

Asian American Representation in US History Textbooks

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Introduction

The United States is often referred to as a “melting-pot country”: an internationally diverse group of immigrants make up the core of American society. In big cities such as New York City, Los Angeles, and Chicago, people of color may comprise more than half of the student population. Though it is a challenge to be inclusive of the endlessly diverse experiences of sociocultural groups, textbooks must reflect the true story of all peoples who have contributed to US history in order to create a more cooperative society. Yet, the US history textbook has long been shown to be biased and exclusive in its acknowledgement of important events and figures. Erasure of African Americans, Native Americans, and Hispanic Americans are well documented, and many studies have shown the biased portrayal of minority groups throughout textbooks (Foster, 1999; Sanchez, 1997; Harada, 2000). However, the lack of exposure of Asian Americans throughout American history is overlooked and particularly worrisome.

The Asian population in the US is a small but incredibly diverse demographic in the United States. Asian American history varies depending on the origin country and the economic and social conditions of the immigrants. Though there were some cases of Asian immigration to the US before the mid-19th century, the first major wave of immigrants moved to California during the 1848 Gold Rush, when Chinese immigrants moved to the “Gold Mountain” to seek out riches. Currently, the Asian population has boomed to a sizable 19 million as displayed on the 2019 Census Bureau population estimate, and there are about 19 million Asian Americans living in the United States (Office of Ministry Health, n.d.). Though the history of Asian Americans is not as long or prevalent as that of other minority groups, the historical development of Asian Americans within the US is an integral part of the country’s development.

History Textbooks Are a Subjective, Not Objective, View of the Past

It may be tempting to believe that US history textbooks provide an objective perspective and truly represent the lives of Americans throughout history. However, many experts contend that history textbooks are far from impartial. Although the curriculum is certainly based upon facts, the selection of content carefully controls and sets the perspective that students utilize to understand history. In other words, historians and textbook authors can be seen as those who create a discourse about the past (Commeyras, 1994). Many go as far as to argue that textbooks are fundamentally fueled by the “political, ideological, or moral beliefs of their authors” (Romanowski, 1996). These selected facts construct a narrative that “seek to imbue in the young a shared set of values, a national ethos and an incontrovertible sense of identity” (Foster, 1999).

The conservative political and ideological influence has a particularly strong hold on the education system. Textbook authors have historically been a Caucasian, Protestant, middle-to-upper class male and tended to portray US history in an idealized manner. “Western tradition” is hailed as the reason for the US’s economic

and political success while patriotism and traditional values were encouraged. In this sense, US history textbooks are thought to instill a sense of “unity and patriotism and a veneration for the nation’s glorious heritage” (Foster, 1999).

Another reason that history textbooks are indeed subjective interpretations of the past is that the publishing companies have maintained total control of the market. In the late 1800s, five publishing houses that constituted 80% of the market merged to create the American Textbook Company. Though the publishing company did provide benefits to education by standardizing educational content, it also essentially wielded a monopoly over the content that would be distributed to students all over the country (Wolf, 1992; Foster, 1999).

It should be noted that textbooks have dramatically improved from the early 20th century. By the 1980s, most US history curriculums throughout the country focused on establishing a multicultural perspective (Wolf, 1992). However, these efforts have since been deemed to be inadequate: rather than restructuring the framework of the curriculum to accommodate multiple narratives, new material was merely added. Thus, it is paramount to examine the current narrative of minorities and Asian Americans.

Minority Representation in US History Textbooks

Before the 20th century, the vast majority of US citizens were White Christians as were the textbook publishers. Language prevalent in textbooks before the 1980s expounded the superiority of the White race—Europeans were described as having great moral character and industriousness. By contrast, minority groups such as Chinese immigrants were deemed as “rats” living in squalor and poverty (Foster, 1999). While ingraining a shared national identity towards the mostly White student population, these textbooks create an alarmingly twisted view of immigrant and minority populations within the US. Native American, African American, and Hispanic American history have been treated as second-class citizens who gained their rights throughout US History. The greatest change in content for these ethnic groups came with The Civil Rights Movement and a concerted move to establish a more socially just curriculum.

