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Studying Asian Studies

According to James D. Anderson, one of the most influential historians of higher education, racism was embedded in the nation's founding and affected its major institutions, including institutions of higher education.¹ As a result of racism invading colleges and universities, the history regarding the curricula of non-U.S. cultures and races lacked quality or was simply absent. Most notably, the scholarship on Asian studies has evolved significantly since its inception after World War II. The history of Asian studies after World War II can be divided into two main periods: the initial fight for the establishment of Asian studies in the 1960s and the renewed fight for Asian studies across the country during the 1980s and 90s.

According to Paul van der Velde: Asia is the area east of the Indus River up to and including Japan and Asian studies is seen as the set of disciplines and subdisciplines pertaining to the humanities and social sciences which focus on Asia, particularly the language, culture, and history.² Despite this definition, the field of Asian studies takes many different forms and names depending on the institution. According to William de Bary, there is no dogmatic core of Asian studies: "Circumstances differ so greatly from college to another - the nature of the student body, the qualifications of the instructors, the time and resources available..."³ Thus, Asian studies

¹ Lee, Sharon S. *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2022: Page 9

² Velde, Paul van der. "Re-Orienting Asian Studies." In *What about Asia?: Revisiting Asian Studies*, edited by Paul van der Velde and Josine Stremmelaar, 87–104. Amsterdam University Press, 2006. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt46n1pj.9>.

³ De Bary, William Theodore. "Asian Studies for Undergraduates: The Oriental Studies Program at Columbia College." *The Journal of Higher Education* 30, no. 1 (1959): 1–7. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1977840>. The name of the article does not reflect the current times, as the term "Oriental" is outdated and not acceptable. The field today is known as Asian studies.

encapsulates the fields of East Asian studies, Asian American studies, Oriental studies, and others.

Previously non-existent in the United States, Asian studies came to flourish following the Second World War. A response to discrimination faced by Asian Americans both during and after the war, Asian American studies was to provide critical and alternative scholarship on the history of Asian Americans in order to reduce the prejudice experienced by Asian Americans.⁴ During the second half of the twentieth century, Asian Americans experienced discrimination in and outside of higher education. Outside the classroom, Asian Americans were viewed as a hostile enemy, as a result of Japan's involvement in the war. This discrimination, however, was not limited to Japanese Americans, it also plagued Asian Americans in general. Inside the classroom, Asian American enrollment dipped sharply on campuses across the country during the 1950s. Notably, at the University of Illinois, President Willard was hesitant to welcome Japanese students back to campus following the war, for he feared backlash from other students and the board of trustees.⁵ This discrimination reached a boiling point in the 1960s at San Francisco State University when Asian American students joined forces with other minority groups to spread awareness of their plight. Thus, the social upheaval of the 1960s and the push for Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State University birthed the new field of Asian studies.

Feeling hopelessly neglected and unheard, Asian American students at San Francisco State University found little representation in the institution's curriculum. For example, literature and history classes largely neglected Asia. In addition, Mandarin was the only Asian language course available.⁶ Due to the lack of representation, students formed organizations, such as Asian American Political Alliance, Intercollegiate Chinese for Social Action, and Pilipino American

⁴ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 10

⁵ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 14

⁶ Maeda, Daryl Joji. *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2012: Page 33

Collegiate Endeavor to create opportunities for fellow Asian American students. These groups connected university students with the local community by screening films, hosting speakers, and holding discussions with community members, such as the Chinatown youth.⁷ However, this action was not enough. Consequently, these groups combined with the Black Students Union, the Latin American Students Organization, and the Mexican Students Organization to form the Third World Liberation Front, which called for special admission for students of color, the development of third world curricula and hiring of necessary faculty, and the retention of current faculty members.

