

VISIONS

ensuring and building a stronger Asian American Community

Volume II
Issue I
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Brown University

Welcome to the second issue of VISIONS, a newsletter for the Asian American community at Brown University. For those of you who are new to Brown, we would like to take a moment to say hello and offer a few words about what we hope this newsletter can accomplish. Although the VISIONS staff and contributors are all affiliated in some ways to Brown University, we are a diverse group. In our diversity, we reflect the different communities that now make up Asian America as a whole. We hope this newsletter will serve as a forum to offer visions of what that diversity means, what it can become. We hope that some of you will also join us as contributors. We encourage feedback: responses to articles, ideas for future topics, and so forth. Finally, we hope that this newsletter, in its own modest way, can help all of us gain clarity: to see each other, to see ourselves- to offer Visions of Asian America.

Kisa Takesue
Assistant Dean of Student Life
and the Visions Staff

Are You Chinese?

John Eng-Wong

When I was growing up my parents said that we were "Chinese". My family alone, all 5 of us, accounted for a full one per cent of the 500 Chinese descent Americans in the 1950 census results for Connecticut. Of those 500, the few dozen I knew were from laundry families, some related by blood, who all had settled in a line from Greenwich to New Haven, a kind of rural Oriental pioneer network.

Our mainline connection to China was through Manhattan's Chinatown where the dialect of my parents' home county was dominant, and relatives, boat cousins, and neighbors regularly collected on Sunday. Here also were the restaurants that cooked in the fashion of the homeland and grocers who stocked the greens familiar in the markets of south China. The food part of being "Chinese" is a heritage I treasure, but I remember also dreading the immersion experiences of Chinatown visits when I was forced to sit for hours on end amongst strange faces in the midst of conversations I didn't understand.

Chinatowns and laundries largely were enclaves in this time. Visitors to the laundry where we lived and worked were few. And Chinatown commerce for the most part centered on the materials and services needed for Chinese businesses: printers for laundry tickets and menus, dealers in laundry supplies and equipment, and the foodstuffs necessary for restaurant trade. I was too young and unreflective then to think that these "China places" stood separate from the American social context that became more and more my main arena of life once school age arrived.

Living as we did in an affluent suburb to New York, my brothers and I were fortunate in our schooling. Chinese was spoken at home, but with the children only at a basic level. English became the main language for my younger brother and me. A wonderful public library sat a quarter mile from our front door. The comics from the Sunday News made me a regular newspaper reader. The radio connected me to stories, sports and the world often at the same time I ironed smooth the handkerchiefs or counted shirts for the wash. Language built a window for leaving the laundry and the life my parents controlled, but from another perspective it was a door blocking communication between my parents and me and the civilization imbedded in that language.

This may seem a little like pre-history. To be sure my coming of age pre-dated the invention of Asian America. And it is simply to say that this longer perspective, a gift and curse of aging, creates different angles on questions that college students from families with Asian origins now encounter. These are questions of identity and authenticity, about the meaning of race and ethnicity, the value of traditions and mother tongues.

I would like for Brown to be a place where these questions get serious consideration. When I was a student here that was not part of my experience. But I know a variety of chances exist to encounter what I believe to be a process of becoming. I have come to believe, not as my parents did, that blood and language inextricably tied you to an essential nationality, but rather that heritage sets a beginning and some values, but ones that are malleable, open to change and adaptation. Let this be my welcome to you to join me and others at Brown as we explore such an unfolding together.

John Eng-Wong, '62, is the Director of Foreign Student, Faculty and Staff Services

afternoon with vincent

Carol Huang '01

Vincent Harisaran, '93, is currently a staff member in the Office of Dean of the College, and the coordinator of the Resource Center. He is a South Asian American who grew up in Guyana.

Q: Can you describe your Brown experience and how it made you want to come back?

V: Well, I'll tell you what I did at Brown that really made my experience memorable. I arranged a GISP in anthropology and the study of classical Indian dance. It was the best course I had ever taken at Brown.

What I really liked about Brown was that it gave me the chance to bring in my culture and interest into my academic experience. When I first stepped into Brown, I was a shy introvert. But through my time here as a student . . . Brown definitely gave me a lot of opportunities. I was able to pursue my passion and pick up classical Indian dance . . . when I entered Brown, I found a group of Indian students who also have the same interest in dancing. We quickly formed our dance team. At the end of the year, we held a performance in which Pres. Gregorian also attended.

Q: Why did you choose to work for the resource center?

V: I enjoy working closely with students. When I first came here, there were no history courses in Asia and South Asia. So I chose to design my own courses. In the same manner, I want to encourage students to be active and take advantage of Brown's liberal curriculum. Therefore, I want to help students to design courses according to their interests and get the most out of their education.

Q: What is the major challenge you face in your job?

