

Finding Light among Uncertainty

吴林 Lin Wu, 熊慧珍 Hui-Chen Hsiung, and 应婷 Tina Bogucharova

During the COVID-19 pandemic, anti-Asian violence has escalated significantly in the United States. While some consider this phenomenon new, history begs to differ. Some graphic examples of anti-Asian xenophobia are the lynching and legal exclusion of Chinese immigrants in the late 1800s, colonization of the Philippines from 1848 to 1946, the incarceration of Japanese Americans on the West Coast between 1942 and 1945, military intervention in Korea, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam from 1950 to 1975, the scapegoating of South Asian Americans after September 11, 2001, the launch of a trade war with China since 2018, and demonizing China for the coronavirus.¹ As seen, anti-Asian racism is at the heart of the U.S. empire to maintain its domestic and global dominance of white supremacy. However, many educators in the United States struggle to teach this subject since the mainstream U.S. history curriculum often excludes Asian Americans' struggles and resilience.² In particular, few studies explore how elementary social studies teachers use culturally relevant pedagogy to help Asian American students analyze and critique anti-Asian violence. This article addresses the gap.

Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

Gloria Ladson-Billings' conceptualization of culturally relevant pedagogy results from her study of five Black and three White female elementary teachers.³ She described successful teachers of African American students as (1) engaging students in academic inquiries instead of focusing on test scores, (2) helping students clarify their cultural identities and navigate diverse cultures, and (3) building students' sociopolitical knowledge and skills to challenge the status quo. Since the publication of her research in 1994, others have examined the utility of culturally relevant pedagogy in social studies for ethnically diverse students, including Asian Americans.⁴ Echoing several themes of social studies (e.g., ① INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY; ② CULTURE; ③ TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE), culturally relevant pedagogy is fitting to examine how teachers engage Asian American students in linking the past with the present, given the surge of anti-Asian racism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Contexts

The strategies suggested here for culturally relevant social studies education for Asian American students emerged from a dual-language (Mandarin Chinese and English) immersion elementary school in Washington state. About 70% of the 450 students identified as Asian Americans, and the 22 teachers were primarily female (92%) and Asian American (68%).⁵ Each grade level had two lead teachers: one taught mathematics and social studies in Mandarin Chinese, and one taught language arts and science in English. Ms. Wáng⁶ was the fifth-grade teacher responsible for mathematics and social studies. She taught English from preschool to middle school in Taiwan and has taught for eight years at this school. Being an ethnic majority in her ancestral home and ethnic minority in her adopted home, Ms. Wáng knew that her racialized experiences informed her understanding of history. In October 2021, Lin (the first author) interviewed Ms. Wáng in Mandarin Chinese⁷ and reviewed her teaching materials. The following sections described culturally relevant techniques Ms. Wáng used to teach her students in three consecutive units during the 2020–2021 academic year. The units were family history, U.S. history, and anti-Asian violence.

Exploring Race and Family History

Ms. Wáng emphasized developing social studies inquiry skills. In the first unit, she used *Let's Talk about Race*⁸ as the main text to help students explore how race intertwines with family history. She began the unit by asking students to reflect in writing on the questions: What does the word *race* mean to you? How is race related to social studies? Why are we talking about race? She then instructed students to share their reflections in small groups before sharing her own story:

我在台湾作为一个多数族裔出生长大。当我来到美国的东海岸读书时，才意识到自己不是这里的多数族裔。后来在美国西海岸一所白人居住的小学教中文时，慢慢意识到自己是亚裔，也意识到我的种族和语言是有密切联系的。

(I was born and raised as an ethnic majority in Taiwan. When I began my graduate studies on the East Coast, I recognized that I am not a member of the racial majority in the United States. After I started teaching

Mandarin Chinese at a predominantly White elementary school on the West Coast, I gradually realized that I am Asian and my language is deeply connected with my race.)

