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UMass Boston Asian American Studies students on a field trip in Lowell, Massachusetts, October 1999.

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Checking Southeast Asian American Realities in Pan-Asian American Agendas

Peter Nien-chu Kiang

Abstract

This article is based on a briefing paper commissioned by the Harvard Civil Rights Project for a Roundtable on Emerging Asian American Civil Rights Issues held in Cambridge, Massachusetts in October 2002.[1] I was asked to address whether subgroups within the Asian American population have been adequately served by pan-Asian American agendas, particularly in relation to civil rights advocacy, and to highlight specific instances that show both positive and negative dimensions of those dynamics. In response, I chose to focus on Southeast Asian American (Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, Mien, Vietnamese, etc.) populations who, by measures of socioeconomic status, persistent poverty, and quality of life, are the most poorly resourced ethnic constituencies within Asian America. Through analysis of issues related to educational equity, policy, and development, both nationally and locally in the state of Massachusetts, I describe ways in which Southeast Asian American realities have been neglected or ignored. In light of the ethical and empirical consequences of failing to intervene proactively in this long-term dynamic of inequality, I also show how some modest local and national commitments have had sustained impact. Finally, I suggest some ways to account more faithfully for the needs, interests, and visions of Southeast Asian American communities in the development of pan-Asian American civil rights agendas. Underlying my argument are commitments to equity and justice rather than identity and representation per se.

Introduction

For the past two decades, the Asian American population has sustained spectacular demographic growth. In the 1990s, while the total U.S. population grew by 13 percent, the Asian American population grew by 72 percent.[2] The growth rates are most impressive for South Asian (Indian, Pakistani) and Southeast Asian (Vietnamese, Cambodian, Lao, Hmong) ethnic groups, as Table 1 shows. Across the country, demographic changes have caused both immediate crises and long-term challenges for practitioners and policymakers (Suárez-Orozco and Suárez-Orozco 2001; Trueba and Bartolomé 2000; U.S. Commission on Civil Rights 1992).

The Asian American population has grown primarily through immigration and refugee resettlement during the past thirty years. The balance is now shifting, however. Of nearly 12 million Asian Americans in 2000, roughly 7.2 million (60 percent) were born in Asia, a sharp decline from 1990 when roughly 5 million of nearly 7 million Asian Americans (71 percent) were Asia-born.[3] A demographic sea-change is underway through which Asian American families during the next two decades will be comprised of predominantly U.S.-born children with immigrant parents. This means, for example, that a third generation of Vietnamese Americans—the children of the U.S.-born children of first-wave professionals who escaped Vietnam in 1975—are already about to enter elementary school. Their realities as "sansei" require dramatic redefinitions of Vietnamese communities as "refugees" and "newcomers." Indeed, by 2020, the immigrant and refugee waves of the 1970s and 1980s will have matured as a generation of immigrant elders with third-generation grandchildren.

Table 1: Population Growth for Selected Asian American Groups: 1980-2000

	1980	1990	2000	% Growth 1980-2000
Total Asian	3,466,421	6,908,638	11,898,828	243
Chinese	812,178	1,645,472	2,734,841	237
Filipino	781,894	1,406,770	2,364,815	202
Indian	387,223	815,447	1,899,599	391
Korean	357,393	798,849	1,228,427	244
Vietnamese	245,025	614,547	1,223,736	399
Japanese	716,331	847,562	1,148,932	60
Cambodian	16,044	147,411	206,052	1,184
Pakistani	15,792	-	204,309	1,194
Laotian	47,683	149,014	198,203	316
Hmong	5,204	90,082	186,310	3,480

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Census Population: 1980,1990,2000.
Note: Census 2000 data based on categories for Asian group alone or in any combination.

Given specific U.S. immigration preferences and the structure of the U.S. post-industrial economy as well as the stratified system of public/private and urban/suburban schooling in the U.S., the Asian American population is itself deeply stratified. Critical differences associated with ethnicity, socioeconomic status, migration wave, and generation are typically hidden or distorted by demographic data that are collected or reported as aggregate totals using the Asian American racial category. For example, the long-awaited 1999 report, "Reaching the Top, the College Board's National Task Force on Minority High Achievement" called for comprehensive, targeted support for African American, Latino, and Native American students from pre-K through higher education. Whites and Asians, the report asserted, are succeeding academically and therefore, do not need comparable attention or interventions. In her critique of the College Board's study, however, Gándara (1999) clarified:

> Data are not disaggregated by the College Board for Asian groups; indeed the College Board lumps all Asians with Pacific Islanders, and this obscures wide differences within the group. The typical standard deviation for SAT scores of Asian students is almost one-fourth of a standard deviation larger than for whites and about one-fifth of a standard deviation greater than for other minority groups, suggesting that some Asian students are performing much higher than others. (9)

The College Board's commitment to enhance African American, Latino, and Native American student achievement is urgent and righteous. Its inadequate analysis based on aggregate data, however, distorts the diverse realities of Asian American students, families, and communities, and ignores warnings that appear in every major study or literature review on Asian American educational issues produced during the past two decades (Park and Chi 1999; Cheng and Pang 1998; Olsen 1997; Weinberg 1997; Nakanishi and Yoshida 1995; Lee 1996; Trueba, Cheng and Ima 1993; Trueba, Jacobs and Kirton 1990; Suzuki 1989; Chun 1980; Suzuki 1977). It is remarkable that research of the scale and significance of the College Board's National Task Force could ignore such longstanding and clearly articulated concerns.

