REVELASIANS

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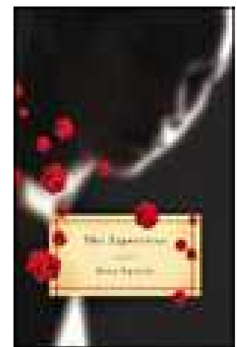

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The Spoken Word Revolution

By Hydie Kim

In between broken phrases, spoken word artist Helen Yum takes a dramatic pause, eyes closed and hands outstretched, before unleashing yet another barrage of carefully chosen and masterfully articulated words. Though said in her soft-spoken voice, each lyrical line of her poignant poetry falls fulminantly upon the ears of the hushed audience. Streams of words pour out of her mouth, seemingly straight from her consciousness, about topics and themes that evidently are intensely personal to her. Assertive and uncompromising with her criticisms, reflections, introspections, and opinions, Helen captures the rigid attention of the crowd and holds it for the short yet dense half hour of her performance. Those not expecting the tempest of words delicately crafted to convey her thoughts on child and sexual abuse, the Los Angeles Riots, and her ethnic identity, are awed as they submit to the power of her poetry.

With the crowd wondering how she could possibly compare to Helen's moving performance, Alison Park approaches the front of the cozy room and proceeds to charm, tease, and dazzle the crowd with her confidence and attitude of self-awareness. Friendly and engaging, Alison sings and talks to the audience between her pieces on Asian American identity, women's issues, and heartbreak. As she speaks of her personal relationships and experiences, an almost cathartic release seems to come over her and sweep onto the audience. Her passion and grace combine to produce a hard-hitting yet empowering impact on those listening.

Professional Korean American poets Helen Yum and Alison Roh Park at the KASY Poetry Jam on February 21, 2003 (photo: KASY)

The eloquence with which these two poets speak evokes new-found inspiration and admiration in listeners for the art of spoken word. *Asian Week,* a weekly special interest magazine devoted to Asian American issues, spotlighted spoken word as its main feature article in June of 2001. Neela Banerjee wrote: "With its blend of hip-hop stylistics, political empowerment, anger and beauty, spoken word has become a voice for America's youth, activists, and those typically seen as voiceless. Spoken word, at its simplest, is nothing more than the oral tradition of poetry. But in the coffeehouses and bars across the country, where poets step up to microphones to speak memorized verses of personal truths, this scene becomes the nexus of art, activism and culture for an entire generation."

Asian Americans all over the country are stepping up to the microphone, displaying their skills and lighting their own individual paths to success and recognition. Teams of poets that compete in regional and national poetry slams where popularity among the audience determines the scores have been growing in number in the Asian American community. Pan Asian spoken word groups like I Was Born with Two Tongues (Chicago), Isangmahal Arts Kollective (Seattle), Feedback (NYC), Mongrel (Minneapolis), and Yellow Rage (Philadelphia) have been gaining fame and popularity across the nation. In addition, several Asian American spoken word poets have been featured in widely acclaimed venues such as Ishle Park in HBO's Russell Simons presents Def Poetry Jam, and Beau Sia in Russell Simons presents Def Poetry Jam on Broadway. With the growing interest in spoken word among young adults and teenagers, numerous writing workshops such as the Asian American Writers Workshop in New York City and Youth Speaks in Oakland, California, have formed programs for budding poets to nurture their talents and to encourage the development of their writing.

This spoken word movement is on the rise even in the Asian American community here at Yale. On Friday, February 21, 2003, the House, venue to the first poetry jam co-sponsored by the Korean American Students of Yale, the Asian American Students Alliance, the Asian/Pacific American Heritage Series, the Asian American Cultural Center, and the Women's Center, was packed with students who arrived interested in hearing some poetry and left inspired yet unsatisfied, craving more, and whose hunger is stubbornly never to be satiated. Hopefully with more and more students exposed to new forms of art and expression such as spoken word, the Asian American community at Yale will move closer to solidarity and empowerment through the arts. The talents and passions of Yale students promise creative growth, innovation and lateralization within the Asian American community that is reflective of the greater movement currently in action across the nation. Whether it is to speak one's mind on marginalization, exoticization, and Asian stereotypes, to share one's personal experiences of love, life and politics, or to encourage others who are fighting for what they believe in, spoken word provides a venue for Asian Americans to make change and revolutionize their worlds.

Vilashini Cooppan
On the Changing South Asian Experience at Yale

by Swati Pandey

When you were an undergrad, what was the South Asian Yale experience like?

I was an undergrad here from the mid to late '80s, which was an interesting time for South Asian students. There was more of an inward focus for the South Asian experience. It's been interesting to see a diasporic sense—like in the recent conference—that wasn't really there in the 80s. That transition is a good thing.

Within South Asian groups, the activities were more cultural than political, you know, they did the Diwali show and other cultural shows. There wasn't anything wrong with that. But I think that the trend toward political activity has to do with changes in how American culture is positioning itself. South Asian popular culture has a much bigger role today—I still remember two years ago being able to see a Hindi film in Orange. We are more mainstream, but we are also more racialized. That's something you definitely see clearly after 9/11. But in the 80s they didn't think of themselves as a race.

What about in terms of academics—what was the demand for South Asian Studies?

Within the academy, the politics of cultural identity is key. [In the 80s] there wasn't really a student demand for South Asian courses. There weren't strong Women's Studies programs, African American studies was just getting big, Gay and Lesbian Studies was very small.

Photo: Patrick McGarvey, YH

When I first came as a professor in '97, there was a strong push for Asian American studies, and it continued for the next few years till today. It became necessary to open that category, with a specific institutional focus. Now the South Asian Studies initiative has brought so many people.

What do you think brought about that change in academics?

It was in part due to identity-specific programs of study, that made it possible to imagine a South Asian Studies program. Again, there were many more cultural events [in the 80s] than political or academic programs. I couldn't imagine an event such as the Solidarity Conference 20 years ago. It shows how South Asian Students have evolved both as South Asians and as Americans.

How has the study of South Asian literature changed since you've been a professor?