In sharing parts of her story, Ms. Wáng personalized the discussion on race and the importance of knowing one's identity (● **INDIVIDUAL DEVELOPMENT AND IDENTITY**). She then used pictures of people with various skin colors and a world map to show global ethnic diversity. To further engage students in relating to the main text, Ms. Wáng assigned a "self-identity project" (see handout) that asked students to discuss race with their family, interview family members about their (im)migration story, and find out shared familial values. This project helped many students clarify their identity, develop historical and political knowledge, and appreciate their families. Hàorán shared, "I am Chinese and Asian American. I value integrity, diligence, and familial piety. I respect Yuè Fēi (1103–1142) and Wén Tiānxiáng (1236–1283) because they are patriotic poets and generals. I also respect my parents because they are my role models." Seo-Jun wrote: "I am Korean and Asian American. I believe in love, respect, and justice. I respect the President of South Korea because he is intelligent and kind. I also respect my parents because they work hard to raise my siblings and me. They love me, and I love them."

Developing Cultural Competence through Studying U.S. History

Building on the previous unit, Ms. Wáng continued to nurture all her students' cultural identities, especially Asian Americans. Relating to the theme of ● **CULTURE**, Ms. Wáng began the U.S. history unit by introducing three main issues concerning the (re)presentation of Asian Americans in U.S. K–12 curricula based on research⁹ and presented them in class (Figure 1).

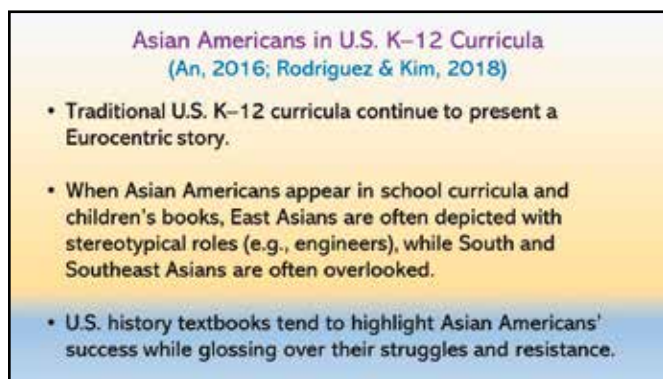


Figure 1

Ms. Wáng then used *Asian Americans in the People's History of the United States*¹⁰ to counter such curricular injustices. For example, she regularly asked students to study each of the twenty Asian Americans profiled in this text and posed these questions: (1) What kinds of hardship did they face?

(2) How did they resist discrimination? (3) Can you connect their qualities with your virtues?

Ms. Wáng also scaffolded historical knowledge of other communities. During one lesson, she juxtaposed an image of Indigenous peoples practicing a ritual in front of a bonfire with another of European settlers holding their swords and flags. She compared another image of White men abducting Africans on a slave ship to one of the "Founding Fathers" waging war with the British Imperial Army. She then asked students to analyze each image critically by posing questions such as: What did you see? What stories did each picture tell? What questions do you have? After reflecting on these questions in writing, students shared their answers in small groups. Nhu stated, "I saw that there are many different stories of American history." A few more Asian American students noticed the cruelty imposed on enslaved Africans and Indigenous peoples and wondered, "Do Asian Americans share overlapping experiences with Native Americans and African Americans?"

In explaining why she used these teaching materials and techniques, Ms. Wáng said,

我希望亚裔学生明白，他们有可能在美国受到种族歧视，而且其他有色人种也会面对同样的遭遇。可如果他们只以一个受害者的身份来对待歧视时，他们就放弃了改变歧视的权利。我最终希望打开他们的心，让他们自己把这些历史连接起来。

(I hope my Asian American students will learn that they may encounter racism in the United States and are not the only people facing racism. However, if they see themselves only as victims, they give up their agency to right wrongs. Ultimately, I want to open their hearts so that they can connect the dots of history.)

