

# Asia in America: Literature and Media for Today's Libraries

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## Introduction to Asian American Lit

Books on different cultures have been changing the dynamic of what is read in today's libraries. Thankfully, libraries, teachers, and most definitely students have been devouring the literature that is being published. This phenomenon, of course, is due in part to the recognition and appreciation people have developed for the multicultural world in which we have found ourselves. This material reflects the students attending our schools, the parents they have to deal with as well as

the conflicts they have with other students/teachers. Unparalleled amounts of material on this multicultural world are now available to students. As a result, I have chosen to focus on material available to younger readers who are interested in Asian American issues. Even narrowing the topic to Asian America is a large task. I have chose to describe the genre in



[www.phillychinatown.com](http://www.phillychinatown.com)

Chinese character for luck—I need it!

four sections: *Living in Two Worlds*, *A Little History, Please*, *More Than Two Worlds*, and *In Our Words*.

## Living in Two Worlds

One theme I found in researching Asian American literature is the idea of the kids living in two worlds: the world of their parents and their new home in the US. The

students are expected to be the diplomats, shuffling between both worlds for themselves and their families. This type of book became especially popular with

titles like *The Joy Luck Club* and *Farewell to Manzanar*. *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan is a story about four different girls whose parents moved to San

## USEFUL WEB SITES FOR ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES:

[Asian American Net:](http://www.asianamerican.net/)  
<http://www.asianamerican.net/>

[Ask Asia: A K-12 Resource:](http://www.askasia.org)  
<http://www.askasia.org>

[Becoming American: A Chinese Experience:](http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/)  
<http://www.pbs.org/becomingamerican/>

[Children's and YA Books with Asian American Themes](http://www.cynthialeitchsmith.com/AsianAmerican.htm)  
<http://www.cynthialeitchsmith.com/AsianAmerican.htm>

[HAPAS](http://www.hapas.com/)  
<http://www.hapas.com/>

[History of Japanese in America :](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/5views/5views4.htm)  
[http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online\\_books/5views/5views4.htm](http://www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/5views/5views4.htm)

[Hmong Studies:](http://hmongstudies.learnaboutmong.org/)  
<http://hmongstudies.learnaboutmong.org/>

[Koreans in America:](http://www.kamuseum.org/community/base.htm)  
<http://www.kamuseum.org/community/base.htm>

[Little Saigon Net:](http://www.littlesaigon.com/)  
<http://www.littlesaigon.com/>

[South Asian Diaspora:](http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/diaspora.html)  
<http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/SSEAL/SouthAsia/diaspora.html>

## Living in Two Worlds, continued

Francisco from China. Each girl represents different experiences Asian Americans encounter in the US. An interesting aspect of the book is that it is not only about the girls. The mothers of these girls and THEIR stories are as important to this very interesting immigrant tale.



[www.http://www.facinghistorycampus.org/](http://www.facinghistorycampus.org/)

Cover of *Farewell to Manzanar*

*Farewell, to Manzanar*

by Jeane Wakastuki Houston

is also a book about a culture clash. However, it is a story of people who were not immigrants but were nonetheless considered to be foreign because they were of Japanese ancestry. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, there was hysteria in the country

that awakened a long tradition of anti-Asian sentiment on the West Coast. *Farewell, to Manzanar* describes the experiences of Japanese Americans as they were placed in relocation centers. The story focuses on her father who was particularly humiliated by the experience. The book is particularly relevant today as we think about how images of Muslim Americans are used in the media today in lieu of 9/11.

## A Little History, Please!

There is a long history of Asian immigration to the US. This history is well documented and shows that the history of this country is a multicultural one. *Strangers from a Different Shore* by Ronald Takaki describes immigration beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century when many East Asians left for Hawaii and the West Coast for manual labor jobs. He describes Japanese Americans working in sugar plantations in Hawaii as well as Filipino immigrants working in the canneries in Alaska. Takaki also describes the significance of the *Immigration Act of 1965* which opened up the US to larger numbers of Asian immigrants. Since one in two

immigrants today comes from Asia, this piece of legislation has tremendously transformed the racial/ethnic composition of the US. This book would be especially useful to high school students doing research on immigration.

*Island* by Him Mark Lai describes the experiences of the immigrants who came to America through Angel Island, the Ellis Island of the West Coast. *Island* is a great testament to the Chinese immigrants who left a series of poems left engraved in the walls of the detention center

at Angel Island. The poems represent the hope, the frustrations, and sometimes regret of coming to a new country.

It is important to...*Continued on Page 3*

*"Leaving behind my writing brush and removing my sword,  
I came to America.  
Who was to know two streams of tears would flow upon  
arriving here?  
If there comes a day when I will have attained my ambition  
and become successful,  
I will certainly behead the barbarians and not spare a  
single blade of glass."  
Anonymous  
From Island*

## A Little History, please...continued

Remember that Asians in the US are Americans but they do have connections to their homelands. Books describing the Bombing of Hiroshima are still poignant. In fact, *Hiroshima* by John Hersey is an interesting book about how different individuals experienced the blast. The book forces the reader to think about the power of this weapon and the circumstances in which it was used. *The Rape of Nanking* by Iris Chang describes the atrocities committed by the Japanese army during WWII.



www.rogerwendell.com/images/japan

Picture of the Hiroshima Peace Memorial

These crimes have been well documented but are not always well

known by all. Students and teachers appreciate having access to such material as it provides them with a more encompassing perspective of events that took place during WWII.

