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Asian American Art and Literature

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Asian American Art and Literature

Abstract
Asian American literature and art cannot be explained by one set of aesthetics or a single method or approach. The sheer diversity of the artists and their backgrounds and even the variety and change within the oeuvre of an individual artist simply defy neat categorization. Some artists emphasize personal experience and reflection; others reflect on historical occurrences and cultural phenomena; others tend toward sheer experimentation with forms of expression and types of media or discourse.

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Where do we draw the boundaries? Do films with a clear Asian American theme, but shot by a multiracial crew—such as Oliver Stone’s *Heaven and Earth* (1993) and David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly* (1993)—qualify as Asian American?

A 1990 reader’s poll in *A Magazine* underscored these questions as readers freely mixed Asian and Asian American screen stars and films in their choices. As the future of each discipline is considered, these questions become increasingly relevant in terms of demographic shifts (both changes in the composition of Asian communities and the increase in racial and ethnic hybridity), the movement of Asians and Asian Americans transnationally, and the positive impact that the Asian American movement has on social institutions, attitudes, and cultural expectations.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


**ASIAN AMERICANS**


Robert Uno

**Asian American Art and Literature**

Asian American literature and art cannot be explained by one set of aesthetics or a single method or approach. The sheer diversity of the artists and their backgrounds and even the variety and change within the oeuvre of an individual artist simply defy neat categorization. Some artists emphasize personal experience and reflection; others reflect on historical occurrences and cultural phenomena; others tend toward sheer experimentation with forms of expression and types of media or discourse.

**Literature: Major Themes.** Asian American authors have explored issues central to the Asian American experience: the legacy of the past; the encounter of diverse cultures; the challenges of racism, discrimination, and exclusion; and the dreams achieved and dreams deferred of an immigrant nation. In the process of developing and defining itself, then, Asian American literature speaks to the very heart of what it means to be American. The authors of this literature above all concern themselves with identity, with the question of becoming and being American, of being accepted, not “foreign.” Elaine Kim characterizes Asian American literature as mainly one of “protest and exile, a literature about place and displacement, a literature concerned with psychic and physical ‘home’—searching for and claiming a ‘home’ or longing for a final homecoming.”

Distinguished Asian American authors and works include Korean American Younghill Kang’s *The Grass Roof* (1931) and his book about life in New York, *East Goes West* (1937); Chinese American Louis Chu’s *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961), also about life in New York; Filipino American Carlos Bulosan’s experiences as a migrant worker in *Letters from America* (1942) and *America Is in the Heart* (1946); and Korean Canadian writer and video artist Theresa Hak
Novelist Amy Tan in Guilin, China, where part of the movie version of *The Joy Luck Club* was filmed.


Eminent anthologies of Asian American writing not only indicate the emergence and coalescence of a body of literature that could be called Asian American, but also signal the form by which that body of literature can be recognized by the reading public and assigned as reading in academic settings. Such anthologies include the aforementioned *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974), edited by Jeffrey Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong. This anthology, devoted exclusively to Chinese American and Japanese American works, was followed by the more inclusive *The Big Aiiieeeee!!!* (1991), whereas Jessica T. Hagedorn's *Charlie Chan Is Dead: An Anthology of Asian American Fiction* (1993) showcases imaginative prose representative of all the major immigrant groups, with the exception of Southeast Asia. Garrett Hongo edited *The Open Boat, Poems from Asian America* (1993). All of the erotic stories and poems of *On a Bed of Rice* (1995), an anthology edited by Geraldine Kudaka, contradict the racist notion that Asian Americans are asexual or passive in their sexuality.

**Artistic Genres.** Art has many meanings and diverse significance for those who create it or behold it or in some way participate in it. It is difficult to define one universally Asian American aesthetic or artistic ideology, yet some generalizations can be ventured. There exists a sense in this emergent Asian American culture that “art” is not the special province of the professional artist, not something merely to be seen and consumed. Art, somewhat like Asian-based religious practice and spirituality, forms a part of everyday life. Art belongs to people and not to a special class of artists and artisans. Nor can the category of Asian American art be limited to that produced exclusively by Asian Americans, for it must embrace as well those works that originate in Asian countries but are imported and translated or otherwise adapted for American reception.