Improving Sociopolitical Consciousness through Examining Anti-Asian Violence

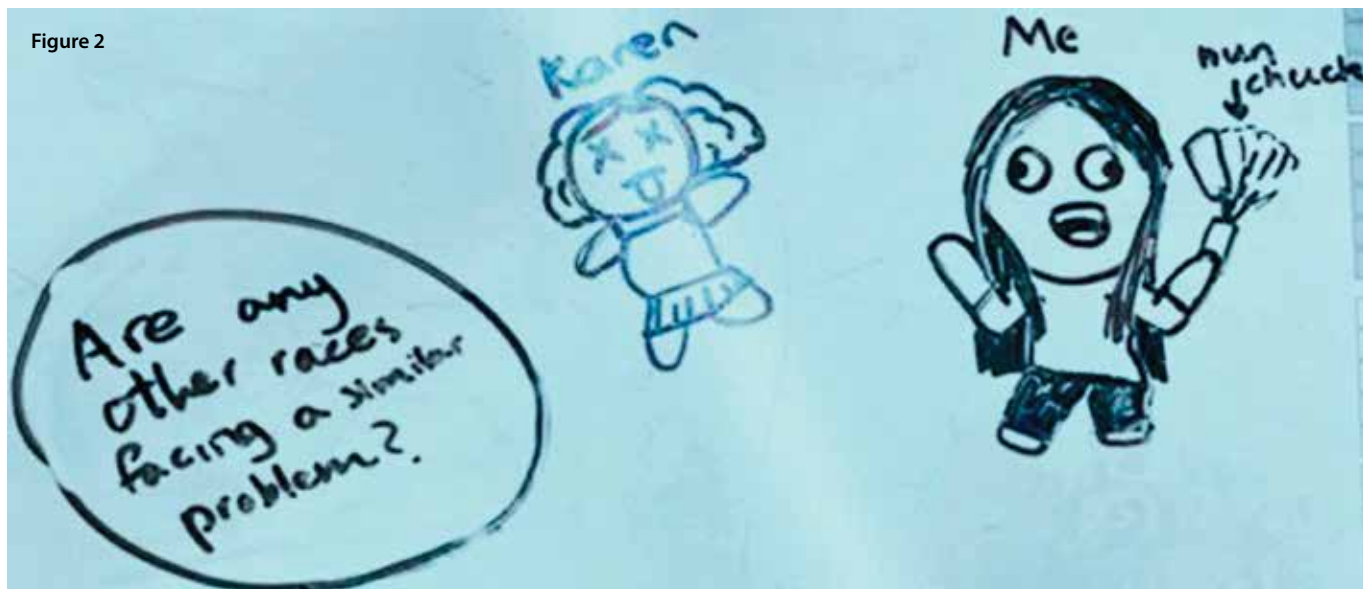
When the school celebrated the Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month in May 2021, Ms. Wáng highlighted the theme ● **TIME, CONTINUITY, AND CHANGE** by using the *Stop AAPI Hate National Report*.¹¹ She disaggregated the data to reveal that Chinese (43.7%), Koreans (16.6%), and Filipinos (8.8%) reported the most hate incidents during the COVID-19 pandemic. She also pointed out that many Asian American women (64.8%) experienced verbal harassment and physical assaults. Ms. Wáng then conveyed that some politicians and media outlets spread fear among the public and instigated anger toward Asian Americans. After these explanations, she asked the class: Why do you think some people blame Asian Americans for the coronavirus?

After a small-group discussion, Yǔxuān responded:

我的爸爸是中国人，我的妈妈是白人。上周末我和家人去超市购物时，一个白人男子走过来对我爸爸说，‘回你自己的家乡！’我爸爸对他说，‘我爸爸对他说，‘我在这住了二十多年，这里就是我的家。’

(My dad is Chinese. My mom is White. When we went

Figure 2



grocery shopping last weekend, a White man walked to my dad and told him, ‘Go back to where you came from!’ My dad told him, ‘I have lived here for more than 20 years. This is my home.’)

Ms. Wáng took a deep breath and guided the subsequent discussion with:

谢谢你勇敢地分享你的故事。那请大家思考一下：为什么这个人会叫一个陌生人回他的家乡？

(Thank you for being so courageous to share your story. Everyone, please think for a minute: Why would he tell a stranger to go back to where he came from?)

Mèngyáo speculated “他可能觉得新冠病毒是从中国来的，所以他害怕。” (Maybe he thinks that the coronavirus started in China, so he is scared.)

Ji-Ho added “他可能有家人得了新冠病毒，所以他很生气。” (Maybe he has a family member who caught the coronavirus, so he is angry.)

Akio countered with “他就是个种族歧视者！” (He is just a racist!)