There was a tendency to connect literature to history, politics, and economics. You can't do that work without thinking of globalization, and what I would call global processes. South Asian literature has become really marketable in a way that it wasn't before. *Interpreter of Maladies* won a Pulitzer, Rushdie continues to write prolifically, *Monsoon Wedding* gets major national distribution. The mainstream of South Asian culture shows how that category of identity has changed—there's an acceptance *and* a racializing.

How were you involved with the Solidarity Conference, and other student efforts?

I worked with students on the conference, and I'm also on the South Asian Studies Council. We try to coordinate course offerings, visits, lectures. I just developed a course on South Asian Literature of the diaspora, and so my research has gotten more South Asia focused. Arjun Appadurai and Carol Breckenridge started the South Asian colloquium last term, a lot of people from different disciplines present their research. It would be nice to have an undergraduate version.

Tell me more about your research; you mentioned it getting more South Asia focused?

I'm doing a comparative study of post-colonial nationalisms, and the changing ideas of nation for post-colonial and anti-colonial moments. So I have to look at the British experience, the South African, West African, and Cuban experiences. That comes from my comp. lit. training.

The South Asian community in South Africa, where I was born, is the largest outside of India. I'm looking at how

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Asian Americans in Congress and an Interview with Senator Daniel Akaka

By Neheet Trivedi

This past summer I interned in the office of my Congresswomen, Rosa DeLauro (D-CT), on Capitol Hill. It was the first time I had to wear a shirt and tie to work daily. The staff was 10 strong, and they were all white. In addition, the 10 interns I worked with were also all white, except for myself and one other. The predominance of white men and women on Capitol Hill extended beyond my office and inflected discussion on every issue from health care to national security.

My Congresswoman was chosen to serve on the newly created Select Homeland Security Committee that was in charge of marking up the bill which would create the massive, new department. While they debated (briefly) over whether this new department would effectively protect the Homeland, discussion on civil rights and civil liberties were ignored. During this time, a group of approximately 40 Pakistanis were deported while over 1,400 men or Middle Eastern and South Asian descent were held in detention. How these violations could occur were not adequately addressed as the bill was bulldozed through Congress. I began to think: if there were more minorities in Congress, would a bill such as this be allowed to pass so easily with such little debate about its effects?

As I became more interested on the numbers of minorities in Congress, I did some archival research and started thinking more about the content of tours that interns like me were giving to visitors. I discovered that the U.S. Capitol houses the National Statuary Collection, a collection of statues, two given by each state of the Union to the Capitol. Of the 97 statues (three states still have one more to give), only three are women and another three are people of color. The rest of them are old, white men. Since I allotted half my time in DC for research, I decided to find about more. From about a week's worth of research through the Congressional Research Service, I discovered that the demographic makeup of the 435 members of 107th Congress did not resemble the demographic makeup of our country (statistics for the current 108th Congress are the same). Only 8.8 % are Black, 4.7 % are Latino, 1.3 % are Asian American, and 13.8 % are women. For all of America, those numbers are (according to the 2000 census): 12.3 % black, 12.5 % Latino, 3.7 % Asian Pacific American, and 50.9 % women. Of course we cannot conclude that those representatives who are black, for example, represent blacks in this country as a whole, but we should be concerned that an unequal majority of the members of Congress are white and male, and that is 140 years after Emancipation and 80 years after Suffrage.

At this point, I became interested in learning about Asian Americans in Congress, how they got there, and what being in their position was like. My first opportunity came when I met the chief of staff of Senator Daniel Akaka of Hawaii. I told him I was interested in interviewing Senator Akaka and my request was cleared a month later. Before the interview with the Senator, I had planned to ask him a list of questions based on his history.

Senator Akaka, born in 1924 and of Chinese and Native Hawaiian ancestry, is one of only three Asian Americans to have served in both the Senate and the House and currently one of nine Asian Americans in Congress. Before becoming a Congressman in 1976, he served in World War II, was a teacher and principal, ran Hawaii's Department of Education, Office of Economic Opportunity, and the Progressive Neighborhoods Programs. Currently, he is the chairman of three Senate subcommittees. I wanted to know what it was like to be a minority serving in Congress, an Asian American serving his country through politics, and growing up in Hawaii. But the interview did not go as planned.

Photo: Office of Sen. Akaka

To my surprise, at the beginning of the interview Senator Akaka began asking about *me*, my family, working on the Hill, my future. He commented on my composure and my potential for success. This man was the friendliest person I had met since arriving on Capitol Hill!

Akaka: It's good to be at the House with DeLauro. The Congress in the top decision making body in the country, even in the world. To have an experience on the Hill - you can't buy what you've seen. Young people are like sponges - they soak up everything. They're all eyes, ears. Being here is like soaking everything in.

If I were to stop and count all the paths I took to get here.... I've made lots of small and big decisions to get here. I'm jealous of you. Jealous not in a bad way. I'm jealous that I'm not going anymore - you've got a great future ahead of you.

Neheet: So with all the paths in front of me, what incentive do I have to go into state/federal house/senate. With all the time it takes to pass anything, and with

most bills getting lodged in committees, do you feel that getting involved in Congress is the best way to effect change?

Akaka: No question. If you want to make any changes in the lives of my community, or my home Hawaii, then this is the place to be. The other reason: decisions made here are by consensus. I'd hate to be the President. He has to make one decision: Yes or no. He has his staff telling him what he should do, but the final decision is up to him. Once you make a decision, the world changes. But we in the legislative body do it by consensus. Because of this, the legislative body is a good place to be. You must come here with the feeling that you want to be here. People ask me, why are you here? And I say, because I like it! You need to be the kind of person who accepts things. If you could not accept criticism, then you wouldn't feel like you belong.