Announced at a cultural festival celebrating the culture, music, and food of non-white students, the Third World Liberation Front (TWLF) swiftly challenged the administration to take action, but to no avail. Vehemently enraged, the TWLF commenced the longest student strike in United States history on November 6, 1968. The historic strike demanded students of color be “granted self-determination over their education and for college to be more accessible to students of color.”⁸ The TWLF Central Committee, composed of members of each student group, organized the strike and petitioned for 15 demands; for example, the administration can not discipline peaceful protestors. These protests included demonstrations, sit-ins, and occupying buildings. Later demonstrations escalated as students started small fires, burnt garbage cans, overflowed toilets and sinks, cut wires on phones and copy machines, and barged into classrooms. Class attendance dropped by 50% two days into the strike prompting a select group of professors to join the strike on November 13th.⁹

Another one of those 15 demands was the right to the self-determination of their education. The TWLF demanded institutional control over the proposed Ethnic Studies program,

⁷ Maeda. *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*. Page 28

⁸ Maeda *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*. Page 28, 29

⁹ Maeda *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*. Page 39

which contained three divisions: Asian American studies, Black studies, and Native American studies. By holding institutional control, the TWLF could deny administrative interference. This demand was eventually granted on March 21, 1969, when the school of ethnic studies, comprising American Indian studies, Asian American studies, black studies, and La Raza studies (today known as Latinx Studies) was established.¹⁰ Soon thereafter, the strike concluded on March 27, 1969. Academically trained professionals and key members of the community taught Asian American studies courses. Directly following the events at San Francisco State University, the University of California Berkeley instituted a similar ethnic studies program. By the late 1970s, many major universities in the West had adopted Asian studies curricula. However, as the students who participated in the strike graduated, the fight for Asian studies lost momentum until it was taken up by the next generation.

Despite the initial founding of several Asian studies programs in the West, the field of study was slow to spread to the East. During the 1990s, students at the University of Illinois regained the spirit of their predecessors of the 60s and protested for Asian studies. This renewed fight was a result of the lack of action by the administration for the benefit of Asian students. For example, the university counted Asian American students as minorities in diversity reports; however, these students did not receive the institutional resources as their counterparts. This phenomenon was not uncommon. The University of California Berkeley Boalt Hall Law School proposed eliminating Asian Americans from affirmative action, for the school claimed Asian Americans have successfully assimilated into American society, as Asian American students averaged a higher GPA and exam scores than their white counterparts. Moreover, Asian Americans were more successful financially than other minorities. In 1975, Boalt Hall eliminated Japanese students from affirmative action and limited Chinese, Korean, and Filipino students to

¹⁰ Maeda. *Rethinking the Asian American Movement*. Page 46

3% of accepted applicants. Later in 1984, the admissions office stopped considering Asian Americans as an underrepresented group.¹¹ Hence, Asian American students became “de-minoritized” after their successes in and outside of the classroom.

In order to combat this, Asian American student groups at the University of Illinois presented Chancellor Weir with a petition signed by several hundred students, faculty, and staff in 1992. The petition advocated for the establishment of Asian studies and the creation of a cultural center that would provide resources to Asian students, such as peer tutoring, and counseling services. In addition, the space would serve as a meeting space for minority groups and fight racism against Asian Americans by correcting stereotypes and disseminating information about the Asian American experience.¹² Later 1993, an Asian American alumni association formed to advocate for “Asian American needs on campus, ie Asian American studies curriculum, Cultural Center.”¹³ Jessica Chen, a vocal leader in the community, challenged her peers to be unafraid of politics and social activism and join the fight: “If we can spend half an hour getting ready for a 3-hour dance... we can spend one hour at an awareness meeting.”¹⁴ Similarly, this fight was continued at Princeton when the Asian American task force submitted a 14-page report requesting the foundation of an Asian studies program. However, this request was initially denied. Later in 1995, students engaged in a sit-in in Nassau Hall, the oldest building on Princeton’s campus.¹⁵

Unlike the success of their predecessors, both of these movements failed. At the University of Illinois, Chancellor Weir denied the petition by claiming that Asian American

¹¹ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 19, 20, 21

¹² Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 93

¹³ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 91

¹⁴ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 91

¹⁵ “A Long Battle Fought’: The History of Princeton’s Asian American Studies Program and a Renewed Push to Expand.” *University Wire*, Aug 16, 2021. Page 2.

students did not need a cultural center like other minority groups, for Asian American students performed better academically than other minority groups, like black and Latinx students. He continued to explain that the university already employed Asian and Asian American professors who serve as a resource and a role models for Asian students.¹⁶ Despite this, Asian American students remained undeterred and committed to the cause. Richard Chang, a member of the class of 1994, said that “we feel like if the University will not get the information out, it is our duty to educate the students and ourselves about issues concerning Asian American students.”¹⁷

Likewise at Princeton, Asian American student groups only experienced disappointment during the 1990s. Hope finally came in 2018, when an Asian studies program was finally established at Princeton.¹⁸ Thus, the second era in the history of Asian studies consisted of the renewed fight for Asian studies.