V: I think it's difficult to be everyone's minority. When I first took this position, I was one of the very few Asian American staff on campus. Therefore, I was called for lots of engagements: to do ALANA, hold workshops and attend meetings to represent the minority . . . I felt that I alone could not solely represent the minority. But Brown has improved a lot since then, and there are a great deal more minority staff working right now, which is great.

Q: Can you please tell me about the new resource center project you are working on?

V: It's a pilot program that we are working on right now. What we want to do is to merge the Tutoring program with the Resource Center in attempt to remove some stigma around the Tutoring program that it has to be one-on-one in a closed setting . . . The goal is to combine the strength of the Resource Center, such as study skills workshops, information on GISPs, and the academic support offered by the Tutoring program.

Carol is a senior this year; she likes to sing, very loudly.

Making Strides: The Year in Review

Karen Wei '04

Looking back on the pre-millennium hype, it can be said that we had good reason to build up this year. Specifically, in the Asian/Pacific American community, Y2K has been filled with progress, especially in the political realm.

Since November of 1995, President Clinton has given support to the American Battle Monuments Commission to build a World War II memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. In the spirit of these commemorations, 21 Asian/Pacific-American (APA) WWII veterans were honored on June 21, 2000 in a White House ceremony. Risking their lives and leaving their families, these victims of racism and internment chose to fight for America anyway. A significant step in the protection of civil rights, their actions help "to earn back those rights of full citizenship for all the rest of us." (Army LINK news)

Also this year, two Asian-American men, Norman Mineta and Bill Lann Lee, have assumed leadership positions in the government. On July 20, 2000, Mineta was unanimously approved to become the Secretary of Commerce, thereby becoming the first APA to serve in the Cabinet. As the Organization of Chinese Americans (OCA) expressed, the addition of Mineta to the cabinet gives the APA community a stronger political voice as well as making Clinton's Cabinet more representative of the population.

Lee also made American history as he was given the recess appointment of Assistant Attorney General for Civil Rights in August of this year. Serving as the "acting" Assistant Attorney General for the past three years, Lee will assume the position until the end of Clinton's term. Lee has served the United States in "addressing such pressing issues such as hate crimes, police brutality . . . and enforcing housing discrimination laws so that all Americans can live as equals no matter what their individual situations may be," says Daphne Kwok, OCA Executive Director.

With all these monumental events taking place this summer of 2000, we, as APAs, should celebrate these social and political advances. Not only are individuals in our community breaking race barriers, but we all are finally receiving the recognition we deserve. The WWII veterans, Mineta, and Lee are inspirations to all of us to chip away the stereotypes of passivity. The 21st century will be a time where we as APAs can redefine ourselves and progress further as an equal community in the United States.

Karen is a freshman from California. She wants to concentrate in biomedical engineering and still thinks that there's a bowling alley beneath Founce House.

EAST ASIAN CULTURE SHOW

JCA-KASA-HKSA-CSA-BTS

11.9.2000

Andrews

Dining Hall

Reflecting on the Past, Looking to the Future:

The Hmong Student at Brown

Cynthia Pong '04

There is a culture called Hmong. When I came to Brown a few weeks ago, I had never heard of it. And I know many Asian and non-Asian students alike are unaware of the existence of Hmong culture. I met Pang Houa Moua and Joe Hang (two of the five Hmong students at Brown) shortly after I came and immediately became fascinated with their stories. They explained their culture and some of their heritage to me, most of which, sadly enough, has since been lost. After the written historical records of early Hmong civilization were destroyed, the history and traditions have been passed down orally.

The younger generation of Hmong hears the stories told by their parents of Siberia and Mongolia — where it is fabled that the Hmong originated — stories of life in China, Vietnam, Burma, and in Laos and Thailand, before and during the war. But with this oral tradition, Hmong culture is becoming more and more blurred, and at the same time more and more valued.

The Flight of the Hmong

During the Vietnam War, the CIA recruited Hmong soldiers to fight on the side of the Americans in exchange for land, aid, American citizenship, and protection, regardless of whether they chose to move to America or stay in Laos. This, however, was not what actually happened.

The Hmong soldiers and civilians were ordered to patrol and protect the Ho Chi Minh Trail. They were fighting an extension of the Vietnam War on Laotian soil, in the country situated precariously on the western border of Vietnam. They fought the Laotian Communist group known as the Pathet Lao. But when the war ended, and the defeated Americans pulled out, the Hmong who had fought for them were abandoned, sitting ducks for the Pathet Lao.

They faced not only capture, but also being blacklisted as traitors and assigned to re-education camps. This persecution was the greatest fear of

the Hmong, and one of the main reasons they tried to escape from Laos. The Hmong had become refugees in a country they considered their own, shared with the other Laotians. The majority fled in the direction of Thai refugee camps that offered shelter and aid. Getting there, however, meant risking their lives.