First, if you want to make change, this is how to do it. Second, if you *work with people, you find the best answers.* (Akaka's emphasis). What's most important for me is *the member.* One who comes here should feel the need to help his 1) constituency. He should build his constituency up. 2) You've gotta feel like you're here to help the country. You have to want to help, not harm, and do good for the whole. In my state of Hawaii we have something called the spirit of Aloha (love). It is the magic of love - and it makes a big difference. You can work with people against or with you. You never burn bridges, you only build bridges. Look at [Representative] Traficant, he was a friend of mine. Why was he here? Because his constituents voted him in! Your mission here should be to serve people.

"First, if you want to make change, this is how to do it. Second, if you work with people, you find the best answers."

Neheet: So when you were growing up in Hawaii as an Asian Pacific American...

Akaka: Wait, I just want to make this clear. Asians were a part of my life growing up. There were no... minorities. There were Hawaiians, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Caucasians, Portuguese... My neighbors were Japanese and Portuguese. And that was my family. There wasn't that feeling of outside-ness. We shared a lot. In Hawaii, we all took pride in our own ethnicity. I'm Hawaiian - and I have some Japanese blood, was how it went. I practically lived at my Japanese neighbor's house. I was a part of their house. And I used to eat the food at the Portuguese family's house. Hawaii is filled with festivals and ethnic life. We were all together.

Since statehood we've had a Caucasian Governor, Japanese Governor, Hawaiian Governor, Filipino Governor, even our mayors as well [have been ethnically diverse]. The state legislature is that way as well. And it is also gender diversified. It is the ideal Asian community with people from the Far East. This makes up the success that is Hawaii."

As I left the office, the Senator gave me a hug and said, Aloha," noting, "That's what we do in Hawaii, that's our love."

The question remains for us as students just starting or just leaving Yale: how do we as Asian Americans and minorities affect change in the communities around us? From the 45 minutes conversation I enjoyed with Senator Akaka, perhaps working in politics is one of the answers. However, once we get there, it is apparent that representing the voices of minorities is not our main job, but just one part of it. As people of color in this country, it seems like we all have to ask our own questions about what we each plug into the political system, and where our responsibilities lie.

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it has negotiated the relationship between being Indian and being South African, an identity which has changed a lot recently. What I like about that is that it's comparative, and I can think transnationally.

What do you think of Yale's efforts to be a "global" university, and how have you contributed to those efforts?

When I first came I started a World Literature course with Michael Holquist, combining texts of non-Western literature. Our students read not only Homer but also the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the same is true for Chinese and Japanese literature. I've done a lot of work on [that course].

I've worked on the Cross Borders Project, sponsored by Ford, to encourage people to think of regions in global ways—we had anthropologists, political scientists, and we planned courses. It's been given new life under Arjun Appadurai's leadership as an academic counterpart to the Center for the Study of Globalization. That's been a big part of my work here.

How did you first come across South Asian literature—in class like your students, or before that?

Well, a lot of that I read in comic book form! I hadn't read the actual works until I started teaching. It just shows how no one owns a great text by virtue of identity. We did part of the Maharbharata because Stanley Insler gave this great interview in the course. Here's a text that's supposed to be "mine," but in class we ended up watching the DVD version, which came from Vietnam, and Stanley explained the work. The level of reception and transformation is really instructive—ethnicity is a mobile category, it's always changing. One can study ethnic literature in global ways, and that changing of identities is still going on. Students are more and more committed to understanding ethnicity and cultures in different ways.

The South Asian College Conference presents "Solidariy"

Addressing Socio-Economic Disparities in South Asian America

By Gita Subramony

Sayu Bhojwani, Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs (NYC) and founder of SAYA! (South Asian Youth Action!), talking with students at the conference

The road to planning the event, "Solidarity: Addressing Socio-Economic Disparities in South Asian America" was a ridiculously long and rough one, but in retrospect every bit of difficulty, every bit of drama, every bit of frustration, every bit of stress was overshadowed by what every one of us took away from planning the conference and watching it unfold on that crazy weekend in February.

Two days before the conference began, I was pretty sure that I wanted this thing to be over and done with. No more marathon Tuesday night meetings, no more calling people you don't know, no more e-mailing people who won't respond, no more worrying about our monetary resources, no more adjusting the brochure layout for the 37th time, no more looking for maps of

Vijay Prashad, Director of International Studies at Trinity College, gave the keynote address for the conference on February 9, 2003. Photo: SAJA

the campus on the internet, no more venturing out early in the morning during a fierce snow storm to buy cookies and pretzels, no more anxiously awaiting the speaker who hasn't arrived, no more wondering if people will actually show up. All of that and more would be over with at the conclusion of the conference.

It wasn't until Sunday afternoon, when the last conference participants were leaving, that I began wishing that I could relive the whole conference and planning process from beginning to end.

I remember watching registrants trickle into the Asian American Cultural Center on Friday evening. People, real people, were arriving for the conference that *we* planned. It was simply amazing to see students, each bringing unique ideas, stories, and experiences, from so many different schools gathering *here*. Was this really happening? I also remember thinking about how all these people would perceive this conference differently than I would.

For me, the whole process was one giant learning experience. I began as another indifferent freshman and ended with a dramatically altered perception of the world. To be honest, before I joined the South Asian Conference Council I was quite unaware of many of the issues confronting South Asians in America. I never thought about my own South Asian heritage. I never thought about other South Asians in America and how their own experiences might be different than mine. These issues were not apparent to me; party because there were not vast numbers of South Asians where I was born and raised (Mississippi), and partly because I chose not to identify with my South Asian heritage.

My perception of South Asians in America has definitely changed over the last several months. Discussing the goals of the conference, researching speakers, and planning workshops made me look at the meaning of being South Asian in America differently. On the weekend of the conference, as I listened to speakers, walked through workshops, and chatted with other students I felt as though I had a better understanding of the many different aspects of South Asian life in America. Ideas that had never crossed my mind before seemed to show up everywhere: labor issues, health concerns, the model minority myth, pan-ethnic coalitions, and countless others. At the conclusion of the conference, I was motivated to put to use all the ideas and opinions I had gathered over the last few months.

Overall, planning the conference was a rewarding experience. Seeing the result of months of work, gaining insight into the South Asian life in America, getting to know an amazing group of people and meeting so many others were just a few of the many things that I gained from this experience. I'm excited to see what the future will bring for this movement.

