

The 1995 National Asian American Studies Examination in U. S. High Schools

ANDREW CHIN

Because of effective professional networks and extraordinary individual efforts, a relatively small number of Asian American Studies departments have had a disproportionate influence on the formulation of Asian American political values and discourse during the past decade. Nevertheless, Asian American perspectives are rarely recognized in most parts of the United States, despite the continuing growth of Asian American communities in all regions of the country. The recent proliferation of Asian American Studies programs beyond the leading universities of the West Coast, Hawaii, New York and New England¹ is therefore of vital importance.

American high schools are also beginning to provide an exposure to Asian American perspectives as part of their required multicultural curricula. More often than not, however, the teachers being asked to provide these perspectives are unaware of Asian American Studies as an academic discipline. The National Asian American Studies Examination is a new initiative to encourage the development of rigorous programs in multicultural education at the high school level. As a co-curricular activity, it motivates students and teachers to engage in a meaningful exploration of the Asian American experience, even in the absence of administrative support.

A further purpose of the examination is to present an empowering context for the educational achievements of exceptional Asian American students. For these students, success in academic competitions, particularly in science and mathematics, often comes at a heavy price: it is seen by the mainstream to affirm the model

ANDREW CHIN is executive director of the Council for Asian American Education and is a NAPABA fellow at Yale Law School.

minority thesis, an ultimately debilitating stereotype.² The National Asian American Studies Examination provides an opportunity for Asian American students to attain academic prestige in an activity which liberates and enables them to challenge such stereotypes and the dominant social and economic order.

A final aim of the competition is to challenge schools and teachers to examine the condition of Asian Americans in their student bodies and communities. The contest thereby supplements the dominant, cultural interpretation of Asian American educational achievement with the relative functionalism perspective of Sue and Okazaki. Beyond identifying high-achieving Asian American students as examples for their classmates, and attempting to "inculcate in others those Asian American values that facilitate educational achievements," participating schools have been required to commit specific resources—instructional materials and time—to studying "the status and situation of Asians in American society."³ The effect of a school's participation, then, can only be to improve the racial climate for the entire student body.

Background

The Council for Asian American Studies Education, a national coalition of university students and faculty founded in 1991,⁴ passed a resolution in 1993 calling for the establishment of an annual high school examination in Asian American Studies. As stated in the resolution, the purposes of the National Asian American Studies Examination were:

- ❖ to recognize students who have endeavored to learn more about the contributions and experiences of eight generations of ethnic Asians in the United States;
- ❖ to improve the self-image of Asian American student participants as they locate their place within American history and contemporary society; and
- ❖ to raise awareness of the diverse perspectives of Asian Americans among all participants and their teacher/sponsors.

The forty-five minute examination consisted of twenty multiple-choice items and one short essay of not more than one hundred words. The multiple-choice questions were based on two texts^{5, 6} which have been widely adopted (some controversy notwithstanding)⁷ by Asian American Studies programs at the university level, but have not received extensive exposure at the high school level.

A bank of one-hundred multiple-choice questions was developed, from which forty items were eventually chosen for the competition and the practice examination. The practice examination was published in *A. Magazine*.⁸ (The 1995 examination is reprinted in Section 2.)

Registration materials, including the practice examination and a color wall poster covering 150 years of Asian American history were sent to 1,145 schools in all fifty states. The invitations were based on successful participation in other national, locally-administered academic competitions, including the National Council of Teachers of English Achievement Awards in Writing and the American High School Mathematics Examination. In addition, press releases announcing the competition were sent to hundreds of periodicals and Internet information resources.

Teachers were asked to obtain copies of the required texts and to register their participating students by December 31, 1994. Many teachers elected to order *The State of Asian America* direct from South End Press, which provided a discount for contest participants. Given the degree of preparation required, the competition enjoyed a reasonable level of participation in its initial year: 192 students at twenty-two schools in thirteen states.

