



ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES K-12 FRAMEWORK

This framework introduces an Asian American Studies framework to K-12 educators. The framework avoids common multicultural approaches that only include communities of color and marginalized groups through disjointed, superficial lessons focused on food, fun, and festivals. It also recognizes that Asian American studies is interdisciplinary and offers a thematic approach to teach Asian American studies across curriculum and throughout the year. The framework has four components: (a) definition of the term “Asian American” and Asian American studies; (b) essential concepts and major themes within each concept; (c) teaching considerations; and (d) a glossary of terms mentioned in the essential concepts and themes. A compendium of resources is available on the website to support teachers in developing lessons based on the framework.

“ASIAN AMERICAN”

The term “Asian American” emerged from a political context and was first used in 1968 by Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, students of the University of California in Berkeley. Inspired by the civil rights and Black Power movements and protests against the U.S. war in Vietnam, they founded the Asian American Political Alliance and sought to unite different ethnic student groups of Asian backgrounds. Understanding the ways in which wars, militarism, and displacement in Asia and the Pacific have shaped the lives of Asian Americans and native Pacific Islanders was and remains a defining feature of Asian American studies. Coining the term Asian American was a result of this consciousness and cross-racial, cross-ethnic solidarity building.

The field of Asian American studies has now expanded to include the experiences of people of West Asia (Afghanistan, Armenia, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Palestine, Syria, Yemen), South Asia (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepali, Pakistan, Sri Lanka), Southeast Asia (Brunei, Burma, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam), and East Asia (China, Japan, Korea, Mongolia, Taiwan, Tibet). These communities have shared histories, geographies, and common experiences of racialization and economic exploitation due to U.S. wars.



Defining who is/is not Asian American can be complicated as the term often excludes parts of West Asia, popularly known as the Middle East, and Central Asia. Some of the people included in these different regions may be classified as white (e.g., Arabs) rather than Asian or Asian American. Additionally, the nations listed do not necessarily correspond with the various ethnic groups that exist across national and beyond boundaries. The term Asian American has also been criticized for its tendency to obscure tremendous diversity within and across Asian American communities. The field of Asian American studies recognizes multiple communities and varied identities and the need to build solidarity across them. For instance, sometimes Asian Americans are clustered with Pacific Islanders through acronyms like AAPI or APA. Pacific Islanders have their own distinct histories, cultures, politics, languages, etc. that often get ignored or erased when this clustering occurs. In other cases, this inclusion is used as a way to raise awareness about the need for a deeper understanding of the specific histories and struggles of Pacific Islander communities.

This framework uses the term Asian American with acknowledgement of the diversity, complexity, and nuances it encompasses. The essential concepts listed below are not meant to be comprehensive but serve as important starting points that educators and students can return to and make connections across over time.

Italicized words/phrases are defined in the glossary at the end of the document

Essential Concept: **IDENTITY**

Major Theme: **EXPLORATION OF SELF**

In order to understand identity, we must begin with ourselves through a deep interrogation of our own cultural and ethnoracial identity and consideration of how identity positions us in particular ways in our society and around the world. Some people hold identities that belong to the dominant group (in the United States, this includes white, cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, Christian, English-speaking, to name a few) while others do not. The term *intersectionality*, popularized by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, describes when someone has multiple marginalized identities that negatively impact their lived experiences in particular ways distinct from those with more dominant identities.

Guiding Questions

- What identities do you hold? (Think about race, ethnicity, religion, class, gender, immigration status, etc.)
- What does learning about our identities teach me about others? Myself?
- What identities are viewed as part of the dominant group (what is considered the norm or “normal”) in the society you live in?
- Which of your overlapping identities may be marginalized in the society you live in?
- How are some identities expressed more in certain spaces than other identities?
- How do the social spaces in which you participate impact how you view your own identity and the identities of others?



