



APA NEWSLETTER ON

# The Status of Asian/Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies

Vrinda Dalmiya & Xinyan Jiang, Co-Editors Spring 2002

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## WORDS FROM EDITORS

**Vrinda Dalmiya and Xinyan Jiang**

To a large extent this issue of our Newsletter is about breaking stereotypes and boundaries. We would like to underscore that Asians have worked on much more than Asian or comparative philosophy—on logic, ethics, epistemology, metaphysics, phenomenology, philosophy of language, post-colonial and feminist theory; and that Asian philosophy, in turn, can be deeply metaphysical, epistemological, ethical, phenomenological or post-colonial. Without pretensions of exhaustiveness, what we attempt to present here is a sample of this wide philosophical spectrum.

The issue consists of three parts. One part focuses on the contributions of some philosophers who happen to be “Asians” and “Asian Americans” while another introduces some of the recent books written by them. But the philosophers whose works are featured here have very little in common. They might not even want to self-identify as “Asians” at all. A self-reflective moment on the fragmented and ambiguous configurations of an Asian identity thus seems to be in order. We begin with David Kim’s ruminations on the invisibility of Asian Americans in philosophy which brings in yet another layer of signification to the concept as a marker for identity.

We sincerely thank all our contributors.

## The Committee on the Status of Asian & Asian-American Philosophers and Philosophies

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## PART I: ON IDENTITY

### *Asian American Philosophers: Absence, Politics, and Identity*

**David Haekwon Kim**

This essay considers some aspects of Asian American identity through a critical reflection of why there are virtually no Asian Americans in philosophy. So I address a matter of some importance to the APA, namely the historical absence of Asian American philosophers, and show how some of the factors involved are precisely the sort that configures contemporary Asian American identity.

### **Absence**

I would wager that most philosophers of Asian descent in the APA are Asian international scholars visiting or residing in the U.S.<sup>1</sup> Their growing presence in American universities is hardly surprising given the present vitality of trans-Pacific ties, and their participation is so much to the good on a number of different fronts, including ethnic, national, racial, and philosophical diversity. It is a mystery, however, that the APA has so few *Asian American* philosophers, those who self-identify as such in virtue of being “homegrown”, having roots in, say, Phillie, Chicago, L.A., Frisco, or NY, instead of, say, Tokyo, Beijing, Bombay, Manila, Saigon, or Seoul.<sup>2</sup> Though I cannot yet be certain, my sense is that there are fewer than 20 such philosophers affiliated with the APA. If this estimate is roughly correct, then Asian Americans constitute a percentage of the membership barely more than zero. Some philosophy departments are larger! So in spite of the fact that Asian Americans comprise a small proportion of the overall population, there has got to be some explanation of their virtual *non-existence* in the profession. This absence is dramatically more conspicuous in light of two further points.

First, consider the subset of the overall populace that is most immediately relevant for the development of the philosophical profession, namely college students. In many state and elite universities, Asian Americans have a numerical presence that far exceeds their representation in the general populace. In some California state schools, they even approach or exceed 50% of the student body, which is why a school like UCI (i.e. U. of California, Irvine) has been dubbed the “University of Chinese Immigrants” and UCLA (i.e. U. of California, Los Angeles) the “University of Caucasians Lost among Asians.”<sup>3</sup>

Second, other theoretically abstract disciplines in the humanities have attained a critical mass of Asian American scholars sufficient for critical reflection on the collective experience of Asian Americans. In the field of Asian American Studies, which serves as a meeting ground for such scholars, some of the most outstanding theoretical work has been produced by literary critics.<sup>4</sup> So Asian Americans do have a presence in culture-making/assessing, theoretically rich disciplines – just not in philosophy.

Consequently, a substantial recruitment base has been supplied by the large Asian American presence in universities, and neighboring disciplines have already been relatively successful in recruitment and retention. And so I ask again: Why are there almost no Asian Americans in philosophy? I think this question is not only fair; it is important since there are now only a handful more Asian Americans in our profession than there were some 150 years ago when Asian American careers were more or less confined to sugar cane farming and railroad construction.