Furthermore, the College Board's powerful, institutional influence triggers a cascade of similarly flawed decisions by national, state, and local funders, government agencies, and schools that target resources, policies, and services for specific student populations—and neglect those who share comparably low levels of achievement, but are hidden within the Asian American aggregate category, such as Southeast Asian Americans from post-1980 refugee/immigrant migration waves.

Much of my own agenda as a biracial, Chinese American teacher/researcher and organizer/advocate working at the intersections between the fields of education and Asian American Studies, therefore, has focused on documenting and analyzing the voices, strengths, and needs of Vietnamese, Cambodian, and other Southeast Asian immigrant/refugee students, precisely because of the failure of educational institutions to support or even acknowledge them. Inspired by those same students, I have also explored how specific curricular and pedagogical commitments in Asian American Studies can serve as models of transformative practice for U.S. higher education (Chang and Kiang 2002; Kiang 2003; 2002b; 2000; 1998; 1997).

In this article, I argue the obvious: that pan-Asian American agendas and commitments, for a variety of reasons, have not adequately addressed the interests, needs, or visions of Southeast Asian American groups who comprise Asian America's most under-represented and under-resourced constituencies. I offer specific examples focusing on education, both nationally and locally in Massachusetts where I am most familiar, to suggest some of the reasons why this is the case. I also highlight examples of efforts to intervene, albeit modestly, in this difficult, long-term dynamic of inequality.

Southeast Asian Americans and the Asian American Studies Field

Following a poorly attended panel on Southeast Asian American community research at the 1996 national conference of the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) in Oakland, Chung Hoang Chuong commented to me, "I think it's time for Vietnamese American Studies to stand on its own." As the most active and respected Vietnamese American senior scholar in the field at that time, Chuong was unsatisfied and impatient with the lumping of Vietnamese American content under not only the pan-Asian umbrella but also the imposed category of "Southeast Asian." His comment has stayed with me since then, informing and challenging my own commitments as a researcher/teacher/advocate in relation to Southeast Asian American students and communities.

I recall parallel sentiments at the 1989 AAAS national conference in New York where an informal but well organized Hapa Caucus convened two panels dedicated to multiracial Asian American realities and boldly claimed voice and space. At the same conference my own paper, titled "Southeast Asian Parent Empowerment in Lowell, Massachusetts," and panels titled, "Korean Americans: A Comparative Perspective," "The South Asian Experience in the United States," and "The Asian American Legacy in the South," which featured Marina Espina's groundbreaking paper, "The 225-Year Filipino Legacy in Louisiana," each signaled ways in which the pan-ethnic field of Asian American Studies was proactively seeking to reflect and document the diverse realities of specific, under-represented Asian American constituencies.

However, in 1994, the AAAS annual book award for fiction was presented to Lois-Ann Yamanaka for her novel, *Saturday Night at the Pahala Theater*. That award was harshly criticized at the time by some Filipino American members of the AAAS who asserted that the book portrayed Filipino Americans in stereotypically negative and one-dimensional ways. While not disputing the author's license to write as she pleased, they challenged the AAAS to be more conscious and critical about issues of representation for traditionally marginalized populations in the awards process. Amazingly, four years later, the AAAS granted another book award to Lois-Ann Yamanaka—this time for her novel, *Blu's Hanging*, which once again presented Filipino American men as stereotypically negative villains. In response, the Filipino Caucus and its allies formally demanded that the book award be rescinded and forced a vote by the entire AAAS membership on the issue. In the aftermath, all but one of the Association's board members resigned, the majority of members present voted to rescind the award, and the Association nearly ceased to function during the next few months.

I am using these AAAS examples to show that under-represented or marginalized groups have struggled to claim significant voice/space within pan-ethnic contexts, even those with the most inclusive social-political intentions and clearest theoretical articulations about racialization and pan-ethnicity. Clearly, the challenges are primarily developmental for some populations who simply require time to gain access through pathways that are based on traditional qualifications. This is demonstrated, for example, by the growing presence of mixed race, Korean American, and Indian American scholars and content in Asian American Studies. For other populations, though, systems and structures of exclusion and inequality are too powerful and pervasive to allow for their development without serious and sustained interventions.

For example, in analyzing the AAAS annual conference programs for the years 1995 to 2000, I count only one Lao American, five Cambodian Americans, five Hmong Americans, and eighty-five Vietnamese Americans out of a total of 2,162 who presented (see Table 2). Moreover, in terms of content presented in a total of 1,610 papers and roundtable discussions, regardless of the presenter's ethnicity, one was Mien-focused, two were Lao-focused, three were Cambodian-focused, nine were Hmong-focused, fifty-two were Vietnamese-focused, and nine focused generally on Southeast Asian topics (see Table 3).

Admittedly, simple counts do not provide meaningful measures of equity or quality of life. Nor do they provide explanations about why they are this way. But I begin with these examples to show that both Southeast Asian American content and participation remain marginal within the national, pan-Asian American Studies field, especially for Cambodian, Hmong, and Lao American populations, even though more than two decades have passed since the early years of refugee resettlement. I view this reality as unacceptable, not only because of baseline principles of representation, but more importantly because these are, in general, the most under-resourced Asian communities in the U.S. and should, therefore, be the highest priorities for intervention by the Asian American Studies field and other facets of the Asian American movement who have articulated commitments to equity, justice, and social/institutional transformation (Louie and Omatsu 2001).