Major Theme: **STEREOTYPES & DISCRIMINATION**

While Asian Americans are an incredibly diverse and complex group, they are often reduced to very specific, stereotypical representations in popular media and school curriculum. Historically, some of these include representations of Asian American women as hypersexual, East Asian American men as emasculated and devious, West, South East, and South Asian American men as a dangerous threat. Often, Asian American representation is simply East Asian American representation. From the *Yellow and Dusky Peril* to contemporary images of Asian American students and adults as a *model minority*, these representations reduce huge communities of people to simple tropes that are rarely at the center of the story and are often portrayed through white perspectives rather than through their own voices and experiences. The pervasiveness of these stereotypes has material, social, and emotional impacts, including discrimination and violence, that limit Asian Americans' full participation in society and their access to education, housing, jobs, and health care.

Guiding Questions

- When you imagine "Asian American", who do you imagine (which groups/communities) and who is left out of your imagination?
 - How are certain identities stereotyped and represented/misrepresented?
 - How could such stereotypes become reinforced in various aspects of society (law, education, media, health care, prison system, sports, entertainment)?
 - How have stereotypes impacted the ways Asian Americans have been discriminated against in U.S. society?
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Essential Concept: **POWER & OPPRESSION**

Major Theme: **IMPERIALISM, WAR & MIGRATION**

U.S. imperialism and militarism in Asia are key drivers of Asian migration to the United States. Asians have migrated to the United States mainly because the United States went to Asia to secure land and resources and continues to have a military presence in Asia for its capitalist expansion. From the *Empress of China*, a U.S. merchant ship that sailed to China for trade in 1784, and the U.S.'s forced opening of Japan for trade in 1853, to the Philippine-American War of 1898 and colonization of Philippines, and to the U.S. wars and military interventions in Japan, Korea, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Iraq, Afghanistan, etc., the U.S. presence in Asia has generated conditions for Asian migration to the United States as colonial subjects, laborers, refugees, asylum seekers, adoptees, military spouses, students, and immigrants. Today, Asian migration continues to be affected by U.S.-Asian international relations.

Guiding Questions

- What is imperialism and how did it impact Asian migration to the United States?
- How have U.S. imperialism, wars, and military interventions in Asia induced Asian migration to the United States?



- When and from where have different groups of Asians migrated to the United States?
- What factors impacted how the U.S. designed its immigration and exclusion policies?
- How do current economic initiatives continue Asian migration for specific labor?

Major Theme: **CITIZENSHIP & RACIALIZATION**

At its formation, the United States defined citizenship as the province of white male property owners and limited naturalization only to free white persons as seen in the Bhagat Singh Third Supreme Court Case of 1923. It was not until 1952 that all Asian immigrants were finally eligible for naturalized citizenship. The long-held use of whiteness as the legal criterion for U.S. citizenship has racialized Asian Americans as *forever foreigners* and generated the wide range of discriminatory laws limiting Asian Americans from fully and equally participating in U.S. society. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 sought to increase U.S. economic strength and helped give way to the idea of Asian Americans as *model minorities* who are intelligent, hardworking, wealthy, and obedient. This model minority myth has strengthened white supremacy by pitting Asian Americans against Black and Brown communities, denying the presence of structural racism, and reifying whiteness as the norm of citizenship.

Guiding Questions

- What are dominant perceptions of what it means to be "American" and what has shaped these ideas?
 - How have Asian Americans fit into (or not) these perceptions and how have they been included or excluded from "American" citizenship?
 - How does this inform Asian Americans' relationships to other racialized groups?
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Essential Concept: **COMMUNITY & SOLIDARITY**

