

Practitioner's Essay

Building a Home for Asian and Asian American Studies at Cal State LA: A Thirty-Year Struggle and Collaboration

ChorSwang Ngin

ABSTRACT

This paper is an ethnography on the founding of Asian and Asian American Studies (AAAS) Department at California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA). It starts by describing the early vision in 1993 to bring learning about Asia and Asian American Studies to a public university when neither was available. With external funding, a core group of faculties founded the B.A. Degree in AAAS by combining Asian Studies with Asian American Studies. The paper continues to detail the building of collegial relationships across many disciplines on campus, especially Pan-African Studies (PAS), Chicana/o and Latina/o Studies (CLS), and Latin American Studies (LAS), which led to the creation of an Area and Ethnic Studies Coffee Group. This relationship was not only vital to AAAS when it was threatened with suspension in 2010, but also paved the way for the founding of the Cal State LA College of Ethnic Studies in 2020 in anticipation of AB 1460.

INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1947, California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA) is one of twenty-three universities in the California State University (CSU) system. Situated east of Downtown Los Angeles, it is in the heart of the old Latino neighborhood of East Los Angeles and the gateway to the burgeoning newer Asian communities of San

Gabriel Valley. Today's 24,673 students are 74.7 percent Latinx, 10.3 percent Asian and Pacific Islander, 4.9 percent white, 3.9 percent Black, and 6.1 percent "other." Most of the students are first-generation college students (Office of Communication and Public Affairs, 2024). The university embraces DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) and social justice as its core values and is ranked a top public university in terms of upward mobility of its students (US News and World Report, 2024). The university is a federally designated Hispanic-Serving Institution (HIS), Minority-Serving Institution (MSI), and Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution (AANAPISI).

In 2020, California Governor Gavin Newsom signed Assembly Bill 1460 (AB 1460) into law. The impact of passing AB 1460, making Ethnic Studies a CSU graduation requirement, can be seen in the creation of Area F: Ethnic Studies. As one of the General Education (GE) requirements for CSU undergraduates, students must take at least one three-unit class in either Asian/Asian American, Native American, African American, or Chicano/Latina(o) studies. All the Ethnic Studies courses at Cal State LA are offered by the College of Ethnic Studies (CoES), which was founded in 2020 and consists of three departments: Asian and Asian American Studies (AAAS), Pan-African Studies (PAS), and Chicana(o) and Latina(o) Studies (CLS).

Since 2020, there have been four hires in AAAS: two in 2020, then two in 2023, with one at the Associate Professor level. According to Associate Dean Miguel Zavala of the CoES, as of Fall 2023, there were ten AAAS courses offered in Area F in addition to eighteen courses each for PAS and CLS. Due to grants and reassigned time for new faculty, only about four AAAS courses are currently offered in Area F each semester; there are plans to increase offerings in the coming year. There has also been a significant increase in overall Ethnic Studies course enrollment as well as an increase in collective Ethnic Studies minors.

This paper is an ethnography of the founding of the AAAS program at Cal State LA: it documents struggles and challenges in our determination to create an academic program on AAAS—such as our decisions between "Asian Studies" or "Asian American Studies"—and our relationship-building with students and colleagues from Ethnic Studies, which became critical for our survival when threatened with program suspension. It is based on my firsthand experience as a trained ethnographer, making observations from the moment I was hired for the Department of Anthropology thirty years ago in 1993 to my current status as a semi-retired faculty member. During

this period, even though my faculty roles and research interests have changed, I continue to make observations and participate as a member of the AAAS Advisory Board on many Faculty Hiring and Retention/Tenure/Promotion Committees for AAAS and the CoES.

Beginnings of the CoES: Now and Then

AAAS at Cal State LA is poised to grow because it is housed in the newly founded CoES, the second Ethnic Studies college in the nation. The CoES began with Dr. Octavio Villalpando's appointment as the founding Vice Provost for Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion (EDI) in 2017. In 2019, he convened a meeting with the Area and Ethnic Studies faculty regarding the pending Ethnic Studies requirement in the CSU system and the university's plan to consider creating a college of Ethnic Studies. Perhaps foreseeing the inevitability of an Ethnic Studies requirement in the CSU, AAAS was fast-tracked from "Program" to "Department" status. Together with PAS and CLS, AAAS became one of the three departments of the new CoES, with plans to create an American Indian/Indigenous Studies department. Dr. Villalpando also led the establishment of the new College by serving as acting dean and shepherding its review through the academic senate. After faculty from the three departments completed drafting the proposal for the College, he provided resources for three faculty from each of the departments to work on drafting three important documents for the new College: (1) a Retention, Tenure, and Promotion (RTP) document, led by Anthony Ratcliff from PAS, (2) a document on Advisement, led by Alexandro Covarrubias from CLS, and (3) the Curriculum document, which I took the lead on developing even though I was not officially in AAAS.¹

Besides the three lead faculty members, many adjunct faculty were involved as well, serving on the various committees. As noted by Abdullah (2000), it was not the institution that birthed the CoES, but the long hard work of faculty and students as well as the push through legislative action by State Assembly member Shirley Weber, former chair of African Studies at San Diego State University.

