korea: The Cold War Origins of International Adoption* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015); Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Empire of Care: Nursing and Migration in Filipino American History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003); Catherine Ceniza Choy, *Global Families: A History of Asian International Adoption in America* (New York: New York University Press, 2013); and Adam McKeown, *Melancholy Order: Asian Migration and the Globalization of Borders* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

might consider a similar approach to Asian American educational history. For example, new studies, including the edited collection *Pacific America: Histories of Transoceanic Crossings*, explore those who moved back and forth across the Pacific.²²

Similarly, Asian American students often traversed the Pacific for educational purposes, in some cases multiple times. The most well-known example would be the kibeï, or American-born Japanese students who spent their formative educational years in Japan at the behest of their parents. The reasons for such a decision abounded, including wanting their children to maintain a connection to Japanese culture and heritage. Such a move would later draw suspicion after Pearl Harbor and in fact government officials and internment administrators often suspected these Nisei as holding loyalties to the emperor. Nonetheless, their experiences are an understudied component of Asian American educational history that may shed light on some of the questions and themes Tamura suggests for further exploration. Moving beyond the scope of the Japanese to look at Asian American children from other ethnicities who were educated in similar ways would influence new ways of defining Asian American education.²³

Tamura's piece remains a timely reminder of how far the field of Asian American educational history has come and how far it has yet to go. Creating a more complete understanding of educational experiences within and outside of the classroom as well as pre- and post-1965 is a necessary exercise that also bridges seemingly disconnected subjects. Additionally, interethnic experiences on college campuses and in secondary education are all areas that historians have yet to fully explore—historians can move beyond the disciplinary “silozation” of the field and build upon many of the studies already completed by social scientists. As a result, Asian American educational history can be seen for what it is: a fascinating field of study and not simply a vehicle for approaching broader topics and themes.

²²Lon Kurashige, ed., *Pacific America: Histories of Transoceanic Crossings* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2019).

²³For more on kibeï students, see Eiichiro Azuma, *Between Two Empires: Race, History, and Transnationalism in Japanese America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).