Although the stakeholders and constituencies of the Asian American Studies field are not identical to those who shape or implement Asian American civil rights agendas, their interests and ideologies do overlap in important ways. The following section focuses on other aspects of the education system to explore these pan-Asian American connections more deeply. I focus on education, in part, because schools and school systems are, themselves, sites of intense civil rights struggles.[4] In addition, mass understanding of and engagement with historical knowledge, critical think-

Table 2: Selected Ethnicity of Presenters at AAAS National Conferences 1995-2000

	1995 SF	1996 DC	1997 Seattle	1998 Honolulu	1999 Philly	2000 Scottsdale	Total	% of Total
Lao	0	0	1	0	0	0	1	0.05
Cambodian	1	1	2	0	1	0	5	0.2
Hmong	0	0	1	1	1	2	5	0.2
Vietnamese	9	8	17	15	19	17	85	3.9
Indian	13	15	9	14	42	30	123	5.7
Filipino	28	18	55	47	42	37	227	10.5
Korean	20	44	41	47	49	39	240	11.1
Japanese	47	46	86	77	61	59	376	17.4
Chinese	94	123	128	106	117	112	680	31.5
Other	66	52	65	84	63	90	420	19.4
TOTAL	278	307	405	391	395	386	2,162	100.0

Note: All five Hmong presenters were different individuals. The five Cambodian presenters were three individuals, two of whom presented in two different years. The eighty-five Vietnamese presenters represented the participation of fifty distinct individuals - eleven of whom presented at three or more conferences and accounted for thirty-nine percent of the total. The “Other” category includes ethnicities such as Chamorro, Hawaiian, Pakistani, Thai, and non-Asian Americans.

Table 3: Southeast Asian American-focused Papers Presented at AAAS National Conferences 1995-2000

	1995 SF	1996 DC	1997 Seattle	1998 Honolulu	1999 Philly	2000 Scottsdale	Total	% of Total
Mien	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0.06
Lao	0	1	1	0	0	0	2	0.1
Cambodian	0	1	2	0	0	0	3	0.2
Hmong	1	0	2	3	1	2	9	0.6
Vietnamese	10	1	15	8	5	13	52	3.2
Southeast Asian	2	2	1	1	1	2	9	0.6
Total SE Asian Am	14	5	21	12	7	17	76	4.7
Total not SE Asian Am	167	211	272	305	290	289	1,534	95.3
TOTAL	181	216	293	317	297	306	1,610	100.0

ing, and internalized values of justice—essential foundations for sustainable civil rights commitments—cannot occur without public education playing a much fuller role. This is particularly obvious after September 11, 2001, in light of widespread references by politicians and the media to Pearl Harbor; hundreds of documented cases of racial attacks against Arab Americans, Muslims, and South Asian Americans (National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium 2002); newly imposed and severe restrictions on civil liberties, especially targeting immigrants; and a re-questioning of who is American (Nakanishi and Leong 2002).

Recognizing Exclusion in the Curriculum and Teacher Preparation

In June 2001, three months before terrorist attacks in New York and Washington, DC, the National Commission on Asia in the Schools released the findings of a two-year study which concluded that Americans have a huge knowledge gap about Asia, despite their recognition of the economic, political, social, cultural, and security-related importance of the region. The Commission's report—the most thorough analysis ever conducted of the status of teaching and learning about Asia and Asian Americans in the U.S.—specifically revealed significant weaknesses in the existing K-12 curriculum and published textbooks about Asia as well as a glaring absence of attention to Asia-related content in university teacher preparation programs. Among its core recommendations, the Commission stated:

> all elements of K-12 education—from curriculum frameworks and material resources to teacher pre- and in-service courses and programs—should reflect current scholarship on Asia and Asian American content. (National Commission on Asia in the Schools 2001, 35)

In the aftermath of the 2001 World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks, the Commission's findings have resonated even more deeply. Furthermore, the forced demise of bilingual education in public schools resulting from well financed political referendum campaigns, together with the overall failure of schools to support immigrant students and heritage language learners to maintain their multilingual competence, is undermining the linguistic and cultural capacity—as well as security—of the nation. For example, while English-Only advocate Ronald Unz led a Fall 2002 ballot initiative that eliminated bilingual instruction in Massachusetts—the state with the oldest bilingual education legislation in the U.S.—the U.S. State Department has called for greater investment in the teaching of Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, Vietnamese, and other languages of Asia, and the FBI is urgently recruiting personnel who are bilingual in those same languages (Federal Bureau of Investigation 2002).

The curriculum—the formal definition of what students are expected to know/learn and what educators are expected to know/teach—reflects and reproduces the knowledge and ways of knowing that are most valued or dominant in society. During the 1990s, state and national curriculum standards, aligned with high stakes testing requirements, were established under the banner of educational accountability across the U.S. In the curriculum policy documents of most states (California and Washington are notable exceptions) as well as professional associations such as the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) that define what curricular content teachers and students must know in order to gain licensure, there is no mention of anything about Asian Americans (Kiang 2002). This exclusion in the curriculum implies that Asian Americans have no voices or contributions worth studying, regardless of the demographic profiles of schools or school districts.

