Red Threads

An invisible red thread connects those who are destined to meet, regardless of place or circumstances. The thread may stretch or tangle but it will never break. - Chinese Proverb

Newsletter for the Center for Asian American Studies
www.utexas.edu/cola/centers/aas/news/newsletter/red-threads.php

The Status of APA Students at UT

Walking around campus, it is all but impossible not to run into Asian American and Asian students taking classes, strolling around the mall, lunching in the new Student Activity Center, and of course, studying in the library. The approximately 100 Asian American student organizations are constantly coordinating events, some drawing hundreds of participants.

This high visibility and activity is understandable considering that Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) students are approximately 18 percent of the undergraduate population. In the fall of 2010, they enrolled in the highest numbers in the Colleges of Natural Sciences (2,581), Engineering (1,237), Liberal Arts (1,086), Business (987), and Communications (342) and have been graduating at rates of approximately 50 percent after 4 years and 80 percent after 6. But the story of apparent AAPI success masks the challenges that some AAPI students face and has the effect of homogenizing the student body. For example, of the 6,858 AAPI undergraduates enrolled in fall 2010, 34 percent, or 2,348 came from low income households and 14 percent, or 982, were first-generation college students [Office of Information Management & Analysis 2011]. According to Robert T. Teranishi, author of Asians in the Ivory Tower: Dilemmas of Racial Inequality in American Higher Education (Teacher’s College Press, 2010), a commonly accepted measures of Asian American attainment, such as "average" SAT scores are "concealing a wider and more uneven (bimodal) distribution of scores than is the case for other populations. Therefore, while there are some AAPI students grouped among scores in the top percentile, there are also many AAPI students who are grouped among scores in the bottom percentile. This wide distribution in scores for AAPIs is correlated with a high degree of heterogeneity within the population with regard to ethnicity and immigration histories, educational attainment and poverty rates, and a wide distribution in language backgrounds.” Because UT does not track APA student data by ethnic background, we do not know whether specific populations are faring equally well on campus.

For example, the US Census includes 48 different ethnic groups under the AAPI racial category and not all fare well at university. About half of Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander students (such as Vietnamese and Native Hawaiians) will drop out without earning their degrees and are three to five times more likely to leave college than their East Asian (Japanese, Korean, and Chinese) and South Asian (Indian and Pakistani) counterparts.

Widespread perceptions that AAPI students are well represented on competitive campuses contribute to oversight of the challenges many face. Teranishi elaborates: “What is a bigger issue related to AAPIs in elite colleges is how much attention it draws away from AAPIs in other sectors of higher education. People are not aware of the fact that the largest number and proportion of AAPI college participation is in the community college sector, which is also where their enrollment has been increasing at the fastest rate over the past two decades. . . . I have found that AAPI students in community colleges (compared to their counterparts at four-year colleges) are more likely to delay matriculation after high school, enroll as part-time students, work full-time while attending college, and be the first in their families to attend college. These “risk factors” are not a part of the dominant narrative about AAPIs in higher education.”

Despite significant numbers on college campuses, AAPIs experience “lower rates of satisfaction and engagement and distinct experiences with their identity development; they also exhibit unique challenges associated with the psychological climate.” According to Teranishi, “One area of particular concern for college administrators and student affairs professionals should be the higher rates of stress, anxiety, and depression among AAPIs.” Relatively high levels of stress and anxiety are understandable for AAPIs if we consider the high percentages who are first-generation college students from low income households, many of whom are also working while trying to graduate in a timely manner. However, the model minority stereotype masks awareness of such pressures and
2010-2011 has been a year of many challenges for the Center for Asian American Studies (CAAS). The budget crisis that had wreaked havoc with universities across the country finally reached Texas in earnest. Long-term decisions regarding matters like staffing and programmatic outreach were held in abeyance while administrators took stock of the situation and decided how best to handle diminishing resources. Under these conditions, CAAS dropped from two to only one full-time staff, with our administrative associate Barbara Jann and interim director Lok Siu heroically stepping up to maintain operations. Late in the spring semester, CAAS received word that we face 25 percent cuts to be phased in over three years—dire news but not as severe as those Centers whose funding had been eliminated altogether. On a brighter note, we finally received permission to rehire a program coordinator to help us restore operations and our ability to conduct outreach and development. For this position, I am excited to announce the hiring of Sona Shah, a UT grad (2000) and former volunteer for AmeriCorp and the Peace Corp, and more recently on staff at the nonprofit organizations SAHELI and Keep Austin Beautiful. With the impending retirement of Barbara Jann, the bedrock of so much of CAAS’s activities throughout its existence, we are also searching for a new administrative associate to run our office. I am hopeful that despite these considerable changes, CAAS will be positioned to continue to develop and expand our activities on multiple fronts: academics, programming, community outreach, and development. The road has gotten rougher but we continue to progress.

