Literature Review:
Understanding the Asian American Experience: The Search for Collective and Connective Culture

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Summary

What does it mean to be Asian American?

While I have been Asian American for basically the entirety of my life, I can't say that it was something that I had always questioned; for the longest time, I just *was*. This experience was something that was affirmed before questioned, as I discussed life in Vietlish with my closest friends, shared Asian meals family-style and was as comfortable with others as I was with my own family, consumed Asian media, and grew up reading and seeing Vietnamese as a second but not secondary language all around me. Upon embarking on a journey in higher education at a PWI, however, and finally feeling what I thought was some distance from my Asian Americanness, did I begin to wonder what exactly, if there was anything that did, defined the Asian American experience?

My sources enlightened me about the experiences of Asian Americans that connect and collect us, in a variety of ways: history, poetry, prose, sculpture, data, film, music. I see more clearly now that this shared culture of experiences is driven and based upon the experiences of the individual. A repeated idea throughout Asian American history, literature, and the sources below is the idea that Asian Americans are not a monolithic group, but one that is complex, composed of many subgroups that share similarities but also the most extreme of differences, from income to citizenship to generation. The differences amongst each Asian American by no means divides us, though. We can see, especially within examples of art and personal story, how someone's personal experiences can remind us of our own or serve as a surface to reflect on for our own lives. Do Ho Suh's apartment intimately invites us to think of our own homes; Olivia Rodrigo sings about her ex-partner and also everyone else's; Evelyn's multiverses of "what-if"'s open up the worlds of our own potentials from other lives. Kimberly Nguyen's poetry words are as if they could have come out of my own mouth, yet Tolentino points out that Hong writes from a position different from her own while still feeling seen by her individual point of view. These artists and scientists in my literature do what I aim to do with my project (C/C): creating space—space to share. It is sharing that creates the "third culture" that Park, Wei, and Tolentino mention (and that the others are adding towards, beknowingstly or not). It is sharing that allows us to get

each other, from a level of sympathy, empathy, or simply policy. And this is something that is possible, as proven in the literature review, although examples of this are not exhaustive to the list below.

This project was originally titled: “Defining the Asian American Experience: The Search for Collective and Connective Culture.” I now realize that defining this culture, setting up the margins for it, cannot be the case, especially for one of the fastest-growing demographic groups in the United States. The Asian American experience cannot be bound, but it can, and should, still be acknowledged and celebrated, as it is an experience that is remarkably complex, continuously developing, and human. To only focus on our differences as Asian Americans from one another is isolating and dismissive, but to view Asian American lives as one and the same is severely reductive. There is room to share, not just what makes us the same, but what makes me different than the person next to me and the reason why we are standing next to each other despite that. There is room to share, to reflect, to understand. There must be.

1. Wei, William. “Who Am I?: Creating an Asian American Identity and Culture.” In *The Asian American Movement*, 44–71. Temple University Press, 1993. http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt14bt3pg.7.

“Who Am I?: Creating an Asian American Identity and Culture” explains the process of conceiving a collective Asian American identity via an activism framework. According to Wei, Asian American activists realized that a self-defined identity for the community was needed to strengthen it and so consciously set out to develop one that honored both past experiences with present conditions. They rejected the notion of Asian Americans having a dual heritage that separated their identities into an Asian and an American one, claiming that that allowed for the rationalization of Asian American injustice due to an alleged inability to assimilate.

For these activists, Wei explains, the definition of an Asian America came down to three things: 1) refuting societal stereotypes; 2) reclaiming history; and 3) reconstructing a culture that reflects their experiences. This research project of “Defining the Asian American Experience: The Search for Collective and Connective Culture” (C/C) seeks to focus on the latter, exploring experiences of various Asian Americans across backgrounds, identities, and generations. While the chapter provides some insight on this directly, there were not many individual accounts of this. Wei’s approach to explaining and understanding experiences is one that is of more general and observational. However, it is still useful to consider when searching for individual accounts elsewhere, and the rest of the chapter also provides good context on reasoning behind finding an Asian American identity.