### Politics

I think the prevailing explanation of the absence combines some facts about demographics and some conjectures about culture: The few Asian Americans that might enter philosophy end up pursuing more lucrative jobs pushed on them by their immigrant parents (e.g. law and medicine) or jobs that do not require complete English fluency (e.g. business and engineering). Now, I don't reject these considerations. Many students, I'm sure, have longed to pursue a major and even graduate work in philosophy but felt compelled in the end to choose a more "practical" career path. I question, however, the sufficiency of the explanation as it is applied to Asian American students as a collective. Specifically, it suffers from being wholly apolitical. Nothing in it recognizes the distinctive set of racialized conditions faced by Asians in the U.S. It relies on a conception of immigrant communities meant to apply equally well to, say, Irish or Italians of an earlier point in U.S. history. Certainly, Irish and Italian Americans of previous generations did experience a great deal of discrimination. Unlike Chinese and Filipino immigrant communities, however, they were eventually relieved of it by being absorbed into the racial class of white persons, and in some local contexts, this inclusion was of a piece with the exclusion of Asians.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, only Asians were subjected for many decades to explicitly racialized immigration blockades (e.g. the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882), which were not entirely removed until as late as 1965. This means that Asian America did not *merely* expand in virtue of recent immigration<sup>6</sup>; it did because its members were *promoted*, and only recently, from the lower rungs of a human or citizen hierarchy. Finally, in regards to emigration sites, Norway was not invaded and brought under "benevolent assimilation", nor atomic bombs dropped on a racialized Venice and Rome, nor napalm showered on the racialized outskirts of Dublin.<sup>7</sup>

Noting these disparities is sufficient, I think, to invite consideration of explicitly political factors in the absence of Asian Americans in the APA.<sup>8</sup> It would be utterly remarkable if powerful racializing forces permeated virtually every aspect of Asian American participation in the body politic except the academy. One of the primary ideologies that undergirds the division in immigration history and persists to this day is orientalism. Crudely, this is the idea that Asians are less than

fully human or less than fully acceptable members of the national community in virtue of possessing certain of a cluster of traits: being alien, inscrutable, inassimilable, exotic, emasculated or hyper-feminine, servile, and so on – and all these, we might add, in that "oriental sort of way". Some aspects of this ideology may sound antiquated – especially references to "Orientals", "hindoos", and "Asiatic hordes" – but it has maintained an active presence in the U.S.<sup>9</sup> Witness, for example, the racialized character of the DNC's campaign finance scandal, the incarceration of Wen Ho Lee, and the eruption of anti-Asian sentiment in the wake of the U.S. spy plane incident on Hainan Island.<sup>10</sup> In fact, a 2001 survey, conducted *prior* to the spy plane incident, on American views of Asian Americans generally and Chinese Americans in particular reveals that 68% of respondents stated some measure of dislike toward Chinese Americans, and of that 68%, 25% had "very negative" attitudes towards them. And 24% of respondents disapproved of marriage with an Asian American, a percentage surpassed only by African Americans (at 34%). Interestingly, the survey also reveals that respondents who oppose minority leadership were the most "uncomfortable" with the idea of an Asian American, over any other minority group representative, as President of the U.S., a CEO of a Fortune 500 company, and a supervisor at work.<sup>11</sup>

### Identity

These considerations suggest that in spite of the peculiar valuing of the "Asian intellect" or "Asian work ethic" in recent decades, there are other significant realms of evaluation in which Asian Americans continue to undergo identity derogation. For example, Asian American students and professors might be viewed as lacking the sort of nuanced social sensitivity crucial for rich and humane analyses of human nature and society; as lacking the social graces or generosity of spirit that facilitates easy rapport and intimate friendships; as lacking the intellectual push or vivacity to excel beyond an ordinary competence or mere smartness; as lacking the dialectical tenacity (e.g. "stickin' to your guns") to be an engaging interlocutor; as lacking the charisma to lead effectively in the classroom, and so on and so forth. Now, there is a perfectly generic sense in which persons of any group might be deemed lacking in collegiality, loyalty, intellectual character, teaching ability, leadership, and the like. My point, however, is that in virtue of orientalism, perceptions of Asian and Asian American students and philosophers may be more easily distorted in these ways and that such distortions will be normalized and, hence, less easily detected.