Last but not least, congratulations to two of our lecturers who are entering the world of tenure-track employment: Jason Chang in the history department at the University of Connecticut—Storrs and Mohan Ambikaipaker in the Anthropology Department of Tulane University.

Thank you for your continuing interest and support!

Madeline Y. Hsu, Ph.D.
Director, Center for Asian American Studies
Associate Professor, Department of History

limits perceived needs for resources to address these problems. Another challenge to understanding APA student attainment arises because “the AAPI student population is often confounded with international students from Asia . . . AAPIs have the highest proportion of students who attended high school outside the U.S. and these students scored 90 points higher on the math section and 33 points higher on the verbal section. As a result, the SAT scores for AAPIs are skewed positively by international students, a trend that is also not occurring to the same extent for other populations.” At UT, we find that tracking the university attainments of Asian American students is indeed complicated by high numbers of international students from Asia, particularly at the graduate level. 24.5 percent of international students come from Asia, with the largest national clusters coming from Korea (908), China (761), and India (659). Those who attended US high schools constitute only 7.5 percent of graduate students. Moreover, UT is highly dependent on the research and teaching labor of these international graduate students – of part-time staff at UT, 22.6 percent are Asian/Asian American (2,923 of 12,913), of which 1,911, or 65 percent, are instructional and research assistants. Thus Asians and Asian Americans constitute 30.3 percent of instructional and research assistants over all. UT’s performance as a Tier 1 research institution, particularly in the sciences and engineering, depends heavily upon overseas talent who in turn may face complications posed by visa restrictions and limited access to employment in the US.

Despite the great visibility of Asians among student ranks, representation at higher levels of the University is much sketchier.

9.6 percent, or 266 out of 2,768, of faculty are Asian with the largest numbers concentrated in the Colleges of Engineering, Business, and Liberal Arts. Of full-time staff, 886 or 7.4 percent are Asian. Of these, only 2.6 percent, or 21, are of executive, administrative, or managerial status. This pyramidal decline in representation means that Asian Americans have relatively little clout at higher decision-making levels. According to Teranishi, nationally less than 1 percent of college presidents are Asian, which translates to less support for AAPI students.

The outlook for APIs at UT is muddied by our lack of information broken down by ethnicity or class. The Office of Information Management and Analysis tracks the numbers, characteristics, and attainments of international and Asian American student standing and but does not further disaggregate what is a very heterogeneous population. A student from a household headed by a South Asian doctor or Taiwanese computer engineer faces a far different outlook and challenges than one from a working-class or refugee background. Considering vast disparities in immigration trajectories, socioeconomic profiles, educational attainment, and household incomes, such data would help to clarify how all sectors of the AAPI community are faring at UT and identify those students who do not fit the “model minority” stereotype now so prevalent. The playing field is not level for some more than other categories of AAPIs and those who face additional challenges should be identified and helped toward admission and graduation. For example, according to the 2009 Census, there are 830,071 Asians in Texas of which the largest ethnic communities are 134,961 Vietnamese, 129,365 Asian Indians, 105,829 Chinese (including Taiwanese), 58,340 Filipinos, and 45,571 Koreans.
We do not know whether each of these communities are represented at UT in numbers commensurate with their state population and whether there are issues with their recruitment, retention, and graduation. UT should recognize the heterogeneity of the AAPI population and track ethnic specific data so that we may grapple with a clearer picture of how all AAPI students are faring at this university.


Please send comments to aasinfo@utlists.utexas.edu.

