



THE QUESTION OF IDENTITY: ASIANS IN AMERICA

Seminar Leader: **Amanda Yang**

House Leader: **Yuina Yamagishi**

Course Description

What is the Asian experience in America, and what significance does it have for the people of today? Asians have interacted with America from its very beginnings with far-reaching implications. The first documented immigration of Asians to America occurred in the late 1500s – almost two centuries earlier than the nation’s own conception in the late 1700s. How, then, can we tackle the question of “otherness” that many Asians still experience as a minority in America? In this seminar, we will first analyze how we assess our own identities and the identities of others, and how these assessments affect our daily lives and interactions. We will then explore the history of Asians in America, and the way that Asians are represented in the media in the US today. In doing so, the seminar hopes to provide each student with a starting point from which to begin their own assessments of the various aspects of identity.

Schedule

Day 1: *An Exploration of Identity*

Before we dive into Asian America, we will look closely at how we identify both ourselves and others. We will discuss the implications of various aspects of identity as an individual and within a group, applying it to our personal experiences. Some questions we will discuss: How is identity defined? Who determines your identity? How has your identity influenced or even directed your life?

Day 2: *A Brief History of Asians in America*

On the second day we will look more closely at the specifics of the Asian American experience by going over a brief history of Asians in America. We will cover events and topics such as the Gold Rush, Angel Island, and the Transcontinental Railroad Project. By doing so, we will try to better understand how the current Asian American identity was formed, and what being Asian American means.

Day 3: *Asian Representation in the Media*

In order to tie both history and identity together, we will focus on a contemporary issue very relevant to Asian Americans today: representation in the media. We will briefly go over how representation has changed (or not changed) over the years, and look at some modern-day examples. Key questions include: How are Asians depicted in US media? How does media affect identity? Why is representation important? We will also compare American media to Japanese media.



Day 4: Reflections

On the last day, we will reflect more specifically on our personal histories and how we can relate on an individual level to the Asian American experience. We will also discuss the potential similarities or differences between Japan – often described as a “homogenous society” – and Asian America, which exists within the framework of the United States as a whole.

Final Exercise

Students will pick a topic related to Asian America (such as education, the workplace, cuisine, music, etc.) which they will research and present on. Just like we focused on representation in media on the third day and related it to identity, students should explore the implications related to identity of their chosen topic.

Readings

- ABC’s *Fresh Off the Boat*: Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1KhRKkLS_4I
- Excerpts from “The Two Asian Americas,” *The New Yorker*: <https://goo.gl/EXnXwl>
- Excerpts from “Asian-American Actors Are Fighting For Visibility. They Will Not Be Ignored,” *The New York Times*: <https://goo.gl/mwTNQO>

Message from the House Leader

Hi everyone! My name is Yuina, and I’m a fifth year student of Kanazawa University. I’ve been to Ireland from September 2014 to June 2015 as an exchange student. Now I’m studying intercultural communication, which finds differences between communication styles between various cultures. If you have any questions about the seminar, or KSS, do not hesitate to contact me! (Of course it’s fine to send me messages in Japanese!) Looking forward to seeing you!!

Message from the Seminar Leader

Hello everyone, and nice to meet you! I’m so excited to have the chance to get to know all of you better. My name is Amanda, and I’m currently a rising sophomore at Harvard University. I’m almost definitely majoring (or, as we say, concentrating) in East Asian Studies. Before college, however, I was lucky enough to have been born and raised in New York City, one of my most favorite places in the world. My parents immigrated from China, so I grew up speaking Mandarin. I’m currently learning Japanese and Korean – I really enjoy studying languages! I have a lot of interests and hobbies, and barely enough time to indulge them all. At Harvard, I’m part of the Taekwondo club, a dance troupe, and an a capella group. In my free time, I’m a total geek and enjoy reading, wasting time on the internet, watching anime, reading manga, listening to k-pop, and napping excessively. I grew interested in the Asian experience



Yang and Yamagishi

in America due to my own circumstances and through my community service activities in high school, where I helped provide English lessons for immigrants in the Chinatown area with (mostly Asian-American) NYC high school volunteers. I look forward to seeing you soon!