These structures of derogation – and again they are continuous with anti-Asian processes working at large – are compounded by an array of secondary phenomena. First, many white Americans lack conceptual articulacy about Asia, Asian Americans, and anti-Asian racism and racialization processes. Far better known, comparatively speaking, are the conditions faced by black Americans. So if such an individual also happens to be racist, then the problem of ignorance is ramified: he does not know that he does not know what Asian Americans are like.

Second, many Asian Americans, in contrast, do have an articulate grasp of much that I have described above. As a result, it is often not so much Confucianist reserve or shyness that explains a student's being quiet, but her being wary of a

professor or a TA that evidences racism, insists upon a Eurocentric curriculum, or, what is not exactly the same, reveals a certain cluelessness about anti-Asian racism and Eurocentrism.<sup>12</sup>

It is worth noting here that these first two points reveal a racially bifurcated access to knowledge and meta-knowledge about Asian Americans. Phenomenologically, this epistemic difference may seem like a *wall of white incomprehension*, which, we must be careful to note, is not the same as confronting white animosity. The animosity, however, is always a live possibility when the *wall* is challenged, for one is not then being a “nice Asian.”

Third, there is a lack of Asian American mentors that might help guide Asian American students along the path of a philosophy career. And of course this is a self-replicating phenomenon since the absence of Asian American mentors may help to ensure the absence of Asian American graduate students and, hence, help maintain the absence of Asian American mentors.

Fourth, philosophical thought that reflects Asian and Asian American concerns is routinely ignored in the profession. Asian philosophy is relegated to a secondary status, and is typically taught in religion departments.<sup>13</sup> And philosophy of the Asian American experience (we might call it “Asian American philosophy”) is virtually non-existent and will likely be marginalized in the way that African American philosophy currently is. Together, these form a facet of what some African American philosophers have been calling the “conceptual whiteness of philosophy.”<sup>14</sup>

In light of these secondary phenomena, Asian Americans interested in philosophy will potentially contend with, in addition to the agent racism described earlier, a wall of white incomprehension, a lack of Asian American mentors, and the derogation of philosophical thought that resonates with their identity. I think we can now see, if it wasn’t already obvious, that factors beyond the exigencies of immigration and language acquisition must be considered in explaining the absence of “homegrown” Asian philosophers. We must be attentive to political identity generated by orientalist identification practices and to the secondary phenomena described.