Faculty Spotlights

Nhi T. Lieu,
CAAS Core Faculty
Assistant Professor of American Studies

For most Americans, the mere mentions of “Vietnam” invokes haunting sentiments that unearth feelings of conflict, ambivalence, pain, trauma, and loss. Having lived my formative years in the embattled nation during and shortly after the war, these emotions occupy my very own consciousness as well. Nevertheless, Vietnam also conveys a deep, complicated history and a sense of culture. My academic pursuits have emerged from this connectedness to history and culture; but unlike most immigrants from Vietnam, whose ties to the nation are more direct and perhaps influenced by nostalgic longing, my intellectual search stem from a need to comprehend the dynamism of the contemporary world that surrounds me. My interest in the past motivated me to study and theorize the present along with the competing narratives of memory, notions of identity, and political dimensions of culture that characterize our times.

The subject of my first book, The American Dream in Vietnamese, examines how sites of culture contribute meaningfully to our understanding of the ways in which ethnic identity is constructed, negotiated, mediated, and re-fashioned. Writing to counter existing narratives that pathologize Vietnamese immigrants as traumatized refugees, my work argues that the formation of identity for Vietnamese Americans must be viewed through a series of previously neglected sites of popular culture because these sites are repositories of memory and desire for subjects of the Vietnamese diaspora. My research therefore closely analyzes various forms of popular culture such as live music variety shows and videos, beauty pageants, Internet websites, and other cultural forms created by and for Vietnamese audiences.

I first encountered these cultural forms during my teenage years growing up in the mid-1980s in Southern California. My parents often enjoyed consuming popular culture created by Vietnamese immigrants because it offered an alternative form of entertainment from mainstream American media fare. Watching video recordings of musical performances in Vietnamese allowed them to wax nostalgic over love songs they had heard in Vietnam and take pride in the talent “our community” was able to nurture after migrating to the United States. I had no interest in ethnic media except when a Vietnamese performer would attempt to sing a familiar American pop tune. Growing up in the 1980s, I was an avid fan of popular American performers and bands such as Michael Jackson, Madonna, Cyndi Lauper, and the Go-Gos. I often laughed whenever a Vietnamese immigrant singer would perform an imitation of these stars in their heavily accented English. It was even more unnatural to see Vietnamese performers dancing and gyrating on stage as if they were the Solid Gold dancers. Though disgruntled by what they considered “inappropriate acts” that deviated from “proper” Vietnamese behavior, my parents used these startling images to instruct me how not to be. Meanwhile, they still wanted me to watch these videos because the next performance might teach me something about Vietnamese culture.

My parents’ ambivalence toward these videos reveals a telling aspect about Vietnamese diasporic cultural production and the relationships viewers forge with these popular forms of culture. The experience of watching gave my parents and those in their generation a mode for reminiscing and preserving their memories, but their discomfort and reluctance to accept the videos’ sexualized imagery illustrate not only disagreement with but also uncertainty about the role cultural production would have in forming the identities of the next generation. Nevertheless, the videos remained the only source for observing some semblance of our cultural heritage at the time. Their presence in our home served as a disruption to mainstream television programming we had voraciously consumed in our eagerness to learn English. In some sense, my parents enjoyed the utopian forms of entertainment and believed they allowed us to connect to some sense of culture and history we would otherwise be losing. However, they were loath to wholeheartedly embrace the images put forth because they represented a larger fear and anxiety about the role popular culture would play in shaping our identities as Vietnamese growing up in the United States.

Vietnamese Americans have used popular culture to fashion their identities in complex ways—employing new technologies and marking their diasporic experiences as distinct from other racialized ethnic minorities precisely through their entangled past with the United States. The public displays of these desires dramatize the community’s struggle to define itself against the legacy of the refugee label that continues to pathologize their experiences in American society. My initial quest to understand migration and culture as larger social processes has led me to become a more politicized thinker.

Professor Lieu’s book, The American Dream in Vietnamese was published by the University of Minnesota Press in 2011.