## Useful Magazines

- *AsianWeek*, the only English language, national newsweekly for Asian Pacific Americans, has become the link for American born Asians to better understand their community.
- *Jade Magazine* strives to be the voice of English-speaking Asian women around the world by creating a forum to shatter the myths that exist about us, as well as providing a needed medium for the open discussion of our views, ideas and concerns.
- *YOLK* is the hipper side of the West-Coast Asian American scene, documented for all to see.

## In Our Words...

I found another powerful type of genre in contemporary Asian American literature: narratives of life experiences. These books are often edited by people who identify with certain themes Asian Americans face in growing up in the US. The narratives deal with topics as varied as the stereotypes students face in school, relations with parents and what it means to be empowered in a society whose dominant race/culture is different than your own. Students enjoy these narratives as many of these books are written by

people who are near their age. Students could use these books

unit dealing with issues on coming to a new country.



http://www.pagesperso.ao1.fr

Image depicting the Rodney King Riots in Koreatown

for pleasure reading but they are also applicable to the classroom. Teachers assigning projects based on immigration should know about books like this as they complement any

Remember Rodney King? The LA riots that followed shortly thereafter? The many Korean American shop owners whose stores were looted and destroyed? In *East to America: Korean American Life Stories*, Elaine Kim, a professor at UC Berkeley, felt that the Korean American interpretation of the events was overlooked and decided to compile a book of Korean American reflections about the event. Since the Korean American community is diverse, Kim's...Continued on Page 4

## Other Great Books!

### Living in Two Worlds

- *The Kitchen God's Wife*—Amy Tan
- *No-No Boy*—John Okada

### A Little History, Please!

- *In Search of Hiroshi*—Gene Oishi
- *A Different Mirror*—Ronald Takaki
- *The Journal of Wong Ming-Chung: A Chinese Miner*—Laurence Yep

### In Our Words

- *Asian American X: An Intersection of Twenty-First Century Asian American Vocies*—Arar Han
- *Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White*—Frank H. Yu
- *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*—Eric Liu

### Looking for Complexity

- *Native Speaker*—Chang-Rae Lee
- *Interpreter of Maladies*—Jhumpa

### Cool Movies with Asian American Protagonists

- *Harold and Kumar Go to White Castle*—Rated R
- *The Joy Luck Club*—Rated PG
- *Kill Bill: Vol. 1*—Rated R
- *The Wedding Banquet*—Rated R
- *Yellow*—Rated R

NOTE: Unfortunately, these titles are not appropriate for school libraries. Does that tell us something?

We're on the web!  
[www.http://  
senna.sjsu.edu/  
dfaires/wiki/  
libr262su05/  
index.php/  
Main\\_Page](http://www.http://senna.sjsu.edu/dfaires/wiki/libr262su05/index.php/Main_Page)

descriptions are very rich. They represent people from various backgrounds and interpretations of the event. The book is great in learning more about Korean American/Korean reactions to the riots as well as the role of race in the US today.

*Yell-Oh Girls* by Vickie Nam is a compilation of essays dealing with the many issues relevant to being an Asian American. Why are my parents different from other parents? Why did that person say my food is stinky? Should I listen to my relatives and have my eyes operated to have “normal” double eyelid like most western people have? These are all questions many young Asian American women have to deal with. Having a book like this available to them is like bibliotherapy. They know that they are not alone in their experiences. Just knowing this makes a difference. This book would also be perfect for ethnic studies classes being taught in school.

*Growing Up Asian American* by Maria Hong is a great resource for learning about the wealth of Asian American literature available. The book provides readers with an anthology of Asian American literature. The books represent various themes from first impressions of being considered different to the day-to-day growing pains of adolescence. Overall, this book could be a great resource for teachers wanting to become familiar with this genre.

## Looking for Complexity

Unlike the literature in which the protagonists are seen as being in two worlds, characters in more contemporary literature are navigating a more complex setting which better represents the world in which today's young people are living. This genre describes the intricate ways in which students interact with the different types of people around them. *Born Confused* is a good example of this type of book. It is about a high school girl, Dimple Lala, growing up in New Jersey. The problems she faces are similar to that of what all teens face. But race, ethnicity and national-

ity are all factors that



www.amazon.com  
Cover to *Born Confused*

make this story one hot masala tale!

Another recommendation is *The Interpreter* about a recent college graduate, Suzy Park, who is forced to deal with the mysterious death of her parents while also coping with

the pain of a failed relationship.

In both cases, the characters deal with situations more complicated than the static perceptions of what any one group is like. Instead, both authors show how individuals from different backgrounds actually do interact with each other, both in positive and negative ways—people from different backgrounds actually trying to work with/put up with/understand each other. So, both stories are pulp fiction type stories but described in a very interesting, multicultural ways.