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Why Anti-Racist Education Must Include Asian American History

Leanne Kang
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This is a commentary on why anti-racist education must include Asian American history, especially in the wake of increased hate crimes against Asians and anti-Asian bullying in schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first half of the paper discusses the issue and how the absence of Asian American history in K-12 and teacher preparation programs plays a role in perpetuating racism against Asians in the U.S. The second half of the paper presents how I have incorporated Asian American history into a social foundations of education course through two legal cases filed by Chinese Americans: Tape v. Hurley (1885) and United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898), landmark cases that have significantly contributed to the expansion of equal education and civil rights in the U.S. I also briefly describe the different pathways of Chinese and Irish immigrants who together built the transcontinental railroad and how this history illustrates the construction of whiteness. In sum, I argue that it is about time that we include Asian American history in our curriculum to undergird the work of anti-racist education. To teach Asian American history is to more fully understand how America’s racial order is reproduced and maintained precisely through the erasure and/or willful ignorance of histories like ours.

Introduction

During the COVID-19 global pandemic, which began in 2020, when then-president Donald Trump insisted on calling COVID-19 the “China Flu” and “Kung Flu,” anti-Asian hate crimes in sixteen major U.S. cities rose 164% in the first quarter of 2021 compared to the previous year (Levin, 2021). Between March 2020 to December 2021, Stop AAPI Hate, a non-profit coalition created in response to the alarming increase of hate crimes, received 10,905 reported incidents targeting Asian Americans, including verbal and physical assaults (Jeung et al., 2021; Yellow Horse et al., 2021). In January 2022, NBC News reported anti-Asian hate crimes rose by 339% in the last year (Yam, 2022). Studies suggest that Trump’s racist description of the virus did indeed fuel the violence (Darling-Hammond et al., 2020; Reja, 2021). On a personal level, the possibility of being targeted was so palpable that I lived in constant fear for my family’s safety, which added to the mental and emotional distress of dealing with the ongoing pandemic. According to Fadel (2021), “1 in 4 Asian households reported the fear of being threatened or physically attacked.” Yet, Asian Americans had few resources and found little support in their schools and workplaces (Abrams, 2021).

In fact, anti-Asian bullying in schools rose sharply during the pandemic (Jeung et al., 2020; Le et al., 2021). One incident made its way into headline news when a middle school student in Los Angeles was told by a classmate that he had COVID and to “go back to China,” and was then punched 20 times in the head when he retorted that he wasn’t Chinese. The boy had to be sent to the emergency room (Kumashiro, 2020; Namkung, 2021). Bullying during the pandemic was so
widespread that many Asian American students were unwilling to return to schools after the shutdown was lifted. One Asian American mother I know – mystified that her sons were not rushing back to school to see friends – discovered that they had been bullied for the virus. Incensed that none of her sons’ teachers had cared to intervene, the mother brought the matter to school authorities. According to a U.S. Department of Education survey published in March 2021, only 15% of Asian American students were attending school in person, compared with 49% of White students, 33% Latino students, and 28% Black students (Mitchell, 2021).

Unfortunately, the failure of school authorities to respond is putting a spotlight on the reality that for more than a century, adults, teachers, and other bystanders have ignored blatant racism against Asian American children. Ask any American adult of Asian descent and they will have some experience to share of anti-Asian bullying, ranging from physical assaults to racial insults and slurs like “Chink,” “Ching-Chong,” “gook,” slanty eyes,” “go back to China, and “do you know Kung Fu?” According to Chow (2014), “Ching-Chong” was hurled at Asian children as far back as the late 1800s. One taunt from the early 1900s goes like this:

Ching chong, Chinaman,  
Sitting on a wall.  
Along came a white man,  
and chopped his head off.

Written off as mere schoolyard taunts for far too long, rather than racial harassment in schools, the vast majority of Americans hardly flinched with the “Kung Flu” tweet nor was particularly vexed when several thousand people at a Phoenix church gleefully shouted “Kung Flu” at a Trump rally (Nakamura, 2020). Though it should have been unsurprising to us, Asian Americans were chilled as we saw in full view how little we matter in the broader racial conversation and experienced the familiar and repeated denial and insistence from the majority that these incidences are just harmless jokes, childish playground insults – not racism. According to Stop AAPI Hate, while adults were present in almost half of the 341 youth-reported cases, only 10% intervened (Jeung et al., 2020). In some instances, the adults were the perpetrators. What allows for adults, teachers, and the general population, to ignore anti-Asian hate? Why are Asian Americans so invisible?