Artistic contributions to American domestic culture abound, as seen in the distinctly Japanese plantings of bonsai and ikebana; Chinese brush painting; the calligraphy of China, Korea, and Japan;
Chinese ceramics and Japanese porcelains; rugs from Turkey, the Caucasus, Persia, the Turkoman of Central Asia, India, Tibet, and China and, of course, the celebrated Asian American culinary arts. Many Americans are familiar with the art of Japanese paper folding called origami. In Japanese-influenced decor one might find the thick bedding consisting of mattress and cover called futon, shoji screens, and tatami mats. Mass and popular culture have been permeated by Anime and Pokéman cartoons, Manga comic books, the Sanrio “Hello Kitty” merchandise, Nintendo video games, the Power Rangers television series, and martial-arts action movies featuring Bruce Lee, Jet Li, and Jackie Chan, for example. Martial arts have gone mainstream as well, with the proliferation of programs and classes in karate, aikido, judo, Korean tae kwon do, Japanese jujutsu, Thai muay thai (or kickboxing), and Filipino kali (or arnis).

Renowned among architects are Minoru Yamasaki, chief architect of the 110-story twin towers of the World Trade Center in New York City; Arata Isozaki, who designed the Museum of Contemporary Art of Los Angeles; Maya Lin, whose Vietnam Veterans Memorial provoked reflection and controversy; and internationally known Tadao Ando, whose minimalist style is characterized by concrete surfaces and geometric figures. Chinese American architect I. M. Pei is best-known for designing the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland, Ohio; the glass pyramid entrance to the Louvre in Paris, France; the John F. Kennedy Library in Massachusetts; New York City’s Jacob K. Javits Convention Center; and the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

Perhaps the best-known Japanese graphic and clothing designer today is Eiko Ishioka, who won the 1992 Academy Award for best costume design. She is one of numerous Asian American clothing designers who have mixed cultural motifs and sensibilities to create the kind of art that is worn. The international fashion world came to appreciate Josie Natori’s beaded and embroidered bustiers as well as Vera Wang’s wedding dresses and evening gowns.

Musicians who have drawn both applause and critical acclaim are Paris-born cellist Yo-Yo Ma; Korean American violinist Kyung-Wha Chung; Japanese and American violinist Midori; and conductors Zubin Mehta, born in Bombay, India, and Seiji Ozawa, born in Shenyang, China. Other musicians include singer-songwriter-artist Yoko Ono, widow of John Lennon. The Japanese American rock group Shonen Knife and the Filipino American singing groups Kai and Pinay have drawn packed crowds of admirers.

Other collaborative artistic projects have produced works and performances that challenge the mainstream views of race and culture. The art network Godzilla has created links of communication among Asian American artists. Based in New York and cofounded in 1990 by Ken Chu, Godzilla has sponsored discussions and debates on the notion of an “Asian American aesthetic.” Group exhibitions such as Yellow Peril: Reconsidered, which toured Canada in 1990 and 1991, and the Godzilla-sponsored The Curio Shop in New York in 1993 displayed the images and artifacts by which Asian Americans have been stereotyped. In both of these exhibitions, artists and installers performed a negative critique.
of mainstream essentialism that has marginalized and dehumanized the image of the Asian in American culture.

Korean American artist Nam June Paik has drawn wide attention for multimedia electronic installations that incorporate videorecorders, television circuitry, and avant-garde musical performance in works that include the *Electronic Superhighway* and the *Information Wall*. Sculptor Isamu Noguchi's creations of interior and exterior works include items of furniture, the Akari Japanese lanterns, the design of the gardens for the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) headquarters in Paris, the sunken garden of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale, and the Philip A. Hart Plaza in Detroit. Among performance artists, Hmong American rapper Tou Ger Xiong brings his family history to audiences with a blend of storytelling and slides. One of his performances, given at Iowa State University in 1999, was titled "Snoop Doggy Dogg Meets Bruce Lee."