The impact of AB 1460 on Ethnic Studies can be contrasted with a time over thirty years ago, during my job interview with Provost Betty Shutler for one of the few faculty member positions in the Anthropology Department in 1993. She instructed me to "go have coffee with the folks down the hall to think about doing something on Asia." To clarify, she meant the folks in PAS, CLS, and Latin American Studies (LAS), probably because these were well-established departments (PAS

and CLS) and programs (LAS), whereas Asian Studies consisted of only one course—AAPS 200: *People, Culture and Society of Pacific Asia*—taught *pro bono* by ten faculty members in 1993.

At that point in my career, I had already spent several years teaching Comparative Ethnic Studies with Dr. Maulana Karenga in Black Studies and Dr. Rodolfo Torres in Mexican American Studies at California State University, Long Beach. With Dr. Torres, we also discussed the inevitable question of Asians and Latinos falling between the cracks of the “Black and White” race paradigm in the United States (Torres and Ngin, 1995). In my anthropological career, I spent a summer visiting the “Vietnamese boat people” refugees in the refugee camps in Southeast Asia, consulted for the World Bank in China on the involuntary resettlement of huge populations affected by the building of four hydroelectric dams, and visited Indonesia for a project on inter-generational relationships for the Rand Corporation. It was painfully clear the provost was not making a distinction between Asia and Asian America. Given my expertise on Asia, I began teaching the only course on Asia—AAPS 200.

How should students at a major public university in Los Angeles learn about Asia? Or should they pay attention to the struggles and challenges of Asian Americans? Why was there no Asian Studies or Asian American Studies at Cal State LA when PAS, CLS, and LAS were some of the oldest Ethnic and Area Studies departments and programs in the United States? Despite the lack of direction and support from upper administration, these questions on learning and teaching about Asia and Asian America led to the beginning of an engagement on the founding of AAAS, which also paved way for the CoES more than two decades later.

Asian Studies or Asian American Studies?

Given my expertise on Asia and experience teaching Asian American Studies, I began exploring the directions of *Asian Studies* versus *Asian American Studies* with Dr. Eri Yasuhara, the Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Letters which housed the sole course on Asia: AAPS 200. Without any administrative support, proposing two programs simultaneously (creating both Asian Studies and Asian American Studies) seemed untenable.

The field of Asian Studies—a field within Area Studies—was created during the Cold War which began in 1947 after the Second World War and ended in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union,

upon which the United States came to represent and champion democratic ideals. To train expertise to meet national security needs, the U.S. established Title VI of the National Defense Education Act (NDEA) of 1958 to provide funding and the systemic production of knowledge about other places and other peoples—producing, as a result, Asian Studies and other Area Studies at major universities (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). According to Cornell University (2023, n.p.), for example, their now-renowned Department of Asian Studies was

initially organized in 1946 as the Department of Far Eastern Studies, which was changed to Asian Studies in 1962. It developed from a wartime program in the language, history, and culture of China that trained people for government service . . . In the 1990s, with the end of the Cold War, influential voices within the Department began to look at Asian Studies from Asian perspectives and to bring the study of Asia out of the framework that during the Cold War had supplied knowledge about Asia in the United States.

Asian American Studies, on the other hand, emerged after the longest student strikes in U.S. history by the Black Student Union at San Francisco State College (now University) in 1968 and the Third World Liberation Front at University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley) in 1969, which grew out of grassroots community organizing for change in higher education. Through protests and activism, the early student strikers critiqued American society and educational systems for their lack of representation of people who were not of European origin. The strike gave rise to the first Ethnic Studies program in the nation at San Francisco State University in 1969. The new term “Asian American” was coined in 1968 by UC Berkeley students Emma Gee and Yuji Ichioka “with a political, activist purpose . . . as a way to unite Asian-descent Americans and fight for justice for all Asian communities” (Zhou, 2021, cited in Yuan et al., 2023, 5).

In pondering the creation of an Asian Studies program versus an Asian American Studies program, we took note of the global trends and local events dominating public awareness of Asia and Asian America. The early 1990s was the time of the “roaring Asian Tigers”—led by Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore—with the world’s economic fulcrum shifting from the Atlantic to the Pacific, as well as China’s emergence as a super economic power to secure Asia’s dominance (Financial Review, 1995). In the U.S., the arrival of the Vietnamese, Cambodians, and Laotians—resulting from the American war in Indochina—had also reached a critical mass. The ideologically

created label “Asian American” from more than two decades earlier came to refer to a set of people with enormously disparate histories, economic realities, and cultures. They did not possess one story, one voice, but included fifth generation Japanese Americans, descendants of Chinese coolies, students, entrepreneurs, millionaires, tech geniuses, and travelers, as well as refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented men and women seeking safe sanctuary in America.

