

 COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY  
Faculty of Arts and Sciences

*Justice - Equity - Rights*



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## **Issue 3: Asian-American Experience During COVID-19**

*A Note from Executive Vice President Amy Hungerford:*

Last year, my office launched this newsletter to showcase Arts & Sciences faculty accomplishments in the realms of justice, equity, and rights. Each quarterly issue features faculty members whose work engages a particular topic on the forefront of public consciousness. In this issue we explore the impact of COVID-19 on Asian-American communities, amid our national reckoning with the recent wave of anti-Asian racism and violence. While we are highlighting faculty who have been working in these fields, our hope is to bring the whole Arts & Sciences community into this critical conversation and to promote faculty collaboration across departments. Inside the issue, you'll find highlights from interviews with professors David Henry Hwang and Mae Ngai, Faculty Spotlights, Columbia Events, and Recommended Reading.

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## **An Interview with Mae Ngai & David Henry Hwang**



Mae Ngai is Lung Family Professor of Asian American Studies and Professor of History at Columbia University. Mae is a U.S. legal and political historian whose research engages questions of immigration, citizenship, and nationalism. She is the author of *Impossible Subjects* (2004), which won six major book awards; *The Lucky Ones* (2010); and *The Chinese Question* (forthcoming Summer 2021). Mae recently published a piece on the history of anti-Asian racism in the U.S. in *The Atlantic*.



David Henry Hwang is Associate Professor of Theatre and Playwriting Concentration Head at the Columbia University School of the Arts. David is a playwright, screenwriter, television writer, and librettist. Many of his stage works, including *FOB*, *M. Butterfly*, *Yellow Face*, and *Soft Power*, explore internationalist themes and questions of Asian-American identity. David is a Tony Award winner, a three-time OBIE Award winner, and a three-time Finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in Drama.

*Professors Mae Ngai and David Henry Hwang spoke with us about the impact of COVID-19 on Asian-American communities. We discussed historical forces that have shaped the "model minority" and "perpetual foreigner" stereotypes; the need for bystander training and intersectional allyship; whether art can catalyze social change; and more.*

*\*Highlights from the interview are excerpted in the newsletter. [Read the full interview here.](#)*

### **On the historical context behind contemporary manifestations of anti-Asian racism:**

**David Henry Hwang:** Asians in this country have always been saddled with a perpetual foreigner stereotype. It doesn't matter how many generations your forebears may have been here, you still get asked: "Where are you really from?" That is a microaggression, but as a result, the way that we are accepted or not accepted here is always a function of America's relationship to Asia. In periods when there is hostility between the U.S. and Asia, Asian-Americans get caught in the crossfire. That includes World War II and the incarceration of Japanese Americans. It includes the murder of Vincent Chin in the 1980s...This is really the latest incarnation of that.

**Mae Ngai:** What we are experiencing now is something that both draws from a very long history of racism against Asian Americans, and is also reproduced according to our present circumstances. The historical roots lie in a policy of Chinese Exclusion legislated in 1882. The reason for exclusion, I believe, rests in the vision some White Americans had of the West, captured in the slogan "Manifest Destiny": the idea that the West was a gift from God to the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant race...White settlers didn't want to share the resources of the West with anybody else, so they developed a racial theory based on their rationale that the Chinese were racially incapable of assimilation to justify their demand for Chinese exclusion.

### **On the impact of the "Asian-American exceptionalism" narrative and the "model minority" stereotype:**

**David Henry Hwang:** The model minority stereotype has been incredibly damaging both to Asian Americans and other people of color. Yes, there are Asian Americans of high educational achievement and high income, but it is also true that under the umbrella of “Asian America,” you have some of the poorest and least educated people in this country. It’s a bifurcated demographic. To say we’re all successful and wealthy is reductive and untrue. I think the right wing wants to use Asian Americans as a wedge against other people of color, saying: “See, this group can make it, so there’s no racism in this country.”...It doesn’t matter whether you’re an executive or a lawyer or a playwright, you can get attacked on the street because of what you look like — as I was attacked.