Wei provides diverse references and examples, from other literature to history, how schools affect curriculum and Asian American self-understanding, Asian American community organizations, films, other community artists, etc. Worth noting, his reported ideas include a range of how Asian American experiences affect the Asian American identity, as well as how Asian Americans are affected by that identity in which is being seeked (ex. how Asian American artists are expected to be "cultural ambassadors," while others are creating more personally and broadly to be able to relate to non-Asian audiences.) Wei also mentions the idea of intersectionality at the end of the chapter for Asian American women, although not much was said. The literature appears to skew more "collective" than "connective"; the final project it may inform will strike a better balance between the two with more acknowledgement of individual identities and intersectionality.

2. Kimberly Nguyen Poetry - https://kimberlynguyenwrites.com/

Kimberly Nguyen is a Vietnamese-American diaspora poet. For Nguyen, her art and identity go hand in hand. On her personal website, she states that "being Vietnamese is inherently poetic," and her poetry also focuses much on being Vietnamese. Her poetry takes the form of art in layout, varying per poem content. The layout is interpretational but not necessarily straightforward, although her language used is not overly flowery or indigestible.

Themes for Nguyen's work include the immigrant experience (*An Immigrant Love Letter*), being an eldest daughter (*I don't know the word for depression in vietnamese*), being an Asian American woman on America (re: 2021 Atlanta murder of 6 women, ~~*6 women are murdered*~~ *man murders 6 women*), and her personal experiences. Nguyen's writing is specific and personal to herself, with many references to her own experience as a Vietnamese-American and inclusion of Vietnamese language and other culture-specific mentions, but they have the ability to be relatable even if one is not Vietnamese. This point of specificity that is broad enough to be relatable is what can be and should be emulated in C/C, although it is a given that not everything will resonate with everyone. Nguyen's voice would be an example of one of many voices surveyed. Nguyen is a PEN America 2021 Emerging Voices Fellow, 2022-23 Poetry Coalition Fellow, and has written articles that take the form of advocacy and have helped lead to institutional change.

3. Wang, Claire. "Survey finds that 42 percent of people in U.S. can't name one Asian American." NBC News, May 13, 2021.
https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/survey-finds-42-percent-people-u-s-can-t-name-n1267283.

Wang's NBC News article reports several findings from a **survey**, specifically focusing on the statistic that 42% of Americans cannot name a well-known Asian American. This survey was by LAAUNCH, Leading Asian Americans to Unite for Change, a non-profit for Asian American success via research, programs, and entrepreneurship. However, the name of the article serves as clickbait; it is not that 42% of Americans cannot name *any one* Asian American—this is a matter of celebrity, or visible success, sensationality. It is more worth to look at the survey itself than this article, while it does reference a few other articles and research. The article did have a quote from one of LAAUNCH's directors: "We wanted to figure out what the root causes behind these attacks are. We know it's not just Trump and it's not just Covid." Thus, the survey and the article are affected by the sociopolitical climate at the time. But then again, experiences are always affected by time and other experiences.

The survey itself acknowledges that it does not capture every nuance for racial communities. A point of consideration is that results are based on a sample size of 2,766 American adults across the country, weighted using population parameters by the U.S. Census Bureau's American Community Survey to reflect the national population. Considering the U.S. total population, this number is not a lot, and results may not be definitive. It is also important to consider that similarly, the C/C survey may not have an extremely large sample size, but it must still be representative of Asian American voices and experiences.

4. "Do Ho Suh: *348 West 22nd Street*." SCI-Arc.
https://channel.sciarc.edu/browse/do-ho-suh-348-west-22nd-street.

Do Ho Suh is an internationally renowned artist that works with various medias, widely known for his fabric sculptures. His work explores notions of memory, displacement, individuality, and collectivity, with a focus also on his personal experiences, themes similar to what is to be explored with C/C.

