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The Development of Asian Studies in Higher Education

Part I: Asian Studies in The United States

A key word when discussing the development of Asian Studies programs is the word *fight*. Asian students had to *fight* racial prejudices for classroom representation via Asian Studies classes, student centers, and programs designed around the study of Asia and Asian Americans. After World War II, Asian Americans experienced widespread racial discrimination inside and outside of the classroom. They relived the horrors of Internment that transcended the experience of Japanese Americans and reverberated throughout the entire Asian American community. In addition, they were subjected to the fallout of the model minority myth that allowed for the overt persecution of Asians in the United States. Propelled by the social and political activism of the era, modern Asian Studies programs at American colleges and universities would not exist today without students joining together to *fight* for their much-deserved representation in higher education.

Racism has played a major role in the history of higher education in America, and Asian students were affected by this inextricable relationship. Various laws were enacted during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries that explicitly targeted Asian immigrants, such as the 1913 California Alien Land Laws that barred Asians from owning land, the Supreme Court decisions of *Ozawa v. US* and *US v. Bhagat Singh Thind* that restricted naturalized citizenship rights for East Asians and South Asians, and finally, the infamous Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 that was

the first significant restriction on immigration towards a specific ethnic group.¹ Because of these policies, Asian American students—along with other racial and ethnic minorities—were largely underrepresented in American colleges and universities until the passing of the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964. Proposed by President Kennedy in 1963, it was signed into law by President Johnson a year later with the aim to provide equal protection under the Fourteenth Amendment and outlaw discrimination. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act prohibited organizations that received federal funding from discriminating on the basis of “race, color, or national origin,” which thus applied to colleges and universities that received financial assistance from the government.² Additionally, Title VI required that fund-seeking colleges report racial and ethnic data for students, which helped pave the way for increased minority admission via affirmative action.³ Nationwide, Asian American enrollment dramatically rose to 107,366 students by 1970, as they were beneficiaries of the Civil Rights movement and the Civil Rights Act that protected minorities.⁴ However, as more and more Asian Americans began attending college, they quickly realized that higher education was an unwelcome environment due to underrepresentation inside and outside of the classroom.

Born out of student activism during a decade of mass social and political upheaval, the first major struggle for Asian Studies played out on the West Coast in the late 1960s. The story begins at San Francisco State College (SFSC), where even though Asian Americans comprised 7.9% of the student population, there was little in the SFSC curriculum that catered to them.⁵ A

¹ Sharon S. Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022), 10.

² Civil Rights Act, 42 U.S.C. § 2000d et seq. (1964).

³ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority*, 17.

⁴ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority*, 15.

⁵ Daryl Joji Maeda, “Campus Activism” in *Rethinking the Asian American Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 28.

white-washed program of study existed at SFSC, as the Asian American experience was often neglected through history and literature classes dealing with immigration, and Cantonese was not taught despite being the mother tongue of many Chinese students at the school.⁶ Although Title VI banned racial discrimination at colleges, minority students felt that the lack of relevant courses was, indeed, discriminatory. Alienation inside the classroom and lack of intellectual diversity was a problem for students of color at SFSC, which led to the notion that “non-white students would have to create a multiracial coalition and engage in direct action if they wanted to force the institution to change.”⁷

Thus, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) was formed at SFSC as an alliance of minority student organizations that collaborated to advance their causes. The TWLF was comprised of six minority student groups on campus, including the Black Student Union, Latin American Student Organization, Mexican American Student Confederation, Asian American Political Alliance, Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action, and the Pilipino American Colligate Endeavor, all standing together for increased representation through the hiring of more diverse faculty and special admission for students of color. Most importantly, the TWLF demanded to formally establish and assume control over the school’s proposed Ethnic Studies program containing Black Studies, Asian American Studies, and Native American Studies; this effort would bring multicultural voices into SFSC’S curriculum and provide a more relevant education for its diverse student body.⁸ The TWLF was active during the fall semester of 1968, organizing strikes, demonstrations, sit-ins, and protests to bring attention to their causes. However, by November, the multi-racial coalition eventually decided that in order for their voices to truly be

⁶ Maeda, “Campus Activism,” 33.

⁷ Ibid, 34.

⁸ Ibid, 29.

heard, a takeover of the institution was necessary for “real control.”⁹ Consequently, the TWLF organized a mass on-campus strike on November 6 that evolved into the longest student strike in American history. It lasted nearly five months until March 21, 1969, culminating in hundreds of student arrests and class disruptions for thousands of students.¹⁰ The TWLF strike was extremely successful, as SFSC established the first School of Ethnic Studies in the country, which included seventeen courses in Asian American Studies broken down into separate Pilipino American Studies, Chinese American Studies, and Japanese American Studies. During its initial semester in the fall of 1969 with a wide-ranging curriculum including language, history, and culture.