While psychologists, sociologists, and legal scholars have long explained this phenomenon of Asian American invisibility through two key stereotypes, the “perpetual foreigner” and “model minority” (Lee et al., 2009, 2017; Wong, 2011), I argue that this invisibility is maintained through the erasure of Asian American history. The fact is Asians have come to the shores of the U.S. since the mid-1800s and have not only helped to build the country but also played a significant role in the civil rights struggle – their histories intersect with other racial/ethnic minority histories rife with White violence and discrimination (e.g., Lee, 2015; Lee, 2022; McClain, 1994; Okihiro, 1994). Yet, most of this history is not taught in our public schools and, as a result, U.S. society remains unaware of how, having internalized these harmful stereotypes of Asian Americans, it is complicit in racism. Thus, in this commentary for a special issue on anti-racist education, I argue that an important aspect of this work is to include and teach Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) history. As anti-Asian hate crimes continue to rise
unabated, this is a critical moment for educators to reflect on our response (or lack thereof) to the AAPI community and to improve our work.

The exclusion and erasure of Asian American history also helps to explain why initiatives focused on social justice are often critiqued for being limited or oversimplified in nature (Sleeter, 2012; Villegas & Lucas, 2002). Indeed, anti-racist discourse is often reduced to relations between Black and White people, rather than how other racial minorities intersect with the treatment of African Americans and how the U.S. racial hierarchy is maintained and reproduced. Lei (2006) calls this the “Black/White oppositional dichotomy,” which deprives us of “a more complex understanding of racism” (p. 86). The omission of Asian Americans also reveals how anti-racist education and other social justice initiatives are not immune from the influences of the wider narrative – still controlled by White people – of who is deserving of attention and whose histories are worth telling. Thus, anti-racist education needs to go deeper by confronting this reality through not only the earnest inclusion and studying of AAPI history but also simultaneously pushing for teaching a wider, more expansive, and truthful history throughout K-16 to undergird its practices. As an education historian who teaches social foundations courses for preservice teachers, I argue that teaching such a history is more urgent than ever – especially amidst the current crisis over teaching “critical race theory” in K-12 schools.

In the remainder of this commentary, I will further discuss the extent of the exclusion and erasure of AAPI history and how this feeds into the maintenance and internalization of the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes. Then I narrate a brief history of Chinese Exclusion, two legal cases – Tape v. Hurley (1885) and United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898) – filed by Chinese Americans that significantly contributed to the expansion of civil rights and equal schooling (yet rarely ever taught), and how this history is rife with lessons to deepen and undergird anti-racist education. I present this history for two reasons: first as an example of what aspects of Asian American history should be taught in a social foundations course for preservice teachers (though I urge for others to develop this history as it currently represents only Chinese Americans); and, second, to fill in the gap and tell the history that has been missing for too long. I conclude the paper by strongly calling for the explicit teaching of AAPI history to contextualize anti-racist teaching and practices, which might also require reprioritizing social foundations courses and teaching history in our education programs.

Maintaining Anti-Asian Stereotypes: The Exclusion and Erasure of AAPI History

For many Asian Americans, the Atlanta spa shooting on March 16, 2021 was a major inflection point. With the former president’s “Kung Flu” tweet in the early days of the pandemic, there was a flurry of brutal assaults on Asians. Then George Floyd was killed by a White police officer, launching protests across the world that many of us supported and participated in (Parker et al., 2020) Though we were extremely angered and distressed, still most of us kept a low profile. However, when the media hesitated to call a shooting targeted at Asian spas a hate crime, we could no longer stay silent. Young people, in particular, took to social media to broadcast what the mainstream media had failed to report and created hashtags such as #webelonghere to raise awareness.
It became apparent that two things were going on simultaneously. Asians were being scapegoated for COVID-19 and when people turned on them, they were subsequently ignored in mainstream media. The hashtag #webelonghere got to the root of the issue: Asian Americans are written off because there is a perception that they are not truly American – what scholars call the “perpetual foreigner” stereotype (Wu, 2002a; 2002b). As Tuan (1998) puts it: whiteness is American; Asianness is not. This perpetual “othering” not only makes Asian Americans invisible but also allows for scapegoating and extreme hate during national crises, often with violent outcomes. For instance, in 1982, as the U.S. economy reeled from a recession and competition from Japan, two aggrieved White auto workers in Detroit beat to death Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American man. That they did not distinguish Japanese from Chinese displayed an ignorance that is all too common among Whites. The brutal murder never made national news and neither man served any jail time. The judge in the case reasoned, “These weren’t the kind of men you send to jail” (Tseng-Putterman, 2017).

