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Linkages and Boundaries: Twenty-Five Years of Asian American Studies

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> There are not many things that we're sure about as we send this first issue of the *Amerasia Journal* to press. We do know, that some very generous people have thought enough of the idea of a national journal on Asians in America to help us finance this first issue, and that some people have felt sufficiently committed to write the articles and poems that appear on the following pages. We also know that many people are sincerely concerned about the fate of Asian-American communities and are trying very hard to see if they can make the lives of their immigrant brothers and those who live in ethnic communities a little bit better. But, aside from these things, we are not quite as certain as we would like to be. . .
> (I)n initiating this journal. . .we set three goals: an attempt to accurately assess our past, to attain a clear knowledge of our present situation, and to pose plausible, well-defined visions of our future. In this first issue, we are far from attaining any of the three original goals.
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> "A Message To Our Readers"
> *Amerasia Journal* 1:1, 1971

The Founding

Perhaps there is some truth to the familiar adage that the more things change, the more they remain the same. Los Angeles, in 1995, seemed to be remarkably similar to New Haven, in 1970, when *Amerasia Journal* was founded. Instead of the controversial double murder trial of O. J. Simpson, the small Connecticut city where Yale University is located was mired in another highly publicized murder trial involv-

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ing another famous African American man, Bobby Seale, the then chairman of the Black Panther Party. In both cases, the relationship between race and the American judicial system loomed large. Indeed, the president of Yale, Kingman Brewster, said that he did not believe that a "black revolutionary could get a fair trial" in America, thereby sparking a national debate on the fairness of the American criminal justice system for African Americans, particularly those involved in radical politics. Seale's trial ended in a hung jury. The judge then dropped the charges, basically agreeing with Kingman Brewster and others that Seale could not get a fair trial.

There was no Judge Lance Ito, no Dennis Fung, no Dr. Henry Lee, or any other Asian American who was directly involved in the controversial trial in Connecticut twenty-five years ago. However, members of the Yale Asian American Students Association (AASA), which founded *Amerasia Journal,* participated in an intense public drama that was played out during the first weekend in May 1970 when thousands of anti-war activists, feminists, counter-culturalists, white leftists, and what were then called "Third World" (and what we would today call, "people of color") revolutionaries came to New Haven for a massive protest. The National Guard, with tanks ready for combat, ringed the city and were available to be called into action if necessary.

Yale AASA, in expressing its solidarity with other student and community groups, issued a press release in support of a fair trial and an end to United States involvement in the war in Southeast Asia. It also helped to board up Chinese and other Asian business establishments in New Haven—the restaurants, laundries, and a curio and food store—just in case the protests got out of hand. We therefore sought, on the one hand, to affirm our support for broader, compelling social issues while, on the other hand, we used hammers, nails, and plywood to protect, in a symbolic and real sense, the interests of our local Asian American community.

It was during the spring months of 1970 that Lowell Chun-Hoon and I first discussed the idea of a journal on Asian American Studies. Both of us were juniors at Yale, and had become actively involved in both Asian American student activities as well as writing and doing research on Asian American Studies topics. Glenn Omatsu, who was then a graduate student in psychology at Yale and now the associate editor of *Amerasia Journal,* was a role model and mentor to us and many other students. Lowell and I had also worked on the establishment of the first Asian American Studies class at Yale,

which was offered by the late Professor Chitoshi Yanaga during the Spring semester. We also were different in many respects. He was from a famous private school in Honolulu, while I attended a well-known public high school in Los Angeles. He majored in history, and was more interested in the Asian American past, while I majored in political science, and was more interested in the present and future. However, we both believed, with equal parts of naivete and Ivy League efficacy, that a major scholarly and creative journal was needed to develop a field of Asian American Studies, and that we had the wherewithal to put one out. We knew that the Basement Workshop in New York Chinatown was planning to come out with a "slick" magazine-format publication called *Bridge,* and that the San Francisco Red Guard Party was going to publish a leftist journal called *Aion.* We also were fully aware of the wonderful Los Angeles-based newspaper, *Gidra.* We felt, though, that there was still an important unfilled niche that we could occupy with *Amerasia Journal.*

Lowell and I made a pact to earn or raise $500 each during the summer months of 1970 to launch *Amerasia Journal* during our senior year. When we returned in September, Lowell had raised over $1,500 from relatives and friends in Honolulu, while I confessed that I had hardly raised anything since I was completely preoccupied with field research in the San Francisco area for my senior thesis. It was only fitting, then, that when we were later trying to figure out the organizational structure of the journal that Lowell elected to become the founding "editor" and I became the "publisher." That is why Lowell is in the picture with the other three individuals who have been editors of the journal, and I am not. But that's okay since I still have my $500.

