The Many Stories of Asian Americans

Ethnic Studies | Grades 9-12 | Brooke Pillifant, M.A., M.Ed.

Theme: History and Movement
Disciplinary Area: Asian American Studies
Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: Historical Knowledge, Geography, Civics and Government
Standards Alignment: CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1-2, 6, & 9
Oregon Standards: HS1-3, 11, 41, 52, 54-55, 60-61, 63, 65, 66
C3 Standards:

- **D1.2.6-8**: Explain how supporting questions help focus inquiry on specific historical or social issues.
- **D1.3.6-8**: Identify and evaluate sources that reflect differing perspectives on identity, race, and justice.
- **D1.5.6-8**: Determine kinds of sources that will be most helpful in exploring immigration, exclusion, and resistance movements.
- **D2.His.1.6-8**: Analyze connections among events and developments, such as exclusion laws and civil rights activism.
- **D2.His.4.6-8**: Explain how perspectives shaped by intersectionality influenced responses to discrimination.
- **D2.His.5.6-8**: Describe how and why perspectives on Asian American identity changed over time.
- **D2.His.14.6-8**: Explain multiple causes and effects of immigration laws, labor exploitation, and racial violence.
- **D2.Civ.10.6-8**: Examine roles of individuals and groups in promoting justice and resisting discrimination.
- **D3.1.6-8**: Gather relevant information from primary sources—letters, photographs, testimonies—to support claims about systemic injustice and resilience.
- **D3.2.6-8**: Evaluate credibility and bias in materials related to stereotypes, immigration narratives, or hate incidents.
- **D4.1.6-8**: Construct arguments using evidence from diverse Asian American histories and activism.
- **D4.3.6-8**: Present findings on the impact of stereotypes and systemic injustice using multimedia or written analysis.
- **D4.6.6-8**: Draw on diverse perspectives to propose actions that support equity and challenge exclusionary practices.

Contents

Lesson Overview

This lesson introduces students to the rich diversity and complex history of Asian American communities in the United States. Rather than treating “Asian American” as a singular identity, the lesson highlights the many cultures, languages, religions, and immigration stories that make up this broad and dynamic group. Students will examine how Asian Americans have been shaped by systems of immigration, labor, and racism, and how communities have responded with resilience, activism, and solidarity. The lesson challenges the Model Minority Myth and encourages students to think critically about intersectionality, systemic inequality, and the impact of stereotypes. Through historical case studies, primary source analysis, and collaborative activities, students will gain a deeper understanding of the diverse experiences within the Asian American community and how those experiences connect to broader conversations about race, justice, and belonging in America.

Key Terms and Concepts

Model Minority Myth: A stereotype that portrays Asian Americans as naturally successful, especially in education and income. While it seems positive, it hides real struggles within the community and is often used to dismiss the impact of racism.

Intersectionality: The complex, cumulative way in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination (such as racism, sexism, and classism) combine, overlap, or intersect especially in the experiences of marginalized individuals or groups.

Immigration Policy: The laws and rules a country creates to control who can enter, stay, or become a citizen. In U.S. history, many immigration policies have excluded or restricted people based on race or nationality.

Citizenship: A legal status that gives a person rights and responsibilities in a country, like voting or protection under the law. For Asian immigrants to America, citizenship was denied for decades based on race.

Labor Exploitation A situation where workers are treated unfairly—often with low pay, poor working conditions, or discrimination—while their labor benefits others. Many Asian immigrants faced this in agriculture, railroads, and factories.

Exclusion The act of keeping people out—whether through laws, social norms, or violence. For example, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was the first U.S. law to ban immigration based on race.

Resilience: The ability of individuals or communities to survive, adapt, and fight back against hardship or injustice. Asian American communities have shown resilience through activism, cultural preservation, and organizing.

Primary Sources: Original materials from a specific time period, such as photos, letters, or official documents. These help us understand history through the eyes of people who lived it.

Solidarity: Unity or support between groups who recognize shared struggles. In Asian American history, solidarity has taken the form of cross-racial activism, labor organizing, and coalition-building.