Furthermore, this reality of exclusion extends to the higher education curriculum as well. For example, using undergraduate course catalogues from nineteen local community colleges, state colleges, and state university campuses, Kiang and Wong (1996) examined the status of Asian American Studies in public higher education institutions in Massachusetts by literally counting courses in three broad categories: 1) Asian Studies courses focusing on the histories, cultures, societies, arts, and languages of Asia; 2) Multicultural Studies courses focusing on dimensions of diversity within the U.S. that might include some Asian American Studies content; 3) Asian American Studies courses such as "Southeast Asians in America" and "Asian Americans and the Law" which, in title and description, were explicitly dedicated to Asian American content. Out of more than 15,300 course listings across nineteen institutions, only eight were Asian American Studies courses, and six came from just one university campus. Furthermore, of those eight Asian American Studies courses, only two focused on Southeast Asian Americans.[5] Based on their findings summarized in Table 4, Kiang and Wong concluded:

> the data describe a reality in which Asian American Studies courses are completely or nearly absent from the formal curriculum of all public colleges and universities across the state. This should be cause for urgent concern and action. (5)

Given that these same public higher education institutions also produce and re-credential the majority of the state's public school teachers, the absence of Asian American Studies content means that Massachusetts teachers have virtually no formal opportunity to learn, in substantive ways, about Asian American history, literature, or contemporary realities—just as the National Commission on Asia in the Schools (2001) documented nationally. This is also a larger policy issue for regional and national accrediting bodies such as the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) which currently makes no mention of Asian American content in any of its elaborately articulated policy guidelines about how teachers should be trained.

The urgency to connect Asian American Studies civil rights commitments with curriculum and teacher training is also intensified by policies such as California Proposition 227 and parallel initiatives in other states that seek to eliminate bilingual education by requiring English-only instruction as quickly as possible within one year for limited English proficient (LEP) students. One result of these trends is that all teachers and school personnel, not just bilingual teachers, are increasingly responsible for establishing culturally responsive and academically engaged learning environments for the diverse populations of immigrant students in school.

Table 4: Asian American Studies in the Massachusetts Public Higher Education Curriculum—1996

Courses Listed in catalogue	Asian Studies	Multicultural Studies	Asian American Studies	All
Community College System (11)	21	35	0	4,727
State College System (4)	46	20	0	3,632
University System (4)	124	61	8	6,959
Total (19)	181	116	8	15,318

Source: Kiang and Wong (1996).

Interestingly, Asian Americans are proportionately far less committed to the field of education than all other groups in the graduate degree pipeline, as shown in Table 5. Roughly 30 percent of those who received master's degrees in 1994 did so in the field of education, but only 10 percent of Asian American master's degrees were in the education field. Similarly, for Asian Americans at the doctoral level, only 7.5 percent of their doctorates were

Table 5: Education Graduate Degree Recipients in 1994 by Race

	Master's	Doctorate
White	29%	20%
Black	33%	38%
Hispanic	30%	22%
Native American	36%	31%
Asian Pacific American	10%	7.5%

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, 1996, Table 263.

in education, compared to much higher percentages for all other racial groups.[6]

This pattern continues to be true in 2000, according to more recent data compiled by the American Council on Education (Harvey 2002), with only 6 percent of Asian American doctoral degrees being awarded in the field of education, and again compared with much higher percentages for every other racial group (Blacks: 36 percent, Hispanics: 16 percent, Native Americans: 30 percent, and Whites: 17 percent).[7] Thus, most Asian Americans have chosen and continue to choose degree pathways that move them away from intervening professionally in educational practice or policy. This is a tremendous irony because Asian Americans invest so heavily in educational institutions but have seemingly left the shaping of those institutions to others.

Unaccountable High Stakes Systems

These challenges of exclusion in the curriculum and the shortage of educators, especially Asian Americans, with strong Asian American content and pedagogical knowledge have no ready solution. But with the positioning of "high stakes" standardized testing as both the ends and the means of education reform, these challenges now interlock as a mutually reinforcing system, making educational equity and social development, especially for Southeast Asian American populations within the pan-Asian American umbrella, all the more difficult to achieve.[8]

One way to see this reality at the state level is to examine MCAS test scores of Asian American students in Massachusetts. The MCAS is a mandatory, high stakes test administered in every

Table 6: 10th Grade Asian Student Scaled MCAS scores and percent Failing MCAS exam in Massachusetts School Districts with more than 500 Asian students enrolled in 1999

City	Asian Students %	#	%	English Fail Score	%	Math Fail Score	%	Sci/Tech Fail Score
Boston	8.9	5,617	33	228	35	232	38	225
Brookline	17.0	1,021	4	246	17.7	246	4	241
Cambridge	9.9	722	32	232	38	232	43	227
Fall River	5.4	663	38	223	64	214	56	221
Fitchburg	10.8	652	48	219	80	211	57	218
Lexington	12.1	705	0	247	09	250	06	246
Lowell	31.3	5,098	52	219	69	215	60	217
Lynn	14.0	2,112	47	221	65	215	61	219
Malden	19.7	1,124	28	232	28	239	30	230
Newton	9.7	1,100	4	247	14	251	10	242
Quincy	22.1	2,011	26	232	34	229	26	230
Randolph	12.3	512	29	234	44	227	37	225
Revere	11.8	707	50	222	69	219	63	217
Springfield	2.1	554	48	220	54	219	47	222
Worcester	7.6	1,942	38	225	46	222	46	221

Scaled Score Levels: Advanced = 260-280; Proficient = 240-259; Needs Improvement = 220-239; Failing = 200-219

Source: Report of 1999 Massachusetts and Local School District MCAS Results by Race/Ethnicity, Department of Education, May 2000.

public school district at the third, fourth, eighth, and tenth grades in English, Math, and Science/Technology. Students must achieve passing scores at the tenth grade level in order to receive a high school diploma. Scaled scores range from Advanced (260-280) to Failing (200-219). Students must pass the MCAS in order to graduate from high school. In collecting and reporting district and statewide scores, the Massachusetts Department of Education aggregates all Asians together, failing to recognize the dramatic differences between urban and suburban school districts and the realities of the specific Asian American populations who reside within them.