Amerasia Journal involved more than the two of us, although it was almost exclusively a product of the Yale AASA. Billie Tsien, who is now a renowned architect, was our graphic designer, and did the first cover of the journal. Bill Lann Lee, who was a Phi Beta Kappa history major from Harlem, New York, wrote an article on Yung Wing, the first Chinese person to graduate from an American college, that being Yale in 1854. Bill has since become one of the nation's leading labor discrimination attorneys, and has worked with the NAACP Legal Defense and Education Fund for nearly twenty years. He is also married to Carolyn Yee, the third editor of the journal. Rocky Chin, who has long been an attorney with the Human Rights Commission of the City of New York, and Sheridan Tatsuno, who has written several books on Japan's high technology industries, wrote community studies on the rapidly changing New York Chinatown

and San Francisco Japantown, respectively. Warner Wada, who is now a professor, contributed a photographic essay about New York Chinatown, while Lowell Chun-Hoon wrote one of the first critiques of Asian American literature in analyzing Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (Seattle: University of Washington, rev. ed., 1989). Finally, the late Henry Hayase worked tirelessly as our managing editor. Quite appropriately, when Henry passed away about a decade ago, his friends and admirers raised funds to establish a permanent academic prize in his name that is awarded annually to the student who writes the most outstanding senior thesis on an Asian American Studies topic at Yale. His legacy lives on with the hundreds of marvelous senior theses that have been produced by Yale undergraduates over the years.

There also were several individuals involved in the first issue who were not connected with Yale AASA. Ray Lou, a Chinese American from Mississippi, who is now a high-ranking administrator at San Jose State University, and Paul Suarez, a Filipino American student from San Joaquin Delta College, contributed poems. We also featured an interview with Warren Furutani, a long-time leader in the Asian American movement who later became the first Asian American ever elected to the Los Angeles Board of Education. Warren was somewhat of a Pied Piper in those days, and would travel to colleges across the country to share the goals and perspectives of the West Coast Asian American student and community movement. He had a tremendous impact on a national scale for many years, and the interview we conducted with him remains timeless with its powerful insights. We also wrote a review of the latest book on the Asian American experience, Stanford Lyman's *The Asian in the West* (Reno: Western Studies Center, 1970).

In releasing the first issue of *Amerasia Journal*, we really could not foresee how it would be received since we were trying to appeal to, and indeed develop, a new audience of readers across the nation who would share our interest in Asian American Studies. I think it helped in the long run that we were undergraduates rather than graduate students because we conceptualized the contents of the journal, and by extension our view of the field of Asian American Studies, in a much more multidisciplinary, multifaceted and inclusive manner than the more specialized foci of Asian American graduate student journals that have appeared during the past twenty-five years in cultural studies, law, and public policy. Indeed, we declared in our "Message to Readers," that "We exist as a journal to collect and publish the best and most provocative material we can find on Asians

in America," and this was reflected in the diversity of scholarly and creative pieces that appeared in the first and in subsequent issues of *Amerasia Journal.* To us, Asian American Studies was a good historical narrative as well as a rigorous attempt at theory building. It was a piece that explored "who am I" from the perspectives of psychology as much as "who are we" from the vantage points of sociology or anthropology. It was creative and artistic—poems, short stories, photographs, drama, paintings, films and music—and it was multiple regression equations and graphical presentations of census or survey data. It was also normative statements that were radically provocative, as well as empirical analyses that were provocatively radical.

However, despite the apparent inclusiveness of this vision, we did not view the journal or the field as being boundless, or without a mission. Again, perhaps because of the political and racial climate of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as our undergraduate idealism, we definitely hoped that *Amerasia Journal* and the field of Asian American Studies would become important contributors to the betterment and advancement of Asian Americans. We were, to be sure, Ivy Leaguers, but we did not want Asian American Studies to become just another Ivory Tower gargoyle. We wanted the field to offer information, analyses, and visions that would assist in our collective movement towards positive social change, as well as to debunk harmful, misinformed, or stereotypic myths and images of Asian Americans in the mass media, in public policy arenas, or the research literature.