Lesson Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify the cultural, linguistic, and historical diversity within Asian American communities.
- Explain how laws and policies have impacted Asian American lives over time.
- Analyze how the Model Minority Myth and intersectionality affect Asian American identities.
- Connect historical examples of Asian American activism to present-day movements for justice.

Opening

Begin by asking the class, “How can one label both unite people and erase their identity at the same time?”

Allow for discussions in small groups and then as a larger class.

Then ask, “What does it mean to share an identity like 'Asian American' when it includes people from dozens of countries and cultures?”

Allow for discussion in small groups and then as a larger class.

Take a moment to think about that. Most of us have heard stereotypes, assumptions, or even praise about Asian Americans that seem to paint everyone with the same brush. But today, we're going to dig deeper. We're going to explore stories of immigration, exclusion, resilience, and activism that make up the Asian American experience.

Information

When presenting information to students, the information can be read aloud by the teacher or a student, read silently, or read in groups. If a copy is provided to students, have students underline or circle areas that resonate with them. If a copy is not provided, have students jot down parts of the reading that resonate with them on a separate sheet of paper.

Asian Americans are one of the fastest-growing racial and ethnic groups in the United States. As of 2022, there are more than 24 million Asian Americans, making up about 7.2% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2022). Between 2000 and 2019, the Asian American population grew by 81%, faster than any other major racial group (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). But “Asian American” is not just one group—it includes people from a wide range of countries and cultures.The term refers to people whose ancestors came from more than 20 countries across East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and parts of Central Asia. Some of the countries often included are:

- East Asia: China, Japan, South Korea, North Korea, Taiwan, Mongolia
- South Asia: India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, and the Maldives

- Southeast Asia: Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar (Burma), Brunei, Singapore, Timor-Leste
- Central Asia: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan (Though less represented in U.S. immigration data, people from these countries are sometimes included in Asian American communities.)

The classification of “Asia” as a single region is deeply rooted in colonial history and European world-mapping practices. During the Age of Exploration and colonial expansion, European powers created categories to organize the world based on their own perspectives and interests. As part of this process, they grouped a vast array of culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse societies under the broad label of “Asia.”

This label did not reflect any internal coherence among these regions, but rather served as a way to distinguish “the East” from Europe. In doing so, it essentialized an incredibly diverse part of the world, masking the complexities and particularities of its many peoples and histories. The problem lies not in naming the region, but in the way that name has been used to flatten difference and reinforce a Eurocentric worldview.

Asian Americans speak more than 300 different languages and dialects. For example, Indian Americans may speak Hindi, Tamil, Telugu, Bengali, Punjabi, or more, while Chinese Americans may speak Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokkien and others. According to the American Community Survey, large portions of Asian American communities speak English as another language—44% of Vietnamese Americans and 38% of Cambodian Americans say they speak English "less than very well" (Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2021).

Religion is also extremely diverse. Asian Americans may practice Buddhism, Hindu Dharma traditions, Sikhism, Islam, Christianity, Jainism, Taoism, and more. A national survey by the Pew Research Center (2012) found that about 42% of Asian Americans are Christian, 14% are Buddhist, 10% are Hindu, 4% are Muslim, and around 26% identify as not religious.

Indian American households are often cited as an example of economic success with a median income around $150,000, nearly double that of White, non-Hispanic Americans. However, this figure masks the wide range of economic realities within the community. The perception of Indian Americans as a uniformly wealthy “model minority” does not hold up when you look at income distribution data more closely.

According to a 2020 survey[1], only 36% of Indian American households earn over $100,000 annually, despite the high median income figure. In fact, 64% of Indian American families earn less than $100,000, and within that group, 30% make under $50,000 per year. These statistics reveal significant economic stratification, often shaped by factors such as immigration history, educational opportunities, and employment pathways.

Broader trends among Asian Americans show similar complexities. In 2018, 10.1% of Asian Americans lived below the poverty line, which is higher than the 8.1% poverty rate for White, non-Hispanic Americans. Such disparities underscore that Asian American communities are not monolithic, and many face economic challenges that are obscured by aggregated data.