Snehal Shingavi, Assistant Professor of English

Snehal Shingavi is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at UT, and he is also affiliated with both the Center for Asian American Studies and the South Asia Institute. A native Texan, Snehal was born in Houston and then went to college at Trinity University in San Antonio, TX before going to UC Berkeley to complete his PhD. He's currently completing his monograph, entitled “The Mahatma
I'm thrilled to be a part of the Center for Asian American Studies not only because it's a representation of the kinds of experiences that were formative to my development, but also because some of the most salient questions that will be asked in the years to come will be about what some people are already calling the 21st century - the Asian century. Unfortunately, Asian American Studies has always been a marginal discipline, and in the current climate of budgetary restrictions, it seems as if we are required to fight to keep research in Asian American history and experience alive. The Center was founded a mere 10 years ago when students protested to demand that Asian American Studies be a part of the curriculum at the University of Texas. (Incidentally, while those protests were going on here at UT, I was involved in similar protests at UC Berkeley to try and save the ethnic studies program there. It's part of the reason why Asian American studies is so dear to my heart). I'm hoping to be part of the project of resuscitating and revitalizing Asian American studies for students in the hopes that they, too, can find a place to understand their own experiences not as irrelevant or marginal to the development of the long story of America but as central and formative, and to begin to appreciate the vital contributions made by Asian immigrants and their children to an ethic of social justice and solidarity here.

Asian American Staff Spotlight

Alex Pong,
Senior Administrative Associate, Graduate and International Admissions Center & AAAFSA Staff Co-Chair

Alex Pong is a Senior Administrative Associate at the Graduate and International Admissions Center at the University of Texas at Austin. His main duties include counseling prospective international students on admissions policies and procedures, evaluating credentials, determining their eligibility, examining foreign transcripts and diplomas to ensure their authenticity and legitimacy and researching foreign countries educational systems and their structure. He has extensive knowledge of the U.S. and international credentials of more than 100 countries around the globe and serves as a liaison to collaborate with department graduate advisers and coordinators in admissions qualifications and requirements. He is also an office supervisor overseeing the application section.

Alex was born and grew up in Hong Kong. He came to California at the age of 16 for his last year of high school. He earned a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration from San Jose State University and moved to Austin in 1984. His birthday is March 2 which is Texas Independence Day of Texas, so no wonder he is now an Asian-Texan.

As Staff Co-Chair of the Asian/Asian American Faculty and Staff Association at UT, his mission is to be creative, innovative, and challenging. His priority goals are to build strong public relationships on campus, increase membership especially of faculty, and to research for additional resources for events and activities. He would utilize his administration skills and knowledge in his leadership role at AAAFSA. Alex would like to establish a breakthrough model that can bring the association to the next higher level.

Besides campus involvement, Alex is a director of the Chinese Society of Austin and a Grand Knight of the Chinese Catholic fraternal organization called the “Knights of Columbus”, becoming the first Chinese to head the council in 150 years of its church history. He is dedicated to charity works and community service. Building and maintaining a good image and reputation of an Asian in the west has become his daily motto!

At home, Alex is a loving husband, father and son. He takes good care of his elderly mom and enjoys lots of family time with his wife and two daughters. Though Alex has been living in the United States for 36 years, he always remembers his roots. An Asian motto says: “When a person drinks water, he should be able to tell where the water comes from.” He is very proud of being a Chinese living on a land called ‘America’.
Barbara Jann has served as administrative associate for CAAS since its founding in 2000. She has been a bedrock through good times and bad. For her high standards, loyalty, and always welcoming equanimity, she will be missed after her retirement this summer.

Why did you first decide to start working for CAAS? Did you have professional/personal reasons for doing so?

I was working part-time in the Chemistry Department and needed a second job to support our family. I saw a half-time position with the Center for Asian American Studies advertised online and was interested because, with a Korean-American son, I wanted to learn more about Asian and Asian American culture and what Asian American studies really meant. We had been members of an adoption group for families with children from Asia and had always felt a connection to those of Asian heritage because our son is from Asia.

What will be your proudest memories of working at CAAS?
The Association for Asian American Studies Conference, and the work we did to make it a success, and the Asia in Latin American Studies Conference. Also, hiring good faculty and a long-term director after many searches.