We also wanted the field to be "relevant" to us, as we used to say and demand, and to have it not only speak for us, but also to speak to us. In the swirl of unprecedented cultural, racial, and political shifts and conflicts of the late 1960s, we expected and wanted the field to steer us, to anchor us, and to challenge us specifically as Asian Americans. As undergraduates at an overwhelmingly white elite institution at the time, our expectations of Asian American Studies were admittedly different than those of a research-oriented professor or a community activist. We unashamedly wanted and needed to personalize the field: to draw linkages between our individual lives and the panorama of an Asian American experience that was never taught to us in our K-12 schooling, and to confront—through our own words and actions, as well as vicariously through the examples of others—the numerous social boundaries that we hoped would not limit, alienate, or destroy us further in college or in the future.

I had little awareness of the complexities of race and social class when I was growing up in the racially segregated, working class neighborhood of East Los Angeles. My real face-to-face encounter with these and other boundaries came 3,000 miles away from home at Yale, although I know from the experiences of some of my high school classmates (and later in my own professional career) that it could have happened less than twenty miles away at an institution like UCLA. Indeed, I still find it amazing to ponder how many layers and layers of socioeconomic and racial differentiation I travel through in making the relatively short and direct trip from my home in East Los Angeles to West Los Angeles, where the university is located. Social mobility of the kind that sociologists rather than transportation experts have in mind is usually a far longer and more complicated journey.

The origins of *Amerasia Journal* must be understood in the context of a different America, a different Asian American community, and a different stage of development of Asian American Studies that existed twenty-five years ago. It also cannot be separated from the life experiences, outlooks, and aspirations of the first critical mass of Asian American undergraduate students that came together at one of the nation's oldest and, at that time overwhelmingly white, universities. When all of this is taken into consideration, it may not be too surprising that we could somehow synthesize what appears to be Shakespeare with Zen Buddhism in offering these final thoughts in our "Message to Our Readers" in vol. 1, no. 1 of the journal: "For in the end, it will be our readership that sustains or deserts us. Unless we or our goals are relevant to their needs, concerns, and aspirations, we're simply shouting loud and listening to the echoes of our own voices in a closed room. We'd like *Amerasia Journal* to be more than a soliloquy, and we need your assistance. Please, let us know what you think."

II. Linkages and Boundaries

Amerasia Journal was founded at Yale, but it was adopted, nourished, and flourished at the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. Since Fall 1971, after vol. 1, no. 1 and 2 were published in New Haven, the journal has been part of the Center's portfolio. Although Yale was well-known for its voluminous number of independent student publications—some of which have been around longer than *Amerasia Journal*—Lowell Chun-Hoon and I were fairly certain that the journal could not sustain itself for very long at Yale and in Connecticut, which had one of the smallest Asian American communities in the

nation in 1970. We sought a more stable and secure arrangement, and we were fortunate that some of the founding leaders of the Center were interested in publishing materials on Asian Americans. Indeed, they were preparing to transform a highly popular and useful anthology of articles that they had assembled for their first Asian American Studies courses at UCLA into a book. The result was *Roots: An Asian American Reader* (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center, 1971), the first textbook for the field, which served as the introduction to the Asian American experience for thousands of students across the nation during the decade of the 1970s and the 1980s as well. It sold over 50,000 copies, and continues to be ordered to this day.

Alan Nishio, who was one of the first directors of the Center, expressed special interest in the journal because the Center was set up administratively as an "Organized Research Unit," and could benefit from having an academic journal under its wings. Nishio, who I had gotten to know during my trips back home to Los Angeles, flattered me when he said that they would make me assistant director of the Center if I brought the journal to UCLA after graduating from Yale. He said that the Center was prepared to subsidize one or two of the four issues we sought to publish annually, and that subscriptions could cover the rest. That seemed like an awfully good deal. I told him I might consider the offer if I did not get into a doctoral program in political science, which was my first choice, or if I was not drafted into the military to fight in Vietnam, which was no choice at all. Luckily, I got into graduate school, and my draft lottery number was beyond the range of being called up. I therefore declined the Center's offer. However, as the benevolent "publisher" and someone who still owed $500 to Chun-Hoon, I asked Nishio whether he would consider making a similar offer to the journal's fantastic "editor," who was not interested in going to graduate school immediately and was not going to be drafted. Nishio agreed, and Lowell and the journal went to UCLA. *Amerasia Journal* was a joint publication, at least in name, of the Center and Yale AASA for several issues, before it became an exclusively UCLA publication. Although this issue of the journal is dedicated to the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Center, it is also a special tribute to the Yale AASA, which also celebrated its silver anniversary in April, 1995. It was a wonderful honor to be asked to give the keynote address at the gathering.