So long as Asian American history is absent from K-12 schools, the perpetual foreigner stereotype will live on. In her study on U.S. history standards in fifty states, Sohyun An, a professor of elementary and early childhood education, found only half included Japanese internment and less than one third included the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. An (2016) asserts, “Asian Americans seem to have almost no place in the story of the United States” (p. 259). An, living just minutes from where the Atlanta spa shooting took place, also told TIME magazine of the troubling absence of Asian Americans in the curriculum: “Kids grow up in Georgia and think Asians are all foreigners” (Waxman, 2021). Moreover, in Georgia, although the history standards cover the Pearl Harbor attacks they do not expect students to learn about the internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans (Waxman, 2021).

Such omission in K-12 history also perpetuates another stereotype: the “model minority.” When they are not seen as a national threat, Asian Americans are the welcomed “racial minority” or “honorary white.” Having achieved tremendous academic and financial success, Asian Americans are perceived as no longer facing “any barriers to economic, social, or political success” (Lee et al. 2009, p. 69). Unlike other people of color, it is believed that Asians do not experience racism or discrimination. Their children are also perceived as high achievers in school and, therefore, do not face any problems. Given that these attributions appear positive, the model minority is perhaps the most insidiously harmful stereotype for several reasons. First, it lumps Asian Americans or AAPI, approximately 50 ethnic groups into a single characterization, concealing some of the worst poverty rates among communities in the U.S. and the severe underreporting of the conditions of Asians in America (Lao, 2021). Second, having supposedly “made it,” the stereotype also makes it seem as if Asians do not experience racism or discrimination as other racial minorities do. Above all, the stereotype – when accepted and internalized – allows for the dominant group to deem which “minorities” are most acceptable in their eyes, a more discreet and less obvious way of upholding and maintaining White supremacy (Lee et al., 2017; Wong, 2011). For example, depending on their interests, White people can swiftly recast Asian Americans from model minority to perpetual foreigner – as in the case with COVID.

If Asian American history is absent in K-12 schools, it is also absent in higher education. Unsurprisingly, AAPI history is also missing in teacher preparation programs. Although most
traditional teaching programs do require their preservice teachers to take a social foundations course or a “multiculturalism” course that may cover some of the racial history of U.S. education. In these courses, students might learn about how Black Americans (and to a lesser extent Hispanic/Latinx Americans) fought for equal education and civil rights, illustrating the persistence of structural and systemic racism and the urgent need to focus on Black and Brown children. The experiences of Asian Americans, however, are rarely if ever mentioned or discussed.

To illustrate this point, in 2001 historian Eileen Tamura deplored “the lack of scholarly focus” on Asian American educational history and how this “neglect” was most apparent in history of education textbooks – texts that are most likely used by preservice teachers (Tamura, 2001, p. 65). When Tamura reviewed issues of The History of Education Quarterly (HEQ) between 1990-1999, she found only one essay on AAPI history among 152 essays (less than 1%) (Tamura, 2001). Since Tamura’s count, unfortunately little has changed. When I replicated Tamura’s method of tallying essays in HEQ issues between 2000-2020, I found only five more essays on Asian Americans among 320 essays (again, less than 1%). (And 4 out of 5 of these essays were confined to a special issue on Asian Americans edited by Tamura herself). If the HEQ, a premier journal for publishing historical works on schooling, is neglectful of AAPI history, how will such histories make their way into textbooks? And, though Tamura (2001) found a significant number of social science studies on Asian Americans, she expressed deep concern that there was little scholarship to provide a deeper “contextual understanding” of this racial group (p. 65). Therefore, college students preparing to become teachers are woefully ignorant of Asian American history and underprepared to address issues that AAPI students face.