Closer to home in April and May of 1992 were the Los Angeles Riots, also known as the 1992 Los Angeles Uprising, sparked by the brutal police beating of Rodney King. Many Asian—especially Korean-owned—homes and businesses were destroyed, and more than sixty people were killed in the riot (Seo, 1993). The incident highlighted the tensions in Los Angeles as the Southern California region experienced a growing Asian immigrant population.

The question for me became: How could an educated student at a major public university in Los Angeles not learn about *both* Asia *and* Asian America? The reality at Cal State LA was that “choosing” between Asian Studies and Asian American Studies needed to be seen as a failure to teach our students about the world: both Asian Americans at home and Asians abroad have stories and histories to be shared. As such, an important task at hand was to generate interest among professors to support teaching about Asia *and* Asian America. Thus began a long process of encouraging course proposals that could be included in a future program for “Asian and Asian American Studies.”

NEH and Ford Foundation Grants

Dr. Yasuhara and I deliberately focused on creating Asian American Studies content because in the mid-1990s, there were more faculty with expertise on Asia. Except for the AAPS 200 course mentioned earlier, courses on Asia were housed in the “traditional” departments of History, Geography, Anthropology, Political Science, and Sociology, but rarely offered. A minor in Asian Studies was already on the books in 1993. On the other hand, the only course on Asian American Studies was an Asian American Experience course in Sociology (SOC 263) taught by Dr. Ron Tsukashima.

With the recommendation of and help from Susan Steiner from the University Development Office, I applied for a National Endowment for the Humanities Faculty Focus Grant to interest our own faculty in paying attention to the Asian American experience. Awarded in 1996, funds for the project “Chinese Diaspora in Southern California: Culture,

Ethnicity, Community and Asian American Studies” provided a public lecture series, faculty seminars, and funding for ten Cal State LA faculty member participants. In the project, I took my colleagues on ethnographic fieldtrips to observe the different ways Chinese culture played out in the diaspora in Southern California’s new and old Chinatowns, in Little Saigon in Orange County, and in the San Gabriel Valley to the east of Los Angeles where large numbers of Chinese have resettled.

In 1998, Dr. Yasuhara received a grant from the Ford Foundation’s Border Crossing Initiative on “Re-visioning Asian and Asian American Studies.” The grant provided opportunities for consultations with Asian Studies and Asian American Studies programs at other universities to help us build our own. We also invited colleagues from PAS and CLS as speakers and panelists, out of respect for their similar experiences, to reflect on their endeavors.

Through these grants, we were able to develop relationships with colleagues across many disciplines and build the beginnings of the AAAS program by developing many cross-listed courses. The fieldtrips funded by the NEH Faculty Focus Grant provided opportunities for campus faculty to converse for the first time on matters that pertained to Asian Studies and Asian American Studies; this awareness resulted in the creation or modification of about half a dozen courses, some of them later cross-listed with AAAS once the program and curricula were established. Many of these courses (for example, AAAS/SOC/PAS 3480: *Class, Race/Ethnicity, and Gender* and AAAS/ANTH/CHS/LAS 4490: *The Anthropology of Race and Racism*) remain in the catalog and are offered regularly. The most significant of all was the creation of a team-taught Comparative Ethnic Studies 108, taught by four faculty members. Another notable result of this collegial relationship building came when the campus was discussing the role of Ethnic Studies as a GE requirement; we then created the Ethnic Studies Coffee Group to present ourselves as a united front fighting for the protection of Ethnic Studies courses. In a sense, Provost Shutler’s instruction became a reality: the Coffee Group was the beginning of an Ethnic Studies collective at Cal State Los Angeles.

BUILDING SUPPORT AND GROWING SOLIDARITY: CHALLENGES AND STRUGGLES

Without a faculty line, the founding of the B.A. Degree program in AAAS was orchestrated out of sheer faculty determination. Along with no university support for neither an Asian nor Asian American

academic program, support for matters related to Asians and Asian American life on campus was equally lacking. For example, in 1998, Lena Chao—a professor of Communication Studies at that time—had to singlehandedly organize an Asian Support Group Dinner inviting alums and community supporters to raise funds for student scholarships. Around that same time, recognizing that support for an academic program must also have the support of university employees, faculty member Gay Yuen in the Charter College of Education and staff member Lily Baba from the Pat Brown Institute solicited funds to organize a luncheon for all staff of Asian descent. The Cal State LA President's Office offered no support for either initiative.

Foremost of our concerns was the constant threat of AAAS course cancellation due to the lack of support and funding from administration. Conversations with other Area and Ethnic Studies departments revealed the same concern. For instance, when I approached Dr. C.R.D. Halisi of PAS in 2001 to suggest applying for an Innovative Instruction grant to propose two cross-listed and team-taught courses on Comparative Ethnic Studies and Comparative Diaspora Studies, he told me that in his seven years as Chair of PAS, no one had inquired about the department's wellbeing. When we received the award to share among the four Area and Ethnic Studies units, he said it was the first time PAS received *any* funding—which he then used to purchase a fax machine for the department.