Similar to the history of Asian studies in the United States, the trajectory of Asian studies at Bowdoin College follows a corresponding path. The first record for the establishment of an Asian studies department dates to May 25, 1965, which is part of the first era in the history of Asian studies. While the fight for Asian studies in the West of the United States was nothing short of a fight, the proposal at Bowdoin College was much more peaceful and civil. The Committee on non-Western Studies, headed by Professor Daniel Levine, proposed Asian Studies: “a program of East and Southeast Asian Studies be inaugurated at Bowdoin.”¹⁹ Moreover, Professor Levine stressed that a Chairman of Asian studies be appointed immediately, for the chairman, along with other professors, will search for the additional personnel required to form

¹⁶ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 94

¹⁷ Lee, *An Unseen Unheard Minority: Asian American Students at the University of Illinois*. Page 96

¹⁸ “A Long Battle Fought’: The History of Princeton’s Asian American Studies Program and a Renewed Push to Expand.” Page 3.

¹⁹ CEP Committee Minutes. Faculty records, minutes, and reports, George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Volume 10. Series Number A01.07.02 Page 37

the department. This new department would build upon the existing courses about Asia and would be reviewed three years after the chairman has assumed his or her duties. However, much debate followed this proposal, as several faculty members raised concerns. The discussion ended with an agreement that the issue will be postponed and debated at a later meeting.²⁰

This discussion remained dormant until August of 1986 when faculty members once again considered implementing an Asian Studies program, for no formal program had been established. The departments of Art, Economics, English, Government, History, Religion, and Sociology, and Anthropology offered courses about Asia, yet the lack of a unifying program was glaringly obvious.²¹ A unified program would improve the quality of education and better aid students with interests in Asia. Similar to the previous discussion of 1965, the faculty proposed that the curriculum of the program would be built on pre-existing courses. Some of these courses included “Modern Chinese History,” which covered the history of China from the collapse of the Ch’ing Empire to the rise of the People’s Republic, and “Asian Frontiers in Chinese and Russian History,” which examined the political, cultural, and economic factors involved in the development of the Chinese and Russian frontiers.²² In addition, some courses would be modified and adapted to fit the Asian studies curriculum. For example, Professor Holt outlined a new “Asian Thought” course that would be heavily adapted from a previous religion course to provide students with an overview of the religion and philosophy of East and South Asia. The committee agreed that a discussion about class sizes was unnecessary until Asian studies was formally adopted.²³

²⁰ Faculty records, minutes, and reports. Volume 10. Series Number A01.07.02 Page 76

²¹ Bowdoin College Course Catalog 1986/1987 Page 83 George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library.

²² CEP Committee Minutes. Faculty records, minutes, and reports, George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Volume 4. Series number A01.07.04 Page 56

²³ Institutional Self-study 1986. George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Page 68

Unlike the past debate, Professor Levine did not lead the discussion. This time, Professors John Holt and Kidder Smith initiated the conversation. Professor Holt explained to the committee that the major would first be offered on a provisional basis for three years, after which a review would decide the future of the program. Students majoring in Asian studies would specialize in either East or South Asia, while also focusing on a language component. These students would need to complete eleven courses, including four courses of an Asian language, and an upper-level senior seminar. Students pursuing a minor would complete five courses in Asian studies; there was no language component to the minor. Studying abroad would also be a key component of Asian studies, with the Intercollegiate Sri Lanka Education (ISLE) Program and the New York-New England China Consortium (which sponsored a fall semester in Beijing), as the two main options. Professor Holt established the ISLE program in 1982 to immerse students interested in Asian religions in a local culture. A dozen other options, such as programs in Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and India, were also available.²⁴ Convinced of the need for Asian studies, the committee voted to recommend the creation of the program depending upon the college's "ability to find incentives to induce departments and individual faculty members to offer courses for such programs and in part on some support from outside funding."²⁵