Native Americans

Native Americans have been the true pioneers of US land, with their history spanning thousands of years. However, history textbooks treat Native Americans as an afterthought and focus merely on the 400 years of European conquest and Caucasian leaders. Native Americans, as an outgroup, were considered to have few similarities from the supposed civilized, white society. A 1987 study showed that important Native issues such as US land policy and treaty rights were barely covered while Natives were portrayed as “noble savages” (Harada, 2000). The trope of the “noble savage” was dominant in much of the descriptions of Native Americans; though Native Americans demonstrated intellect and reason, they were considered inferior and barbaric by the Western, Christian invaders. The message was clear: Native Americans were fundamentally inferior and had very little to do with the US’ founding and development (Foster, 1999).

African Americans

African American history is the most discussed issue in discussions about reform in history education. The history of African Americans whose families have resided in this country for at least 4 generations are deeply rooted in slavery, and textbooks before the 1980s were quite deficient in discussing the societal impact of African Americans throughout history. The first issue was the very institution of slavery. Though the outright condoning of slavery was unheard of, the justification of the institution was prevalent. Authors pointed out that the African societies where slaves came from also condoned slavery, and that slaves were indeed well treated.

(Foster, 1999). Portrayal of African Americans during the Reconstruction Era (after slavery was abolished) was also heinous. The struggles of a destitute population with little wealth were ignored; rather, the texts highlighted the social problems that the population brought about, which was actually caused by the poor quality of life of recently freed slaves. African Americans presented in the text are merely depicted as occupiers of menial jobs and victims of forceful subservience (Sanchez, 1997).

Hispanic Americans

Hispanic Americans have also undergone a kind of erasure in US history textbooks. Hispanic/Latino history spans back nearly four centuries, and there are many references to major events such as the Spanish American War, The Alamo, and The Chicano Movement. Although there are pages and sections devoted to these topics, the use of images and depictions were severely lacking, with Hispanic American figures limited only to Cesar Chavez. Moreover, discussions were mainly limited to an immigrant context and their assimilation (Noboa, 2003). Hispanic American culture encompasses a countless array of traditions from indigenous cultures that are as varied as the countries in Europe, yet textbooks fail to discern between different Latin American countries (Mexico, Cuba, Dominican Republic, Guatemalan, Columbian) and their contribution to American society (Rodriguez & Ruiz, 2000).

1960s: The Civil Rights and a Multicultural History Education

The 1960s was a tumultuous time in the US. Foreign conflicts dominated the national discussion, and cultural changes were dividing society. Of particular note, the plight of African Americans was finally recognized with the countless brave acts of civil rights activists throughout the US. One strong push by the Civil Rights Movement was to remove racial discrimination in education. Textbooks that stated explicit prejudice towards African Americans were mandated to be removed. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, textbook publishers were acutely aware of the public sentiment and started to represent minorities in a more positive light. However, the fundamental framework of history courses did not change (Foster, 1999).

Today, the representation of various minority groups has expanded, but only marginally. It has only been in the past two decades that courses such as *African American* or *Mexican American Studies* have been available at American public schools (Myong, 2021; Endo, 2012). One insightful critique on the portrayal of minorities is that they are portrayed as passive agents who are at the hands of the American government. As education budgets are cut and textbook companies continue to have an iron hold on the content of the textbooks, progress is slow.

Effect of Representation in Textbooks and Student's Identity and Critical Literacy

Influential educational reformer Emily Style claimed that school curricula play an important role in shaping students' sense of identity. She stated that students are looking into a "mirror" when they see themselves represented in the text, an important process in understanding one's sense of self. However, it is also important to see others represented in the curriculum through "windows" to truly have a balanced sense of self and others. An imbalance in either perspective may lead to ethnocentrism on one end and self-hatred on the other (Endo, 2012). Because almost all high school students study using high school textbooks, the portrayal of minorities in textbooks has shown to have an impact on students from minority groups. If students only see negative or stereotypical depictions of minority groups in American history, students may not recognize the positive achievements and triumphs of those groups (Giarizzo, 2013).

