

# An Interview with Mae Ngai & David Henry Hwang

*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. Interviews were conducted separately and over the phone. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.*

*By: Meghan Gilligan*

**Racism against Asian Americans is not new. How would you contextualize the violence we've witnessed in the past year within the larger history of anti-Asian racism in the U.S.?**

**David Henry Hwang:** I think 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, when there was tension between the U.S. and Japan, and unemployed auto workers mistook him for Japanese and killed him because they'd lost their jobs. It includes the racial profiling and hate attacks against South-Asian Muslims after 9/11. This is really the latest incarnation of that. The resentment against China stirred up by the former president has led to attacks on AAPIs, which have been in the news lately, but have really been spiking since the beginning of lockdown and the awareness of COVID-19.

**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. That bill was the culmination of several decades of agitation from California and the Pacific Coast to exclude Chinese from the West. 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.

On another level, the Chinese were seen as a "coolie race" of semi-slaves. 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. One of the big reasons Exclusion passed Congress when it did was because this was a time when Reconstruction in the South had been overturned, with Jim Crow, and there was a turn in the direction of the country toward a White Supremacist structure of power. From the very beginning, Chinese Exclusion was tied to the overthrow of Reconstruction in the South.

**What are your thoughts on the term “Asian American,” which has activist origins? Do you see it as a uniting force?**

**David Henry Hwang:** I’m of the generation that tried to advance the term Asian American. Yes, there are ways in which it is imperfect. It’s general. It attempts to put a lot of different cultures under one umbrella. But there’s also a reality to it. It doesn’t matter if you’re a Chinese American or a Vietnamese American, you experience that same otherness. You also, in more recent decades, fall into the “model minority” stereotype. I think the label is useful in terms of capturing an experience and a political distinction in this country.

**Mae Ngai:** It is a uniting force and it does have activist origins. It’s a political concept that brings together or aspires to a unity and a coalition of diverse Asian ethnic groups, but it’s not mutually exclusive with recognizing that there are distinct national origin groups among Asian Americans. It’s not an either-or. I’m a Chinese American but I’m also an Asian American. I think we need to understand and respect the diverse experiences of different Asian Americans, but there’s also definitely a political place and a need for the idea of Asian Americans.

**How would you describe 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.” You may be accepted for a while, but it turns on a dime when all of the sudden the country is mad at China or Japan or another Asian 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 exclusion laws were overturned after World War II, but immigration from Asia didn’t really open up until after 1965. The quota system put into place in 1965 was one that 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.

Other social science research has shown that Asian immigrant families, even from the working class strata, tend to have access to community resources that will help their children in school. In places like Chinatown and Flushing, or Koreatown in LA, there are a lot of educational

services that are very low-cost or free of charge. Some of them are set up by churches; others by nonprofits. But that doesn't apply to all groups. You won't find that kind of infrastructure among the Cambodian refugee community. Here's where being specific about different communities is important.

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. All immigrants want their children to do well in school. They know that education is going to be the main thing that helps them get ahead in life. But not all immigrant communities have the same access to education: good schools, educational resources, or support networks.

I also think the model minority idea is a kind of pathology. It's like our kids aren't "normal." All of these stereotypes about tiger parents and Asian students being automatons are actually insulting. They disrespect the work that Asian-American students do. They do work and study hard and they should not be pathologized for that. And finally, given levels of education, Asian Americans hit what they call the "bamboo ceiling." They can only go so far in the corporate world and they still get channeled into certain occupations like technology or pharmaceutical research. But they can't break into the top.

### **What do you think of the Biden administration's actions in response to recent incidents of violence against Asian Americans?**

**David Henry Hwang:** First of all, it's such a relief to have a president who isn't actually encouraging acts of violence against Asian Americans. In that context anything the Biden-Harris administration does is a huge step up. That said, [President Biden] was giving a speech, and he started it by making a statement anti-Asian violence: how it's wrong, it's un-American, and it's got to stop. I got quite choked up because I'm not used to seeing and hearing the concerns of Asian Americans being central to the national dialogue. That was very moving to me. And the fact that we have a mixed Asian-American woman as our Vice President — that sort of representation and validation is incredibly encouraging and empowering. There are a lot of factors that go into anti-AAPI hate. It's a difficult thing to address through legislation, but you have to attack it in many different ways, and I feel like this administration is taking the tools it has and is at least trying to chip away at this current plague of hate.