However, by examining MCAS scores from the fifteen school districts in Massachusetts with the largest numbers of Asian American students as shown in Table 6, location can be used as a proxy for ethnicity, particularly for the Southeast Asian American populations who are overwhelmingly concentrated (Cambodians in

Lowell, Lynn, Fall River, and Revere; Hmong in Fitchburg; Vietnamese in Boston, Worcester, and Springfield). In fact, it is exactly those same school districts (shown in italics in Table 6) where mean scaled scores for Asian tenth-grade students are failing (220). In contrast, other school districts with large numbers of Asian students (primarily Chinese and Indians in suburbs such as Brookline, Lexington, and Newton) have mean scaled scores at the proficient level (240+).

The reasons that explain why Southeast Asian American students are performing so poorly on the MCAS are complex—reflecting systemic failure and structured inequality of the urban school districts within which they are concentrated. Using the MCAS as a graduation requirement clearly has a disparate impact on Southeast Asian American populations, though this effect is hidden when statewide aggregate Asian scores are reported. The disparate impact is further exacerbated by a proposed state education policy that will require in-state students to pass the MCAS in order to be eligible for admission to the state's public college and university system—the only affordable higher education alternative for most Southeast Asian American families.

Ironically, while the public discourse that compels high stakes testing is framed in terms of accountability, the policies and policymakers have, themselves, been completely unaccountable to Asian American communities and other communities of color for whom standardized testing continues to serve as a system of sorting and exclusion (Darling-Hammond 1995; Lemann 2000). Moreover, the lack of attention or intervention by the state to strengthen Southeast Asian American students' educational achievement is a direct consequence of failing to recognize that aggregate data do not accurately represent all Asian groups.

The evolution of high stakes testing in Massachusetts resulted from sweeping state education reform legislation passed in December 1993. At that time legislators also mandated the construction of curriculum frameworks for all subject areas that would define the content to be tested by the MCAS. Although the legislation explicitly stated that the content of the curriculum frameworks should reflect the state's diversity, the History and Social Science Frameworks referred to Asia only in terms of ancient Chinese, Indian, and Japanese civilizations and twentieth-century wars. Asian Americans were completely invisible in this articulation of what Massachusetts students should know about history and social studies (Massachusetts Department of Education 1997). Furthermore, as a third leg of education reform, the state mandated testing in literacy and communications as well as subject areas for all current and future teachers and school administrators. Like the MCAS exams, the subject-specific teacher tests were also constructed to align specifically with the state's curriculum frameworks. Therefore, no Asian American content was designated as important for teachers in Massachusetts to know (Kiang 1998-1999).

To summarize: the interlocking system of education reform began with statewide curriculum frameworks that excluded substantive Asian American Studies content. Standardized test questions were then closely aligned with those exclusionary frameworks. The high stakes nature of those tests impelled classroom teachers to weigh instruction heavily toward test preparation. Teachers' instructional choices—focusing on curricular content to be tested—has left students in a continuing cycle of ignorance about Asian American voices and experiences. The parallel alignment of mandatory testing for all public K-12 teachers and administrators based on those same exclusionary curriculum frameworks further guarantees that new teachers entering the system will also have little knowledge of Asian American Studies content.

Within this tightly scripted context for public educational policy and practice, the urgent and systemic needs of Southeast Asian American populations remain hidden within the pan-Asian American aggregate category, making it all the more difficult—and important—to intervene. Indeed, as my opening example in this article illustrates, Southeast Asian American populations and content in the Asian American Studies field—a domain far easier to influence than urban K-12 school systems—still remain marginal after more than twenty years. Unlike the prospects of every other ethnic Asian American population, such stark educational realities at the K-12 level systemically restrict the pathways for a critical mass of Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and perhaps Vietnamese Americans to gain advanced degrees and thereby gain the credentials that are necessary to play leadership roles in the academic world of Asian American Studies and other critical professional fields such as policy, law, and philanthropy where advanced degrees matter. Thus, the likelihood for Southeast Asian

Americans to have significant impact in shaping the future of these fields, either on their own or through representation in pan-Asian American networks, continues to be minimal as structures of inequality reproduce themselves.

This is where targeted and sustained interventions—grounded in holistic agendas linking education reform, community development, civil rights, and other areas of social, cultural, economic, political, and spiritual development—become essential. In the next section I offer two examples of educational interventions with equity agendas—one from my own Asian American Studies program and one from a visionary group of Nisei elders—to suggest that it is possible for pan-Asian American and non-Southeast Asian American groups to do more.

Modest Interventions

Asian American Studies as Capacity Building

One example of a modest but sustained commitment to students and communities as well to Southeast Asian American Studies content in the curriculum is found at the University of Massachusetts in Boston. UMass Boston is an urban, public commuter university with a diverse student body, 60 percent of whom are the first in their families to attend college. The immediate neighborhood next to the university is home to the largest Vietnamese community in the northeastern United States. Cambodian communities in Lowell—the second largest in the country—as well as in Revere and Lynn are also nearby.

Although nearly every course offered by the program includes some readings, case studies, or projects about Southeast Asian American issues, the program has also offered "Southeast Asians in America" each semester since 1989. This course examines the processes of migration, refugee resettlement, and community development for Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodians nationally and locally, and the interplay of themes of trauma, healing, and resilience with changing contexts of families, communities, schools, public policies, and homeland relations.

As one of the first few courses in the U.S. developed with this focus in the 1980s, the "Southeast Asians in America" course has been offered about thirty times since 1989, reaching 1,000 students of whom roughly half have been Vietnamese, Cambodian, and ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia. In the early 1990s most students were second-wave refugees with direct memories of war and refugee flight; in 2002, some students were U.S.-born, others were babies during the second-wave migrations, and many others came as teens with their fathers and families during the mid-1990s through the Humanitarian Operation program. Sustained classroom-based research with Southeast Asian American students in courses at UMass Boston has added much needed grounded perspectives to the body of literature about culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy in the fields of education and Asian American Studies (Kiang 2002b; 1996; 1995).