Another important aspect is the American education system's hampering effect on the critical literacy of children. When examining moments in history, students must read texts and construct a framework for understanding themselves, instead of blindly regurgitating information. An important question for students is "What does it mean to be an American?" and minorities are certainly included in the discussion. However, the construction of current history curricula has shown that critical literacy is not encouraged (Maples, 2009).

The Challenge of Teaching Asian American History

In depth discussion regarding Asian American history and its effects on Asian American students are few and far between. Asian American history is relatively young compared to other groups, and Asian Americans still comprise a small fraction of the population. Though the Asian American population is as diverse as other ethnic groups in the US, US history education mainly focuses on the history of the Chinese immigrants during the 19th century and the Japanese American internment during World War II. Moreover, throughout the history textbooks, there are two dominant portrayals of Asian Americans: one of the perpetual foreigner and the other of the model minority.

Chinese Immigrants and The Chinese Exclusion Act

Chinese immigrants have a particularly long history in the US. Immigration started in earnest during the California Gold Rush, with workers seeking out fame and fortune. Most Asians were employed as low-skill workers and underwent the most brutal and racist treatment. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 solidified the US's horrific treatment towards immigrants from Asian countries. From then on, Chinese Americans were merely mentioned in demographic changes in various American cities (Suh, 2015). In particular, there are no specific figures or incidents that depict the accomplishments of Chinese Americans throughout history. Though textbooks point out the hardships faced by Chinese Americans, US history textbooks' representation of Chinese Americans are severely lacking.

One such court case that forever changed immigration policies and can be added to history textbooks is the Wong Kim Ark case. Wong Kim Ark had parents who were not eligible for citizenship because of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, which denied citizenship to Chinese immigrants. Thus, he challenged that he should have citizenship despite his parents' citizenship status as he was born in the United States. Ultimately, he won the case, received his citizenship, and effectively changed citizenship laws in relation to immigrants. Another important Asian American figure who should be further discussed in textbooks is Yuri Kochiyama, a vigorous political activist who continually pursued social justice and societal equality for all. She founded Asian Americans for Action, seeking to build a more political Asian American movement and liberate all minorities from the reality of a cruel society.

Japanese Internment During World War II

One of the most difficult periods in Asian American history was during World War II, when Japanese Americans were rounded up, had their possessions confiscated, and forced to live in internment camps in response to anti-Japanese sentiments. Although Japan did side with the Axis powers against the US-affiliated Allied Powers and attacked a US Army Base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in 1942, the US government's action was a flagrant infringement of personal freedoms and a modern example of the brutality of the US government and the anti-

Japanese hysteria that rampaged the country. Studies demonstrate that the mentions of Japanese Americans throughout the decades have been so far woefully inadequate, with mere paragraphs spent on the entire incident (Endo, 2012). In addition, the discussion of Japanese Americans post-WWII is almost nonexistent: the narrative of Japanese Americans do not go far beyond their passive victimhood during World War II. Finally, the view of Asian Americans as a model minority has led to the assumption that they had successfully and rapidly undergone cultural assimilation into American society (Endo, 2012).

Methods

The aim of the paper is to analyze two US history textbooks that are currently in use in high school courses. The first analysis will be in the US history textbook, *America's History, For the AP Course*, a textbook that is used in AP US history courses. Advanced Placement (AP) courses are nationally available courses offered through College Board organization (College Board, 2021). *America's History*, by Bedford/St. Martins is a textbook specifically offered for the AP course and is used all throughout the country. The second analysis will be in the US history textbook, *The American Vision*, by McGraw-Hill. This publisher is one of the largest textbook publishers in the US and is influential in many school districts (SPARC, 2020), used in many US history courses.