Why Asian Americans Should Support Affirmative Action

By Chiraag Bains

On April 1, 2003, the Supreme Court heard the cases of two white women, Jennifer Gratz and Barbara Grutter, who claim affirmative action was the reason they were not admitted to the University of Michigan. They contend an underqualified black, Latino, or Native American probably took their spots. Where do Asian Americans fit into this story?

According to conservative pundits, they belong squarely alongside Gratz and Grutter in the fight to annihilate the race-based policy. The oversimplified narrative goes something like this: We Asian Americans outperform everyone—even whites!—in the classroom and on standardized tests. We have no problem getting into college. In fact, we are overrepresented, so affirmative action only hurts us. If affirmative action were gone, our numbers would skyrocket, as we'd all get into the schools we deserve to attend. Leave the whites out of this, it's obviously not about them. The problem is those freeloading blacks—they keep taking our spots!

Okay, so those last couple lines are not usually included, but they articulate what the argument basically comes down to. It effectively eliminates the role of whites from the discussion and urges Asians that their interests are at odds with those of African Americans. It does so by relying on an argument that has been picked apart by numerous writers, but which continues to be ignored in popular debate and everyday discussions: the model minority myth.

The model minority myth holds that Asians are the ideal that African Americans and other minorities should follow: Asians are only four percent of the population and face some discrimination, but they have still managed to succeed in this country. Their average income is above that of whites, they go to college in disproportionate numbers, and they do not need racial preferences to give them a leg up. They earn their achievements through hard work, not whining for handouts, and African Americans should do them same.

The argument seems to praise Asian Americans, but its true purpose is to target African Americans and rollback the civil rights victories they won just 40 years ago. Soon after the major legislative achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, William Petersen coined the term model minority in a January 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article on Japanese-Americans.[1] A December article in *U.S. News and World Report* the same year applied the term to Chinese Americans, clearly lashing out at black Americans: "At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities, one such minority, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work….Still being taught in Chinatown is the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts—not a welfare check—in order to reach American's 'promised land.'"[2]

Asian Americans should reject their portrayal as the model minority for at least three reasons. First, it is false. Asians have a high average income and college enrollment rate not simply because of hard work, but because those who are succeeding constitute a state-selected group of high-skill individuals. Much of the Asian immigrant population—particularly the segment sending its children to college in such high numbers—is the product of selective post-1965 immigration policies that recruited professionals (doctors, engineers, computer scientists, and other experts that our economy lacked) to enter the country. This highly educated population is predisposed to be successful.

Second, the model minority myth trivializes the history of oppression faced by other minorities, and, by pitting us against them, prevents people of color from building political power to challenge white supremacy. Reading the narrative paraphrased above, one would completely overlook the fact that African Americans were enslaved, lynched in record numbers, and denied any political rights for hundreds of years. Asian Americans never faced such severe oppression. We have, however, sustained over 100 years of exclusionary legislation, political disenfranchisement, and violent hate attacks. We share a history of oppression, survival, and resistance with other minority groups, and we should work with them to ensure a better future for everyone.

Third, the model minority myth hurts us in direct ways. It assumes that we face no discrimination and ignores the significant economic differences within our communities. While Asians have penetrated bourgeois, formerly all-white neighborhoods around the United States, they are also concentrated in the highest-poverty urban centers. Ignoring this, college campuses often fail to provide support services for Asian Americans, such as mental health services and language programs. Furthermore, operating as early as the mid-1800s, the thesis has exaggerated Asian success and provoked violence against us. Chinese miners who came to California in the 1850s were regularly murdered by rival white miners and tax collectors. The early 1900s brought the infamous Alien Land Laws across the Pacific Coast, which forbade successful Indian and Japanese farmers from owning land. In 1982, Vincent Chin was mistaken for being Japanese and murdered by two disgruntled white auto workers; the American economy was suffering and they blamed the prosperous Japanese for their hardship. Unfortunately, most of us do not know this history, and we do not see the relevance of the Asian American studies courses taught by our few faculty members.

Beyond resisting the dangers of the model minority myth, there are a number of compelling reasons Asian Ameri-

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Flower Drum Song: "Chop Suey" or Authentic Flavors?

By Tiffany Lu

It was 1958 when Rogers and Hammerstein's production of *Flower Drum Song* was first performed on Broadway. Although the musical was often criticized for its lack of sensitivity and political correctness, it enjoyed a 600-performance success before vanishing from the theaters in the 1960s. So, when *Flower Drum Song* finally returned to Broadway's in 2003, this time reworked by the distinguished Chinese-American playwright David Henry Hwang and performed by an entirely Asian American cast, a group of thirty Yalies and I jumped at the chance to see the Valentine's Day show under AASA's generous funding.

As I sat in Virginia theatre that night, flipping through the Playbill, I couldn't help but notice the absurd titles to some of the musical numbers. "Fan Tan Fannie" and "Chop Suey"?? I wasn't sure where the show would be going with such names. The orchestra soon began playing and the show opened with Tony-Awards winner Lea Salonga as Mei-Li, a young Chinese woman fleeing from Communist China to San Francisco's Chinatown in the late 1950's. As Salonga sang to the prologue "A Hundred Million Miracles," her movements and expressions were almost mechanical, immediately invoking the image of a stereotypically submissive and naïve F.O.B. Nonetheless, the story continues and Mei-Li arrives at a run-down Chinese opera house and meets Master Wang and his American-born son Ta, who dreams of attracting business night-club style despite his father's insisting on following archaic Chinese opera traditions. Not long after, Ta discovers success with the talents of the sultry Linda Low, also an American-born Chinese who dreams of Hollywood fame, and Madame Liang, her fast-talking know-it-all agent. They traded in conservative Chinese opera ways for flashy costumes and jazzy numbers, and transformed 'The Pearl' into the new hotspot in town, 'Club Chop Suey.'