348 West 22nd Street focuses on the concept of home, with his personal memorializing of his former apartment in New York City. It is a full-scale replica made by polyester and stainless steel, material that allows the audience to be able to look through the fabric and into the apartment, made of the same material as the walls that hold it. Suh's methodology includes traditional sewing techniques and digital modeling tools, potential things to explore for the design deliverable of C/C. There is an intimacy with Suh showing all of his apartment, but connectivity with the themes that his artwork demonstrates, despite most others not living in that apartment. He is able to create feeling and suggest ideas spatially, with color, material, assembly, etc. The work does not say, "You had to be here to have known," necessarily, but invites the audience to think about home, belonging, and experiences in their own spaces.

5. Ruiz, Neil, Shao, Sunny, & Shah, Sono. "What It Means To Be Asian in America." Pew Research. August 2, 2022.

"What It Means To Be Asian in America" is a cross-ethnic, comparative qualitative research project described to explore identity, economic mobility, representation, experiences of immigration and discrimination among the Asian population. Results are in written, designed (infographics), and in documentary form, and based off of 66 focus groups and 264 total participants, with the groups organized into 18 distinct Asian ethnic origin groups, fielded in 18 languages and moderated by members of their own ethnic groups. The research is successful in giving room for a diverse set of voices from variety of Asian ethnic groups, especially ones that are not always presented in traditional polling.

The key question asked was: "What does it mean to belong in America?" and inspires potential questions for the C/C survey that also explore self-identity and perception and, in turn, relationships to collective identity. Key common findings from the survey include how the pan-ethnic label "Asian" is only one part of how participants thought of themselves, how there is a disconnect between how Asian Americans see themselves and how others view them (because of the pan-ethnic label, the model minority myth, ignorance, etc.), and the multiple ways in which people take and express pride in their cultural and ethnic backgrounds while also feeling at home in America. The research also brought up points about identity being influenced by birthplace, what home is, and what being American in general is. Methodology for research will be similar for C/C, but the deliverable will be different, as well as the focus, being specifically about what being Asian American is as an idea in itself beyond, if possible, context.

5. Rodrigo, Olivia. "Olivia Rodrigo - deja vu (Live Performance) | Vevo LIFT", March 12, 2021. Live music video performance of Rodrigo's single, "deja vu," with band in an Asian supermarket.

Breakout singer-songwriter and half-Filipina American Olivia Rodrigo performs one of her singles, "deja vu," in a special live performance for Vevo Lift. The most notable part of this music video, besides her performance itself, is its location: inside of an Asian supermarket. Throughout the video, Asian products (soy sauce, noodle packages, pastries, etc.) and Vietnamese and Chinese signage are shot as the artist and her band make music.

"deja vu" as a song centers around how Rodrigo's ex-partner is now moving on with another girl, yet the new relationship echoes many moments and memories shared within their past one. Heartbreak and longing are universal themes. Similarly, the sentimentality of being inside a supermarket is also universal, specifically for Asian Americans who have visited Asian supermarkets, having seen signage in their mother tongues, food and ingredients vital to Asian meals, and even snacks they had growing

up as Asian and visiting these markets in America. This location acts as a way for Rodrigo to nod at and celebrate her Asian American heritage, as she mixes her art, which is not exclusively Asian American by content, style, or target audience, with her half-Filipina identity. It is also interesting to note that the market she performed in was not a Filipino supermarket—even so, the location selection is a clear statement for her Asian American-ness and suggests a non-exclusivity between Asian American ethnicities (even if there may have just been challenges in location scouting).

Overall, Rodrigo's performance in this video signifies togetherness: in being Asian American; in love/the falling out of it/the human experience; and the nostalgia that comes with experiences for both. The video makes a setting that seems homey and humble, also art, and the ballad of a single breakup highlights the rawness and punchiness of all other breakups. The performance is an example that C/C can learn from in combining art, identity, universal experiences (across people of all identities), shared experiences (across Asian Americans), and personal experiences (in this case, Rodrigo's heartbreak).

6. *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, directed by Daniel Kwan & Daniel Scheinert (A24). 2 hr., 19 min.
https://www.amazon.com/Everything-Everywhere-All-At-Once/dp/B09RDF4BNL.