1. Identify the scope of Asian American coverage by counting the sections in which Asian Americans are mentioned, with specific Asian American groups identified for each group;
2. Examine whether Asian Americans are portrayed as passive agents;
3. Inspect whether there are meaningful diagrams or pictures as visual aides; and
4. Note whether historical figures are mentioned in the text.

Results

America's History, For the AP Course textbook

In the *America's History* textbook by Hennretta, used by the 11 grade AP US History course at White Plains High School, there are a total of 10 separate references to Asian American historical events. These references can be further separated into specific incidences of history. Below are seven historical events that represent the general narratives that are used to represent Asian American history:

Era	Minority Group	Description	Passive Agents (Y/N)	Pictures or Diagrams (Y/N)	Historical Figures
19th to early 20th century	Mostly Chinese	1840's - The California Gold Rush prompted the first immigration of Chinese Americans. 1882 - The Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted due to intense nativist feelings by native born	Y	Y	N/A

	Very few Japanese, Korean	Americans. Chinese laborers were barred from entering the United States. 1900 - Chinese workers in salmon canneries and other low paying jobs are depicted in figure 3. Anti-Chinese sentiment was nationally pervasive. 1906 - The U.S. Attorney General ruled that Japanese and Koreans were also barred from citizenship.			
Late 19th to early 20th century	Filipino	1898-1899 - The U.S. tried to annex the Philippines for the Philippines' harbors. The harbors would help the U.S. economically as they facilitated goods from Japan. 1901 - Insular Cases - Filipinos did not have civil rights or political status because they were considered a colony.	Y	Y	N/A
1941-1942	Japanese	December 7, 1941 - Attack on Pearl Harbor killed over 2,400 Americans causing America to enter WWII. 1942 - Executive Order 9066 authorized the War Department to remove Japanese Americans from their homes and relocate them to internment camps. Gordon Hiyabashi actively resisted incarceration.	Y	Y	General Hideki Tojo
Late 1940s	Japanese	The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) filed lawsuits to regain property lost during the war and lobbied Congress to gain citizenship.	N	N	N/A
1950-1953	Koreans	The Korean War was a facade for the Cold War conflict between the Soviet Union and the United States. The Korean War ended with the signing of the Korean War Armistice creating a Demilitarized Zone splitting Korea into North and South Korea at the 38th parallel.	Y	Y	N/A
1961	Vietnamese	The Vietnamese War was a highly controversial event that divided the country, as there were pacifists and militarists. The war was a	Y	N	Ho Chi Minh

		highly unsuccessful effort by America in its attempt to spread democracy and banish communism in countries around the world.			Ngo Dinh Diem
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Figure 1. Analysis of Asian American minority groups throughout the US history textbook, *America's History*.

The American Vision textbook

The American Vision textbook showed 21 instances of Asian American history, while showing a majority of sections having some pictorial representation of Asian American history. However, these pictures are mostly maps and charts that only relay information and don't convey the life of Asian Americans. This textbook shows some improvement in Vietnamese American representation with the textbook spending a whole chapter on the Vietnam War and its effect on American society. Furthermore, the textbook explains the incidents of Pearl Harbor and the Japanese in a more neutral stance. Below are seven main instances of Asian American history throughout the textbook.

Era	Minority Group	Description	Passive Agents (Y/N)	Pictures or Diagrams (Y/N)	Historical Figures
1954-1975	Vietnamese	America intervened in a war between North and South Vietnam in which the North was communist and the South was democratic. The U.S. intervened in the war in order to stop the spread of communism. The political divide between supporters and opposers of The Vietnam War are mentioned. The U.S. eventually withdrew from the war and this was the first major war loss in U.S. history.	Y	Y	Ho Chi Minh Ngo Dinh Diem
1940-1942	Japanese	The Attack on Pearl Harbor was prompted by America imposing embargoes on Japan and freezing American assets in Japan. This elicited America to join World War II, thus becoming a major factor in the allies' victory. Japanese Americans were relocated to internment camps after the bombing of Pearl Harbor because of racial prejudice from native-born Americans. This resulted in Japanese American businesses being destroyed, and families losing their entire fortunes.	Y Y	Y Y	N/A