Twenty-five years is not a long stretch of time, but the period from 1970 to 1995 will surely become one the most significant eras

in the Asian American experience. In terms of almost any criterion, the last two-and-a-half decades have been remarkable because of the range and depth of unprecedented and, in many respects, totally unexpected transformations that have occurred among Asian Americans. I think we are fortunate that Asian American Studies was initiated, survived, and matured during this period because future historians will have a plentiful supply of materials to assess the meaning, character, and importance of the past quarter century. And during this period, there is no question that capturing, analyzing, and forecasting the Asian American experience—through words, numbers, moving images, and lyrics—grew at an extraordinary exponential pace. In 1971, for example, when the UC Davis Asian American Studies Program published its first annotated bibliography, the compilers said that they had identified 2,000 books, articles, dissertations, and other publications that had ever been written about Asian Americans up to that date. In contrast, in 1994, Glenn Omatsu, who compiles the annual bibliography for *Amerasia Journal,* found over 2,500 new articles and other works that were written about Asian Americans in that year alone.

Although I went to graduate school immediately after my undergraduate career, I have had the good fortune of working at UCLA and at its Asian American Studies Center during my entire professorial career. I have seen the Center grow enormously during the past twenty-five years. It is now probably the largest and most comprehensive program of its kind, with thirty-eight professors (seventeen of whom hold formal joint appointments between Asian American Studies and another UCLA department), a Center staff of thirteen, an undergraduate and graduate teaching program that offers over sixty classes annually that attract over 3,000 students, and a wide array of programs in research, publications, library and archival collections, and public educational activities. The Center has always been wonderfully collective, and it could not have grown and thrived without the talents, sacrifices, contributions, and commitment of literally thousands of individuals—faculty, staff, students, administrators, alumni, and community leaders. It also has benefited from a number of strong, mutually beneficial relationships with organizations of Southern California's rapidly growing and diverse Asian Pacific American communities—museums, civil rights groups, alternative media and drama organizations, social service agencies, educational institutions, and others—as well as with individuals and groups across the country and around the world. In this regard, the Center owes a great debt to other scholars, students, writers,

and supporters who have been involved in the national development of Asian American Studies over the past twenty-five years. During good times as well as difficult times, they have always been there, be it to purchase our publications or to lend a hand during a tenure fight.

Twenty-five years ago, as an undergraduate, I thought it was exciting, challenging, and compelling to contribute to the development of the field of Asian American Studies through the founding of *Amerasia Journal* and other activities. I think it is even more exciting, challenging, and compelling to enter the field now, and I am highly optimistic that we will continue to attract excellent and committed individuals, who will build on what we have accomplished and will pioneer new areas. For example, I hope we will make a commitment to duplicate what we have been able to unearth, document, and create in terms of our two most developed ethnic-specific areas—Japanese American and Chinese American Studies—for all other groups in the Asian Pacific American population during the next twenty-five years. I also hope that we will continue to contribute to the larger endeavor of addressing some of our nation's most persistent and imperious issues, especially those of race and poverty. I hope we can continue to advance theoretically, as was reflected in the last issue of the journal, and to further address the many thorny methodological issues that are posed by the extraordinary demographic growth and diversity of Asian Pacific Americans. I also hope the field can remain inclusive, and not to tilt unnecessarily in one disciplinary direction, but instead to embrace a broad cross-section of fields from urban planning to film studies and from comparative literature to public health that are now making substantial contributions to the field.

Finally, I am hopeful that we will continue the legacy of pursuing research that speaks for us, like many of the community studies of this special issue, as well as encouraging the creation, sharing, and teaching of works that speak to a new generation of students in our schools and colleges, as well as new audiences in our communities. Indeed, the admonition which we gave ourselves twenty-five years ago remains surprisingly apropos: "Unless we or our goals are relevant to their needs, concerns, and aspirations, we're simply shouting loud and listening to the echoes of our own voices in a closed room."