**Mae Ngai:** That stereotype is ironically based on immigration patterns since 1965...The quota system put into place in 1965 favored professionals and highly-educated people. You could either come if you were sponsored by a family member or by an employer. And because there had been such low levels of immigration from Asia, there weren’t many people who could use the family preferences. In [certain Asian countries], you have what my colleague in sociology Professor Jennifer Lee calls “hyper-selectivity” in immigration. Once people come under the employment category they can later bring their family members, but they are reproducing the same class origin. A lot of people think Asians are so much smarter, but that’s ridiculous. You have 1.3 billion people. They’re not all scientists or doctors. The preponderance of upper-middle-class professional technical workers, highly educated people, is a product of American immigration policy.

Some of the socioeconomic success among Asian Americans has been weaponized by White elites as a way of criticizing other minority groups. This is where it’s pernicious. My success is used to criticize you, whereas I might have succeeded because I come from a more privileged background and you come from a much more disadvantaged position.

#### **On what led her to pursue immigration as a research interest:**

**Mae Ngai:** The first research issue I was interested in grew out of acquaintances I had, who had been pursued by the FBI during the 1950s and early 1960s as part of a so-called confession program. The Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) wanted to legalize people [making them amenable to deportation] because they thought the illegal immigration system was being used by Communist China to send spies into the United States. It was ridiculous. [Using false documents] was a practice that had developed because the Chinese were excluded. There were some elders I knew in the community who had been activists, and the FBI and INS pursued them through this program as a road to try and deport them...I became interested in this question of illegal immigration and where and when the government had an interest in legalizing people who were here without the proper documents. That was [the subject of] my Master’s thesis, which was ultimately a chapter in my first book.

#### **On whether art can catalyze social change:**

**David Henry Hwang:** I think art can move the needle on how people think. One of the things that *Soft Power* tries to address is the way in which art that is not necessarily political has an underlying political agenda and is perpetrating a political point of view. *The King and I*, which people generally don’t think of as having a political narrative, is actually about a white woman who goes to Siam and teaches the king how to bring his country into the family of nations and civilize his people. There are underlying assumptions that get conveyed to an audience through the most beautiful music and an almost perfectly-crafted script. It does affect how people think. Therefore, I have to believe that shifting that lens can also help people see issues, see power relationships, see politics in a different way. The mere act of humanizing a character of color can go a way in changing how audience members relate to people from that culture. So I do believe you can make a difference.

## On their current scholarly projects:

**David Henry Hwang:** One thing I'm working on which was motivated by anti-Asian hate during COVID-19, as well as the racial reckoning following the murder of George Floyd, is a play about the San Francisco State University Third World Student Strike in 1968. I feel it's important to remember that time when what we used to call "Third World solidarity" was active and Asian Americans were allied with Black, Indigenous, LatinX, and what we now call BIPOC people. The history of Asian-American radical progressivism has largely been forgotten through the emergence of the model minority myth in the past three decades. The model minority stereotype really became prevalent in the 1970s and it has sadly been successful in severing some of the natural allyship and intersectionality that Asian Americans should feel with other people of color.

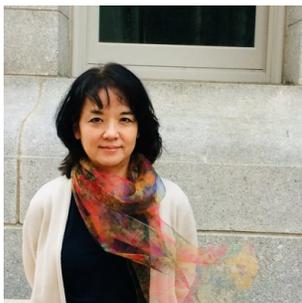
**Mae Ngai:** I just finished a book that will be published this summer, called The Chinese Question. It's on the origins of anti-Chinese politics and racism in the 19th century. I also [recently wrote a piece] for The Atlantic about some of the things we talked about: the Chinese Exclusion Act and the relationship between the West and the South.