mid-to-late 1800s	Chinese	1848 - The Chinese first immigrated to the Americas because of internal strife in China and because of the first sightings of gold during the California Gold Rush.	Y	Y	N/A
		1860s - Chinese immigrants worked menial jobs such as constructing railroads and worked as laborers or as servants. However, some Chinese immigrants worked in skilled trades, as merchants, or as business owners because of the refusal by native-born Americans out of many businesses.	Y	N	
		1882 - The Chinese Exclusion Act barred Chinese immigrants from entering the U.S. This act was spurred by an intense feeling of nativism and prejudice against immigrants.	Y	N	
Early 1900's	Japanese	1910 - A rapid influx of Japanese immigrants entered the United States and overloaded Angel Island which is where immigrants from Asia entered from. Japanese Americans emigrated from Japan because of hardships and economic problems caused by their government.	Y	Y	N/A
1898	Filipino	America bought the Philippines for \$20 million from Spain after winning the Spanish-American War. Despite America annexing and claiming the Philippines, there was widespread rebellion in the Philippines only reduced through U.S. civilian governor of the islands, William Howard Taft, efforts to benefit the Philippines through reforming education, transportation, and health care.	Y	Y	Emilio Aguinaldo
1898-1900	Chinese	Due to the Open Door Policy, China was symbolized as a pie, in which the major countries such as Germany and Great Britain received a "slice" of the pie. The major countries all took pieces of territory in China and had looked to control greater land. This foreign presence in China led to the Boxer Rebellion, in which secret Chinese Societies	Y	N	N/A

		worked to remove foreign powers in China through methods such as killing.			
1950's	Kore-ans	The Korean War was a proxy war incited during the Cold war between the Soviet Union and the United States. The communist North invaded the South, but with the help of the United Nations, the South pushed back the North. Eventually, the war ended in a stalemate and ended with an armistice.	Y	Y	N/A

Figure 2. Analysis of Asian American minority groups throughout the US history textbook, *American Vision*.

Discussion

Compared to textbooks from previous decades, current textbooks discussing general topics of Asian American life have changed moderately but not in a very meaningful way. There are very few pictures or diagrams in *America's History* to represent Asian Americans while *American Vision* provides ample pictures and diagrams. However, many of these represent the lives of Asian Americans as well as a lack of historical figures, with Japanese activists Gordon Hirabayashi and Fred Korematsu as the only main figures discussed throughout the text.

Depiction of Chinese Americans

Though textbooks do point out the positive developments of Asian immigrants, such as the success of some types of Asian businesses and court cases fighting for Asian Americans' rights, the specifics are not detailed in any length. There are no specific court cases that changed the status of Asian immigrants or any important figures who were a key part of the fight for Asian American rights. The grim reality that Asian immigrants faced is certainly an essential aspect of teaching Asian American history. However, the positive developments are not expounded upon nor are any Asian figures ever introduced. We only see the Asian immigrant as a victim of unfortunate circumstances. A good solution may be to integrate incidents such as the Wong Kim Ark Case. Wong Kim Ark was a Chinese American born to two parents who were barred from becoming United States citizens under the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. Because his parents were not citizens, Wong Kim Ark was denied re-entry into the United States after a trip to China. Thus, Wong Kim Ark sued the United States government, resulting in a momentous Supreme Court decision that determined that the government could not deny citizenship to anyone born in the United States. This legislation re-interpreted the 14th Amendment and changed citizenship policies forever. Wong Kim Ark is a man who should not be forgotten and taught to every history student because his actions dismantled racial barriers in the United States ("March 28, 1898: Wong Kim Ark Wins Citizenship Case", n.d.).