After hearing these comments, Ms. Wáng probed with “就算他害怕或生气，他有权利对一个陌生人说那样的话吗？” (Even if he is scared or angry, does he have the right to say those words to a stranger?)

Many students answered “没有！” (No!)

Ms. Wáng continued to inquire “如果遇到类似的情况，你会怎么处理？” (What would you have done if you encountered a similar scenario?) She then instructed students to discuss in small groups.

Afterward, a few students stated “我会告诉我的家人。” (I will tell my family.)

Other students suggested “我会用在学校学到的知识和技能来应对。我可以和他理论，可以教育他，也可以不理他。”

(I can use the knowledge and skills I learned in school to cope with a similar scenario. I can reason with him, teach him why he is wrong, or ignore him.)

Ms. Wáng then encouraged students to respond to an open-ended question through writing or drawing: Reflecting on your peer’s story and what we learned in the previous units, what do you think about the ongoing hate crimes against Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic?

Carlos made a personal connection between the past and the present in his writing, “I realize that anti-Asian hatred is not new and can happen to my family.”

Xiǎolóng resisted the U.S. mainstream cold-war rhetoric in his reflection, “I do not want a war between China and the United States.”

Yùpíng conveyed her insights through a drawing (Figure 2). In it, a worried-looking Asian American woman holding nun-chucks stands next to a mocking Karen (a racist White woman) with the question: “Are any other races facing a similar problem?” The drawing suggested that this student recognized that even if White and Asian American women both encounter sexism, some White women can practice racism against Asian Americans and other People of Color. The drawing also indicated that this student utilized nun-chucks, an Asian martial arts weapon, to position Asian American women as capable of defending themselves and resisting victimhood.

Self-Identity Project

关于我 (About Me) _____

1. 认识我的族裔 (Recognize My Race)

我是 _____ 美国人。(非裔, 亚裔, 欧洲裔, 原住民, 拉丁美洲裔, 或混血)

(I am African, Asian, European, Indigenous, Latinx, or Mixed-Race American.)

2. 认识我的家庭 (Introduce My Family)

我来自 _____ 口之家。我的家人有 _____、_____、_____ 和我。

(I come from a family of [how many people]. My family is made of [the members] and me.)

3. 认识我的信仰 (Know My Religion)

我信仰 _____ 教。

(I believe in [name of the religion].)

我不信仰任何宗教。

(I do not have a religion.)

4. 认识我的美德 (Understand My Virtues)

我相信 _____、_____ 和 _____。

(My virtues are [choose three from the list].)

正直/善良/感恩/尊重/合作/负责/共情/自信/优异/勇气/努力/诚实/耐心/爱 (integrity/kindness/gratitude/respect/collaboration/responsibility/empathy/confidence/excellence/courage/diligence/honesty/patience/love)

5. 我尊敬的一位代表我族裔的人 (Someone I Highly Respect Who Represents My Ethnicity)

我特别尊敬 _____, 因为 _____。

(I highly respect [the person's name], because [the qualities of this person].)

Practical Guidelines for Teachers

Ms. Wáng's culturally relevant pedagogy deepened many students' learning. Yet, we recognize that some teachers may struggle with teaching U.S. history to Asian American students. Hence, we offer some practical guidelines. First, teachers can design units to help students explore the linkage between race and family history and relate their life experiences to class discussions. This method will engage all students, especially Asian Americans, in connecting their lives with history. Second, teachers can adapt the sources and methods described in this article to affirm all students' cultural identities while growing the historical knowledge of their own and other communities. In so doing, Asian American students and their peers will become multiculturally competent. Third, teachers must learn about the U.S. history of blaming Asian Americans for contagious diseases.¹² They can then teach this history by using sources such as *Menace to Empire*¹³ and *Asian Americans*¹⁴ to show how Asians and Asian Americans have been victimized yet resisted U.S. imperialism. This may enhance all students' critical consciousness of reimagining the COVID-19 pandemic as a portal to uproot anti-Asian racism in the United States.¹⁵