[1] Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2021). Appendix: Indian American Attitudes Survey (IAAS), 2020. https://carnegie-production-assets.s3.amazonaws.com/static/files/Appendix_IAAS_final.pdf

These statistics reveal that while Asian Americans are often portrayed as a monolithic "model minority," they experience vast economic, linguistic, cultural, and religious differences, shaped by distinct immigration histories, geopolitical forces, and social contexts. So when we talk about “Asian Americans,” we’re talking about people with incredibly different stories, cultures, and experiences—not just one group, but a collection of communities that together form a rich and complex part of American society.

Discussion Questions

In what ways can having a shared identity like "Asian American" be empowering or useful?

What might be lost when we group people from over 20 different countries and hundreds of cultures under one label?

How can we better recognize the unique experiences within the Asian American community?

Information

The First Arrivals

Hindus have been part of U.S. history since at least 1635, when an “East Indian” was recorded in Jamestown, Virginia. In the 1700s, some Indians, including Hindus, were enslaved in Maryland and Delaware, later blending into the freed African American population. Despite these prejudices, free Hindu sailors began arriving in ports like Salem and Boston in the 1800s, contributing to early patterns of Indian migration.

In the 1850s, Chinese immigrants began arriving in California during the Gold Rush, drawn by dreams of economic opportunity. Many worked in dangerous conditions, mining for gold or later building the Transcontinental Railroad, which connected the country from east to west. Chinese workers made up more than 80% of the Central Pacific Railroad workforce, but were paid less than white workers, given the most dangerous tasks like blasting tunnels, and were often denied housing and healthcare.

As competition for jobs increased, so did racism. White laborers and politicians began blaming Chinese workers for unemployment and low wages, leading to violent anti-Chinese riots, such as the Rock Springs Massacre in Wyoming in 1885, where at least 28 Chinese miners were murdered and hundreds were driven from their homes.

This led to one of the most shameful laws in American history: the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. It was the first federal law to ban immigration based on race or nationality, and it made Chinese workers ineligible for citizenship. Families were separated for decades. This act stayed in place until 1943—over 60 years.

Japanese and Korean Immigrants: Farming Under Restriction

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, Japanese and Korean immigrants began arriving on the West Coast and in Hawaii. Many worked on sugar plantations or as tenant farmers. They weren’t allowed

to own land because of laws like the California Alien Land Law of 1913, which prevented “aliens ineligible for citizenship” (a phrase targeting Asian immigrants) from buying property.

Still, these communities organized and thrived. Japanese farmers, for example, formed cooperatives and built successful farming businesses in places like the Central Valley of California.

But even success couldn’t protect them from racism. In 1907, the Gentlemen’s Agreement between the U.S. and Japan limited Japanese immigration. Then, the Immigration Act of 1924 banned nearly all immigration from Asia altogether.

These laws reflected the belief that only white people could truly be American—a belief that shaped U.S. immigration policy for decades.

South Asian Laborers: Citizenship Denied

Around the same time, immigrants from India—mostly Sikh men from the Punjab region—arrived in the U.S., especially in California and the Pacific Northwest. They worked in harsh conditions, building railroads, harvesting crops, and cutting timber. Many faced hostility from white workers and were targets of racist violence. In 1907, the town of Bellingham, Washington saw a white mob attack and expel hundreds of Indian workers in what was called a “Hindu riot,” even though many of the men were Sikh.

These workers were mostly men, and laws prohibited them from bringing their families or marrying white women, creating a generation of bachelor communities. However, there were also widespread marriages between Indian men, particularly Punjabis, and Hispanic women, leading to large communities in southern California of mostly mixed-race families.

Although Indian immigrants were legally classified as “Caucasian” under the racial science of the early 20th century (science that was widely accepted at the time but is now thoroughly discredited) the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in Bhagat Singh Thind v. United States (1923) that Indians were not “white” according to the common, everyday understanding of the term. As a result, Indians were deemed ineligible for U.S. citizenship. This decision not only blocked new naturalizations but also retroactively stripped more than seventy Indian immigrants of citizenship and land they had already obtained. Since naturalization required renouncing their previous citizenship, these individuals were rendered stateless meaning they were without the legal protection of any nation. The consequences were devastating and at least one person reportedly committed suicide in the aftermath.

Even so, Indians organized labor unions and community centers, like the Ghadar Party, which fought both U.S. racism and British colonialism in India. They laid a foundation for later civil rights struggles.