The 1995 Examination

Part One: History

1. The Chinese Americans responsible for completing the transcontinental railroad constituted 90 percent of the work force of which company?
 - a) Southern Pacific Railroad
 - b) Western Pacific Railroad
 - c) Central Pacific Railroad
 - d) Missouri Pacific Railroad
 - e) Union Pacific Railroad
2. The Asian American ethnic group which has the highest percentage employed as managers and professionals and the lowest percentage employed in services is
 - a) Vietnamese American
 - b) Japanese American
 - c) Chinese American
 - d) Korean American
 - e) Asian Indian American
3. In which case did the Supreme Court rule that the Naturalization Law of 1790 specifically excluded Asian Indian Americans from U.S. citizenship?
 - a) *Kumar*, 1906
 - b) *Thind*, 1923

- c) *Khan, 1926*
 - d) *Bagai, 1928*
 - e) *Das, 1933*
4. Which prominent Filipino American wrote: "America is not one class of men. We are all Americans that have toiled and suffered and known oppression, from the first Indian that offered peace in Manhattan to the last Filipino pea pickers."
- a) Karin Aguilar-San Juan
 - b) Carlos Bulosan
 - c) Sophie Bilbat
 - d) Hazel Simbe
 - e) George Pimentel
5. The prevalence of Chinese American-owned laundries in the 1920s and 1930s
- a) tended to be concentrated in the Chinatowns of a few major cities
 - b) reflected the ethnic segregation of the U.S. labor market
 - c) was welcomed by white business owners and politicians
 - d) demonstrated the commercial value of certain skills learned in China
 - e) all of the above
6. All of the following stereotypes of Chinese Americans were used by the politicians and the press to argue for the restriction of Chinese immigration in the late 19th century *except*
- a) immoral
 - b) deceptive
 - c) superstitious
 - d) cowardly
 - e) lazy
7. Before 1913, which of the following arrangements was utilized by Japanese American farmers who did not own land, but could take financial responsibility for obtaining tools, seed, fertilizer, and other provisions?
- a) silent partner
 - b) contract
 - c) migrant
 - d) lease
 - e) share
8. The Japanese American Citizens League, established in 1930, advocated all of the following strategies for gaining a stake in American society *except*:
- a) retention of Japanese culture
 - b) ethnic solidarity
 - c) political agitation
 - d) American patriotism
 - e) acceptance of employment discrimination

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9. As a result of the post-1965 wave of Asian immigration, the two most significant changes to the ethnic profile of the Asian American population were
- a) proportionately fewer Japanese Americans and more Vietnamese Americans
 - b) proportionately fewer Chinese Americans and more Filipino Americans
 - c) proportionately fewer Cambodian Americans and more Laotian Americans
 - d) proportionately fewer Korean Americans and more Indian Americans
 - e) none of the above
10. The aspirations of second-generation Asian Hawaiians in the 1930s were more likely to be met than those of their mainland Asian American counterparts for all the following reasons *except*
- a) Asian Hawaiian workers did not displace a large white working class
 - b) plantation camps gave Asian Hawaiians a relatively strong sense of community and culture
 - c) Asian Hawaiian communities had a relatively higher proportion of women
 - d) Asian Hawaiian children had been carefully schooled to accept their parents' position in society
 - e) white Hawaiians did not hold a monopoly on class privilege

Part Two: Political Science

11. According to Karin Aguilar-San Juan, many young Asian Americans have focused on affirming their Asian heritage at the expense of understanding the historical struggle of Asian Americans against racism. The term she uses to describe and criticize this perspective is:
- a) mainstreaming
 - b) ethnic consciousness
 - c) assimilation
 - d) identity politics
 - e) multiculturalism
12. According to Milyoung Cho, journalists covering the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riots interviewed Korean American community leaders primarily in order to
- a) provide a balance of perspectives on an important current event
 - b) engage Korean Americans in the mainstream debate on race
 - c) depict Korean Americans as universally condemning African Americans
 - d) portray Korean Americans as disunited and apathetic
 - e) amplify the viewpoints of Korean Americans whose businesses had been destroyed

13. When R. Radhakrishnan's son asks, "Am I Indian or American?" the answer that he is both neglects which issue?
 - a) The son will face discrimination to the extent that he identifies himself as Indian.
 - b) The son knows much more about American culture than about Indian culture.
 - c) The son should forge a new hybrid identity in the United States, innocent of his "pre-history" in India.
 - d) The son's identity and perspective cannot be fully understood by his father.
 - e) The son has little or no emotional attachment to India.