**Arts and Identities.** Inasmuch as being Asian American means to find one's own identity as multiply originated and diversely situated, many productions of Asian American art must seek a coming-to-terms with an inherently plural selfhood. Asian Americans have attained a critical mass and achieved a self-consciousness of their agency in the making of history. Coming from specific countries of origin, from diverse religious, ethnic, and linguistic groupings, they know the dangers of generalization and self-ghettoization. Accordingly, most artists are wary of pinning themselves down to anything that could be called an Asian American aesthetic. Many works aim to create a change in social consciousness. For example, Sung Ho Choi's 1993 installation of burnt-out wood, photographs, awning, and living plants titled *Choi's Market* vividly recalls the 1992 riots of south central Los Angeles, in which Korean storekeepers became the targets of racial enmity.

The crossing of borders and the creation of hybrid spaces are obsessions of many Asian American artists. One of Rirkrit Tiravanija's installations in New York's 303 Gallery in 1995 consisted of a "meditation area" complete with a camping tent, a couch, an audio tape of a Hmong radio program, and a video on Hmong appliqués. This art of dislocations and thresholds brings together cultures and technologies and engages viewers in the examination of their own social frameworks. In 1994 artist Michael Joo videotaped himself swimming in two thousand pounds (907 kg) of monosodium glutamate, addressing with this, as with other performances, stereotypes of Chinese culture and the "economic" circulation of meanings and identifications. Xu Bing's *A Book from the Sky* offered a view of sheets and sheets of paper—some hanging from the ceiling, some bound up in books, some hung on the walls—inscribed in authentic-looking but invented "Chinese" characters. This 1995 installation examined the crisis of meaning involving Chinese tradition and modernity, expression and silence. Art critic Alice Yang has called Bing Lee's 1994 show "an imaginative foray into chance operation," by which, beginning with a blank wall, the artist adds drawings to it each day, creating an array that amounts to a "pictodiary" that stages a sort of surrealist automatism as it performs a Buddhist meditative notation marking the subject's emptying-out. Cultures cross again in Chen Zhen's 1996 "Daily
Incantations,” composed of 101 Chinese wooden chamber pots arrayed and suspended in the fashion of Bronze Age chime bells. By so merging the physical and the spiritual, Chen’s installation indicates the cycles of consumption, assimilation, and expulsion that transcend the national dramas.

**Aesthetics and Social Import.** As this brief overview has indicated, Asian American writers and artists in general have undertaken a twofold task: that of creating art works while displaying true originality and combining elements of European American and Asian cultures; and that of transcending or subverting the ethnocentrism of the dominant culture, offering in its place a transpacific aesthetic, a new racial and cultural synthesis, and a renewed vision of art’s possibilities.

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**EUGENIO MATIBAG**

**Asian American Politics**

Politics, for Asian Americans, covers a host of concerns that hold in common a challenge to racialization beyond a black-white paradigm, a critique of the persistence of discrimination and exclusion, a recognition of their group’s increasing numbers and diversity, and a desire to empower their communities. The term *Asian American* was an internally defined political label that arose as a consequence of the civil rights movement but was elaborated as a specific expression of anti-imperialist, antiracist, and antiexploitation agendas that bound together ethnonational groups whose origins could be traced back to Asia. Even though Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, and others previously regarded themselves (and were also regarded by society) as distinct and competing groups, political activists in the 1960s realized the advantages of intergroup mobilization to fight for common demands.

Such a panethnic formation has had important consequences for building political consciousness among very diverse populations. Not only were Asian Americans able to appreciate their common geographical origins but their political efforts also have become more recognized as intimately connected to common historical and contemporary experiences of disenfranchisement and violence, mainly because of perceptions that they are a “model minority,” are threats to society, or are foreigners. This panethnic label has also been used by the state primarily for census purposes and resource distribution. However, this way of lumping for convenience has, at times, perpetuated unfair treatment.

An important occasion that resulted in Asian American political mobilization occurred in the wake of the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982. Chin, a Chinese American, was targeted as an Asian foreigner responsible for lost or diminishing job opportunities in Detroit. His case is evidence of the power of coalition politics as a response to racism. Such politics have further called for a more complex consideration of race relations beyond those that include only African Americans and European Americans, the ways in which Asian Americans challenge dominant assimilationist demands imposed on them, the advantages of forging ties with other minoritized groups, and the quest to be regarded as equal members of American society.

Because the Asian American population has grown exponentially and changed dramatically with different immigrant groups since the 1960s, questions about the viability of panethnic grouping have arisen. Among the issues being debated are the in-