Immigration, labor, and racism are interconnected systems.

- The violence against Chinese miners and exclusion laws remind us of how scapegoating immigrants during economic hardship leads to violence and legal discrimination—something we still see today.

- The Alien Land Laws show us that having money or success doesn't protect against racism when laws are written to preserve white supremacy.
- The denial of citizenship to Indian immigrants is a powerful example of how race was used to define who "belonged" in America, and how those ideas were upheld by the highest courts.

Discussion

How have laws and policies shaped Asian American lives in both positive and negative ways?

What does it say about a country when it builds itself on immigrant labor but excludes those same workers from belonging?

Can you think of any present-day examples where immigrants are blamed for economic or social problems? How is this similar or different from what early Asian immigrants faced?

Activity 1

Materials: Case studies

Divide the class into 4 groups, with each group assigned one of the following case studies:

1. Japanese American Internment (1942–1945)
2. Filipino Farmworker Movement (1960s)
3. Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement (1970s–1990s)
4. South Asian Americans and Post-9/11 Backlash (2001–present)

Each group will become “experts” on their assigned case study.

Follow these steps as a group:

1. Read your case study. Carefully read the case study your group has been assigned. Make sure everyone understands the main ideas.
2. Explore the primary sources. Take a close look at the primary sources for your case study. These include photos, letters, government documents, and sometimes video clips. Discuss what they show and why they matter.
3. Fill out the analysis chart. Work together to answer the questions in your chart using the case study and information from the primary sources. Write down your group’s ideas clearly in the "Group Notes" column.
4. Compete a Justice Scorecard. Justify each score with evidence from the case study and the primary sources.

Analysis Chart

Question	Group Notes
What happened in this case study? Who was affected?	
What systems of power, law, or belief contributed to the discrimination or injustice?	
What forms of resistance, resilience, or organizing took place?	
What emotions or ethical questions does this raise for you as a student?	

Justice Scorecard

Determine a score as a group and circle.

1. Government Accountability

   How responsible was the government for the injustice, and did it do anything to repair the harm?

   1 - Caused harm and did nothing to fix it

   2 - Partial recognition or small changes

   3 - Took full responsibility and made meaningful changes

   Evidence:

2. Community Response and Resistance

   How did the community respond to injustice? Was their resistance strong, organized, or successful?

   1 - Ignored or perpetuated injustice

   2 - Limited or symbolic resistance

   3 - Strong and meaningful response

   Evidence:

3. Public Understanding and Empathy

   How well did the general public understand or care about what happened to the community?

   1 - Dismissive or harmful response

   2 - Surface-level awareness

   3 - Deep understanding and support

   Evidence:

4. Long-Term Justice or Redress Achieved

   Did the community receive lasting justice or recognition for what happened?

   1 - No justice or acknowledgment

2 - Incomplete or short-term efforts

3 - Meaningful and lasting justice

Evidence:

Case Study 1: Japanese American Internment (1942–1945)

What happened?

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the U.S. government and public grew suspicious of anyone with Japanese ancestry—even if they were American citizens. Just two months later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which led to the forced removal and incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast.

These individuals—many of whom were U.S. citizens and had never been to Japan—were sent to internment camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. They lost homes, farms, and businesses. Families lived in cramped barracks with no privacy, often in harsh climates like the deserts of Arizona or the mountains of Wyoming.

Despite these conditions, Japanese Americans showed resilience. In some camps, they created schools, newspapers, and sports teams. Others resisted, like Fred Korematsu, who challenged the internment in court. In 1988, after decades of activism, Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act, offering a formal apology and $20,000 in reparations to survivors.

Why it matters:

This case challenges us to think about what happens to civil rights during times of fear and war. Can a government claim to protect democracy while imprisoning its own people based on race?

Primary Sources:

- **Japanese American Relocation Digital Archive (JARDA)**: A comprehensive collection of photographs, personal letters, diaries, and government documents detailing the internment experience.
- **Densho Digital Repository**: Offers oral histories, images, and documents chronicling the Japanese American experience from early immigration through post-war redress.
- **Library of Congress – Japanese American Internment:** Provides a curated set of primary sources, including photographs and official documents related to the internment camps.