I conclude with one last consideration in this vein. Earlier, I noted that Asians and Asian Americans can be devalued in spite of the accolades given to the “Asian intellect” and “Asian work ethic”. This valuing of Asian American academic and economic success often issues from the idea that Asians are a “model minority”, better not only than other non-whites but, in some respects, whites as well. In Asian American Studies, this idea is called the “model minority myth” and has been rightly denounced on a number of grounds. Perhaps the most insidious feature of this myth is its political *function*: it placates Asian Americans, prevents their solidarity with other nonwhites, and normalizes an enduring racial hierarchy. This myth has been enormously influential. For Asian Americans generally, there is a real temptation to be placated, to finally join whites at their location in the racial hierarchy, even if racism may prevent its complete success. For Asian Americans (and Asians) who want to be a part of the profession, one way to deflect some racism and to no longer be bothered by the wall of incomprehension, the lack of mentors, and the derogated philosophies is simply to succumb. This temptation, then, is also a dynamic of Asian American identity.<sup>15</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Of course, many are “1.5 generation” immigrants who began their education in the U.S. in high school or college.
2. The APA has always collapsed this distinction, lumping together Asians and Asian Americans in all of its demographic analyses. Through the advocacy of a Chinese American philosopher, Gary Mar (at SUNY, Stony Brook), the APA has recently expanded the scope of its Committee on Asians to include issues of Asian American concern – hence the new title “Committee on Asian and Asian American Philosophers and Philosophies”.
3. Thanks go to Michael Omi for passing these acronyms along during his presentation at the *Asian American Philosophy and Critical Race Theory* panel at the 76th Pacific Division Meeting of the APA (March 29, 2001).
4. There is some research that suggests that such a large Asian American presence in these and other universities has resulted in subtle racial exclusion in admissions processes. See Dana Takagi, *The Retreat from Race* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992). The idea seems to be that although Asian presence is good, you can’t have *too many* of them. Also, I have focused on mainland universities since it is obvious that universities in Hawaii are Asian and Pacific Islander dominant. In fact, the overwhelming presence of these Pacific “Others” may be an important reason why Hawaii is often marked off from the rest of the U.S. in the American imagination. Though, interestingly, it can be easily reclaimed in patriotic remembrances of Pearl Harbor.
5. See, for example, Lisa Lowe’s *Immigrant Acts* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996) and David Palumbo-Lui’s *Asian/American* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).
6. See Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy: Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1971); Sucheng Chan, ed., *Entry Denied* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992); and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge Press, 1995).
7. Actually, the Asian American community seems to be bifurcated in terms of immigration. A large subset of the community consists of 3rd, 4th, and even 5th generation Asian Americans, but a larger subset is comprised by post-1965 immigrants.
8. For a short excellent history of Asian America, see Gary Okihiro, *Margins and Mainstreams* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1994).
9. There are many other disparities. Although some German and Italian Americans were interrogated by law enforcement during WWII, only Japanese Americans (some 110,000) were herded *en masse* into concentration camps. Less well known is that the U.S. used its influence in Latin America to extradite many Japanese Latin Americans and place them as well in concentration camps. Canada also had its version of this federal policy. The incarceration of “nefarious Japs”, then, was a phenomenon of the entire Americas.
10. In addition, unlike European immigrants, many Asian immigrants left countries that were explicitly or semi-colonized by the U.S. For example, a large proportion of post-1965 immigration issued from the Philippines, Korea, and Vietnam. The U.S. stands unique among imperial Western powers in having exclusively Pacific and Latin American colonies or semi-colonies. This is a fecund fact that has not been fully acknowledged even in critical race theory.
11. The classic text on orientalism is of course Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), but for an application of some of his general ideas to the specifically Asian American context, see Robert Lee’s *Orientalisms* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999) and Henry Yu’s *Thinking Orientalisms* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).
12. Clearly, after September 11, South Asian Americans have in addition been targeted by anti-Arab and anti-Muslim prejudice.
13. These statistics are taken from, *American Attitudes Toward Chinese Americans and Asian Americans: A Committee of 100 Survey*. Their website is [www.committee100.org](http://www.committee100.org).
14. On the importance and complexity of trust in race relations, I have learned a great deal from Laurence Thomas’ “Moral

Deference”, reprinted in Cynthia Willett, ed., *Theorizing Multiculturalism* (Malden: Blackwell Press, 1998).

13. For an excellent critique of the marginalization of Asian philosophy (and Asian women in philosophy), see Yoko Arisaka’s “Asian Women: Invisibility, Locations, and Claims to Philosophy” in Naomi Zack, ed., *Women of Color and Philosophy* (Malden: Blackwell Press, 2000).

14. For more on this notion, see Charles Mills, *Blackness Visible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press: 1999), esp. his chapter “Non-Cartesian Sums”.

15. I would like to thank Yoko Arisaka and Rowena Tomaneng, for critical discussion of this short essay, and the editors, Xinyan Jiang and Vrinda Dalmiya, for facilitating this expansion of the dialogue on Asians, Asian Americans, and philosophy. Finally, I would like to thank Linda Martín Alcoff for providing the initial impetus and subsequent recommendations for my reflections on this topic.

## PART II: ASIAN/ASIAN AMERICAN PHILOSOPHERS

### *Hao Wang and Mathematical Logic*

#### Charles Parsons

Hao Wang is known for his contributions to mathematical logic, computer science, and philosophy. He was a native of China and came from there to the United States in 1946. Except for a five-year interval in England, he remained in the US for the remainder of his life. After the opening up of relations between the US and the People’s Republic of China, however, he renewed his own relations with China and visited there already in 1972, and a number of times thereafter. Although he became a US citizen in 1967, Wang would have resisted characterization as an Asian-American. I believe he thought of himself as simply Chinese, a member of the Chinese diaspora that has existed for centuries.