In many ways, the extent of the absence of Asian American history in K-16 education is harrowing. But its absence in and of itself explains how stereotypes and racist logics continue to live on among White Americans, and even among Asian Americans and other racial groups. Thus, in the next section, I will tell the history that has been excluded and erased to further illustrate the points above and to provide an example of how AAPI history is interwoven among the broader U.S. history of race, civil rights, and equal education.

**Exclusion and Erasure:**

**AAPI History in a Social Foundations Course for Preservice Teachers**

The remainder of this commentary briefly narrates the history of two legal cases, *Tape v. Hurley* (1885) and *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898). Filed by Chinese Americans during the height of Chinese Exclusion, the cases significantly contributed to the expansion of civil rights and equal education; yet most Americans are unaware of them. The Library of Congress describes *Tape v. Hurley* (1885) “one of the most important civil rights decisions that you’ve likely never heard of [emphasis added]” (Thomas, 2021). History.com also depicts the case as “[…] one of the most important civil rights decisions you’ve never heard of [emphasis added]” (Pruitt, 2021). The Wong Kim Ark case is described by The Washington Post as such: “There is Dred Scott and there is Plessy, there is Brown and there is Bakke and Loving. But Wong Kim Ark draws a blank with most Americans” (Barbash, 2018). The fact that these cases are largely unknown illustrate Asian American exclusion and erasure. The cases are also about how and why exclusion and erasure develop, the creation of anti-Asian stereotypes, and how Whiteness becomes a key
criteria and standard for Americaness. It is a critical history that has been absent in K-16 curriculum and, thus, needs to be told here.

This history also fits the objectives of a social foundations of education course for preservice teachers, which also doubles as a U.S. diversity requirement at a public university in the Midwest. The purpose of this course, as stated in the syllabus of record, is as follows:

This course will introduce the historical, philosophical, and sociological foundations of education in the United States. Emphasis will be placed on the changing purposes of education historically, the legal and procedural expansion of schooling to an increasingly diverse student population, and the cultural competencies needed to teach all students effectively. Fulfills U.S. Diversity requirement.

In particular, teaching these court cases and the history of Chinese exclusion and erasure address both the historical foundations of education and the “legal and procedural expansion of schooling to an increasingly diverse student population.” Although the course does not explicitly call for anti-racist practices, it is implicit in the emphasis on “cultural competencies” and a broader commitment that is shared across the college.

Sequentially, this history is also told after students have studied the Black American struggle for civil rights and equal education, particularly during Reconstruction. In this account, there is an emphasis on how Black people made it possible for the ratification of the 14th Amendment in 1868, which, remarkably, eliminated the race-based definition of citizenship (of whites-only) and turned citizenship into a birthright (Anderson, 1988). Birthright citizenship allowed the ex-slaves to become full citizens with equal protection before the law – but it was also, in the words of historian Eric Foner, an “unprecedented effort to build an interracial democracy on the ashes of slavery” (Foner, 2015). In the history of American public schooling, the 14th Amendment enshrines civil rights and equal access to education among the different races. However, White people immediately began devising ways to thwart this progress (e.g., Jim Crow, Northern residential segregation). Importantly, this is a recurring theme that intersects with Chinese exclusion and erasure.

In 1884, nearly 70 years before Brown v. Board of Education, a Chinese American family filed a lawsuit against the San Francisco Board of Education for refusing their daughter’s enrollment in their local school. Parents Mary and Joseph Tape argued that the school board’s policy of excluding Chinese children from White schools was in violation of California Code 1662, which entitled all children admission to public schools. In many respects, the Tape’s lawsuit was remarkably audacious for its time, as it was the height of anti-Chinese sentiment.