With additional faculty interest and support from the grant-funded projects in the mid/late 90s to the dedication to relationship building within and across Area and Ethnic Studies units in the late 90s/early 2000s, I took the lead in writing a proposal for an AAAS Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) degree. The proposal detailed an interdisciplinary program combining Asian Studies and Asian American Studies; I led it through the system-wide approval process by explaining the difference between Asian Studies and Asian American Studies, between Area Studies and Ethnic Studies, and the justification for combining them—stating specifically that our students' future employers and employees were likely to be Asians *and* Asian Americans. The B. A. Degree in AAAS was approved by the California State University Chancellor's Office in 2004. With the recognition of AAAS as a Degree Program, AAAS was moved from the College of Arts and Letters to join PAS and CLS in the College of Natural and Social Sciences. I served as the program's Director and spent the next six years (2005-11) building the program by working on curriculum development, community

outreach,² grant writing, fund seeking, student advisement, hiring adjunct faculty,³ and all aspects of running a program for “one-course release time” (or 1/9 of reassigned time from my nine-course teaching load per year), all while also serving as the Chair of the Anthropology Department between 2006-09.

During the fortieth anniversary celebration of the founding of San Francisco State University’s College of Ethnic Studies, the only one in the country at the time in 2009, I led the four units from Cal State LA to attend the event as a group: C.R.D. Halisi and Mel Donalson representing PAS, Mike Soldatenko from CLS, Enrique Ochoa from LAS, and myself from AAAS. According to the organizer, we were only one of two universities presenting as a group among approximately three thousand scholars and students from seven countries, ten states, and thirty-five universities.

More importantly, our collective interest in Ethnic Studies and our genuine collegial relationship generated space to discuss our common problem of low student enrollment. In our discussions on and survey of popular courses on other campuses, we discovered students’ interest in social justice. We created a proposal for a B.A. Degree on Identity and Social Justice (ISJ) in 2009. The PAS, CLS, LAS, and AAAS faculty amended and approved the proposal and sent it to James Henderson, the Dean of the College of Natural and Sciences at the time. The faculty’s emphasis on social justice was based on our informal survey of student interests and reasons for their reluctance to major in Ethnic Studies. We felt that within this larger umbrella degree on social justice, students could then also focus on a particular racial/ethnic group of their choice, thus potentially increasing the enrollment for PAS, CLS, LAS and AAAS. We reasoned that social justice cannot be studied as an abstract idea; students must focus on one of the four groups in their study. Our discussion at this point in 2009 predated AB 1460’s drive to make Ethnic Studies a requirement within the CSU system. While our collaboration did not play a role in making Ethnic Studies a requirement, this steady collaboration was important by the end of the year to help AAAS fight for its survival.

AAAS Under Attack

In our hope to increase student enrollment by creating a B.A. degree program in Social Justice, we did not expect our effort to be turned around by the dean. Dean James Henderson, in an email sent on January 5th, 2010 to the four faculty representatives for PAS, CLS,

LAS, and AAAS— Mel Donaldson, Mike Soldatenko, Enrique Ochoa, and myself—informed us that he would reduce the chairs' roles to coordinators,

Creating a division of Ethnic and Area Studies, that would have one Director for the Division. There would remain the current degrees that would be granted. However, there would not be a chair for each program, but a coordinator who would oversee the advising for the program, do curricular development, and work with the director to schedule classes . . . Each coordinator would have some release time to do this, but it would be limited . . .

In response to Dean Henderson's suggestion, an expanded group of Area and Ethnic Studies faculty met on January 26th, 2010 to prepare a statement on our position. The report that was sent to fourteen faculty members present at the meeting emphasized the solidarity among the four groups. This report, sent by email, read:

This statement would confirm our autonomous depts/programs while affirming our collective intentions. The statement would reinforce the position that if one dept/program is cut or discontinued, then it affects all of ethnic and area studies. Our discussion suggested that this statement would be presented to the administration, but we did not rule out other possible targets on-and-off campus.

On November 5th, 2010, Dean Henderson requested a meeting with me. Sitting across his small round table in his office, the first sentence he uttered was, "I am going to suspend the AAAS program for up to three years." Drawing on my experience working in the international arena, I diplomatically tried to see things from his perspective but also argued against it with all reasons conceivable: rationally, optically, financially, and institutionally. Dean Henderson suggested calling a meeting with interested faculty so that my points could be recorded.

Immediately after the meeting, I called my own meeting before the follow-up with Dean Henderson scheduled for November 29th. My meeting was attended by about twenty-five students and faculty members, with colleagues who could not attend expressing desire to be kept in the loop. Within twenty-four hours after the meeting, news of the potential suspension spread like wildfire. Colleagues activated their social networks, gave interviews to community groups, and contacted their political representatives and the media. WaiKit Choi from Sociology drafted petitions and gathered signatures while Gay Yuen

suggested that we needed to shame the university. Students also prepared posters, contacted their student organizations, started their own petition, and used various social media platforms to get the word out.