Through the first half of the performance, I had mixed feelings. The musical numbers were fun, but they were certainly not impressive sing-alongs from *Rent* or *Les Mis*. The elaborately designed Chinese-style gateway stage set and the ever-changing wardrobe of the performers were certainly eye-catching and creative, but the ensemble of Chinatown showgirls dancing and singing in gigantic light-up take out boxes was too ridiculous to take seriously. I found myself laughing uncomfortably at the stereotypes that the characters represented: the strict traditionalist Master Wang, who changed his name to Sammy Fong to appeal to the white-American audience; Linda Low, the exotic, leggy show-girl who 'enjoys being a girl' for all the gifts her suitors can offer her; and finally, Harvard, the gay costume designer who was definitely not the typical Ivy-League-bound pre-med Asian boy. Even more disturbing were the male ensemble actors in bright red boots with two-inch heels, dancing in the background, as if intentionally accentuating the stereotype of the passive, asexual Asian males. The plight of the characters seemed to sadly parallel Madame Liang's show-biz ethic: if you want to sell to the audience, you got to be American; that is, forget old Chinese traditions, they stand no chance in the mainstream! They were indeed a 'Chop-Suey,' lost in the struggle to balance cultural heritage against their newfound success.

As the musical resumed, the storyline seemed to take a turn from burlesque and dove deeper into the issue of identity. Mei-li, who has fallen in love with Ta, leaves the Club fearing her 'Chinese-ness' was not adequate for Ta's American dreams. Ta, on the other hand, struggles to accept his bi-cultural identity and realize his love for Mei-li. Sammy Fong, now rich and famous, re-evaluates his past and makes peace with the memory of his beloved deceased wife. And Linda, seeing how limiting her roles at Club Chop Suey were, decides to move on to Hollywood and follow her heart's desire. They are all confronted by the need to examine themselves as simultaneously Chinese and American, and their undefined, chop-suey-like identities from the first half of the show became more personalized and realistic. At the end, Ta and Mei-Li are re-united at 'Club Chop Suey,' celebrating their love for each other in a traditional Chinese wedding, and re-inventing traditional Chinese opera for others to appreciate. Each character's story reflects the hardship in finding success in a foreign land, or in embracing a cultural identity as unique, and as the cast ended the show announcing to the audience their respective birthplace, they served as a testament to the richness of American culture and the possibility in achieving the American Dream.

Photos: www.flowerdrumsong.com

Indeed, Hwang did not choose to appeal to any particular audience with overriding concerns for political correctness. In fact, he made stereotypes an integral part of his reworking, and thrusted them in our faces. The modern American culture, although coming a long way from the Civil Rights Movement of the 60's, is still filled with cultural misconceptions and enduring prejudices. In the discomfort of laughing at the ethnic jokes, it

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A Conversation with Jyoti Thottam

By Alice Hong Van

Jyoti Thottam currently lives in Brooklyn, New York and is a business reporter for *Time* magazine. She graduated Yale as class of 1993 with a B.A. in religion and economics. Before 1997, when she obtained her master's degree in international affairs from Columbia University, she worked as a reporter in Florida. After graduate school she traveled throughout Asia in countries including India, Thailand, and Nepal as a freelance writer. Now, as former president of the South Asian Journalists Association (SAJA), she remains active in encouraging minorities to voice themselves to the public.

Alice: First of all, how would you describe yourself? …Let's start with background.

Jyoti: Well, I guess I'm born in India, but raised in the United States. My parents are from South India. …I was not even four [when I came to America]... So, I really grew up in the US.

A: Wow, in that case, I suppose... Would you consider yourself American? More American than Indian? Or Indian-American? Or how would you classify?

J: I guess, I mean, either one, it doesn't—I don't really... I don't worry too much about labels. I mean, I am American. I'm an American citizen. But Indian, South Asian American... I think they're all... they're all useful labels in different ways depending on the context.

A: When were you at Yale? And what were you involved in while you were at Yale?

J: I was there from '89 to '93. Most of my out of classroom time, you [could] find me in office at the *Yale Herald*, [where] I held a number of positions leading up to the executive editor. Or I was doing something with the South Asian Society. I was very involved with that. Another thing I should mention, projects I'm working on, or wherever, I've also been sort of involved—I try to stay in touch with the South Asian Studies Committee at Yale. That's something that I hope that South Asian Alumni would be involved in. So far, it's a fairly informal network, but I'm really wonderful with what's been happening in the year since I've graduated in terms of getting more courses and professors in different programs. Something that wasn't there when I was a student. But I wish was there. I'm glad to see that, although it's too late for me to benefit, but that things have changed a little bit.

A: What would you consider is your greatest accomplishment at Yale and after?

J: It's hard to… I don't want to take credit for too much, because everything—all the things that I worked on. That I'm really proud of were really things that I did with a group of other people. Like the *Yale Herald*, for example. Well, I guess, if I wanted to single one thing out, as far as the journalism that I did at Yale, I know probably people on campus are thinking a lot about whether there is gonna be a war, or what's going to happen. You know, I was at Yale, in 1991, during the first Gulf War. I remember the day that the bombing started; the campus was just in a real upheaval. And in addition to all our—as journalist, you sort of have two reactions to things: you have your personal reaction, and then your reporter's reaction. I just remember the issue—just remember working very hard on the issue that we put out immediately after the war started. That particular issue, I thought that—or the work that I did, and also the way the whole staff really came together to put it all together.

A: What's the story that you're most proud of after Yale?

J: Probably, the single story that comes to mind recently… was published in *Time* in October of last year that I wrote about Citibank in Trinidad. There are lots of things that I've worked on that am proud of, but I think this story was sort of unique in that I wrote to build it from scratch. I even had to learn the language. Oh! One more thing: SAJA also, I'm not sure if you saw from our website [http://www.saja.org/], but we offer scholarships to college student who are interested in journalism. Actually, if you want to put under the sort of my accomplishments that I'm proud of, that would have to be one of them, because when I was president of SAJA, one of the things I promise I would do is write up a scholarship for young people who wanted to get into journalism. And we actually did that—we awarded our first scholarship last year. It makes a real difference, both for the individual student, but for journalism in general in the United States to have more of a voice for minorities. To help improve journalism and inform their readers.