The Daniels' (Kwan & Scheinert) film, *Everything Everywhere All At Once* (EEAAO), tells the tale of a Chinese family in America: Evelyn, her husband Waymond, and their daughter Joy. They run a laundromat on the first floor of their home that is now being audited by the IRS, except Evelyn is now distracted by other conflicts—pleasing her father for Lunar New Year, coming to terms with her daughter's sexuality and her coming out to her father, her marriage falling apart, and the wondering about her different lives lost, had she not left China and chosen a different path for herself. Right before their meeting with the IRS, Evelyn meets a different version of her husband, Alpha Waymond from the Alphaverse, who asks for her help in saving the entire multiverse from the hopelessness and absurdism of Jobu Tupaki, the Alphaverse version of her daughter, of whom was pushed too far. In an attempt to save her daughter in this universe, Evelyn embarks on a multiverse mission, where she gets to learn about and experience realities, in which she has lived the different lives that she had once dreamt about.

The film is extremely entertaining and engaging, and very abstract. This abstractness could potentially lose some viewers in some multiverses and the messiness of it all. However, it is the most outrageous type of fiction, maximalist science fiction, that is also very human and very real. EEAAO explores themes of ambition, personal potential, the meaning of life, and the power and importance of our relationships and shines true lights on Asian-American experiences. It does so with the "basics" of the plot that set the scene: the Asian American hoarder household, the Lunar

New Year celebration, the family-owned business downstairs, the daughter needing to help her parents with taxes as their primary translator, the language barrier between the family and those around them otherwise. The film just *got it*, and on an even deeper, structural sense (although the aforementioned basics are nowhere near shallow, especially in the context of C/C): EEAAO highlights the parent-child relationships between different generations: the first-generation immigrant, the 1.5/2nd generation child, and the parent of the first-generation immigrant, contextualizing the movie's themes with the Asian experience. This is something C/C will attempt to do, while in a different format, showing the relationship between different generations of Asian Americans in the context of the Asian American experience.

Another aspect of the film that one may consider for C/C is how the deeply emotional experience that the film offers is juxtaposed with more lighthearted, silly parts. This movie, also, is not just enjoyed by the Asian American demographic, although it is clear that being able to empathize with the characters enhances one's experience, whether one is Asian American or not. That being said, the themes in this movie are part of the overall Asian American experience that is being explored in C/C. With its wide reception and high level of buzz amongst the Asian American community upon its release this year, paired with lack of very much AAPI representation in Hollywood at all, one is also inclined to ask the question: is EEAAO part of the Asian American experience itself?

7. Gebeloff, Robert, Lu, Denise, & Jordan, Miriam. "Inside the Diverse and Growing Asian Population in the U.S." ***The New York Times*****, August 21, 2021. https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/08/21/us/asians-census-us.html.**

This article by *The New York Times* details The Times's analysis of 2 dozen groups, via the 2020 census results as well as compared figures from previous decades. They also used microdata from the 2019 American Community Survey, obtained from the Minnesota Population Center, for more detailed characteristics of Asian groups. Key topics explained via infographics and text include U.S. citizenship status, location and population, income, education, and political preference of Asian-Americans, split up by different ethnic groups. The article highlights the complexity and development of the Asian-American population in the U.S., how it has tripled in the past 30 years, and how "Asians are now the fastest-growing of the nation's four largest racial and ethnic groups." One stand-out comment mentioned how the Asian population in America is no longer the pre-conceived "West Coast phenomenon," but an "American phenomenon." The Times also points out how 3.5 million people identify as mixed-race Asian, another part of the Asian-American population and experience.

Using secondary research, The Times does a fantastic job at showing the differences between different Asian groups, but also a collectiveness in the way that

data and trajectory are displayed, something that is an aim to be achieved in C/C. The infographics are done beautifully and thoughtfully, something that can be learned from when arranging data for C/C, although this data will be collected via primary research. According to the Methodology statement, the data that The Times showed is based on how people described themselves, but may not necessarily reflect where they were born/immigrated from, something that C/C's survey should make a point to specify. C/C's survey can take after The Census Bureau, though, who, as The Times mentions, defines the term "Asian" as "anyone with origins from East Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent."