Particularly important were key individuals from the California Faculty Association's (CFA's) Los Angeles chapter, such as Melina Abdullah from our PAS department, and CFA-Los Angeles Affirmative Action Chair Kimberly King, who sent word to the larger organization. From there, it went to the CFA API Caucus, and then from there, CSU East Bay professor Kim Geron helped alert Asian American Studies departments in the CSU and beyond. Soon after, the following faculty from universities statewide sent letters to President James M. Rosser and Dean Henderson: Florante Peter Ibanez, Library Services, Loyola Law School; Lorraine Dong, Asian American Studies, San Francisco State University; Sandra Stanley, Asian American Studies, CSU Northridge; Estella Habal, Asian American Studies, San Jose State University; Eliza Noh, Asian American Studies, CSU Fullerton; and Theresa Suarez, Ethnic Studies, CSU San Marcos. Other letters soon followed, each representing large civic groups and university consortiums. Most impactful was when Gay Yuen contacted Mike Eng—California State Assemblyman from 2006-12. Assemblyman Eng contacted me by phone for updates and told me that he would speak with President Rosser. Carol Ojeda Kimbrough, an adjunct faculty member in AAAS, contacted Congresswoman Judy Chu's office and took me to meet with her. Other faculty also contacted the office of Kevin de Leon, now Los Angeles City Councilman.

On November 29th, the day to determine the fate of the AAAS program, more than fifty students and faculty members packed into the Dean's conference room—with even more students outside holding signs protesting the suspension. I reported the outcome in an email to update and thank colleagues who could not attend the meeting, quoted below:

Quick Impression from 11/29 Meeting with Dean James Henderson:

We came away feeling stunned, frustrated, and saddened. The Dean's mind was made up. It was very clear that there was no conversation at all. He said very little and deflected questions. Immediate comments from students and faculty included: "getting him to say anything was like pulling teeth," "he was deliberately inarticulate," "the meeting was a fraud," "he was dismissive of our presence," "it was not the cost, it was not the numbers, and it

was not the lack of student and faculty interest, then what? You go figure out,” “Now he can say that he had a meeting as required by Senate guideline on suspension and then he can go ahead and suspend it.”

So, despite the eloquence of a broad spectrum of faculty leaders who wanted to nurture the AAAS program and move it forward, he was not persuaded to stop the suspension.

Dean Henderson said he will be on vacation until after Christmas and there was no deadline on when he will get back to us. We are now afraid that by cutting a viable program without justification who is the next to fall? Pan African Studies? Chicano Studies? Latin American Studies?

Student Protest: February 2nd, 2011

After the start of the new school year, there was still no news from Dean Henderson; diplomacy and fact-based arguments had failed. The response to the subtle—as well as outright—ways we had been dismissed ruptured into a full-scale protest.

On February 2nd, 2011, to celebrate the Lunar New Year, about twenty AAAS students put up a table in front of the Cal State LA Student Union to gather signatures and make protest posters. Mark Masaoka of A3PCON (Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council), now AAPI Equity Alliance, joined the group. According to an account given by student leader Natasha Khana-Dang, a large contingent of about forty students from Dr. Abdullah’s PAS class joined the initially small group. The students, carrying posters and chanting, marched to Dean Henderson’s office in King Hall, going floor to floor setting off fire alarms and opening the doors of classrooms on the way there, inviting others to join them. Gathering more students along the way, hundreds of students jammed into Dean Henderson’s front office and the hallway outside.

The staff told the students he was not there. Some students then jumped on the sofa and tables outside his office. Looking through the clear glass partition above the door, the students shouted, “He is here! He is hiding!” Many pressed the protest posters against the glass, chanting and calling him a racist.

Dean Henderson eventually came out looking visibly scared. Khana-Dang reported that he said it was not his fault; “He gave all the ‘political jargon’ that the administration asked him to say.” The students would not have it. They said they joined the protest because

tuition fees were going up and Ethnic Studies classes were getting budget cuts while the STEM classes were still getting a lot of funding. The Dean's staff called the police to disperse the protesters. The police waited outside the front doors of the A and D Wings of King Hall, and a photo taken by student activist Victor Interiano showed a fire engine parked outside the building. Khana-Dang said she directed the students to go back upstairs and to leave by the backdoors of the building's two other wings.



Figure 1: Students at the February 2nd Protest. Photo Credit: Victor Interiano

A few weeks later, Dean Henderson informed me that a new AAAS director had been appointed to replace me. The new director had fully reassigned time support on par with other department chairs, a tacit recognition that I, as the previous director of AAAS for six years, had not been adequately supported. Dean Henderson then took an unusual public venture into the highly opinionated realm of the *University Times* editorial page, writing a letter that was both specific and personal, blaming me for the low enrollment. In the end, what began as my attempt to argue against his decision to suspend the program resulted in my expulsion as program director. I was also not allowed to teach in the AAAS program.

My colleagues were shocked. One commented: "He kicked you to the gutter. He set you up for failure. You are the victim of a fight

between a lion [the president] and a tiger [the dean]. The dean is the hatchet man. He put another Asian woman [in your position] so he can't be accused of racism!"