**Chinese Exclusion: From Model Citizen to Yellow Peril**

Initially they were welcomed. During the first wave of Chinese immigration in the 1840s the Chinese were well received as a source of cheap labor. In 1850, the governor of California even declared that the Chinese were “one of the most worthy classes of our newly adopted citizens” (McClain, 1994, p. 9). But as the American economy faltered most notably after the Panic of
1873, attitudes quickly turned into hostility. Anxious white laborers began to claim that Chinese immigrants were stealing their jobs, though they composed of only .002% of the population. Political leaders began to openly degrade the Chinese, calling them ethnically inferior and immoral. The scapegoating and hysteria culminated in Congress passing the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which forbade the entry of new Chinese immigrants and the naturalization of those already in the country. While Irish and German immigrants were also arriving to the U.S. in great numbers, the Chinese were the first immigrant group banned from entry due to their race. During this period, anti-Chinese sentiment also erupted into violence and mass killings such as the Chinese Massacre of 1871, what some describe as the largest mass lynching in U.S. history (Lucas, n.d.), and the Rock Spring Massacre of 1885 (Lew-Williams, 2018).

Despite this hostile climate, Mary and Joseph Tape (Jeu Dip) were indignant and insisted on their daughter Mamie’s right to an equal education. Both had emigrated from China as children and by all accounts had thoroughly assimilated into Western culture: they had anglicized their names and Joseph dropped his queue, a single long braid of hair that Chinese men wore at the time. (See Figure 1.) They married in 1875, and Joseph went on to become a well-regarded businessman among both the Chinese and White communities in San Francisco.

**Figure 1. The Tape Family**

![Photo of The Tape Family](image)  
Photograph courtesy of Alisa J. Kim

However, the Tapes’ efforts to assimilate were not enough for their child to be accepted into their neighborhood school. In fact, key to *Chinese exclusion* was White Americans establishing the perception that the Chinese were unassimilable and suspicious outsiders whose first allegiance was to their country of origin. The justices of the Supreme Court who upheld the Chinese Exclusion Act equated Chinese immigration with acts of war – that it was an act of “aggression and encroachment” even though there was no actual conflict with China at the time (Wu, 2002b, p. 92). Thus, Chinese exclusion is a critical turning point in America’s racial history. First, White people falsely blamed and scapegoated the Chinese for the country’s
economic woes. Then, to maintain Whiteness, they swiftly recast the Chinese from model citizen to a foreign threat to national security, or what they began to call “yellow peril” (which they would later use to describe Japanese Americans in the early twentieth century as well).

Yellow peril was central to the portrayal of the Chinese as foreign encroachment, including characterizations of the Chinese spreading filth and disease in cities. In 1885, a San Francisco health officer described Chinatown as a “social, moral, and political curse to the community” (Wang, 2020). White Americans also perceived Chinese women as sex workers. During the Tape case, the Superintendent alleged that if allowed enrollment, the Chinese would all lie about being born in this country, overrun the schools, and the girls would attend schools just to learn English to increase their market value as prostitutes (McClain, 1994). Herein the enduring stereotypes of model minority, on the one hand, and the perpetual外国er, on the other, began to emerge and were seared into our cultural fabric.

Despite the rising hate against the Chinese, remarkably the California Supreme Court ruled in the Tapes’ favor. The court stated, “it would be unjust to levy a forced tax upon Chinese residents to help maintain our schools, and yet prohibit their children born here from education in those schools” (Staff, 2018). But more significantly, the court agreed with the Tapes that the school board had violated Mamie’s right to equal protection under the 14th Amendment. Importantly, the ruling for an Asian American family served as a test case for the 14th Amendment, which was the culmination of the Black struggle to dismantle slavery and racism. What was enshrined in the 14th Amendment was what the Tapes knew and understood intrinsically: they had every right to equal education because they knew themselves and their children to be American.

The victory was, however, short-lived. Mamie and her siblings never attended their neighborhood school. Seizing on education codes that permitted schools to exclude children who had “filthy or vicious habits, or children with contagious or infectious diseases” (Lee, 2015, p. 83), the school board claimed that Mamie lacked a certificate of vaccination. Moreover, the board of education pushed the state to pass a special provision to establish separate schools for “children of Chinese and Mongolian descent” (Staff, 2018). In response, Mary Tape decried,

> I see that you are going to make all sorts of excuses to keep my child out of Public Schools...Is it a disgrace to be born a Chinese? Didn’t Go[d] make us all!!! What right! Have you to bar my children out of the schools because she is of Chinese Descen[t]. (Lee, 2015, p. 83)

In 1902, Chinese Americans would again challenge segregated schooling but failed in the face of “separate but equal” doctrine established by Plessy v. Ferguson (1896). Segregated schools for the Chinese would last well into the 20th century (McClain, 1994).