Major Theme: **RESISTANCE & SOLIDARITY**

Asian Americans have resisted discriminatory laws, policies, and practices. Chinese railroad workers in the late 1800s went on strikes to protest exploitation in the workplace. Japanese farmworkers in the early 1900s joined Mexican farmworkers to launch a strike and formed one of the first multiracial labor unions in the U.S. Filipino migrant workers played a key role in organizing farmworkers and demanding justice in solidarity with Mexican farmworkers from the 1930s through the 1960s. Asian Americans challenged racist citizenship laws, school segregation, and incarceration of Japanese Americans. Asian Americans have also joined African Americans and other marginalized groups in organized activism in the 1960s and 70s, fighting for the end of the Vietnam War. Asian Americans were directly involved in the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) who spearheaded the longest student strike in the nation alongside the Black Student Union (BSU) at San Francisco State University in 1968. This strike resulted in the institutionalization of ethnic studies. In the post 9/11 context, Japanese Americans challenged racist proposals, based on Japanese internment, to intern Arabs and Muslims. South Asian Americans organized with Arab Americans and Muslim communities against war, Islamophobia and racial/religious profiling. Asian American activism and cross-racial solidarity continues today in the fight against anti-Asian violence, discriminatory deportation and immigration

policies, police violence, mass incarceration, inaccessible housing, workplace exploitation, Islamophobia, and Anglocentric curriculum.

Guiding Questions

- How have various groups of Asian Americans resisted against discriminatory laws, policies, and practices?
- How have Asian Americans built cross-ethnic and cross-racial solidarity to fight against racism and discrimination?
- What are examples of everyday resistances and acts of solidarity that individuals and families engage in to maintain linguistic, religious, and ethnic practices in spite of the dominant cultures' oppressive structures?
- What can these acts of resistance and alliances indicate to us about pathways forward?

Major Theme: **CONTENTION & COMPLEXITY**

Whereas there are many moments when Asian Americans participated in collective struggles against oppression, there are also moments when Asian Americans were complicit in sustaining white supremacy, anti-Black racism, settler colonialism, and other forms of oppression. Asian American experiences are diverse, positive, negative, and often within the spaces inbetween. Contentions exist as Asian Americans have been divided on whether to assimilate to or disrupt whiteness, whether to recognize or deny their implication in settler colonialism, and whether to support or challenge affirmative action, to name a few. Division within groups also exists, such as Hindu nationalism, East Asian dominance over Southeast and South Asian Americans, China vs. Taiwan. These contentious and complex histories need to be explored and interrogated to understand the wide variety within Asian America.

Guiding Questions

- In what ways have Asian Americans been complicit in anti-Black racism and settler colonialism?
- In what ways have Asian Americans sought to dismantle oppression?
- What contentions and divisions are there within and across various groups of Asian Americans and why? How have they affected various communities?

Essential Concept: **RECLAMATION & JOY**

Major Theme: **RECLAIMING HISTORIES**

Against the public erasure and misrepresentation of their stories, Asian Americans have reclaimed their histories and constructed their narratives. These include (re)naming streets after Asian American changemakers (e.g., “Kala Bagai Way” in Berkeley, CA), conserving Asian American historical sites (e.g., Angel Island Immigration Station), reenacting erased histories (e.g., the Golden Spike reenactment ceremony honoring Chinese railroad workers), rebuilding ethnic enclaves (e.g., Chinatowns), and using artwork as resistance (e.g., art by incarcerated Japanese Americans during WWII, “I Still Believe in My City” arts project during the COVID-19 pandemic).

Guiding Questions

- How have Asian Americans reclaimed their histories and spaces of belonging that are largely forgotten, misrepresented, or left absent in the dominant society?
- How does reclaiming Asian American histories and stories allow Asian Americans to think about identity and power?
- How does Asian American reclamation of histories and spaces contribute to collective struggles against settler colonialism? How can we reconcile this?

Major Theme: CREATIVE EXPRESSION

Creativity can be a way to survive oppression as well as a means to challenge it. Asian Americans are finding ways to tell their own stories in their own voices and for their own communities, rather than trying to appeal to white audiences. These stories take many forms, from children’s literature to poetry to social media to documentaries and major motion pictures. These forms of creative expression have existed since Asians first arrived in the United States (e.g., poetry carved into the walls at the Angel Island Immigration Station) and have been an important way to communicate a range of emotions and experiences (e.g., art created in prison camps by Japanese Americans during World War II; music that describes the surveillance of South Asian American communities after September 11, 2011 and transnational Asian American lives).