14. According to Richard Fung, the films *Do the Right Thing* and *Sally's Beauty Spot* both raise which of the following questions?
 - a) What are the main similarities between the Asian American and African American experiences?
 - b) Are Asian Americans portrayed accurately in films directed by African Americans?
 - c) Must Asian Americans claim blackness in order to join African Americans in fighting racism?
 - d) Are relationships between Asian Americans and African Americans "taboo"?
 - e) Which ethnic group was most victimized by the 1992 Los Angeles riots?

15. According to Sonia Shah, how has the Asian American women's movement adapted to changes in the Asian American community since the 1960s?
 - a) A nationwide Asian American feminism has emerged which is distinct from black or white feminism.
 - b) The movement has succeeded in unifying across class divisions.
 - c) The movement has attained considerable influence over mainstream American culture.
 - d) The focus has shifted from empowerment of professional women to meeting the needs of immigrant and oppressed communities.
 - e) Geographically scattered women's groups have successfully used new communications technologies in their networking.

16. According to Peter Kiang, the Cambodian community in Lowell, Massachusetts in the 1980s had parallel experiences with the Irish community in the 1850s in all of the following respects *except*
 - a) the role of religious leaders in formal negotiations with city officials
 - b) economic recession impacting the industrial labor market
 - c) overwhelming political support for nativist positions
 - d) the accommodationist tendency of the community's middle-class entrepreneurs
 - e) the role of religious institutions as centers of the community

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17. According to Rita Chaudhry Sethi, the words *guru*, *nirvana*, *pundit* and *mantra* are examples of Hindu terms which
- indicate the gradual acceptance of Indian Americans among American linguistic scholars
 - demonstrate the growing influence of Eastern religions on American popular culture
 - have become meaningless buzzwords
 - illustrate the diversity of perspectives within the Indian American population
 - have been appropriated into the English language with connotations of irreverence or disbelief
18. According to Lane Hirabayashi and Marilyn Alquizola, undergraduate courses in Asian American Studies at San Francisco State University have been developed as a "service-oriented" program. Here, *service-oriented* means
- providing the widest possible range of topics to students majoring in Ethnic Studies
 - encouraging students to perform unpaid work in the community
 - providing a standard general curriculum to large classes
 - focusing on teaching rather than research
 - focusing on practical applications rather than theoretical issues
19. According to Jessica Hagedorn, a novel which is remarkable for "the scope of its ambition. . . because it confronts head-on a society of immigrants, aliens, others, natives, spirits, racists, angels, devils, and other sacred cows with courage, compassion, humor and breathtaking genius" is
- Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*
 - Amy Tan's *The Kitchen God's Wife*
 - Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia*
 - Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*
 - Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*
20. Asian American activists regularly demonstrate against the Chinese American Planning Council in New York City because of the council's
- opposition to bilingual education
 - unfair lending policies
 - illegal and unfair labor practices
 - opposition to City Council redistricting
 - housing discrimination

Part Three: Short Essay Approximately 75 Words

Identify one historical episode which resulted in the empowerment of Asian Americans, and explain what significance it has to Asian Americans today.