**Whiteness is American, Asianness is Not**

Though Chinese American children would remain in segregated schools, Tape v. Hurley (1885) had set an important precedent, laying the legal groundwork for Brown v. Board of Education (1954). Moreover, the constitutional status of birthright citizenship was reaffirmed again in 1898 in the ruling of United States v. Wong Kim Ark. This time, the U.S. Supreme Court took up the
case filed by Wong Kim Ark, a Chinese American man who argued he was unlawfully forbidden entry after a trip to China. Once again, citing the 14th Amendment, the court ruled in Wong Kim Ark’s favor. The justice who wrote the majority opinion clearly understood the racial implications had they ruled the other way around:

To hold that the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution excludes from citizenship the children, born in the United States, of citizens of subjects of other countries would be to deny citizenship to thousands of persons of English, Scotch, Irish, German, or other European parentage who have always been considered and treated as citizens of the United States. (Barbash, 2018)

In other words, the Chinese were not the only immigrants whose children born in the United States were now U.S. citizens and protected by the law – so were the children of European immigrants pouring into the country. Clearly, the Chinese were in question only because of their race.

Together, Tape v. Hurley (1885) and United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898), are some of the most important civil rights decisions in U.S. history, allowing for the legal and procedural expansion of schooling to an increasingly diverse student population. But just like with the ratification of the 14th Amendment and how White Americans retaliated against Black progress, so they did with the Chinese by enforcing and prolonging Chinese Exclusion while negotiating Whiteness.

The vastly different pathways of Chinese and Irish immigrants illustrate how Whiteness became a regulative ideal while simultaneously closing the country off from non-White immigrants. Roughly entering the U.S. at the same time, Chinese and Irish immigrants built the transcontinental railroad, contributing to the westward expansion of the U.S. Both were reviled foreigners at first. So-called “native” White Americans looked upon the Irish with derision, referring to them as lazy savages who would rather beg than work (Takaki, 1994). White Protestants feared Irish immigration would lead to a papal takeover. A political cartoon from the 1860s entitled, “The Great Fear of the Period,” depicts an Irishman and a Chinaman swallowing up Uncle Sam, a metaphor for their takeover of America, illustrating just how much both were feared and reviled. (See Figure 2.) However, in the last panel, we see the Chinaman in the process of swallowing up the Irishman, which suggests how the Chinese were seen as the ultimate threat. As historian Ronald Takaki puts it, the Irish had a “distinct advantage” of their complexion (Takaki, 1993, p. 9). In his book, How the Irish Became White, Noel Ignatiev argues how the eventual acceptance of the Irish demonstrates how Whiteness is not a biological fact but rather a social construct—negotiable and contingent (Ignatiev, 1995; also see Kang, 2019; Mondon & Winter, 2019). Similarly, Italians, Germans, and Polish immigrants would also gradually become accepted as White, and therefore American (Woolf, 2015). Through Chinese exclusion and the creation of anti-Asian stereotypes, the Chinese, on the other hand, would be made aliens. And Whiteness became a regulative ideal for who is imagined as an American, even when the race-based definition of American citizenship was legally eliminated during this period.
Sustained until 1943, Chinese Exclusion also worked in sharply reducing the Chinese American population and, not to mention, set a precedent for immigration restrictions on other

Figure 2. “The Great Fear of the Period” published by White & Bauer, circa 1860s

“undesirable” groups (e.g., Middle Easterners, Hindu and East Indians, and the Japanese; Staff, 2018). For a time, there were not enough Asian Americans to assert our stories until the next wave of immigration. In fact, it was the second-generation Asian American college students in the 1960s and 1970s – a result of a “post-World War II Asian American baby boom” – joined activist movements that led to the establishment of Asian American studies (Lee, 2022, p. 15). However, by this time the perception of Asians as foreigners were well internalized while few would question the Americanness of European immigrants and their descendants.