Just across the San Francisco Bay, students at the University of California Berkeley echoed the TWLF’s tactics and initiated a three-month long student strike in the first quarter of 1969. The Berkeley strike included demands similar to those of the TWLF—that is, “third world control” over programs involving minorities, including the establishment of a School of Ethnic Studies, increased admission for minorities, and financial aid for students of color overseen by minority student groups. However, given Berkeley’s reputation as a center of activism and unrest, and unlike the TWLF strike at SFSC, the Berkeley strike was much more violent, disruptive, and noisy, leading Governor Reagan to raise the threat of martial law to quell the 3,000 campus strikers with the National Guard. The strike came to an end with the announcement of a formal Ethnic Studies department slated to begin in the fall—a major win for students of color and the minority student committee that helped carry out the strike.¹¹

The development Asian Studies within the subfield of Ethnic Studies at both SFSC and Berkeley helped to pave the way for the national proliferation of academic programs devoted to

⁹ Stokely Carmichael quoted in Maeda, “Campus Activism,” 37.

¹⁰ Maeda, “Campus Activism,” 28-29.

¹¹ *Ibid*, 47.

“[providing] critical and alternative perspectives to traditional and oftentimes racist scholarship on Asian American history,” which was sustained during the 1970s through the emerging notion of Asian Americans as a distinct ethnic minority group with a unique historical experience.¹² The events at both SFSC and Berkeley also set the stage for future Asian Studies college curricula within Ethnic Studies programs, giving representation to the growing number of students of color on college campuses and establishing Asian Studies as a necessary field in higher education.

From its inception, Asian Studies has continued to evolve. Yale University’s formal study of East Asia dates all the way back to 1878 with Prof. Samuel Wells Williams’ courses on China. In addition, Yale founded its Council on East Asian Studies in 1961, which “encourages collaborative linkages across fields and departments and contributes to diversity across the curriculum and in the classroom,” and it is still in operation to this day.¹³ Asian Studies underwent an important name change during the twentieth century as well. At some schools, the study of Asia was called “Oriental Studies,” an outdated and pejorative word that is not used today. This rang true at Columbia University, where an Oriental Studies Program was in effect during the 1958-59 academic year.¹⁴ Oriental Studies became known as Asian American Studies, or simply Asian Studies, depending on the institution. The Asian Studies curriculum has changed dramatically over time, too. Columbia’s Prof. William Theodore de Bary, who taught in Oriental Studies Program, said that “[covering] Asia as a whole was certainly out of the question,” as

¹² Ling-Chi Wang, “Asian American Studies,” *American Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1981), 349.

¹³ “A Brief History of East Asian Studies at Yale University,” Council on East Asian Studies at the Whitney and Betty MacMillan Center for International and Area Studies at Yale University, accessed May 2, 2022, <https://ceas.yale.edu/about-ceas/brief-history-east-asian-studies-yale-university>.

¹⁴ William Theodore De Bary, “Asian Studies for Undergraduates: The Oriental Studies Program at Columbia College,” *The Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 1 (January 1959), 1-7.

courses on China, Japan, and Pakistan were only offered.¹⁵ As time progressed, Asian Studies programs began to reject de Bary's claim and expand to Southeast Asian Studies, which included the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand, thanks to promotion by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) due to growing interest resulting from the US's involvement in the Pacific during World War II.¹⁶ Perhaps the biggest change for Asian Studies has been its departure from underneath the umbrella of Ethnic Studies. Across the country, Ethnic Studies Programs have devolved into separate autonomous departments, like Black/Africana Studies, Asian Studies, and Latin American Studies, instead of all being domiciled into one branch of study. Despite the popularization of Asian Studies in recent decades, many colleges and universities still lack formal Asian Studies programs, with only 25 institutions in America offering degrees in 2019, including Duke University as the only school in the South.¹⁷ The history of Asian Studies in the US hinges on institutional racism, Asian American students' struggle for representation, and increased awareness of the minority experience for persons of color in higher education. Thanks to student activism of generations past, Asian Studies has thrived in higher education as a culturally-rich, relevant program that fosters an immersive study of Asia.

Part II: Asian Studies at Bowdoin College

The growing national consensus about the importance of Ethnic Studies made its way to Brunswick, Maine, when Bowdoin College began to consider the implementation of an Asian

¹⁵ De Bary, "Asian Studies for Undergraduates," 4.

¹⁶ Russell H. Fifield, "Southeast Asian Studies: Origins, Development, Future," *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (September 1976), 151.