Answers and References

- | | |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|
| 1. C (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 85) | 11. D (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 8-9) |
| 2. E (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 446) | 12. C (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 269) |
| 3. B (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 299) | 13. D (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 223) |
| 4. B (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 350) | 14. C (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 167-168) |
| 5. B (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 240-245) | 15. D (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 148) |
| 6. E (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 240-245) | 16. A (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 125-146) |
| 7. D (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 188-189) | 17. E (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 241-242) |
| 8. C (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 223) | 18. C (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 358) |
| 9. A (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 420) | 19. A (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 177) |
| 10. D (Takaki, <i>Strangers</i> , 172-176) | 20. C (Aguilar-San Juan, <i>State</i> , 254) |

Results of the 1995 Examination

The multiple-choice sections of the examination were scored with a penalty for wrong answers to discourage guessing. Three points were awarded for each correct answer, and one point was deducted for each incorrect answer. The essays were scored by panels of three readers on a basis of thirty points, with validity, composition and original insight as the criteria for evaluation. Thus the maximum possible total score was 90. Table 1 indicates the percentile ranks for the scores attained in the competition.

Percentile	Score
1	-2
10	4
20	8
30	20
40	26
50	32
60	36
70	39
80	46
90	53
99	64

Table 1. Distribution of scores on the 1995 NAASE.

The first place individual winner was Michele Smith, Grade 12, Moanalua High School, Honolulu, Hawaii. Smith will receive a \$250 scholarship to attend the University of Hawaii. The second place individual winner was Eddie Chiu, Grade 12, Clarkstown High School, New City, New York. Chiu will receive a \$150 scholarship to attend Brooklyn College. The third place individual winner was Edwin Yau, Grade 12, Bellaire High School, Bellaire, Texas. Yau will receive a \$100 scholarship to attend Rice University.

The first place school team, coached by James Suchy, was Clarkstown High School, New City, New York, with a score of 149. Team members were Eddie Chiu, Aysha Venjara and Timothy Chung.

The second place school team, coached by Darlene Pang, was Moanalua High School, Honolulu, Hawaii, with a score of 145. Team members were Michele Smith, David Kamiya and Mercy Tamayo.

Analysis of Results

A standard evaluation of the validity of multiple-choice test items is a comparison between the point-biserial correlation of the credited response with those of the distractors. This statistic is conceptually based on the rationale that the correct response for an item should appeal to high scorers, while the distractors⁹ should appeal to those who have not mastered the domain of knowledge.¹⁰ Generally, items should be designed so that the point-biserial correlation for the credited response is higher than that for all of the distractors.

Table 2 compares for each item the point-biserial correlation for the credited response with the highest correlation among the four distractors. For 15 of the 20 items, the point-biserial correlation was highest for the credited response, satisfying the criterion for validity described above.

Item	Credited Response	Maximum of Distractors	Item	Credited Response	Maximum of Distractors
1	+ .220	+ .048 (A)	11	+ .183	+ .403 (A)
2	- .215	+ .305 (B)	12	+ .429	+ .107 (D)
3	+ .194	+ .039 (E)	13	+ .026	+ .389 (E)
4	+ .555	+ .096 (C)	14	+ .339	+ .222 (B)
5	+ .361	- .092 (A)	15	+ .443	+ .074 (C)
6	+ .226	- .054 (A)	16	+ .255	+ .026 (E)
7	+ .367	+ .143 (B)	17	+ .237	+ .146 (C)
8	+ .194	- .019 (A)	18	0	+ .242 (B)
9	+ .406	- .144 (E)	19	+ .271	+ .299 (C)
10	+ .672	- .048 (C)	20	+ .194	+ .120 (E)

Table 2. Test item validation statistics.

Although the small number of items may preclude drawing general conclusions about the Asian American Studies curriculum, the standardized test format can provide new insights and observations based on this statistical analysis. The failure of five items to satisfy the validity criterion highlights topics in the required readings that were poorly understood even by the high-performing students.

First, the fact that three of the five invalidated questions (2, 13 and 19) relate to South Asian topics may indicate the extent to which Asian American Studies has tended to focus on East and Southeast Asian American perspectives. In particular, the data for item 2 indicates that high-performing students succeeded in the competition despite being less well-informed than average about the relative socioeconomic status of Asian Indian Americans. This anomaly points to the more general marginalization of South Asian Americans within Asian American identity, which can only be partly redressed through inclusion in academic texts.