A: What advice would you give to undergraduates and/or to people who are already in the "real world"?

J: Well, probably, undergraduates. The one, I think—the one think I wished I had done better and done more of, is to take advantage of your time at Yale to learn a second language. It's like your best opportunity and one that you may not have any time soon to really devote the time and energy to studying a language. And Yale has a great language program; so that's the only thing I wished I had done. Yeah, and the other thing I would tell people who are within

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Faculty Spotlight: Prof. Kang-I Sun Chang

By Connie Chan

Prof. Kang-I Sun Chang specializes in the fields of Classical Chinese Literature; Women Writers of Traditional China; Comparative Studies of Poetry; Literary Criticism; Gender Studies; Hermeneutics; and Cultural Theory/Aesthetics. She teaches Man and Nature in Chinese Poetry *and* Men, Women, and Gender in Chinese Poetry. *She has been teaching at Yale since 1982 and has published extensively in both English and Chinese. Her major publications include* Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism (co-edited with Haun Saussy, 1999); The Late-Ming Poet Ch'en Tzu-lung: Crises of Love and Loyalism (1991); and Six Dynasties Poetry (1986), *all published in English*; *and most recently, her memoir titled* Farewell to the White Terror (2003), *published in Chinese.*

Educational background

I was an English major when I attended college in Taiwan, and though I continued to study English literature, I became more interested in my own Chinese literature. I seemed to have ignored Chinese literature when I was in Taiwan, but then here in the U.S., I began longing for my cultural roots, so I became interested in comparative literature. In the summer of 1968, I came to the U.S. as a graduate student; I received my Master's in English literature, and then pursued one at Princeton University in classical Chinese literature, with a minor in comparative literature. I also received my PhD from Princeton in classical Chinese literature, again with a minor in comparative literature. Then I became the curator of the Gest Oriental Library at Princeton, and a year later I came to Yale to teach. Now, here at Yale, I am very involved in Asian research.

Breaking New Ground: Pioneering Gender Studies in the Field of Classical Chinese Literature

I was trying to help the field, to develop something new, and I identified the role of women as a neglected dimension of traditional studies of classical Chinese literature. I was one of the pioneers in gender studies in Chinese literature. In the beginning, in the 1960s and early 70s, when I was still a grad student, I was interested in gender issues, but nobody was doing it in the field; I got no encouragement or inspiration from anyone. I couldn't predict that I would do all this work. All my research, in retrospect, showed my interest in gender issues. In writing *Love and Loyalism* and upon discovering works written by Ch'en Tzu-lung's lover Liu Shih, my interest in her was more intense than my interest in him. So after the completion of this book, I thought how the image of woman was changing in that period. Chinese women writers became very conscious and wanted to publish; more than 3000 anthologies and collected works by women from the 17th-19th centuries have been found. And unlike in western culture, the men wanted to support them, and thus helped them publish. When I discovered all these, I was still lonely, because not many people were doing studies. Finally, in 1993, I organized with Ellen Widmer of Wesleyan University, who was also doing gender studies, and we hosted a conference called "Writing Women in Late Imperial China." That was the first international conference on Chinese women's literature of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, meaning post-14th century. We edited selected articles and published a book by the same title.

After this book, I edited *Women Writers of Traditional China: An Anthology of Poetry and Criticism* with Haun Saussy, a former student of mine who is now a professor at Stanford and will be joining the Yale comparative literature department in 2004. This was by far the hardest job I have ever done, as we invited 63 scholars in the country to do translations, and we had to read through every poem. Coordinating so many scholars' translations meant more work for us, but it meant each translator did not have to do as much work, so the whole anthology took us eight years to complete.

Being Bilingual and Rewriting for Three Audiences

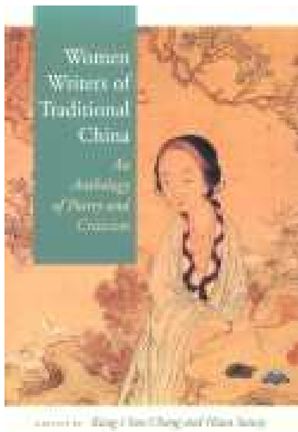
After completing the women's poetry anthology, I was very tired, and I had a crisis: I worried that I might have forgotten how to write in Chinese. In fact, I had almost entirely lost my skill, so I motivated myself to re-learn how to write Chinese. I had been in the States for about 35 years and had forgotten how to write Chinese in a scholarly way. I worked very hard on my Chinese to make sure I could become a bilingual writer. I first published a collection of essays about my life at Yale, followed by another book of scholarly essays on Yale, gender, and culture.

In 1996, I was invited to give a lecture in Taiwan, and I presented to an eager and interested audience on feminist criticism in American in the 1990s. The people of Mainland China and Taiwan are increasingly interested in gender issues and feminism, but because the two audiences have different interests, I have to tailor my talks and publication versions

accordingly. For example, mainland scholars are more interested in canonization, while Taiwan scholars are more interested in gender.

On the issue of translation, I often have the habit of simply writing two versions of my scholarly works rather than doing a direct translation from English into Chinese or vice versa. I find translation boring, so instead, I simply write the work again in a different language, and I've found that the way I write in Chinese is very different from the way I write in English. Sometimes the beginning becomes the end, because the interest of the audience is different.

Recent publications: Book-signing anticipated in Fall 2003
I recently published my memoir, entitled "Farewell to the White Terror," which was the period from 1949-1987, when many of the intellectuals were being put in jail in Taiwan. I was six years old when my father was imprisoned. At that time, the Guomindang was very worried about mainlanders crossing the ocean. Last year, I made up my mind that I must write my memoir. My father is old now, and I wanted to make sure that he reads it. He was very happy about it. I spent two months on this book last summer, as that was the only time I had; I felt very inspired, and it was the first time I wrote a Chinese book with such great speed; sometimes I wrote one chapter a day. When my father came home, I was 16 years old. When I wrote this memoir, my daughter was 16 years old, and I felt that there was a special meaning in comparing what life was like as a 16 year old for me and my daughter. After writing this book, I felt very fulfilled and very happy, because it felt as though I had paid some kind of debt. I should have written this book 30 years ago; when I first came to this country, I wanted to write this book. Only after all these scholarly publications did I begin to write this book that I wanted to write most.