¹⁷ Agnes Constante, "After 50 years, Asian American studies programs can still be hard to find," *NBC News*, June 27, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/after-50-years-asian-american-studies-programs-can-still-be-n1022331>.

Studies program during the 1986-87 school year. The first step to creating an Asian Studies program at Bowdoin was to secure approval from the Curriculum and Educational Policy Committee (CEP). Two scholars, Professor of Religion John Holt and Professor of History Kidder Smith, played integral roles in developing an Asian Studies program by working with the CEP to outline goals for the new program. In keeping with the interdisciplinary nature of Bowdoin's curriculum, Asian Studies would include mastery of an Asian language, concentration within either East Asia or South Asia, and work within a traditional academic field of study. Concern for the limited number of courses available each year—due to lack of faculty expertise and lack of current study abroad opportunities for majors—was expressed at the January 26th, 1987, CEP meeting. But Holt and Smith prevailed, as the committee voted to recommend their proposed Asian Studies major for faculty approval.¹⁸

After receiving the green light from the CEP and Bowdoin administration, Asian Studies needed to secure funding to find a concrete direction. A \$490,000 grant during the 1986-87 schoolyear from the Pew Memorial Trust “enabled the College to strengthen further its Asian Studies Program with appointments for 1988-1989 in the areas of Asian anthropology and Chinese language and literature,” which was essential for the program's survival.¹⁹ For Bowdoin, “finances and concern about finances going forward,” were of the utmost importance throughout the process of developing the Asian Studies program, according to Professor Allen Springer, participated in conversations about implementing the new program.²⁰ The Pew grant fueled the

¹⁸ Bowdoin College, “Curriculum and Educational Policy Committee (CEP) Minutes and Reports, 1986-1990,” (January 26, 1987) *Faculty Records, Minutes, and Reports*.

¹⁹ Bowdoin College, "Report of the President, Bowdoin College 1987-1988" (1988). *Annual Report of the President*. 5.

²⁰ Professor of Constitutional and International Law and Government Allen Springer quoted in discussion with the author, April 2022.

take-off of Asian Studies from a fledgling program with few course offerings into a major area of study with many classes and large enrollments. Funds established teaching positions in Japanese religion within the Religion Department, Chinese language, and South Asian languages, in addition to visiting professorships in more niche fields. Additionally, a grant from the Mellon Foundation during Asian Studies' first year at Bowdoin, the 1987-88 school year, made Japanese language and literature available to students in the future.²¹ These two grants truly paved the way for Bowdoin to develop, promote, and retain Asian Studies as a program at the College. Springer remembered that "there was always caution because of the soft money that was expected to harden," meaning that "the understanding was that College would pick [the costs for maintaining Asian Studies] up" after the Pew and Mellon grants eventually ran out.²² When the inevitable happened in 1990-91, Bowdoin decided to fund and establish tenure-track positions within Asian Studies and renew three-year contracts to solidify the Asian Studies program.²³ Bowdoin's Asian Studies program was further bolstered through a \$1,000,000 gift in 1990 from Stanley Druckenmiller '75, which meant that "for the first time since its inception six years ago the program [was] on a secure foundation," removing uncertainty surrounding its place at Bowdoin.²⁴ With secure funding and institutional financial backing, Asian Studies at Bowdoin was given the opportunity to flourish and provide increased curricular and extracurricular opportunities for students.

²¹ 3.13 Asian Studies: Records: 1991, "Report of the Committee on Asian Studies," September 12, 1991.

²² Springer, quoted in interview.

²³ "Report of the Committee on Asian Studies."

²⁴ 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, "Asian Studies Newsletter, Number 4," Winter, 1991.

In its first year, Asian Studies was chaired by Professor Holt and centered around the study of East Asia or South Asia, congruent to their proposal to the CEP a year prior. Students majoring in Asian Studies were “required to gain a general understanding of both culture areas, to acquire a working proficiency in one of the languages of South or East Asia, to develop a theoretical or methodological sophistication in one of the disciplines constitutive of Asian Studies (e.g., history, religion, literature, anthropology, etc.), and to demonstrate a degree of applied specialization,” highlighting how the major was designed with interdisciplinary intentions.²⁵ This was accomplished by weaving economics, government, and other social sciences into the humanities-centric program by virtue of Holt and Smith’s involvement in developing Asian Studies.