Faculty rapidly embraced the program and the outside funding soon came in the form of a grant of \$490,000 from the Pew Trust in 1988, which allowed the new department to hire professors in Asian anthropology and Chinese language and literature.²⁶ Soon thereafter, a grant

²⁴ Bowdoin College Course Catalog 1986/1987 George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Page 83

²⁵ Institutional Self-study 1986. George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Page 68

²⁶ Report of the President 1987/88 George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Page 5

from the Mellon Foundation funded the teaching of Japanese language and literature.²⁷ Thus, Asian studies, housed in the garage of 38 College Street, was officially established at Bowdoin College, with Professor Smith serving as the first chairman. Professor Allen Springer, a Government and Legal Studies professor at Bowdoin College since 1976, participated in the faculty discussions and stated that “the core [of Asian studies] was going to be history, culture, and language.”²⁸ The first courses offered by Asian studies held true to this idea. Professor Holt taught “Literature and Religion in Modern South Asia,” which analyzed the writings of major religious figures and how the texts influenced the culture of South Asia. Furthermore, Professor Smith led courses about the history of China, including “Traditional China,” and “Problems in Chinese History.”²⁹ During 1986 and 1987, these classes were cross-listed with other departments; however, at the start of the 1988 academic year, courses were only listed under Asian studies, suggesting the program earned the approval of the administration.

Students eagerly enrolled in Asian studies courses. In 1988, fifty-four students enrolled in Asian studies 101. Enrollment for seminars was expectedly smaller with seven students in AS 263, twelve in AS 275, ten in AS 285, two in AS 370, and lastly one student in AS 401.³⁰ Asian studies advertised their offerings heavily during the first few years of its existence to bolster enrollment numbers. Announcements and flyers from 1988 to 1991 encouraged students to learn Chinese for business and cultural opportunities⁴. Furthermore, Asian studies sponsored various lectures, such as “The Myth of the Fortune Cookie” by Academy Award-nominated Asian American Film Producer Christine Choy, as part of the Asian Studies Colloquium Series, which

²⁷ Asian Studies: Records: 1991, Report of the Committee on Asian Studies

²⁸ Interview with Allen Springer April, 2022

²⁹ Bowdoin College Course Catalog 1987/1988 George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Page 105

³⁰ Report of the President 1987/88 George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library. Page 66

started in 1988.³¹ Faculty hosted informal talks by Fredric Wakeman, an Asian studies professor at the University of California, Berkeley, Stanley Tambiah, an anthropology professor at Harvard University, and Wu Jiulong, a member of the Chinese Ministry of Culture. An impressive photographic exhibit of Tibet from October 29 to November 23 of 1990 also acted as an advertisement for Asian studies.³² These events, open to the public, connected Asian studies to the local Brunswick community.

As a result of this advertising, enrollment in classes steadily increased. In 1990, Asian studies boasted that over a dozen students majored or minored in the field, and “more than a third of the entire student body fulfills its non-Eurocentric course requirement by taking a course on Asia.”³³ The next year, seventeen students listed Asian studies as a major or minor.³⁴ In addition to student enrollment, the faculty also grew. By the fall of 1991, nine faculty members made up Asian studies, with members of other departments contributing courses. Evidently, Asian studies at Bowdoin College swiftly grew from its founding and received praise from students, faculty, and the academic world at large.³⁵

In 1991, three years after the establishment of Asian studies, a Committee on Asian studies formed to report on the success of the program. The committee strongly recommended that Asian studies receive the full support of the college. Consequently, the college established a tenure-track position in South Asian anthropology, renewed the three-year contracts of Chinese and Japanese language instructors, and promoted a Chinese professor to the position of assistant

³¹ George J. Mitchell Department of Special Collections and Archives, Bowdoin College Library Call Number: A03.13 Volume/Box: 1 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1988-1991, Announcements and Flyers

³² Asian Studies: Records: 1991, Report of the Committee on Asian Studies

³³ Asian Studies Newsletter, Volume 1, Spring 1990 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, Newsletter

³⁴ Asian Studies Newsletter Winter 1990 Number 2 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, Newsletter