Families had to flee for months through dense forests and mountains traveling under the cover of darkness. And if they survived to see the Mekong River and freedom on the other side, they still faced one last gargantuan feat: crossing the river. Many Hmong could not swim, and the river was wide and had a strong current. Families were torn apart: parents and children died or disappeared in the forest, in the chaos.

Those who survived were forced to live in subhuman conditions in refugee camps, but this was insignificant, as they were grateful to be alive at all. Later, many Hmong relocated to Canada, Australia, and France, but most of the Hmong resettled in the United States. The states with the largest Hmong populations are California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Colorado and North Carolina. Rhode Island has a substantial population as well.

Hmong in America

Today, living standards are much better, but at the same time, the Hmong face challenges daily. Leaving your homeland is perhaps one of the most painful things to do. And trying to make a new home in a country whose language and culture are so foreign to you only adds to the hardship.

The Hmong diaspora is tightly knit, and family, like other Asian cultures, always comes first. The younger generation of Hmong, like Pang Houa and Joe, has faced the challenge and pressure of helping their parents to adapt to life in America, which often means growing up too quickly. Older Hmong veterans, who contributed so much to the American effort in the war, have only recently begun to be recognized for their selflessness

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Organization Spotlight on the Filipino Alliance

Rolland R. Janairo '02 and Melissa Callejo '02

The purpose of the Filipino Alliance is to maintain and promote the awareness of Filipino culture and heritage at Brown University. They work actively in the Brown and surrounding communities, fostering a sense of pride and camaraderie within the Filipino population. Boasting a large general body, the Filipino Alliance, often simply referred to as "F.A.," not only represents the Filipino community at Brown, but also the peoples and communities of many other countries, including China, Japan, India, Thailand, and Laos, just to name a few. Their diversity allows the members of the organization to grow in knowledge of many other cultures, bringing forth a profound respect and admiration for other tra-

ditions and beliefs besides those of the Philippine people. They are firmly committed to the Third World community at Brown, and are dedicated to the promotion of unity and the embracing of diversity.

Recently featured in *Filipinas Magazine* (July 2000), the Filipino Alliance is currently involved in many activities. They are preparing for many events during Asian History Month, especially the cultural show, *Legends of the S.E.A.* FA is in the midst of starting a mentoring program, designed to aid the youth of the local community. They are also developing a Big Sibling/Little Sibling Program within the organization, designed to help the newer members of the Brown community to ad-

just to their new surroundings. They are also involved in numerous community service projects, and always find time to socialize as well. They are constantly updating their website, located at <http://www.slanted.org/fa>, which lists current and former members, as well as activities and events that the Filipino Alliance is involved in. So stop by, sign their guestbook, and see what they are all about. Any questions or inquiries concerning the organization can be sent to alliance@brown.edu.

Rolland and Melissa are both juniors and co-coordinators of FA. They've used their newfound fame only for good, never evil.

Visions

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Reflecting on the Past

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and sacrifices. This is a step in the right direction, but it still doesn't change the fact that most American citizens, Asians included, are completely unaware of people of the Hmong culture.

In the end, the Hmong survived, despite the persecution, the pain of replacing loved ones with cherished memories, and the hardships of starting over. The story of the Hmong is a story of strength and of will.

"Even though they came with nothing but their courage and integrity, they have used their free agency and the opportunities available to them...to create their own version of success." – Steve Nelson, sponsor of relocating Hmong families in America.

Much thanks to Padade Vue '02, Joe Hang '04, and Pang Houa Moua '04 for the invaluable contributions and inspiration.

The Hmong New Year is coming up in Rhode Island (the dates vary across the country) on October 7-8.

This story was written with the help of the Hmong Students at Brown.

Further reading:

[The Spirit catches you and you fall down](#)

by Anne Fadiman

[Tragic Mountains](#), Jane Hamilton-Merritt

www.hmongonline.com

www.hmong.org

www.hmong.com

Cynthia Pong is a freshman this year. She loves eating twinkies.

Asian American History Month

Deconstructing the "Twinkie"? 2000

Christine Moy '03

This year's Asian American History Month will prove to be an exciting and thought-provoking set of events oriented to unite the community through education, entertainment, and interaction. In a major attempt to rally a diverse and open-minded body of Asian Americans together along with the greater Third World and campus communities, this year's month has been redesigned into weekly themed segments to address a few (read: not all) issues and concerns related to the AA experience while also featuring the artistic talents of Brown students and cultural tastes of their origins.

Though AAHM is still in the initial planning processes, already an unbelievable amount of brain power, support, and excitement has been inspired and invested to make this coming month revolutionary and truly provocative.

Everyone is welcome to all AAHM events, so long as there is a willingness to challenge preconceived notions of Asian America in attempts to figure out: "Who the hell are we?"*

note:: *theme of 2000 Asian American History Month

Special thanks to:

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If you would like to contribute to *VISIONS*, have suggestions or comments or know someone who would like to receive this publication, please contact Kisa_Takesue@brown.edu, 401-863-3145.