What are the biggest changes at CAAS while you have been working there?
Probably most recently, the budget cuts, which have affected a large part of the University. The Center is relatively young, and hasn’t experienced many ups and downs except with the change in directors. Each director or interim director left his influence on the Center, which made it what it is today.

What was it like helping to start a new program at UT? How involved did you feel in establishing a new program?
It was a challenge but at the same time quite exciting to start a new program. Art Sakamoto did much of the work before I arrived, and Mia Carter, Jim Lee, Rowena Fong and Madeline Hsu built on that foundation.

What things do you think you will miss after retiring? What are you looking forward to when you retire?
I will miss working at such a large, impressive institution of higher learning, with all the people here whom I admire. But I’m looking forward to taking care of myself, helping my husband, and learning all about our family business.
groups of minorities, I’ve excelled at my standardized patient exams and interactions with patients in the community. I was chosen as the first year representative of the Asian Pacific American Medical Student Association and am newly elected as the Vice President for next year. I hope to continue to empower other Asian Americans and provide better access to healthcare for our community. I also ask that you look at the courses offered for AAS next semester and to sign up for a few to find out what AAS is all about!

AAS Major Spotlight
Rachel Gounder ’11

What factors were involved when you decided to become an AAS major?
I decided to become an AAS major because I felt such a strong connection with the coursework. I actually looked forward to going to my AAS classes. AAS courses helped me shape my identity. Growing up, I always found it difficult to balance both sides of my culture, my Asian side and my Western side, but these classes helped me find balance.

How has being an AAS major reflected in your academic and personal life?
Being an AAS major has been great for my academic career. I have had many opportunities available to me which I would have not had in other areas of study. My GPA also has been benefited as my passion for my coursework is reflected in my grades. Personally, being an AAS major has helped me to become a better person. It has made me higher appreciate how all cultures contribute to mainstream society.

What personal benefits have you received by being an active member of your UT-Austin community?
By becoming a an active member of the Asian community I have developed a greater social voice. I am not afraid to speak out against things and have also improved my public speaking skills.

In what ways have you been involved with the UT-Austin/ Austin community or Global Asian/Asian American communities?
I have been involved with the UT-Asian community through CAAS, where I am the Student Liaison. I have been able to become involved in different Asian sub-cultures that I would not have had the opportunity to do so.

If someone was interested in becoming active members of their community, what would you advise them to do or think about?
I would advise them to freely contact active community members and asking where help is needed. The hardest part about being active in the APA community is just taking the first step.

If someone was interested in majoring/minoring in AAS, how would you advise them?
I would highly encourage prospective students in becoming an AAS major. Not only will they stand out, but many of AAS courses are cross listed in other disciplines and meet many degree requirements. Also due to a smaller class size, every student gets to know their professors which will ultimately lead to amazing recommendations.

UT-Austin Organizational Spotlight:
Asian American Mental Health Task Force
During the spring of 2011, a group of campus faculty, staff, administrators, and students convened to discuss ways of addressing mental health needs of Asian and Asian American students. A catalyst for this group was a rising awareness within the APA community of the need to provide programs and services for students to address a variety of mental health needs including depression and anxiety. Additionally, the Counseling and Mental Health Center and the Office of the Dean of Students also expressed a need to consult with community members and share information and resources aimed at addressing the mental health needs of APA students on campus. Dr. LaToya Hill, Assistant Dean for Student Emergency Services and Smita Ruzicza, Associate Director of Greek, Leadership and Intercultural Education invited various campus stakeholders to meet in January 2011 to begin discussing these issues. Members of this group consisted of representatives from the Division of Diversity and Community Engagement, Division of Student Affairs, the Center for Asian American Studies, Asian and Asian American Faculty Staff Association (AAAFSA), the International Office as well as student representatives.

The purpose of this group is to share information about recent issues affecting APA students in their individual units including statistical information about mental health issues. When relevant, this data was contextualized with national data. Enrollment and graduation rates were compared to average campus statistics. The committee also discussed anecdotal data regarding mental health issues in the community from students and other community members and issues often faced by international students compared to Asian American students. Members agreed that the campus community must be educated about the differences between these two student groups.