³⁵ Asian Studies: Records: 1991, Report of the Committee on Asian Studies

professor.³⁶ From here, Asian studies continued to dramatically grow. In the winter of 1991, Bowdoin alumni Stanley Druckenmiller, a renowned hedge fund manager and a member of the class of 1975, donated one million dollars to endow a new position in Asian studies.³⁷ Moreover, the headquarters at 38 College street continued to develop a small circulating library of some 600 volumes, mostly on China and Japan. The library also boasted two eighteenth-century thangkas (Tibetan religious paintings).³⁸

With the turn of the century, Asian studies at Bowdoin held high hopes for continued growth and development. This hope was soon realized when “the College received a grant from the Freeman Foundation to continue funding student and faculty research in Asia, as well as supporting the current position in advanced Chinese literature for another two years.”³⁹ The grant also funded Professor Nancy Riley, a sociology professor with interests in gender, to visit China for six weeks during the summer of 2001. With this grant, the foundation for “an outstanding Asian Studies Program at Bowdoin is finally, and fully, in place.”⁴⁰ Recognizing the tremendous achievements of Asian studies, then Bowdoin College President Robert H. Edwards authorized the continuation of instruction of advanced Chinese, allowing for Japanese and Chinese languages to be taught from the beginner to advanced levels.⁴¹

Four years later in 2005, twenty-five students majored in Asian studies, in addition to fifteen minors. Growth was not limited to majors or minors, for over a quarter of all Bowdoin

³⁶ Asian Studies: Records: 1991, Report of the Committee on Asian Studies

³⁷ Asian Studies Newsletter, Number 4, Winter 1991 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, Newsletter

³⁸ Asian Studies Newsletter, Number 4, Winter 1991 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records: 1990-1994, 1996-1999, Newsletter

³⁹ Asian Studies Newsletter, Spring 2000, Volume 1, Issue 10 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records 2000-2007, Newsletter

⁴⁰ Asian Studies Newsletter, Spring 2001, Volume 1, Issue 11 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records 2000-2007, Newsletter

⁴¹ Asian Studies Newsletter, Spring 2001, Volume 1, Issue 11 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records 2000-2007, Newsletter

students took courses in Asian studies each year. At all levels, twenty-five students enrolled in Chinese, and thirty-eight students enrolled in Japanese.⁴² In 2009, thirty-six students majored in Asian studies, and a further twelve students minored in the field. Language enrollment also increased with seventy-seven students learning Chinese and forty-five learning Japanese. Moreover, a total of 584 students enrolled in courses in Asian Studies in the fall and spring. Asian studies also presented its most ambitious schedule of events in 2009 ranging from concerts, puppet shows, film and documentary screenings, lectures, and art exhibitions.⁴³ Today, Asian studies at Bowdoin College builds on the success of the past and looks forward to the future.

With the world becoming increasingly connected, Asian studies provides students the opportunity to study other cultures and learn about the other half of the world. In addition, Asian studies equips students with the tools to better understand foreign policy, the global economy, and the relationship between Asia and the West.⁴⁴ The quality of education in Asian studies has grown dramatically from its origins in 1960. Today, the establishment of Asian studies programs in universities has greatly enhanced the study of Asian and Asian American history according to Ling-Chi Wang, a former professor at the University of California Berkeley.⁴⁵ Further, two generations of Americans have been educated with Asian studies available in institutions of higher education. A third is currently on the way. While the future remains uncertain, the

⁴² Asian Studies Newsletter, Spring 2005, Volume 1, Issue 15 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records 2000-2007, Newsletter

⁴³ Asian Studies Newsletter, Summer 2009, Volume XX 3.13 Department of Asian Studies: Records 2000-2007, Newsletter

⁴⁴ De Bary, "Asian Studies for Undergraduates: The Oriental Studies Program at Columbia College." Page 5. The name of the article does not reflect the current times, as the term "Oriental" is outdated and not acceptable. The field today is known as Asian studies.

⁴⁵ Wang, L. Ling-Chi. "Asian American Studies." *American Quarterly* 33, no. 3 (1981): 339-54. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2712470>. Page 340

foundation for Asian studies has been laid and the field of study will continue to be legitimized in the future.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Fifield, Russell H. "Southeast Asian Studies: Origins, Development, Future." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 7, no. 2 (1976): 155. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20070179>.