The Taiwan edition has been published, and when the Mainland edition is also done, there will be a book-signing party here in the fall at the Yale Bookstore.

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becomes even more apparent just how distorted stereotypes are. None of the characters of *Flower Drum Song* fit into a Chinese or Chinese-American mold and all define their bicultural identities in different ways; some more direct like Mei-li and Ta, and others more compromising, like Madame Liang and Sammy Fong. Perhaps that is the authenticity to the modern Asian American. We are constantly growing and changing, discovering ourselves in this multi-cultural nation where some unease over cultural differences still remains.

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five years of graduation. I'll give people two pieces of advice, which are a bit contradictory: but one is to, whatever you end up doing in the first couple of years after you graduate, it may not be exactly your dream job, it may not be even in your dream field, but I would just remember, I would just tell you to take it—not to worry too much about what it all means for your future because I think you'll have lots of time to really find the ideal place to work and place to live. But along the way, I think I would also encourage people that—I think it's great to try a lot of different things when you're in your 20s. I think it's really important, but it can also—I think sometimes if you're trying something new, there's also the temptation to jump from one after just after a few months or a year. I would really encourage people be persistent, when you're in a job and you're not really sure whether it's not right for you. Sometimes it can be really good to stick with things for two years. Because I think that the first year in any job you're really just learning, and you start to blossom in that job only in the second year. So, I would just say that unless there's a really good reason otherwise…you might be surprised how different the second year looks in any job from the first.

A: How did you go about realizing what you wanted to do in life? You always knew before you got into Yale? Or was it a sort of self-discovery process?

J: No, I didn't know at all before I went to Yale. I really have to give a lot of credit to the *Yale Herald*; it's a great newspaper, and a lot of excellent journalist has come out of that newspaper. Working there was really where I learned how much I loved the news business. ...I think figuring out what you want to do is really… the hardest part; you need to think very carefully about—I think it takes a lot of self-awareness. I think it takes a very self-aware person to know what your strengths and weaknesses are and what will really make you happy. Because there are lots of professions that, you know, so many people go into and your parents may say, you know…try this or try that or this is good or this is bad. The only way you'll really find what you want to do is to—I mean, it's impossible to try everything, but it is possible to think very carefully about what's best suited to you and to really pursue that.

A: Okay, last question: what motivates you to do what you do every morning?

J: Well, I have to say, I really love my job. Sometimes the hours are extremely long, and at times it can be frustrating, but I—I mean there's nothing else that I'd rather be doing. You create something that didn't exist before you touched it. It really requires you to really think. I think I'm one of the few people I know who—I think a lot of college graduates finish thinking that all that stuff they learn in college is sort of useless in the real world and I haven't found that to be the case at all. I mean journalism, after all, or the kind I do, requires you to think and use accumulated knowledge. It's also social in some ways: you're connected to your readers, you're connected to the people you write about… you have the chance to indulge your curiosity. It's a wonderful, rewarding line of work.

From The Unwanted to Literary Success: Kien Nguyen's Visit to Yale

By Harry Dao

Kien Nguyen is a dentist, living in New York City. He has the typical story to tell, of immigration to the United States and a harrowing escape from war-torn Vietnam. After the Americans pulled out of Saigon, he tried for 15 years under Communist rule to get out. What is uncommon about his story is that he is Amerasian, half-Vietnamese and half-American. He succeeded in leaving the country through the United Nations' Orderly Departure Program in 1985 that gave 50,000 Amerasian children the opportunity to leave Vietnam with their families. Kien Nguyen wrote *The Unwanted*: A Memoir of Childhood in spellbinding prose, recording his life before, during, and after the Vietnam War. The Vietnamense Students Association (ViSA) sought out this author, asking him to participate in a Master's Tea and to hold a memoir-writing workshop. He enthusiastically agreed.

Many women in Vietnam had children with Americans, falsely hoping that they would stay. Amerasian children came in two categories, those descending from white blood and another, called "burnt rice," children from Vietnamese and African American descent. The image of "two pairs of eyes [in darkness] burning at us like hungry wolves" haunts us because we suddenly become aware of the unwanted children who never had a chance like Mr. Nguyen to tell their stories. He was now endowed with the important responsibility of making sure that their stories could be remembered.

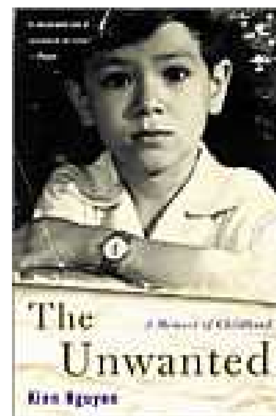
When Mr. Nguyen came over to America, he was filled with hatred for Vietnam for the way he was badly treated, never being able to erase those hurtful memories. First arriving in Georgia with his family, he left with enough money for a one-way bus trip to New York where he felt he could pursue his dreams. He succeeded in his classes in Buffalo University and NYU, eventually becoming a dentist. However, he could not rid himself of those nightmares, and he desperately needed to "free that boy" – himself. So he wrote his memoir, never intending for it to be published.

Kien Nguyen with students at a Branford Master's Tea on February 27, 2003.

Mr. Nguyen visited Yale February 26 and 27. From 3-5pm on Wednesday, Mr. Nguyen was available at the Yale Bookstore for a book signing and chat with the author session. His presence was felt beyond Yale campus limits, bringing in visitors from New York University and Greenwich, CT. Later that evening, he held a memoir writing workshop in St. Anthony for those interested in hearing how he decided to start writing and how he came to write *The Unwanted* (memoir) and *The Tapestries* (fictional work), his two publications. On Thursday, Mr. Nguyen spoke at the Branford Master's Tea with Master Smith. The personal contact with Mr. Nguyen was the best part of the visit; there was always time to walk up to him to talk.