Second, the invalidation of Question 18 indicates that detailed discussions of university politics and Asian American Studies curricula¹¹ remain incomprehensible to virtually all high school students. In fact, none of the 192 participants gave the correct response to this item. This is a clear reminder of the long learning curve which Asian American student leaders face when proposing curricular reforms at the university level. Specifically, it is sobering news for campus Asian American Studies initiatives, which are becoming increasingly demanding on student leaders, both in terms of long-term commitments and sophistication in university politics.

Third, the invalidation of Question 11 may be due to a lack of resolution of ethnicity, like other aspects of identity, in the personal development of many Asian American high school students. The identity politics criticized by Aguilar-San Juan¹² persists on American university campuses today, where organized Asian American student activities directed toward empowerment remain the exception rather than the rule.

Finally, the validation of fifteen of the twenty questions demonstrates that the topics covered on the 1995 National Asian American Studies Examination were generally appropriate for the high school curriculum, in the sense that these test items were sensitive to training and instruction.

The essay question permitted a wide range of topics and perspectives. Table 3 lists historical episodes that were identified by three or more participants as resulting in the empowerment of Asian Americans.

442nd Regimental Combat Team in World War II

San Francisco State University Strike

Hawaiian plantation labor movements

1965 Immigration Law

Los Angeles riots/uprisings

Miss Saigon protests

Vietnam War

Table 3. Popular short essay topics.

Given the time pressure, the short essays were generally thoughtful and well-written. The following two essays are illustrative.

The Los Angeles riots of 1992, although debilitating and financially damaging to many Asian American business owners, indirectly empowered Asian Americans to publicize the racial inequalities they are still facing today, from the same people who were experiencing the discrimination hundreds of years ago. Entrepreneurs, facing the common problems of the looting that occurred during the Los Angeles riots, and other Asian Americans witnessing this mindless destruction, united during this time of crisis to speak against the ongoing racism they face. The Los Angeles riots allowed Asian Americans to form stronger bonds with each other and to fight for what they believe in.

—Jennifer Nguyen, MacArthur High School
Houston, Texas

Without a voice, an idea cannot be conveyed. One “shout” by Asian Americans was the controversy dealing with the Broadway musical *Miss Saigon*. For some, it was mere entertainment. Yet for Asian Americans, it was a degrading, stereotyping insult. That was the cause of demonstrations against Lambda Civil Rights Organization’s use of *Miss Saigon* as a fundraiser. A coalition of many Asian groups from Los Angeles to New York City let all know the subtle dehumanizing stereotypes depicted in the play. With this event in their foundation, Asian Americans have sounded their cries and now have been heard. Asian Americans have now the voice, as well as the will, to spread their ideas and influence in America.

—Timothy Chung, Clarkstown High School,
New City, New York

Further Results

Several participating schools reported that their involvement in the examination increased awareness of Asian American Studies among both teachers and students. Most of the participating schools already included some material on Asian Americans in their history curriculum, but teachers found the examination useful in developing new courses and activities. For example, at Moanalua High School in Honolulu, Darlene Pang’s AP European History classes wrote research and position papers based on the assigned texts as well as other references.¹³ In the papers and essays of these high school students are the voices of the next generation of Asian American leaders.

David Kamiya, one of the high scorers on the Moanalua team, wrote a thoughtful critical analysis of the diverse perspectives represented in *The State of Asian America*. He concludes:

The resources of the movement must be focused. One group used *Miss Saigon* as a fundraiser, while another protested *Miss Saigon* by picketing the theatre. This infighting ironically leads those Asian Americans who are not as outspoken as others to turn away from the movement, because it is seen as hostile to new ideas and alternative approaches.¹⁴

"The assigned readings cleared up a lot of issues for me," said second-place winner Eddie Chiu, who added that he had started talking with his parents about his family's history as a result of his participation in the contest. "It was a great experience."¹⁵

Although all three of the award-winning individual students were high school seniors, many younger students also succeeded on the examination, most notably Elizabeth Chiu, a ninth-grade student at Bellaire High School, Bellaire, Texas, who scored in the 79th percentile.