**Mae Ngai:** I think it's really positive that [President Biden] has spoken out forcefully against racism and hate acts. Both he and Vice President Harris have been very clear that it's wrong. On the other hand, although Biden doesn't say things like "China Virus," he is continuing the trade war with China. He and his Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, have openly said that China is an adversary of the United States. That's unfortunate because it's not good for U.S.-China relations. I don't think we should be adversaries. As long as Americans hear on the news that China is bad, some will take it out on Chinese Americans or all Asian Americans because they can't tell anybody apart. In that sense, the Biden administration is talking out of both sides of its mouth.

**I read that you became interested in immigration (as a phenomenon and policy question) during your years working in Chinatown communities. Did you have any specific experiences that led you 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.

**Can art catalyze social change? What do you find most challenging, and most rewarding, about creating socially-engaged art?**

**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.

I do my best work when I'm engaged and I feel like my work is relating to the world around me. When I don't have this sense of purpose — that is when I find the work more challenging. Writing *Soft Power* helped me accept that I had been the victim of a hate crime. When you are the victim of a hate crime, there is oddly and paradoxically some shame that goes with that. You kind of want to deny it. And certainly everything in our police system encourages you to believe that it wasn't a hate crime. We see this in the Georgia situation. Writing the piece helped me process and understand what had really happened to me. Yes, everything else that may come from it — if audiences like it, if critics like it, if it gets awards — that's wonderful also. But the fundamental thing I think one goes for as an artist is to try to understand yourself and your relationship to the world more deeply.

**What are you working on? Any projects engaging the territory of Asian-American experience during COVID-19?**

**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 stereotype. That 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.

**Are we seeing progress in the fight against anti-Asian racism? How do we move forward?**

**David Henry Hwang:** For most of my life, the general American point of view has been that there's no racism against Asians. Our invisibility in this society has been quite prominent and as a result, any problems we face have tended to be obfuscated. This is the first time in my life that I feel the nation acknowledging and focusing on anti-Asian hate. That's a huge inflection point. The murder of Vincent Chin in the 1980s was an issue that galvanized a lot of different Asian-American communities, but didn't really penetrate the wider society. At the moment, that is happening, therefore we can make change.

We have to acknowledge the ugliness and hatred and the history and power of racism. We have to acknowledge all of those things before we can begin to address the issue and hopefully get past it. I believe the solution lies in greater allyship between Asians, Black people, BIPOC people, and our White allies as well.

**Mae Ngai:** I think first, on an individual level, we have to take a stand against these hate attacks. I recommend everyone take [bystander training](#), so you know what to do if you see somebody being attacked on the street. The incident that happened in Midtown where all of these people stood around and did nothing while a woman was being stomped on the head — that's absolutely disgusting. But if you saw something, you may not know what to do. I don't think the doorman [from the Midtown incident] was scared. I've seen the video. But it's fair to say that a random bystander may not know what to do. There are a lot of different trainings available online and Columbia is offering some. Just like everybody should get a vaccine, everybody should get bystander training and try to make a difference. That's on an individual level.

Second, we have to find ways to express solidarity with one another. Asians aren't the only victims of racism. There was just another horrible police shooting of a young Black man in Minnesota. Even as Derek Chauvin's trial is going on for murdering George Floyd — even while that trial isn't even finished — there is this incident where this policewoman shot and killed a young man. We all have to show solidarity with the African-American community. White supremacy and racism is a real problem in our society and it can only get fixed when people

show solidarity with one another. On another level, we have to address the systemic issues in our society that reproduce inequality and injustice. There's a lot of work to do.

**Do you have any recommended reading or viewing on these topics?**

**David Henry Hwang:** [Minor Feelings](#) by Cathy Park Hong is a great, relatively recent book. It's a memoir/essay that I think makes a great statement on where Asian Americans are nowadays. Then there are fundamental Asian-American texts like [Strangers from a Different Shore](#) by Ronald Takaki and books like [The Woman Warrior](#) by Maxine Hong Kingston or [No-No Boy](#) by John Okada. Then because I've been interested in the San Francisco State University strike, I've been reading [Golden Children](#) by Juanita Tamayo Lott, which [traces] the history of that strike.

**Mae Ngai:** Right now PBS is rebroadcasting two shows, which I recommend. One is [The Chinese Exclusion Act](#). That's a film done by Ric Burns and Li-Shin Yu. It's on the Chinese Exclusion Act, so it's a kind of deep dive into that history. They're also streaming the series [Asian Americans](#), which is produced by Renee Tajima-Peña, one of our leading Asian-American filmmakers. That's a five-part series. That's a good place to start. I think PBS is very smart to rebroadcast them.