Committee members brainstormed possible programs and initiatives to offer to APA students including educational programming and awareness about mental health issues. APA committee members expressed an interest in working on a status report about the APA community at UT Austin. Finally, the committee members decided that the purpose of this particular committee will be mostly for information sharing and consulting with one another when issues arise.

2011 CAAS Student Scholarship Awards

Undergraduate Student Awards:
Quratul ‘Ainee’ Athar (ANT/IRG, 2013)
Project: “Margins within the DREAM: Identity Formation among Undocumented Asian Youth”

Cathleen Chen (Plan II/PSY, 2011)
Project: “The Effects of Acculturation on Self-Schemas in Asian Americans”

Amy Rattananinad (AAS/ANT, 2012)
Project: “Directing the University of Texas: Repackaging Diversity through the Lens of Capitalist Logic”

Jennifer Richardson (ANT, 2012)
Project: “A Recreation of Pinoy Pride in Austin Through the Consumption of Filipino Objects”

Graduate Student Awards:
Yijie Wang (Human Development)
Subject of Research: Acculturation among Chinese immigrant families

Organizational Award
Vietnamese Students Association
Center for Asian American Studies

2010 - 2011 Programming

Speaker Series

✦ The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History
Yunte Huang, Professor of English at the University of California - Santa Barbara

✦ Missing: Youth, Citizenship, & Empire after 9/11
Sunaina Maira, Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California - Davis

✦ Ummah in the Backyard
Aisha Khan, Associate Professor of Anthropology at New York University

✦ Subjectivity and Difference Post-Identity
Kandice Chuh, Professor of English at CUNY/The Graduate Center

✦ Black Current: Mexican Responses to Japanese Art, 17th-19th Centuries
Caron Smith, Curator of the Crow Collection of Asian Art
Image shown: Views from Inside and Outside Mexico City; Mexico, ca. 1660

✦ We Are Here Because You Were There: Migration and Empire in U.S. Global Histories
Paul Kramer, Associate Professor of History at Vanderbilt University

✦ Vincent Who?
Tony Lam, Director

✦ Amreeka
Cherien Dabis, Director

✦ Ping Pong Playa
Jessica Yu, Director

✦ The People I’ve Slept With
Quentin Lee, Director

✦ Mooz-lum
Qasim Basir, Director

✦ Namesake
Mira Nair, Director

Asian American Cinema Series, sponsored with the Asian American Culture Committee

✦ Missing: Youth, Citizenship, & Empire after 9/11
Sunaina Maira, Associate Professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California - Davis

✦ Ummah in the Backyard
Aisha Khan, Associate Professor of Anthropology at New York University

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Qasim Basir, Director

✦ Namesake
Mira Nair, Director

APA Lunch Discussions
Spring Semester Discussion Series Co-Sponsored with the Counseling and Mental Health Center and featuring psychologist Dr. Shalini Batra

✦ The “Stress Continuum” and How It Affects Asian American Students

✦ Depression and Suicidal Feelings Among Asian American Students

✦ Asian American Students Preventing Suicide With guest speaker, Marina Trattner, suicide prevention specialist from CMHC

2011 Asian American Studies Graduates

Congratulations to:

✦ Phung My (Samantha) Cao

✦ Jamie Lee Helton

✦ Donna Le

✦ Andrew Hsieh

✦ Dean Pham

MADELINE HSU, PH.D.
DIRECTOR
myhsu@austin.utexas.edu
(512) 232-9469

SONA SHAH
PROGRAM COORDINATOR
sona.shah@austin.utexas.edu
(512) 232-6428

BARBARA JANN
ADMINISTRATIVE ASSOCIATE
barbaraj@austin.utexas.edu
(512) 232-6427
Thank You for your contributions & continued support!

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We invite all individuals who are interested in Asian American issues to support our Center. Our goal is to increase awareness of Asian American issues by facilitating multidisciplinary teaching and research enabling students to become active members of their community. Contributions will allow our Center to develop new courses, provide scholarships for students, increase research opportunities, and sponsor university and public programs.

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_____ $500 500 Club Member
_____ Other (please specify amount $______________ )

University of Texas at Austin
Center for Asian American Studies
1 University Station A2200
Austin, TX 78712