Perhaps Dean Henderson thought I would agree with his suggestion to suspend AAAS. He clearly did not anticipate the resistance from both faculty and students, the large community of Asian American Studies scholars, and a huge number of community organizations and political representatives at large—all coming to rally support around a scrappy AAAS program.

Without any formal announcement from Dean Henderson, many colleagues on and off campus inquired about the status of the program. On May 21st, 2011, I wrote and posted a report titled "CSULA DIVERSITY UNDER ATTACK" on WordPress to honor and thank the supporters, who are acknowledged at the end of this paper.

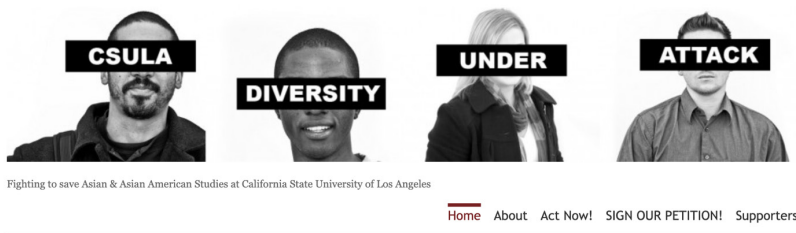


Figure 2: The banner of the CSULA DIVERSITY UNDER ATTACK WordPress website, where over 1,400 signatures were gathered on a petition to save AAAS at Cal State LA. Source: Courtesy of ChorSwang Ngin.

Has Anyone Argued Against Establishing the Program?

A year ago, Tim Tran, a student minoring in Asian American Studies within AAAS, asked a very perceptive question: "Has anyone argued against establishing the program?" This is a question Lena Chao and I had discussed throughout our long struggle to win equity for AAAS, even before 2010-11; the real issue was administrative ineptitude and neglect. For instance, Lena Chao and I had personally—and repeatedly—met with the administration to request support for building the AAAS program in its early years, but to no avail. When Lena Chao tried to disperse remaining scholarship funds from the Asian Support Dinner she organized in 1998, the funds had disappeared into some university accounting black hole. When Gay Yuen, mentioned

earlier, tried to solicit funds from the Cal State LA President to organize the luncheon for Asian faculty and staff around the same time, the President's Office told her "not to go near the president with anything about Asia."

When another proposal I had written to support AAAS—this time on "Asia at Cal State LA" to the Freeman Foundation in 2005—failed to receive an award, Fred Wells of University Development, who had helped us with a previous grant proposal to the Ford Foundation, told me the Freeman Foundation informed him that reviewers liked my proposal. Though they noted they planned to use it as a model for their future request for proposals, he relayed the insight that "we could have received the major grant if the provost had supported us by giving the Foundation a phone call."

With these and many other frequent encounters of negativity from the Cal State LA administration towards anything about Asia and Asian Americans, it was extremely disappointing, but there was no recourse. When the large contingent of faculty and student leaders told Dean Henderson they were willing to work with him at the beginning of the AAAS suspension negotiation, his reluctance to meet, to provide an explanation, or to negotiate only led others to conclude that he was a racist. Perhaps he thought, Why should I care? Asian Americans are racialized as a model minority. They do not protest, would not create trouble for him, and after all, his ignorance, benign neglect, and outright refusal to engage had not cost him his job.

In the end, though, his hubris as a dean cost him his credibility. The student protest and the responses from all over the CSU system and beyond were the price of that refusal to engage. Dean Henderson's lack of transparency and his inability to support AAAS politicized and awakened a whole community of faculty and students and rallied both the public and politicians for a just cause. In the end, it was not due to our hard work alone, but the more direct and public strategies of protests, public shaming, potential notoriety, and activism led by more politically awakened and experienced faculty and students using their political power that saved AAAS, as made clear in a recent paper by Melina Abdullah who was then-Chair of PAS (Abdullah, 2020).

Despite being expelled from AAAS by the dean in 2011 and forbidden to teach in the program, the relationships I built with many individuals and the community over the years continued. When Dr. Villalpando convened a meeting in 2019 to establish the CoES, I

was invited to both join PAS, CLS, and AAAS faculty in drafting the proposal for the CoES and play a major role leading the Curriculum Committee. Today, I continue to serve on various hiring and faculty review committees in CoES.

Another significant relationship that endured despite the expulsion were those with individuals and groups in the larger Asian community who collaborated with us to build and nurture a new AAAS program. These relationships are not based on our academic and institutional responsibilities, but reflected our embrace of shared values of love, care, and respect for individuals in the community who supported our vision to teach the young generations about Asia and Asian America.