Guiding Questions

- How is representation impacted by both the producer and the audience?
 - Who are some Asian American artists that have challenged systems and brought attention to Asian American stories?
 - How have Asian Americans shown ingenuity and creativity beyond what is traditionally known as the arts?
 - How have Asian Americans expressed their struggles, resilience, and hopes through arts and other creative expressions?
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TEACHING CONSIDERATIONS FOR K-12 ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES

WORDS MATTER

Distinguish between Asian and Asian American and avoid euphemisms that obscure the truthful stories of people’s experiences (e.g., referring to *displacement* as *relocation*, or using *internment* instead of the more accurate word *incarceration*). Use the terms and names created by the group to describe themselves (e.g., for example, people of South Asian descent may refer to themselves as Desi) rather than terms imposed by outsiders (e.g., Oriental, Asian Indian) and take the time to learn correct pronunciations. Some identifying terms are based on regional (e.g., Southeast Asian, South Asian), religious (e.g., Sikh), and ethnic (e.g., Mien, Hmong, Hakka) identities - ask, don’t assume!



AVOID A “FOOD, FUN, FESTIVALS” APPROACH

Asian American everyday life is deeply connected to diverse cultural practices. The uncritical focus on holidays, heroes, food, and fashion offers a superficial view of Asian American cultures and fosters stereotypes of Asian Americans as cultural others, exotic, and/or foreign. Instead, contextualize Asian American historical figures, events, and social movements within larger sociopolitical contexts with a focus on Asian American communities’ histories, struggles, resistance, contributions, and joy.

MOVE BEYOND A SINGLE STORY AND TOWARD AN INTERSECTIONAL APPROACH

There is no single story of what it means to be Asian American. There is diversity, complex historical formations, and competing meanings on what it means to be an Asian American, within and across ethnic and racial groups. Thus, teach diverse, divergent, complex, and intersecting stories, including Asian American actions both in support of and against white supremacy, anti-Blackness, and settler colonialism. Also teach the reality that there are gaps in education, income, employment, access to healthcare within and across Asian American communities and these exist due to structures and systems of power, not simply as a result of individual effort or failings.

TEACH ACROSS CURRICULUM THROUGHOUT THE YEAR

While social studies and language arts are critical places to teach Asian American histories and narratives, other content areas including math, science, and the arts are also important areas to incorporate and infuse Asian American experiences. Do not stop the “regular” curriculum to do a separate lesson for Asian Americans or only teach them during AAPI History Month in May. Doing so sends a message that Asian Americans and their experiences do not matter in the “regular” curriculum. Instead, meaningfully incorporate Asian American studies throughout the year.

BE AWARE OF AND ADDRESS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Asian Americans are often teased and stereotyped for their physical appearance, clothing, food, and traditions. However, when non-Asian Americans, white Americans in particular, enjoy aspects of Asian culture, they are often received very differently. For example, dressing as geishas for Halloween or wearing bindis or henna has become a fashion trend. When the same aspects of Asian culture used to denigrate Asian and Asian American people are exhibited by non-Asians and taken up positively, this is cultural appropriation. Given the long history of mocking accents and denigrating yellowface and brownface (acts wherein non-Asians adopt the facial coloring/features of Asians through make-up) in film and television, it is important to interrogate cultural appropriation and discuss shifts toward cultural appreciation and acceptance in order to move away from presenting Asian Americans as mysteriously different or unusual. It is also important to note that cultural appropriations are often connected to a market economy that profits from the selling of "culture," which benefits white wealth accumulations.



DIMINISH POSSIBLE HARMS

Review curricular resources to ensure that they are devoid of stereotypes. If you encounter resources that contain stereotypes, bring these ideas to your students' attention and develop their critical eye as you critique the resources together. Similarly, when using resources such as propaganda posters or political cartoons that deliberately depict Asian Americans in racist ways, be sure that they are analyzed for problematic content and that counterexamples are provided which humanize Asian Americans. If you do not know something, you can openly admit so and use it as an opportunity for everyone to grow, rather than asking Asian American students to represent their entire Asian American community or culture(s). Recognize intra-group differences related to ethnicity, language, religion, culture, politics, beliefs, etc. Educators need to avoid "fun," crafts- or game-based lessons that dehumanize Asian American experiences since such approaches trivialize Asian American experiences and are not taken seriously by learners.