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## Faculty Spotlights



Denise Cruz, Associate Professor of English and Comparative Literature, is a scholar of gender and sexuality in national and transnational cultures. Denise is the author of Transpacific Femininities (2012), a study in which she uses Philippine print culture to explore the importance of the "Transpacific Filipina" to Philippine nationalism, women's suffrage, and constructions of modernity. Recently, she received a 2021 Presidential Award for Outstanding Teaching, as well as an Innovative Course Design grant for the online redesign of her Introduction to Asian American Literature course.



Ellie Hisama, Professor of Music, Music Theory and Historical Musicology, is a music theorist and musicologist whose research engages interdisciplinary studies, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and the social and political dimensions of music. She has written at length on musicians who have been left out of the canon, as well as expressions of "Asiaphilia" in popular music. She is the author of Gendering Musical Modernism (2001), which was named a Choice Outstanding Academic Title, and the co-editor of the volumes Ruth Crawford Seeger's Worlds (2007). Ellie organized and moderated the recent panel "We Have to Reimagine." As of July 1, Ellie will begin the next phase of her career, becoming Dean of the Faculty of Music at the University of Toronto.

Jennifer Lee is the Julian Clarence Levi Professor of Social Sciences at Columbia University and President of the Eastern Sociological Society. She is author or co-author of four-award winning books, including The



*Asian American Achievement Paradox* (2015), *The Diversity Paradox* (2010), *Civility in the City* (2006), and *Asian American Youth* (2004). Jennifer is a leading immigration scholar and public commentator. She recently published work on the rise of COVID-19-related anti-Asian violence in *Science magazine* and *Brookings* (co-authored with Tiffany Huang). She was also interviewed on this topic by the *Southern Poverty Law Center's Hatewatch blog*.



Marie Myung-Ok Lee, Writer in Residence at The Center for the Study of Ethnicity and Race (CSER), is an acclaimed Korean-American writer. She is the author of the novels *Somebody's Daughter* (2005) and *The Evening Hero* (forthcoming in 2022), as well as young adult novels including *Finding My Voice* (1992). Her stories and essays have appeared in publications including *The Atlantic*, *The New York Times*, *Slate*, and *The Guardian*. In the fall, Marie published an essay in *#StopAsianHate* on her conflicting feelings about her debut novel being reissued in the context of Trump's America.



Lydia Liu is the Wun Tsun Tam Professor in the Humanities and Director of the Institute for Comparative Literature and Society. A scholar and theorist of media translation, Lydia's research centers on modern China and cross-cultural exchange, with a focus on the evolution of writing and digital media. She is the co-editor or author of several books, including *The Clash of Empires* (2006), *The Freudian Robot* (2011), and the creative nonfiction work *The Nesbit Code* (2014), published in Chinese, which won the Hong Kong Book Award.

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## Columbia Events

### *See Arts & Sciences Faculty in Conversation*

Upcoming Events:

#### Unmasking the Asian American Experience during COVID-19

- June 11, 2021, 2:00 pm EST. A discussion shining a light on anti-Asian bias and violence, highlighting perspectives of students, staff, and faculty members in a healthcare setting. Moderated by Jane Hyun.

#### Upstander and Allyship Workshop

- June 16, 2021, 2:00 pm EST. An interactive workshop on using interpersonal tools to prevent, disrupt and help heal from violence in their communities. Presented by CUIMC African, Black, and Caribbean, Asian Pacific Islander and LGBTQ+ ERGs. Register here.

Add your event to our calendar by completing [this form](#). Please note that any events submitted should be relevant to issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in Arts and Sciences. If you have any issues submitting your event, please contact [tjh2150@columbia.edu](mailto:tjh2150@columbia.edu).

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## Recommended Reading

### *Asian American Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month*

In honor of May's AAPI Heritage Month, we're celebrating Columbians of Asian heritage whose innovative work has made an indelible impact on the world. Read here: [12 Groundbreaking Asian Columbians You Should Know](#).



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What would you like to see featured in future issues?

[Take our Survey](#)

For questions, contact Natalie Nevarez (nt2569) and Meghan Gilligan (meg2228).