Case Study 2: The Filipino Farmworker Movement (1960s)

What happened?

In the 1960s, farmworkers in California faced back-breaking labor, low wages, and unsafe living conditions. Many of these workers were Filipino Americans who had come to the U.S. in the early 20th century, often without families because immigration laws had restricted Filipino women from entering.

Led by Larry Itliong, Filipino workers went on strike in Delano, California, in 1965. They refused to pick grapes until growers paid fair wages. Eventually, they joined forces with Cesar Chavez and Mexican-American workers to form the United Farm Workers (UFW) union.

Their nonviolent protests, boycotts, and marches caught national attention. After five years, the growers finally agreed to better wages and working conditions. The Delano Grape Strike is one of the most powerful labor movements in U.S. history, but Filipino leadership is often left out of the story.

Why it matters:

This case highlights the power of multiracial organizing and shows how Filipino Americans fought for dignity in a system designed to exploit them.

Primary Sources:

- **Farmworker Movement Documentation Project**: Features photographs, letters, and documents related to the Delano Grape Strike and the role of Filipino labor leaders like Larry Itliong.
- **Digital Public Library of America – Delano Grape Strike**: A primary source set highlighting the collaboration between Filipino and Mexican workers during the strike.
- **National Park Service – Larry Itliong Biography**: Provides insights into Itliong's leadership and contributions to the farm labor movement.

Case Study 3: Southeast Asian Refugee Resettlement (1970s–1990s)

What happened?

After the Vietnam War and U.S. military involvement in Cambodia and Laos, millions of Southeast Asians faced violence, civil war, and genocide. The Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, for example, murdered nearly 2 million people in just four years.

Between the 1970s and 1990s, the U.S. accepted hundreds of thousands of refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Hmong communities from the highlands of Laos. Many had helped the U.S. military during the Vietnam War (also known as the Second Indochina War) and were now fleeing for their lives.

These families often arrived with nothing. They were placed in low-income neighborhoods and expected to learn English, find jobs, and adapt quickly, while dealing with trauma, racism, and poverty. In schools, Southeast Asian students were frequently misunderstood and ignored. Some were labeled as “model minorities,” while others were tracked into low-performing classes.

Despite these challenges, Southeast Asian Americans built strong communities, started cultural centers and mutual aid organizations, and advocated for educational equity and mental health services.

Why it matters:

These cases help us understand what it means to be a refugee, not just an immigrant, and how war, trauma, and survival have effects that continue for generations. They also challenge stereotypes that all Asian Americans are successful and don’t need support.

Primary Sources:

- **Asian American Education Project – Southeast Asian Refugees**: Offers lesson plans and resources, including primary sources, on the experiences of Southeast Asian refugees in the U.S.
- **UCLA Asian American Studies Center – Policy Reports**: Contains policy analyses and reports detailing the challenges faced by Southeast Asian refugees during resettlement.
- **Hmong Studies Journal – Refugee Experiences**: Presents studies and narratives on the experiences of Hmong refugees adapting to life in the United States.

Case Study 4: South Asian Americans and Post-9/11 Backlash (2001–present)

What happened?

After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, South Asian Americans—especially Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu Americans—faced a wave of racial profiling and hate crimes. Many people in the U.S. wrongly assumed that anyone with brown skin, a beard, or a turban was a terrorist.

The first hate crime victim after 9/11 was Balbir Singh Sodhi, a Sikh gas station owner in Arizona, who was shot and killed four days after the attacks. He had no connection to terrorism; he was murdered because of how he looked.

Across the country, mosques, temples, and gurdwaras were vandalized. Students were bullied for wearing turbans, headscarves, or speaking different languages. Many families were placed under government surveillance, detained at airports, or denied jobs because of their names or religions.

In response, groups like the South Asian Americans Leading Together (SAALT), Desis Rising Up and Moving (DRUM), and Sikh Coalition began fighting for civil rights, religious literacy, and curriculum reform and were joined by many other groups as time went on. They pushed schools to teach about Sikhism, Hinduism, and Islam accurately to reduce ignorance and bias.

Why it matters:

This case invites us to think about how fear can lead to prejudice, and how important it is to understand the diversity within Asian American communities: not everyone is the same, and not everyone is treated equally.