CONCLUSION

When I started building the AAAS program thirty years ago, there was no faculty line, no budget, and little faculty interest or administrative support. With the vision of a few key faculty members and the support of external grants, we were finally able to establish the AAAS program. When we were threatened with program suspension, we discovered many allies waiting in the wings to support us. This might not be the experience of other universities offering Asian American Studies today, but there are important lessons from this long struggle. My reflections on the possibilities ahead for AAAS and the CoES at Cal State LA are very much connected to the recent legislative restrictions on discussing race in the classroom and the Supreme Court's banning of college admissions based on race (*SFFA v. Harvard*, 2023; *SFFA v. UNC*, 2023). Given the protection provided by AB 1460, there are opportunities as well as challenges ahead for AAAS. These include the gift of AB 1460, the problematics of the idea of race, and the importance of culture through the stories of everyday life of Asian Americans.

The gift of AB 1460

When AB 1460 made Ethnic Studies a graduation requirement, it provided stability of student enrollment. Recalling the past struggles with trying to offer AAAS courses, the legal mandate of AB 1460 meant that faculty could legitimately offer AAAS and other Ethnic Studies courses without worrying about them being dropped or rejected by the administration. The legal support for Ethnic Studies also meant that Cal State LA was required to hire Asian American

Studies scholars for the first time in its history. This resulted in the hiring of four new faculty members: two in 2020, and two during Fall of 2023. We now have a small community of AAAS scholars to nurture the growth of the department and to work on the challenges ahead. Housing AAAS in CoES—which was probably spurred by the legal mandate of Ethnic Studies—also provides a convenient and immediate platform to rally against any future threats of suspension or closure.

Within this context of stability is the potential opportunity to work with other units in the CoES. One of the most exciting moments in the founding of AAAS, from my experience, was the team-teaching of Comparative Ethnic Studies with my colleagues from Area and Ethnic Studies. In this team-teaching course (taught between 2011-13), the four faculty—Dr. C.R.D. Halisi from PAS, Michael Soldatenko from CLS, Enrique Ochoa from History/LAS, and me representing AAAS—would meet the students in the same classroom at the same time. Organized like a presentation at a panel, each of us would give a lecture based on our expertise then engage in conversation with each other and with the students on the topic of the day. Students in the class were able to learn about the different perspectives and observe our real-life collegial civility, whether in agreement or disagreement.

The problematics of the idea of race

The opportunity for analyzing Asian Americans and Latinos from a comparative perspective was an important question my former colleague Dr. Rudolfo Torres and I had raised decades ago. In the racialized paradigm of representing African Americans as “Blacks” and peoples of European descent as “Whites,” how do we discuss Asian Americans and Latinx people without reinscribing them with racialized terminologies?

Since the creation of the idea of “race” to classify human beings by Linnaeus in 1735, the use of “race” persists despite evidence from genetic science to refute differences between “races” (Müller-Wille, 2014; Goodman, Mosses, and Jones, 2019). The U.S. Census used the idea of “race” to categorize its populations and define their rights. For example, early Chinese immigrants were excluded based on “race,” and the Japanese, who were not “White,” could not become citizens and were hence denied land ownership in the 1913 Alien Land Law (Lopez, 2006; Ngin, 2018, 25).

We use race and ethnicity as convenient handles for discussion about groups. We also assume and judge others based on race and ethnicity, unconsciously or consciously. That is, we constantly racialize others by signifying their physical features, skin color, and cultural characteristics as “important.” Asians are racialized as the model minority, hardworking, and never complaining. According to an analysis by Jennifer Lee (2022; Lee and Ramakrishnan, 2022), the American public assumes that Asians are less likely to be victims of racism, despite national survey data showing the prevalence of anti-Asian assaults. She also notes that, not surprisingly, even the murder of eight workers at a spa in Atlanta, Georgia in 2021 was quickly forgotten. If these horrible murders are invisible, what is the nature of racism against Asian Americans?

Based on the struggles in building AAAS at Cal State LA and the violence endured by victims of anti-Asian hate, we must continue to provide evidence of contemporary rebuffs, microaggressions, and violence.⁴ Today, we must directly confront the challenges of quantifying racism when Asian Americans are viewed as both as racially privileged and also victims of anti-Asian violence.

The importance of culture and tradition through everyday stories

At the same time, the story of Asian Americans is not merely the model minority myth or victimization. One of the canons of Asian American Studies is the inclusion of the community. Asian American Studies scholars have advocated for diverse communities—from farm workers to sweatshop workers. Today, we must focus on the diverse and nuanced voices of the Cantonese-speaking home healthcare workers, the high-tech Indian engineers of Silicon Valley, the Hmong farmers in California’s Central Valley, the Vietnamese hip-hop performers at local talent shows, the Korean/Mexican fusion taco vendors in Los Angeles, and the restaurant dumpling makers everywhere. The same sweatshop workers are not unionized, not at the front of the marches and protests, nor trained to interrogate the problematics of race and racism. For example, in the backyard of Cal State LA, the San Gabriel Valley is home to a burgeoning Asian population; the communities of immigrants, asylum seekers, entrepreneurs, millionaires, investors, high-tech workers and students have grown beyond the “First Suburban Chinatown” into a region with complexities upon many layers of other complexities based on geography, nation, political ideology, legal status, faiths, cultures, and class (Fong, 1994).