Furthermore, Lao, Khmer, and Vietnamese American graduate students and advanced undergraduates regularly serve as Teaching Assistants in "Southeast Asians in America" and expand their own capacities in the process. Many alumni are now community advocates and bilingual educators themselves. The course has also provided important teaching opportunities for Southeast Asian American community practitioners and graduate students, including a former coordinator of the Mass. Office for Refugee Resettlement (Chinese Cambodian), a former undergraduate who became the first Vietnamese American to receive a doctorate in education from Harvard, and a former program staff member who became the first Lao American enrolled in Harvard's Ed.D. program. With so few Southeast Asian American faculty members in U.S. universities, courses like "Southeast Asians in America" at UMass Boston serve not only as interventions for students and communities, but also as critical opportunities for individual faculty mentoring and development.

Recalling Chung Hoang Chuong's assertion that Vietnamese American Studies should stand on its own, the Asian American Studies program developed and twice offered a new course, "Resources for Vietnamese American Studies," in 2002-2003 to explore ways of studying the reconstructions of identity, culture, and community for Vietnamese in the U.S. and their diasporic relationships around the world. Taught bilingually by a community practitioner, the course featured presentations by local Vietnamese American researchers, writers, and community leaders, including visiting scholars associated with the university's "(Re)Constructing Identities and Communities in the Vietnamese Diaspora" program funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. Building on its success, a parallel course titled "Cambodian American Culture and Communities" was also offered for the first time in Fall 2003 as part of a larger strategy to support pathways that will enable more Cambodian American students to pursue undergraduate and graduate programs at the university.

Nisei Commitments to Justice

The second example is a little known but remarkable intervention, based on internalized values of justice and shared social responsibility, that grew originally from the war-time efforts of predominantly white educators, church groups, and service organizations that established the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council which enabled roughly 4,000 college-age Nisei interned in U.S. concentration camps to leave camp and continue their education at colleges and universities, primarily in the Midwest and East Coast.[9] The impact of this effort on the Nisei was both immediate in transforming their life opportunities and life-long in transforming their values related to social justice and civic responsibility. Forty years later, based on those shared, internalized values, some of the impacted Nisei identified with and responded to Southeast Asian refugee youth in crisis by establishing the Nisei Student Relocation Commemorative Fund (NSRCF). According to Yutaka Kobayashi, a former president of the NSRCF:

> This group was started back around the summer of 1979 in New England by a group of Nisei at a picnic. In swapping stories and recalling experiences of the war years, it became apparent that many of them were among those who had left their relocation camps for college. The picnickers came up with the idea of starting a commemorative fund to honor the memory of the grass root movement in the United States which resulted in the relocation of Nisei students from camp to college. The plight of the "boat people" from Southeast Asia was in the news at that time and the problems faced by the college age students of that group were reminiscent of the problems faced by the Nisei college-age students in the Relocation Camps. It seemed appropriate to help needy Southeast Asian college-bound students in the same spirit as the Nisei were helped during World War II under similar circumstances. Since the first scholarships were awarded in 1981, this volunteer group has doggedly managed to plod along running annual fund raising campaigns and arranging awards in various cities in the continental United States where needy South-

> east Asian students were concentrated. Awards have been given in Philadelphia, New York City, Houston, Los Angeles, Seattle, Boston, Minneapolis-St. Paul, Fresno and Stockton. Local award committees were organized at each city to select recipients and award the scholarships. (Kobayashi 2001)

This has been a sustained, voluntary intervention for more than two decades based on deeply shared values, rather than superficial politics of ethnic representation. As such, the NSRCF has questioned whether its commitments, after some twenty plus years, should shift away from Southeast Asian American youth to support other struggling populations. Given evidence of continuing realities of inequality facing Southeast Asian American communities, however, the NSRCF decided to continue its targeted support in 2003, while also recognizing that other populations, including those who may not be Asian American, are becoming important to consider.[10]

Following 9/11, Yutaka Kobayashi reflected further:

> As WWII becomes a more distant memory with each passing year, it is clear to me that we need to look at the Nisei experience of that time, not so much as a Japanese American experience, but as a lesson in American history. It is a lesson of how democracy can fail in a time of crisis. Persons of the Islamic faith in America, both immigrants and their American children, have experienced what happened to the Nisei in 1942, in part, since September 11, 2001. We must take a firm stand to defend the civil liberties guaranteed by our Constitution to all of its citizens. The Nisei experience during WWII must not be allowed to happen ever again to any other ethnic group in America. Our democracy, which is the envy of the world, is our birthright. To have any real meaning, democracy must work equally during war as it does so well during peace. It is this aspect, an important lesson of democracy failed, which is timeless. Although our mission is focused on the children of SE Asian immigrants from the Vietnam War period today, the time will come when our Fund's help will not be critical for their success. We, as a Fund, need to look ahead to that time and think about how best to fulfill our mission. (Kobayashi 2001)

These examples—and many others that deserve recognition but are not mentioned here—reflect justice-minded, forward-looking commitments that should inform the process of crafting a national Asian American civil rights agenda. At the same time, however, these types of modest interventions are simply not powerful enough to counter the social, cultural, economic, and political forces that reflect and reproduce structures and systems of inequality nationally and locally, as the following final example illustrates.