Wang was born in Jinan, Shandong, China, May 20, 1921. He obtained a B. Sc. in mathematics and an M. A. in philosophy in wartime China.<sup>1</sup> In 1946 he came to Harvard to study logic and philosophy. He received his Ph.D. in 1948 and was a Junior Fellow of the Society of Fellows at Harvard until 1951. From then until 1961 he taught philosophy at Harvard and then Oxford. He returned to Harvard in 1961 as Gordon McKay Professor of Mathematical Logic and Applied Mathematics. But in 1966 he went to the Rockefeller University as a visiting professor; the next year he became professor, establishing a research group in logic. He made Rockefeller an active center, especially of research in set theory. After the group was broken up by the Rockefeller administration in 1976, only Wang remained, even beyond his retirement in 1991. He died in New York May 13, 1995.

Wang was a philosopher from early on and published his first philosophical essay before he left China. However, the primary field of his early work was logic, and his publications through the early 1960s are largely in mathematical logic. He published a large number of papers, most of which up to 1960 are included in *A Survey of Mathematical Logic* (1962). One significant contribution arose from W. V. Quine’s attempt in his book *Mathematical Logic*<sup>2</sup> to add classes to the sets of his

well-known system New Foundations (NF). The axiom Quine proposed was shown inconsistent by J. Barkley Rosser in 1942. Wang analyzed the situation thoroughly and devised the axiom that best expressed the intended idea, which was then incorporated into the revised edition of the book.<sup>3</sup> Wang gave a model-theoretic proof that if NF is consistent then his revision is also consistent.

Perhaps encouraged by the year (1950-51) that he spent in Zürich under the auspices of Paul Bernays, Wang worked throughout the 1950s on questions of the relative strength of axiom systems, particularly set theories. He was a pioneer in the post-war research reviving Hermann Weyl’s idea that mathematics might be developed in a way that avoids impredicative set existence assumptions. He also contributed to the effort of logicians of the time to analyze predicative definability.

Wang gained practical experience with computers early on, and some of the papers he published around 1960 are significant work on the border between logic and computer science, long before “logic in computer science” became a field with hundreds of publications every year. The best known of these papers reports programs that proved all the theorems of propositional and predicate logic in *Principia Mathematica* in a few minutes. By using the kind of logical analysis pioneered by Herbrand and Gentzen, he was able to improve substantially on the previous work of Newell, Shaw, and Simon. Possibly his most significant result in mathematical logic was the proof, obtained with A. S. Kahr and E. F. Moore in 1961, that the general decision problem for first-order logic can be reduced to that for the class of quantificational formulas of the form “For all x, some y, and all z,  $M(x, y, z)$ ”, where M contains no quantifiers, so that satisfiability of formulas in that class is undecidable.

Wang’s prolific writing in logic included expository and historical work, which is to be found in *A Survey* and in some of his philosophical writings, especially *From Mathematics to Philosophy* (hereafter FMP). But he wrote only one expository book on logic, *Popular Lectures on Mathematical Logic*, based on lectures given in China.

Wang’s early philosophical writings are short critical pieces, varied in content.<sup>4</sup> Longer pieces in the 1950s stay close to logic and the foundations of mathematics but express a point of view owing much to the European work before the second world war. Probably his first really distinctive extended philosophical essay is “Process and existence in mathematics” (1961). This essay clearly reflects reading of Wittgenstein’s *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*, although Wittgenstein’s name is not mentioned. The notion of perspicuous proof, the question whether a mathematical statement changes its meaning when a proof of it is found, the question whether contradictions in a formalization are a serious matter for mathematical practice and applications, and a Wittgensteinian line of criticism of logicist reductions of statements about numbers are all to be found in Wang’s essay. But it could only have been written by a logician familiar with computers. Computers and Wittgenstein enable Wang to present issues about logic in a more concrete way than is typical in logical literature then or later.

This essay also exhibits a style characteristic of Wang’s philosophical writing, which is to present a certain amount of the relevant logic and mathematics, to look at the issues from