Primary Sources:

- **StoryCorps – Remembering Balbir Singh Sodhi**: An audio narrative from Sodhi's brothers recounting his life and the circumstances of his death in a post-9/11 hate crime.
- **CNN Interactive – Balbir Singh Sodhi**: An in-depth article exploring the impact of Sodhi's murder on the Sikh community and the broader implications of post-9/11 hate crimes.
- **Pluralism Project – Sikhism Post 9/11**: Analyzes the challenges faced by Sikh Americans in the aftermath of 9/11, including instances of discrimination and violence.

Information: The Model Minority Myth

When people think of Asian Americans, they often imagine straight-A students, top colleges, stable jobs in tech or medicine, and quiet obedience. This image, known as the Model Minority Myth, paints Asian Americans as a monolithic group of hardworking, law-abiding, high-achieving individuals. At first glance it might seem like a compliment. But dig deeper, and you'll find a powerful myth that causes real harm.

The "model minority" label was popularized during the 1960s, a time when civil rights movements led by Black Americans were gaining strength. By holding up Asian Americans as an example of "how to succeed" in America, media and politicians subtly used this stereotype to silence demands for racial justice. The message was clear: If Asian Americans can make it, why can't everyone else?

But this narrative is misleading. It erases the wide diversity within Asian American communities. While some East Asians might benefit from economic privilege, others—especially refugees from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia—struggle with poverty, trauma, and lack of access to quality education. In fact, Southeast Asian American students often face some of the lowest college completion rates of any ethnic group in the U.S., but their challenges are hidden by the success stories of others. Recall that although Indian Americans are often cited as a "model minority" due to a high median household income, the reality is that 64% of Indian American households earn less than $100,000, and nearly 30% make under $50,000 annually. Furthermore, around 10% of Asian Americans lived in poverty in 2018, a rate higher than that of White, non-Hispanic Americans (8.1%), highlighting the economic struggles that persist within the broader Asian American population.

Worse, the Model Minority Myth drives a wedge between communities of color. It promotes the idea that racism isn't really a barrier, just something you can overcome if you try hard enough. This ignores the reality of systemic inequality: unfair laws, policies, and practices that affect entire groups regardless of how hard they work. In this way, the myth isn't just inaccurate; it's dangerous.

Asian Americans aren't a single story. In fact, they represent over 20 different ethnic groups with origins in East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Indian subcontinent. Each community brings its own language, religion, immigration history, and social challenges.

For example:

- South Asian Americans (like Indian, Pakistani, or Bangladeshi immigrants) may face religious discrimination, even within their own communities.
- Southeast Asian Americans from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam may come from refugee backgrounds, often fleeing war and genocide.
- Pacific Islanders, frequently grouped with Asian Americans in data, face unique struggles related to U.S. colonialism and cultural erasure.

This complexity grows when we think about intersectionality, a term coined by scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw. Intersectionality asks us to look at how different parts of our identity, like race, gender, sexuality, class, or immigration status, combine to shape our experiences.

Consider the story of a LGBTQ+ Filipino American teenager. They might feel isolated within their ethnic community because of their sexual orientation, and at the same time feel invisible in the broader LGBTQ+ space due to racial stereotypes. Or imagine a Korean American girl who struggles with the pressure to meet academic expectations while quietly dealing with mental health issues that her family refuses to acknowledge due to cultural stigma. These are real stories that happen every day.

Contrary to the "quiet, obedient" stereotype, Asian Americans have a long history of resistance and activism. In 1968, Asian, Black, and Latine students in California formed the Third World Liberation Front, leading massive strikes demanding Ethnic Studies programs in universities. Their movement was groundbreaking; it linked their struggles and demanded education that told their histories.

Fast forward to recent years, and you'll find Asian Americans speaking out against anti-Asian violence, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, when hateful rhetoric led to a spike in attacks. But rather than isolating themselves, many Asian American activists stood in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, advocated for Indigenous land rights, and marched for immigrant justice.