Civil Rights as Community Development

Seventeen years ago, following a Christmas Eve arson that left twenty-one refugee residents homeless, the Cambodian community in Revere, Massachusetts made history in organizing what I believe to be the first public demonstration by Cambodian Americans. Having endured many incidents of racist harassment, vandalism, and violence for six years in Revere, the community finally decided to assert its public claims of voice, space, and rights by marching from City Hall to the arson site with signs and banners that proclaimed in Khmer and English, "Enough is Enough!" (Tang 2002; Asian American Resource Workshop 1987). The January 1987 rally in Revere also marked a proud, inspiring moment when local pan-Asian organizations, civil rights leaders, and other multiracial constituencies firmly united together to support the Cambodian community's demands for justice and peace.

Moments do not make movements, however. Over time, the elementary school-age children who held hand-painted signs saying, "Enough is Enough!" at the rally continued to grow up experiencing racism in school and on the streets. Many turned to gangs as a form of self-defense and identity, and faced increasingly severe racial profiling and harassment from the police and criminal justice system. The MCAS scores for Revere's Asian American (predominantly Cambodian) teens reported in Table 6 above speak volumes about the current lack of opportunity structures available for those same youth who, as young children, rallied with their resettled refugee families for a safe, secure life in their new home. For those young people who acquired criminal records and never became U.S. citizens, some 1,400 Cambodian Americans nationally, including some from Massachusetts with Revere roots, now face deportation back to Cambodia.

Furthermore, although Revere's Cambodian community predates the well established community in Lowell and has functioned as a critical center of commercial/residential/cultural life for Cambodians in Massachusetts since 1981, it can no longer survive because economic and political forces associated with land redevelopment in Revere have made it too expensive for most Cambodian American residents to remain. The out-migration from Revere, as reflected in Census figures showing roughly 3,000 Cambodians in 1990 and only 879 in 2000, mark the dispersal/destruction of the physical Cambodian American community in Revere, thus achieving the same final outcome that racist arsons and assaults were meant to achieve in the mid-1980s. Despite more than fifteen years of local pan-Asian organizational development and social-political maturation since showing solidarity at the 1987 rally, few Asian American individuals or groups outside Revere have challenged or even recognized these relentless realities of displacement and disempowerment confronting Cambodian American youth and their community. The contrast between the absence of pan-Asian American organizing or advocacy in Revere, compared with the sustained, sophisticated, and inspiring commitments to fight displacement and disempowerment in Boston's Chinatown during the same period of time, for example, are striking.[11]

Conclusions

Many have written about these topics—representation, rights, identity, history, culture, community, justice, peace—with greater theoretical clarity, poetic language, and practical application than I.[12] Perhaps because my own pan-Asian American professional responsibilities and revolutionary social commitments are mediated by my racial/cultural hapa background, I view (and experience) dynamics of exclusion and marginalization holistically across programmatic, political, and personal terms. When invited to write this article, I initially considered focusing on hapa issues and intended to open with Maria Root's bill of rights for racially mixed people as an important reference point because it links abstract articulations of rights to concrete attitudes and actions in daily life that all of us have some power to shape (Root 1996).

I chose, however, to focus on Southeast Asian American realities in order to suggest that the national Asian American civil rights leadership must better understand, respect, and respond to the struggles, visions, and daily lives of those populations who are most vulnerable or oppressed in both immediate and long-term social contexts. For example, visiting a Cambodian community temple reveals a world of civil rights issues faced by elders, especially widows, whose daily realities are not represented by either the pan-Asian civil rights organizations or the mainstream advocacy groups who have missions to protect the rights of the aged and/or people with disabilities. How should an Asian American civil rights agenda, then, intersect with both locally grounded social-cultural networks, such as temples, in specific communities and also with those mainstream advocacy networks that need to be more responsive and culturally competent with Asian American constituencies—especially those who are most vulnerable, including elders, children/youth and their mothers, and those with disabilities—in relation to health, education, and economic development as well as laws, politics, and public policy.[13]

In addition, pan-Asian American civil rights leaders must understand the importance of looking beyond a domestic U.S. agenda. The life stories and trajectories of Southeast Asian American community leaders, including those most respected for their activism in the domains of civil rights and political empowerment such as Chanrithy Uong, the first Cambodian American elected official in the U.S., clearly show the importance of their diasporic commitments and visions. Indeed, Rithy's participation in the United Nations-monitored election process in Cambodia was a crucial factor in his decision-making process to run for city council when he returned to Lowell, Massachusetts after devoting some years to the economic, educational, and civic development of his homeland. A review of the visions, priorities, and contributions of critically important Southeast Asian American organizations nationally and locally also confirms this point.[14]

The current crisis in Cambodian American communities concerning forced deportations further exemplifies how Asian American civil rights advocates cannot ignore diasporic, transnational realities. In fact, the deportation issue shows the urgency of not only recognizing these local/global connections, but also understanding the holistic and historic connections between immigration status, gang involvement, and youth responses to racist violence. Had interventions to address discrimination, exclusion, and anti-Asian violence against Southeast Asian refugees in the 1980s been more thorough and sustained, perhaps far fewer young people would have felt the need to turn to gangs as their organizational strategy to survive, and fewer today would be facing deportation as a result of having criminal records.[15]

The realities of inequality facing Southeast Asian American communities in the U.S. require far more attention at all levels from national policy and municipal government to the school and the street. While recognizing that the clear priority of Asian American civil rights organizations in 2001-2002 understandably responded to the explosion in hate crimes following 9/11 which overwhelmingly targeted South Asian Americans, Arab Americans and Muslim Americans (NAPALC 2002), it is worth noting that two months earlier in July 2001, a sixty-two-year-old Lao American elder, Mr. Thung Phetakoune, died of head trauma after being attacked in a New Hampshire parking lot by a thirty-five-year-old white male who later explained his brutal action to police in terms of the Vietnam War: "Those Asians killed Americans, and you won't do anything about it, so I will. . .Call it payback." Racist sentiments associated specifically with the Vietnam War still have civil rights consequences after more than thirty years.[16]