Thus, Asian Studies was deliberately created as a *program* rather a *department*, to foster the “fusion of all different disciplines” and create an all-encompassing study of Asia.²⁶ The difference, according to Springer, is that “programs by nature are inherently interdisciplinary and seek to develop almost an ethos within the program that brings things together,” while departments can tend to be more insular.²⁷ Asian Studies at Bowdoin hinged on a symbiotic relationship with various other departments through joint-appointment professorships between Asian Studies and their home department. While joint appointments were in their infancy at Bowdoin during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the model used by the newly-funded Asian Studies program succeeded in providing students access to a plethora of courses within the humanities and social sciences in an area of study traditionally surrounded in linguistics.

²⁵ Bowdoin College, "Bowdoin College Catalogue (1987-1988)" (1988). *Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks*, 104.

²⁶ Springer, quoted in interview.

²⁷ Springer, quoted in interview.

Still headquartered at 38 College Street, Asian Studies has evolved over time while staying true to its core interdisciplinary roots in both the faculty and student realms. Asian Studies grew in tandem with increased funding for faculty, which popularized the program and made it more accessible for students. By 1990, nine faculty members resided within the fledgling Asian Studies program, each offering between twelve and fifteen courses per semester.²⁸ As time progressed, more funding added tenure-track and visiting appointments for professors to teach full-time within Asian Studies, particularly in language instruction and the study of Southeast Asia. By 2001, the program achieved parity for faculty positions devoted to the study of China and Japan, which enabled the complete study of Chinese language from beginner to advanced levels.²⁹ Today, Asian Studies is home to thirteen full-time faculty who teach within the program, and five contributing faculty members who offer cross-listed courses between their department and Asian Studies.³⁰

Enrollment within Asian Studies and course offerings in general have both increased dramatically throughout the program's history. A few years after Asian Studies' start, Bowdoin graduated seventeen majors and minors in 1989.³¹ This number notably rose as the program began to pick up speed throughout the 1990s, thanks to increased funding and student enrollment in Asian Studies courses. By 2005, twenty-five students were majoring in Asian Studies, with fifteen students holding a minor, and more than a quarter of all students began to take courses

²⁸ 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, "Asian Studies Newsletter, Volume 1," Spring, 1990.

²⁹ 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, "Asian Studies Newsletter, Volume 1, Issue 11," Spring, 2001.

³⁰ "Our Faculty and Staff," Asian Studies, Bowdoin College, accessed May 7, 2022, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/asian-studies/faculty-and-staff/index.html>.

³¹ 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, "Asian Studies Newsletter, Number 2," Winter, 1990.

within the program each year.³² Four years later in 2009, the number of majors increased to thirty-six and enrollment in Chinese language classes soared threefold from twenty-five to seventy-seven students.³³ The popularity of Asian Studies was reflected in the enrollment of 584 students during the 2008-2009 academic year, representing a whopping 34% of the student body.³⁴ Required fulfillment of the Distribution Requirements, “International Perspectives” and “Diversity, Power, and Inequity,” (formerly “Exploring Social Differences”) certainly played a major role in leading students to take courses housed or cross-listed in Asian Studies, which highlights Bowdoin’s interdisciplinary curriculum and commitment to the liberal arts. For the Fall 2022 semester, Bowdoin is offering seventeen courses within Asian Studies—with classes cross-listed in English, Art History, History, Government and Legal Studies, GSWS (Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies), Urban Studies, Religion, Environmental Studies, and Cinema Studies—in addition to offering a full Chinese and Japanese language progression from elementary to advanced.³⁵

Bowdoin’s development of an Asian Studies program in 1987 was a direct response to a growing national consensus of its importance as a field of study. Specifically creating Asian Studies as a program perfectly encapsulated the College’s mission as a liberal arts institution by interweaving a variety of academic areas to create the most comprehensive study of Asia for students. The history of Asian Studies at Bowdoin is one that reflects the transformation of a

³² 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 2000-2007, Thomas Conlan, “Asian Studies Newsletter, Volume 1, Issue 15,” Spring, 2005.

³³ 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 2000-2007, “Asian Studies Newsletter, Volume 20,” Summer, 2009.

³⁴ Bowdoin College, “Bowdoin College Catalogue (2008-2009)” (2009). *Bowdoin College Catalogues, Course Guides, and Academic Handbooks*, xii.

³⁵ “Fall 2022 Schedule of Course Offerings,” Bowdoin College, accessed May 7, 2022, <https://www.bowdoin.edu/registrar/course-information/pdf-schedules/fall-semesters/sched-f22.pdf>.

group of course offerings relying on grant funding for their existence to a large and celebrated degree-conferring program that offers study abroad opportunities and cross-listed classes in virtually every major department. This history was made possible through sweeping Civil Rights reforms that allowed for minority voices to be heard on campuses across America and students' struggles in California during the 1960s that brought awareness to the importance of giving Asian Studies its rightful place in higher education.