COLLABORATE WITH ASIAN AMERICAN FAMILY AND COMMUNITY MEMBERS AND ORGANIZATIONS

Build relationships and engage in meaningful consultation with Asian American community members and organizations to plan and teach Asian American stories in critical ways, especially if you have not been a part of Asian American experiences and/or have not deeply engaged with Asian American communities. This can support the selection of culturally, linguistically, and historically responsible curricular content, materials, and pedagogies. Be mindful that there are many curricular resources and pedagogies written from white, Eurocentric perspectives that are deeply misleading, inaccurate, and harmful for learners, especially Asian American children and adolescents.

GLOSSARY

Forever Foreigner Myth

The Forever Foreigner myth is the assumption that all Asian people must be foreigners or recently arrived immigrants. Regardless of their length of residence in the United States, most Asian Americans are asked, "Where are you really from?" or told to "Go back to your country." This Forever Foreigner myth is grounded in the racist idea that people of Asian descent do not have any claims in the United States and has been at the core of anti-Asian hate, discrimination, and violence throughout US history.

Model Minority Myth

The Model Minority myth characterizes Asian Americans as exemplary minorities who are always academically high achieving and do not challenge the status quo. The problem of this myth becomes



clear when we ask, “A model for whom and by whose standards?” This myth pits Asian Americans against other Communities of Color, erases the presence of Asian American struggles and diversity, denies systemic racism, and upholds the dominant narratives of meritocracy (a society where people’s success depends purely on their talents and efforts), individualism, and the American Dream.

Yellow Peril

Yellow Peril refers to white/western fears that Asians would invade their lands and threaten the supremacy of white/western civilization. Its historical roots can be traced to the persistent theme in Western culture that the barbarian hordes of Asia, a yellow race, were always on the point of invading and destroying Europe and Western civilization itself. In the United States, the Yellow Peril first became a major issue in the 1870s when white working-class laborers feared losing their jobs amidst an economic decline and discriminated against the “filthy yellow hordes” from Asia. The Yellow Peril was later applied to the Japanese, particularly after Japan’s victory over a Western power Russia in the 1904 Russo-Japanese War, reaching its height during WWII and the Pearl Harbor attack. The Yellow Peril is alive and well today as evidenced by the upsurge of anti-Asian violence during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Dusky Peril

Similar to Yellow Peril, Dusky Peril is an expression of xenophobia toward South Asian migrants. The term was first used by Puget Sound American, a daily newspaper published from Bellingham, Washington, to describe the immigration of what it described as Hindus to the area in its 16 September, 1906 issue. The newspaper described the rise in Indian immigration as a “dusky peril” and referred to Indians as “Hindu hordes invading the state.” This xenophobic belief led to the violent attack on South Asian workers. On September 4, 1907, in Bellingham, Washington, five hundred white working men gathered to drive a community of South Asian migrant workers out of the city. Indian immigrants, most of them Punjabi, were violently attacked, pulled from their work, had their property destroyed, and were driven out of city limits. This led to the ethnic cleansing of Bellingham because within days, all the South Asians had left the city. The Dusky Peril is alive and well today as after 9/11, Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs— many of them South Asian Americans—have been targets of hate crimes across the country.

Intersectionality

First coined by Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is the acknowledgement that everyone has their own unique experiences of discrimination and oppression and we must consider everything and anything that can marginalise people – gender, race, class, sexual orientation, physical ability, etc. Crenshaw [recently noted](#) that intersectionality is “basically a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. We tend to talk about race inequality as separate from inequality based on gender, class, sexuality or immigrant status. What’s often missing is how some people are subject to all of these, and the experience is not just the sum of its parts.” As such, intersectionality underscores that all forms of inequality are mutually reinforcing and must therefore be analyzed and addressed simultaneously to prevent one form of inequality from reinforcing another.



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