Ironically, the vital civil rights issue that captured the attention and priority of pan-Asian American activist college students and young professionals in 2002 had no connection to the issues highlighted in this article concerning urban school inequality or land redevelopment and displacement or police harassment and deportations of immigrant youth or even post-9/11 violence. Rather, their impressive and effective organizing, awareness-raising, and movement-building energies and resources targeted a short-lived run of stereotypic designs on pricey t-shirts marketed shrewdly by Abercombrie & Fitch.[17]

This article was commissioned originally to contribute to a discussion about emerging issues, strategies, and priorities that might define a new national agenda for Asian American civil rights advocacy and organizing. I have used the opportunity to foreground some issues and policy areas in K-12 and higher education that need attention from civil rights vantage points, including high stakes testing, curriculum reform, and teacher training. In addition, I suggest the importance of viewing issues and policy areas holistically and the urgency of making connections locally/globally, for example, among racial violence, gang activity, immigration status, and deportation. I also hint at the critical roles of temples and churches as well as mutual assistance associations and other community-based organizations, particularly in Southeast Asian

American communities, and in light of the federal government's increased support for faith-based initiatives.

But rather than conclude here with a package of specific recommendations to define a shared policy or advocacy agenda, I am calling for a more fundamental, justice-centered process of reflection and critique through which we individually, collectively, and continually ask of each other: how do our specific decisions, actions, and commitments contribute to expanding the institutional access and representation, community development capacity, and quality of life for those Asian American populations who are most vulnerable, under-served and under-resourced? Cambodian, Hmong, Lao, and Vietnamese American communities, though not alone, are among those who should expect more responsive answers from pan-Asian American networks and agendas, both immediately and for the long-term.

Notes

1. Thanks to Jacinta Ma, Don Nakanishi, Angelo Ancheta, Rosa Hernandez Sheets, Shirley Tang, Karen Suyemoto, Julia Heintz-Mackoff, Paul Ong, and two anonymous reviewers for feedback and suggestions.
2. The 72 percent growth rate uses the Census 2000 population counts of Asian alone or in combination with other races. See U.S. Census Bureau (2002). *The Asian Population: 2000*. February.
3. These numbers include figures from both the March 2000 Current Population Survey and Census 2000. They also do not capture foreign-born Asian American populations from countries outside Asia such as Trinidad, Guyana, Brazil, France, Canada, and elsewhere. See U.S. Census Bureau (2002). *A Profile of the Nation's Foreign-Born Population from Asia (2000 Update),* February.
4. See, for example, L. Ling-chi Wang (1976), Victor Low (1982), Margaret A. Gibson (1988), U.S. Commission on Civil Rights (1992), P.N. Kiang (1998).
5. I estimate the number of Asian American Studies courses offered in Massachusetts public colleges and universities in 2002 was approximately twenty-five, with three to four focusing on Southeast Asian American populations.
6. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1996, Table 263.
7. Source: William B. Harvey. Table 20: Doctoral Degrees, by Field, U.S. Citizenship, and Race/Ethnicity: 1991, 1998, 1999, 2000. *Status Report on Minorities in Higher Education 2001-2002*. Washington, DC: American Council on Education. 2002, 76.

8. These tests are "high stakes" when life-affecting decisions of student tracking, placement, and graduation as well as teacher hiring and school funding become specifically tied to test results (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 1999), even though evidence of test validity and reliability have rarely been demonstrated.
9. See National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, "From Camp to College: The Story of Japanese American Student Relocation," Philadelphia, 1945.
10. For more information about the Nisei Student Relocation Commemorative Fund, write to: 19 Scenic Drive, Portland, CT 06480.
11. For a brief overview of Boston Chinatown-centered activism in relation to development issues, see: http://www.protectchinatown.org/bostonchinatown/chinatown.html and http://www.aamovement.net/community/flpcac1.html.
12. See, for example, Trask (2002); Wu (2002); Prashad (2000); Lee (1999); Ancheta (1998); Tuan (1998); Matsuda (1996). For comparative purposes, see, for example, Ian F. Haney López. 2003. *Racism on Trial: The Chicano Fight for Justice*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
13. For example, a strategic connection can be made with the National Technical Assistance Center for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with Disabilities (NTAC) regarding how to best advocate for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders with disabilities. See http://www.ntac.hawaii.edu.
14. For example, the national Southeast Asian American organizations include: Cambodian American National Council (CAN-C), http://cancweb.org; Hmong Network Development (HND), http://www.hndlink.org; Laotian American National Alliance (LANA), http://www.lana-laotian.org; National Alliance of Vietnamese American Service Agencies (NAVASA), http://www.navasa.org; National Association for the Education and Advancement of Cambodian, Laotian, and Vietnamese Americans (NAFEA), http://equity4.clmer.csulb.edu/netshare/kclam/apa/nafea.htm; and Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), http://www.searac.org.
15. For further information regarding the deportation of Cambodian Americans begun in 2002, see http://www.searac.org/cambrep-news/html.
16. For an analysis of the Phetakoune case and the context of Lao community life in New Hampshire, see Sing Vivathana (2002).
17. For a video document of a local Asian American protest against Abercrombie & Fitch in Harvard Square, Cambridge, see http://www.web.mit.edu/linus/www/afrally/.

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