Take Grace Lee Boggs, a Chinese American activist who spent decades organizing in Detroit with African American communities for economic and racial justice. Or Yuri Kochiyama, a Japanese American who survived internment camps and later became a vocal ally of Malcolm X. These stories remind us that Asian American activism isn't new; it's deeply rooted and deeply connected to broader fights for justice.

Understanding the Model Minority Myth, intersectionality, and Asian American resistance isn't just about learning someone else's history. It's about understanding how power works, how stories are told, and how injustice hides in plain sight. It's also about finding strength in solidarity—recognizing that our struggles, while different, are often linked by the same systems.

You have the opportunity to explore the many stories that shape our world including those that are often left out. By learning about diverse perspectives, you can begin to decide for yourself what empathy, equity, and community mean to you.

Activity 2

To begin the activity, either randomly assign students a partner or allow them to choose their own. Place a scenario card at each set of desks before the activity starts. Let students know that these cards are inspired by real experiences but are fictionalized to reflect common challenges faced by students from diverse backgrounds. Once seated, each pair will discuss the questions related to their scenario for three minutes. After the time is up, students will rotate to a new desk with a different scenario card and repeat the process with the same partner. Continue rotating as time allows.

Pairs work together to answer the following:

1. What stereotype or assumption is being made in your scenario?
2. How does this connect to the Model Minority Myth or intersectionality?
3. How might the person in the scenario feel, and why?
4. What systemic issue or misunderstanding might be fueling this experience?

Scenario Cards:

1. *A Chinese American student is praised by a teacher as "naturally smart" in math, even though they actually struggle with it and work hard to keep up.*
2. *A Southeast Asian student faces pressure at home to go into medicine, even though they want to pursue art. Their family compares them to more "successful" relatives.*
3. *A mixed-race Black and Asian student feels they're constantly forced to "pick a side" when talking about race, and their peers often don't believe they're both.*
4. *An Asian American LGBTQ+ student hears stereotypes that their culture is "too conservative" to be accepting, and they feel excluded from both their cultural and queer spaces.*
5. *A Filipino student in a mostly white school gets asked, "Where are you really from?" even though they've lived in the U.S. their whole life.*
6. *A Korean American student speaks Korean with their grandparents at home. One day at school, a classmate mocks their pronunciation while overhearing a phone call. The student becomes self-conscious and avoids speaking their language in public.*
7. *An Indian American student wears a bindi (sacred forehead mark) during a cultural celebration at school. A teacher comments that it's "a cute sticker," and a few classmates ask if it's related to being in a cult.*
8. *A Thai American student is repeatedly asked to represent all of "Asian culture" in school projects and diversity events.*
9. *A Vietnamese American student has corrected teachers on the pronunciation of their name multiple times. One teacher jokingly says, "I'll just call you something easier."*
10. *A Laotian American student receives free lunch at school. When classmates talk about how "all Asians are rich and have it easy," the student feels like they shouldn't speak up about their family's financial struggles.*

Wrap Up

Throughout this lesson, we explored the diverse histories and experiences of Asian American communities in the United States. We examined how immigration, labor, and racial exclusion have shaped the lives of Asian Americans, and we learned about the resilience and activism that communities have shown in response to injustice. We challenged the Model Minority Myth and deepened our understanding of intersectionality, thinking critically about how race, culture, class, gender, and other aspects of identity overlap and influence our lives. Through case studies, primary source analysis, and thoughtful discussion, we developed a more nuanced view of the Asian American experience and reflected on what justice, identity, and belonging mean in our society today.

Assessment

Have each student use three sticky notes, each in a different color, to reflect on the themes discussed in the lesson. On each note, they should write a response using one of the following prompts:

- “I learned…” to share a new insight or understanding,
- “I wonder…” to ask a question or express curiosity,
- “This connects to…” to relate the content to their own experiences, prior knowledge, or something they’ve seen or read.

Once completed, have students place their sticky notes on a designated board or wall space in the classroom.

Homework Assignment

For this assignment, write three thoughtful paragraphs reflecting on the following question:

How does learning about Asian American history help you better understand your own community or identity?

You may write from your own experience, or share the perspective of a family member or someone in your community. You can talk about how it connects to your cultural background, challenges you've witnessed or experienced, or how it changes the way you think about identity, race, or belonging in your school or neighborhood.

Citations

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