What gives joy to any human is an acknowledgement of a person's presence through their foods and rituals, songs and poetry, art and dance, and designs on blogs and social media that all define their identity—that reveal tremendous creativity, untold struggles, as well as a desire for belonging. That sense of belonging is increasingly localized in their American neighborhoods and places of commercial transactions, blending old traditions with new ingredients by building houses of worship, heritage language schools, tutoring centers, boba teahouses, and restaurants that cater to the tastes of home but also as offerings of their cultures with others in their new homeland. This can be summed up by a waitstaff in San Gabriel Valley who told me, “We are very happy when non-Asians come to eat our food.” We must continue to tell the new stories that are rooted in our commonalities and our new identities, and continue to build relationships with others for mutual support.

Asian Americans do not exist in isolation. We are integrated into the larger community as neighbors and friends, employers and employees, producers and consumers, service providers and clients, and a myriad of other relationships. There is no single story. Today, Asian American Studies scholars must go beyond our “origin” story based on past exclusion and find a balance between rallying for a more fair and just society, as well as beyond the need to examine the conundrum posed by the problematics of “race” and the real threat of racism. Capturing and presenting these new voices through the stories of a more multifaceted and complex Asian American population will help to avoid essentializing Asian Americans as just model minorities or the victims behind the Stop Asian Hate campaign.

These suggestions presented here—seeking opportunities for collaboration with related programs in Ethnic Studies, researching into the problematics of the idea of race as it affects Asian Americans, and embracing the vibrance of Asian American communities that comes from storytelling—require an emphasis on our relationships with other Ethnic Studies programs and disciplines, as well as with individuals and groups in the community. This focus on all our multifaceted relationships will expand our scholarship and portends a more promising future.

In this long struggle in the founding of AAAS, many people and organizations were involved. It is important to know that an individual's role matters. By keeping the flame going, a single person can make a difference in the struggle for a more fair and just society by including the teachings and learnings of Asians and Asian Americans.

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NOTES

1. Besides myself as the only full-time faculty, other members of the Curriculum Committee included AAAS faculty July Phun and Jason Chiu, who were both adjunct at the time. July Phun became our first hire in 2020 (along with Joy Sales) and Jason Chiu our 2023 hire (along with May Fu). Others included CLS faculty Felicia Montes, PAS faculty Nicole Vines, and AAAS Student Representative Hannah Wong. It was the Curriculum Committee that discussed and voted to refer to the Ethnic Studies College as the College of Ethnic Studies and use the acronym "CoES," as it rhymes with coalesce, an auspicious connotation. As a committee, the members prepared course modification for all AAAS/CLS/PAS courses so that they could be used to fulfill the Ethnic Studies requirement, among other tasks.
2. Two significant community members include playwright Mr. C.Y. Lee of *The Flower Drum Song* fame who "adopted" us and funded two Asian American writing contests sponsored by AAAS (1994-95). C.Y. Lee also deliberated with us the power of love through the play "*The Houseguest from Xinjiang*" (Lee and Ngin, 2017). The other is Elaine Chao Thomas, the founder "Joy Luck Club," an international organization to empower women. Elaine, along with her husband, Stephen J. Thomas of Thomas Business Law Group, are our connection to the Chinese-language speaking community in Southern California.
3. Some of the adjunct faculty were Carol-Ojeda Kimbrough, Allen Axibal, and Worku Nida during the early phase of the AAAS program. Worku Nida's research was on African businesses in China.
4. Many of these ideas are from my decades of work as an anthropological expert witness on the "race" of asylum seekers from Asia (Ngin, 2018) and my work with the Orange County Human Relations Council on race/racism issues in the community (See Ngin, 2023a; Ngin, 2023b). The unbelievable hurdles Asians seeking asylum protection face in the US are an obvious omission in the discussion on culture and are not discussed in this paper.
5. Dr. Lena Chao, a colleague in Communication Studies mentioned earlier, was a faculty participant in the NEH project from the very beginning. Beginning Fall 2023, she serves as Interim Dean of the College of Ethnic Studies.

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CHORSWANG NGIN is a semi-retired professor of Anthropology at California State University, Los Angeles and an award-winning author with extensive international research, consulting, and publication experience. She was a Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Socio-Legal Studies at Oxford University in 2019 and is an Honorary Associate of “Cultural Expertise in Europe: What is it Useful for?” Her focus is on “Cultural Expertise” on race.

ChorSwang’s book *Identities on Trial in the United States: Asylum Seekers from Asia* (Lexington 2018) based on her expert witnessing in asylum courts won the American Anthropological Association’s General Anthropology Division (GAD) 2019 New Directions Award for public anthropology. She was invited to give a Distinguished Lecture at the American Anthropological Association meeting in 2022 on “Who Gets Permission to Write and Teach What? Cultural Expertise on Race in the American Courtroom and Anthropology”.

She is also a playwright. Co-authored with CY Lee, *The Houseguest from Xinjiang* had a successful production in 2017.