There was no statistically significant difference between the scores of American-born and Asian-born participants, or between male and female students, although female and American-born students scored somewhat higher than the overall average.

Conclusions

Through the incentive of interscholastic competition, the 1995 National Asian American Studies Examination has introduced dozens of high school students and teachers to the rigorous and scholarly discipline of Asian American Studies. The contest therefore represents a vital opportunity to extend Asian American perspectives beyond the university lecture halls of the two coasts into the high school classrooms of America's heartland.

Despite the support of the Coalition for Asian American Studies Education and the work of resourceful and talented volunteers, several external factors remain vital for the continued survival and growth of the competition. First, adequate financial support will be needed to provide for continuing operating expenses and scholarships. Broader and more substantive support from the academic community and national organizations will be necessary to augment limited personal resources. Second, the Asian American Studies community should devote greater effort to engaging the nation's school districts in the development of multicultural curricula

containing a substantive Asian American Studies component. Although many of the participating schools reported that Asian American topics were included in the required curriculum, the ethnic composition of the examinees indicates that usually only Asian American students are asked to study the subject in depth. Finally, the competition should be placed on the calendar of nationally recognized annual scholastic competitions, in acknowledgement of the importance of Asian American Studies and the educational value of the examination. The coalition will be applying for recognition by the National Association of Secondary School Principals, and to that end has ensured that this year's examination was conducted in accordance with the latter organization's published guidelines for contests and activities.¹⁶

Notes

For information on how to contribute to the success of the 1996 examination, the author can be contacted at (203) 772-2590.

1. Shirley Hune, "Opening the American Mind and Body: The Role of Asian American Studies," *Change* (November/December 1989), 56-63, reprinted in: Don Nakanishi and Tina Yamano, eds. *The Asian American Educational Experience* (New York: Routledge, 1995).
2. Don Nakanishi, "A Quota on Excellence? The Asian American Admissions Debate," *Change* (November/December 1989), 38-47, reprinted in: Nakanishi and Yamano, *Experience*.
3. Stanley Sue and S. Okazaki, "Asian American Educational Achievements: A Phenomenon in Search of an Explanation," *American Psychologist* 45 (1990), 913-920, reprinted in: Nakanishi and Yamano, *Experience*.
4. The primary mission of the council has been to provide substantive support to student-led initiatives for the establishment of Asian American Studies programs at U. S. universities, including successful campaigns at Texas A & M University and the University of Texas.
5. Karin Aguilar-San Juan, ed. *The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s* (Boston: South End Press, 1994).
6. Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (New York: Penguin Books, 1989).
7. See forum on *Strangers from a Different Shore*, *Amerasia Journal* 16:2 (1990), 63-156.
8. J. Yang, "Examining Identity," Fall 1994, 12-13, with an erratum in the April/May 1995 issue at p. 5.
9. S. J. Osterlind, *Constructing Test Items* (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989).
10. T. M. Haladyna, *Developing and Validating Multiple-Choice Test Items* (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1994).

11. Lane Ryo Hirabayashi and Marilyn C. Alquizola, "Asian American Studies: Reevaluating for the 1990s," in Aguilar-San Juan, *State*, 351-364.
12. Aguilar-San Juan, *State*, 8-10.
13. Popular sources included K. Backus and J. Furtaw, eds. *Asian American Information Directory* (Detroit: Gale Research Inc., 1992); Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991); and M. Hong, *Growing Up Asian American* (New York: William Morrow, 1993).
14. Darlene Pang, personal communication, April 11, 1995.
15. Eddie Chiu, personal communication, May 22, 1995.
16. "NASSP National Advisory List of Contests and Activities 1994-5," National Committee on Contests and Activities of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, 1904 Association Drive, Reston, VA 22091.