Conclusion

While gratifying to see students exploring their identity, family history, and anti-Asian violence in Ms. Wáng's class, it is crucial to acknowledge the support she received from colleagues and parents. Some other teachers will not be so fortunate. However, culturally relevant social studies education is imperative for all students to acquire critical historical knowledge. Amidst the rupture caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, we (the authors) remember our ancestors have taught us that “危机” (crisis) means danger and opportunity. Thus, we hope that Ms. Wáng's teaching and our practical guidelines are vessels for turning dangerous times into imaginative opportunities to teach Asian American history. More importantly, we hope all educators are committed to finding light among uncertainty, “for there is always light, if only we're brave enough to see it. If only we're brave enough to be it.”¹⁶ 🌍

Acknowledgments

We appreciate Dr. Sohyun An and Dr. Noreen Naseem Rodríguez for their sustaining support in publishing this article. We are also grateful to Dr. Ken Carano, Dr. Geneva Gay, and the anonymous reviewers for their feedback on earlier drafts of this article. Any remaining shortcomings are our own.

Notes

1. Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2015); Lok Siu and Claire Chun, “Yellow Peril and Techno-Orientalism in the Time of COVID-19: Racialized Contagion, Scientific Espionage, and Techno-Economic Warfare,” *Journal of Asian American Studies* 23, no. 3 (2020): 421–440.
2. Sohyun An, “Asian Americans in American History: An Asian Crit

- Perspective on Asian American Inclusion in State U.S. History Curriculum Standards,” *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44, no. 2 (2016): 244–276.
3. Gloria Ladson-Billings, *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teachers of African American Children* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1994).
 4. Karen L. B. Burgard, Caroline O'Quinn, Michael L. Boucher, Jr., Natasha Pinnix, Cynthia Trejo, and Charnae Dickson, “Using Photographs to Create Culturally Relevant Classrooms: People of San Antonio, Texas, in the 1930s,” *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 33, no. 3 (2021): 3–7; Valerie Ooka Pang, “The Beliefs of Successful Asian American Pacific Islander Teachers: How Culture Is Embedded in Their Teaching,” *AAPI Nexus* 7, no. 1 (2009): 55–82.
 5. “Bellevue School District,” *Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction*, October 1, 2021, <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/100019>.
 6. We use pseudonyms for the teacher and the students to protect their privacy.
 7. We present parts of the article in Mandarin Chinese to honor the authenticity of the teaching and learning in Ms. Wáng's class. This bilingual effort is another way that culturally relevant pedagogy can be embedded in social studies education.
 8. Julius Lester, *Let's Talk about Race* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008).
 9. An, “Asian Americans in American History”; Noreen Naseem Rodríguez and Esther June Kim, “In Search of Mirrors: An Asian Critical Race Theory Content Analysis of Asian American Picturebooks from 2007 to 2017,” *Journal of Children's Literature* 44, no. 2 (2018): 17–30.
 10. “Asian Americans in the People's History of the United States,” *Zinn Education Project*, 2016, <https://www.zinnedproject.org/materials/asian-americans-and-moments-in-peoples-history/>.
 11. “Stop AAPI Hate National Report,” *STOP AAPI HATE*, May 6, 2021, <https://stopaapihate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Stop-AAPI-Hate-Report-National-210506.pdf>.
 12. Sohyun An and Noreen Naseem Rodríguez, “Anti-Asian Violence amid the COVID-19 Pandemic and Implications for Social Studies Education,” in *Post-Pandemic Social Studies: How COVID-19 Has Changed the World and How We Teach*, ed. Wayne Journell (New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2021), 163–174.
 13. Moon-Ho Jung, *Menace to Empire: Anticolonial Solidarities and the Transpacific Origins of the US Security State* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022).
 14. *Asian Americans*, written by Alex Keipper, featuring Daniel Dae Kim and Tamlyn Tomita, aired May 11–12, 2020, PBS.
 15. Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal,” last modified April 3, 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>.
 16. Amanda Gorman, *The Hill We Climb: An Inaugural Poem for the Country* (New York, NY: Viking Books, 2021).

Lin Wu is an Assistant Professor of Teacher Education at Western Oregon University. He can be reached at wul@mail.wou.edu

Hui-Chen Hsiung is a Teacher at Washington State Public Schools. She can be reached at hsiumgh@bsd405.org

Tina Bogucharova is a Principal at Washington State Public Schools. She can be reached at bogucharovat@bsd405.org