8. Tolentino, Jia. "'Minor Feelings' and the Possibilities of Asian-American identity." ***The New Yorker*****, March 6, 2020.**
https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/minor-feelings-and-the-possibilities-of-asian-american-identity

In attempt to gaining a general understanding of Cathy Park Hong's *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* by proxy, via Jia Tolentino's review of it for *The New Yorker*, I was able to learn about the book of essays from not only Hong's point of view, but also Tolentino's. This is especially important and useful, as perspective is something that should also be highlighted in C/C. In *Minor Feelings*, Hong expresses her discomfort as an Asian-American woman, particularly an East Asian Americans woman, subject to living in the confines of white America, living a "purgatorial status" amongst races as she "overcompensates" and deals with "feelings of inadequacy." She has a precise, distinct, feminist, Asian Americans voice in her work.

Tolentino notes that Hong herself focuses mostly on the East Asian experience, since that is what she knows, and feels uncomfortable speaking for everyone. Hong utilizes the second person a lot in her book, "deploying a 'you' that really means 'I,' in the hope that her experience might carry shards of the Asian-American universal." This is interesting to consider for C/C—although it may have seemed like a given, this decision of language and perspective is important in collecting and displaying data to tell stories specific to each individual surveyed, as well as encompassing all individuals' stories, together.

What is extremely useful in this review is Tolentino's response to Hong's writing, as a Filipino-American. While Tolentino points out that she has not experienced everything Hong has, in the same ways or capacities (and vice versa), Hong's essays still "bled a dormant discomfort" out of her. Tolentino recalls, "when I hear people perform gross imitations of "Chinese" accents, I don't know if it hurts the way it does because I'm an Asian person or because I come from a family of immigrants or simply because racism is embarrassing and foul." This suggests that despite being of different ethnic groups, having different individual experiences, Asian Americanss can come together on three levels: empathy, sympathy, or simple policy, ideas that can come out

of C/C. Tolentino also asks, “Is there a future of Asian American identity that’s fundamentally expansive—that can encompass the divergent economic and cultural experiences of Asians in the United States, and form a bridge to the experiences of other marginalized groups?” This is a future that C/C hopes to add to.

9. Park, Jerry Z. “Second-Generation Asian American Pan-Ethnic Identity: Pluralized Meanings of a Racial Label.” *Sociological Perspectives* 51, no. 3 (2008): 541–61. https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2008.51.3.541.

“Second-Generation Asian American Pan-Ethnic Identity” is a study conducted by Jerry Park, featuring survey-interviews of second-generation Asian American students from major public universities with a large Asian-American student population, relative to the universities’ overall demographics: UC Irvine, University of Illinois, University of Houston, and SUNY Stony Brook. Park asks the overarching question: “What do you think of when you hear the term Asian American?” He breaks the term up into 4 “particular cultural and demographic trends”: ethnic diversity, religious diversity, the model minority stereotype, and the second-generation experience. Key ideas from these 4 “trends” are: how the term “Asian American” fail to resonate with so many “Asian Americans”; that there is “a common ground somewhere” to be found and group unique ethnic cultures together—this is where C/C is also mining; how being Asian American consists of a shared limited set of diverse religions and morals, based on exposure and environment; how the model minority image can range from limiting to empowering; and how the “second-generation” experience begets a “third culture” of being “here”—a culture that C/C is also searching for.

Throughout the study, ideas of duality arise. Park explains a duality that is key to how we understand what the “Asian American” label means: whether we view it in a cultural discourse that is multiculturalist, emphasizing differences amongst Asian groups, or of racialization, grouping all Asians together. He extends that these two frameworks are interdependent, coming together to form what he calls racialized multiculturalism. To understand the Asian American identity holistically is to acknowledge both sides. There is truth in individual experiences, and there is power, validity, and connection in shared truths as well. This is the driving idea behind C/C. Things to note that C/C will do differently, however, include those being surveyed: opening up data collection to various generations of Asian Americans across America, as the idea of the “third culture” that is being explored here, I would argue, is not limited to second-generation Asian Americans and is informed by Asian Americans of all generations and backgrounds. The project may also not tackle all 4 trends Park had mentioned, although survey answers may prove otherwise depending on trends in data collected.