He advised his listeners not to worry about their critics. He said, "Your work is like your child. If someone says it's ugly, it's still your child…Write for yourself." His first critic happened to be his English teacher in college, and he was devastated at first. Then he said that America gave us the freedom of speech, finding a new appreciation for his listeners.

The Vietnamese Students Association found a huge level of support from the Yale community to sponsor the events from the Council on Southeast Asia Studies, St. Anthony Hall, Branford College, Saybrook College, Yale Journal of Human Rights, Asian Pacific American Heritage Series, Asian American Cultural Center, Yale Bookstore, and the Ethnicity, Race, and Migration Department. St. Anthony Hall is a literary fraternity dedicated to intellectual debate, and its members include budding poets and writers who were especially glad to host Mr. Nguyen at Yale. The overwhelming support for Mr. Nguyen is a great indication that his story touches people in diverse ways. He inspired those who heard him speak, and it will be up to them after he leaves to carry on his message of hope and sincere desire to reach out to others.



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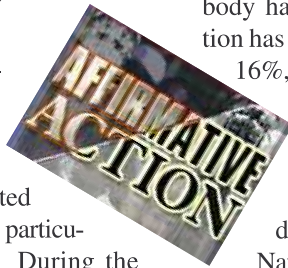

cans should support affirmative action. To begin, it should be made clear that Asian Americans *have* benefited from affirmative action, particularly in employment. During the 1980s, Asians made up 20% of the construction firms in San Francisco, but received only 1% of available government contracts. They agitated for the implementation of an affirmative action program, which they won in 1993, and their share of the contracting multiplied by three. Also, since the advent of affirmative action in the California state civil service, Asians have gone from being underrepresented in virtually every sector to achieving parity in 11 of 19 job categories.[3]

When considering the impact of affirmative action on admissions, it is important to recognize the heterogeneity of the Asian American community. Americans of Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian, and Hmong descent are much more likely to live below the poverty line than other groups, with poverty rates of 34%, 34%, 47%, and 66% respectively.[4] They are also underrepresented at colleges and universities across the country. Well-crafted affirmative action programs rightfully distinguish between different groups of Asians to recognize the significance of past discrimination and current inequality.

For many, however, the concern is that Asian Americans are losing their hard-earned college spots to other minorities. Upon careful consideration, however, it becomes clear that white people, not other people of color, are taking their spots. Consider the following: University X has a long-standing affirmative action program, so while it cannot use quotas, it does use race to build a diverse class of students. Every year, it admits a critical mass of black, Latino, and Native American students. Over the last two decades, Asian American students have become more and more competitive and have applied to this college in increasing numbers. Their representation in the student body has increased, but their population has mysteriously leveled off at 14-16%, despite the fact that they continue to outperform students of other ethnicities. Considering that they are competing more directly with white students than blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans, and that the university has affirmed its commitment to underrepresented minorities from the beginning, exactly who is taking the spots of Asian Americans who are denied admission despite their qualifications…? Right. But why do some Asian Americans continue to attack blacks for their supposedly unfair "racial preference," rather than indicting whites for legacy admissions? I'm still trying to figure that one out.

Actually, legal precedent set through the Supreme Court holds that Asian Americans are not to be harmed by affirmative action, regardless of whether they are overrepresented. John Hart Ely argued before the Court that "it is acceptable for the majority to disadvantage itself to benefit a minority, but it is not acceptable for the majority to disadvantage a minority, nor to disadvantage a minority in the course of benefiting another minority."[5] The Court accepted this reasoning because it recognized the impact of facing discrimination in society, which distinguished Asians from whites.

"...this should be about a commitment to equality and anti-discrimination, not mere self-interest."

If these arguments are not convincing enough, I urge skeptics to consider the wide-reaching consequences a defeat for affirmative action will have for colleges across the country. If the justices write that racial preferences are unconstitutional because the use of race violates the Fourteenth Amendment, special programs for students of color would be open to attack. The *New York Times* recently reported that, in anticipation of the decision, several schools have already ended affirmative action, abolished scholarships for minorities, and opened up minority summer programs for people of color. Targeted recruitment of minorities would most certainly have to end, which for Yale also means our beloved SRCs would be out of work. Cultural Connections, the Ethnic Counselor Program, and perhaps even the four Cultural Centers would go next. Yale's lawyers are already compiling information on these programs, to determine whether they are defensible in the event of a negative decision in the University of Michigan cases. Asian Americans fought hard to create and sustain these institutions. Are we ready to let them go?

Even more compelling than the need to preserve such programs, however, should be the vision of a more progressive society. To oppose affirmative action is to pretend racial inequality and discrimination no longer exist. This article cannot help anyone who believes in such a fantasy world. Asian Americans have faced, and continue to face, inequality, whether manifested through disparities in access to health care, glass ceilings in the professional world, or the rising incidence of hate crimes. We will benefit from attempts to assure a comparable quality of life for all Americans. But this should be about a commitment to equality and anti-discrimination, not mere self-interest. If we recognize that inequality persists, we should discard our ill-reasoned concern for our own career prospects in favor of a dedication to a radically different society.

[1] William Petersen, "Success Story: Japanese American Style," *New York Times Magazine*, 9 Jan 1966, 20.
[2] "Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.," *U.S. News and World Report*, 26 Dec 1966. Note the little-disguised reference to the "promised land" of racial equality that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. told African Americans they would someday reach.
[3] Theodore Hsien Wang and Frank Wu, "Beyond the Model Minority Myth," *The Affirmative Action Debate*, Ed. by George Curry (Cambridge, MA: Perseus, 1996), 198-99.
[4] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, "Asian and Pacific Islander American Demographics," www.epa.gov/aapi, 8 Mar 2002, 8.
[5] Explained in Frank Wu, "Neither Black Nor White: Asian Americans and Affirmative Action," *Boston College Third World Law Journal*, Vol. 15:2 (1995), 281.