For too long, these cases – *Tape v. Hurley* (1885) and *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) – and the history of Chinese exclusion have been hidden. They must be unearthed now to more fully expose how racism is maintained and reproduced. So long as this history remains absent from the K-16 curriculum, it will be impossible to understand the insidiousness of exclusion and erasure, an underhanded way for White people to maintain supremacy and innocence through controlling the narrative. Without this history, it will remain challenging for people to recognize the harmfulness of stereotypes like the perpetual foreigner and model minority; or, for people, especially non-Asians, to develop a deep commitment to address AAPI issues. Without context, it will also be harder for individuals to uncover their own unconscious biases against Asians. The story of Chinese exclusion and erasure is rife with lessons that help to contextualize and undergird anti-racist education in all of its forms, and I leave readers with several more points that may have implications for their thinking around anti-racist work. I offer these points in the
form of questions as a way to suggest how history teaching can generate meaningful and incisive conversations:

1. What are the hidden investments of keeping AAPI history absent from our K-16 curriculum? Thus, how might the history of Chinese exclusion and erasure offer a robust lens through which to examine the ongoing debate about Critical Race Theory or efforts to ban the teaching of race in K-12 schools?

2. How does AAPI history intersect with the histories of other underrepresented groups, and how might such examinations contribute to a fuller and more complex understanding of the construction of the U.S. racial hierarchy, its maintenance and reproduction – as well as strategies for disruption?

3. How do Tape v. Hurley (1885) and United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898) shed light on how people of color have led the country to its truest expressions of democracy (Okihiro, 1994)? How might this accounting decenter Whiteness?

4. Given that the state often worked to “position early Asian immigrants as outside the realm of Americanness” through “exclusion and segregation in schools” (Lee et al., 2017, p. 505), what is the role and responsibility of public schools now? What responsibility do schools as state entities have towards their AAPI students?

5. What does the history of Chinese exclusion and erasure reveal about the ways in which politics and the economy drive how White people cast non-White groups and the formulation of other racist logics?

6. How does excluding and erasing AAPI history ensure that minority groups remain pitted against one another, rather than coalescing against systems of power established by imperialism, colonization, and White supremacy?

7. How will learning about AAPI history empower Asian American children and other children as well?

CONCLUSION

Children of Asian descent in the U.S. have endured violence and harassment long before COVID. It is time for educators to recognize how the downplaying of AAPI history have been harmful to Asian American children. Internalizing anti-Asian stereotypes have made AAPI children, families, and communities invisible, allowing for inconceivable acts of physical and mental harassment in schools, workplaces, on the internet, and in the streets of our neighborhoods. The time is also ripe to include AAPI history in the K-16 curriculum: Asian Americans (currently 6% of the U.S. population) are the fastest growing racial group in the U.S. Also, despite recent efforts to ban “critical race theory” in schools, legislators in Illinois and New Jersey have recently passed laws that will make teaching Asian American history mandatory (Chavez, 2022). Make Us Visible NJ, a coalition of students, parents, educators, legislators, and professionals advocating for AAPI studies in NJ schools, have been doing incredible work with helping to pass the law while educating NJ communities on their movement and cause.

I conclude with a strong call for the explicit teaching of AAPI history to contextualize, undergird, and deepen anti-racist teaching and practices and other social justice initiatives. This might require some of us in higher education and teacher preparation programs to reprioritize our social foundations courses, programs, and instructors, making sure to ensure that the racial
history of U.S. education contextualizes preservice teachers’ work. For those who wish to get up to speed with AAPI history, as so many of us must since it was missing in our own education, I not only recommend the readings that appear in this commentary’s references but also the following documentaries: PBS’s *Asian Americans*, *Slanted Screen*, *Of Civil Wrongs and Rights: The Fred Korematsu Story*, *Go For Broke: An Origin Story*, and *Who Killed Vincent Chin?*

Lastly, a word to this generation of Asian American students in K-16, and their parents: yes, Asian American history tells a story of how and why Asians might find themselves aliens in their own country – but it also – tells a story of Asians with incredible strength, courage, and agency, who fought for a truer democracy. In addition to the Tapes and Wong Kim Ark, there are countless others (e.g., Fred Korematsu, Yuri Kochiyama, Patsy Mink, the soldiers of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the students of the Third World Liberation Front). Asian American history is American history. You belong.

Author Notes

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References


COMMENTARY

ANTI-RACISM INCLUDES ASIAN AMERICAN HISTORY