Chinese Workers in a Salmon Cannery, c. 1900

Shut out of many fields of employment by racial discrimination, many Chinese immigrants founded their own restaurants, laundries, and other small businesses. Others, like these cannery workers in Astoria, Oregon, took on some of the most grueling and lowest-paid work in the American economy. Job segregation reinforced, in turn, racial prejudice. Visiting British author Rudyard Kipling, touring canneries along the Columbia River, described Chinese workers in the plants as "blood-besmeared yellow devils." These workers, refuting Kipling's slur, appear clean and respectable. Notice the man in an apron, on the left, who wears his traditional queue, or braided pigtail, tucked into his straw hat. Oregon Historical Society.

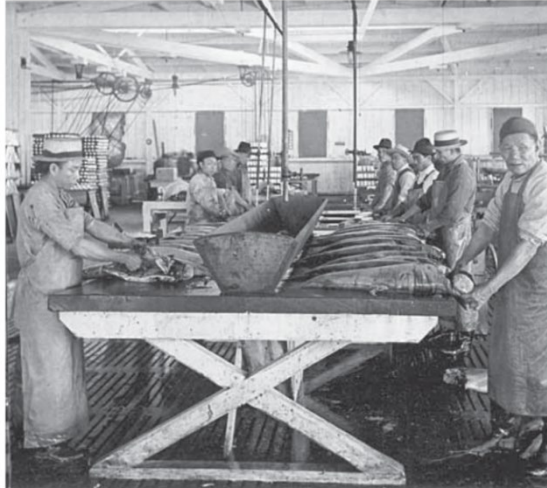


Figure 3. Diagram of Chinese salmon cannery workers in *America's History, For the AP Course*.

Depictions of Japanese Americans

The depiction of Japanese Americans in World War 2 internment camps seems to show some improvement. Though previous textbooks mentioned Japanese internment camps merely on one page or even one paragraph, this textbook spends an entire section (5 pages) on the internment camps. However, in the *America's History* textbook, there is only one picture of Japanese boys standing behind a fence in an internment camp that displays the treatment that they received at the hands of the government. Even in the instances of specific heroic figures in the fight for Japanese rights, such as the Hirabayashi and Korematsu cases (in which the curfew and constitutionality of the exclusion of Japanese Americans from the Executive Order 9066, respectively, were ethically challenged), these cases are also only mentioned in mere paragraphs. A greater explanation must be given in the textbooks, as Korematsu and Hirabayashi both have immensely impacted laws and stigmas around Japanese people and immigrants overall. In particular, the textbooks should explain the significance of Hirabayashi's court case as he argued that Congress unconstitutionally delegated its legislative power to the military, thus enforcing an unconstitutional curfew on Japanese Americans. Hirabayashi was the first case to challenge the Executive Order 9066, a catalyst for future challenges to the Executive Order 9066 (*Hirabayashi*, n.d.). Similarly, the Korematsu case (in which Fred Korematsu challenged the constitutionality of the Executive Order 9066) should be explained more in depth; Korematsu's case exposed the discriminatory nature of the United States government (*Korematsu v. United States*, n.d.).

Filipino Americans

There was also a dearth of Filipino American historical events. This is due to the sparse and sporadic nature of Filipino immigration throughout US history. The US annexed the Philippines as part of its territory on December 10, 1898, rendering part of Filipino history an American one. However, there are barely any mentions of Filipinos aside from those of groups that came over during periods of mass migration such as in the 1970's. Furthermore, there are simply no pictorial representations of Filipino Americans. This presents a grim example of how these texts may lead to erasure of people. The first step toward greater inclusion of Filipino Americans would be the implementation of Loida Nicolas Lewis into American history textbooks. She was one of the most influential figures among Filipino descent, as she created the National Federation of Filipino American Association and advocated minority empowerment in mainstream America. In fact, she was the first Asian woman

to pass the New York bar exam, breaking a racial barrier in the workplace for Asian Americans. It is paramount to include her into American history textbooks to raise awareness of the beneficial attributes of Asian Americans in history textbooks (Diaz, 2020).

Korean Americans

Throughout *America's History*, there was one mention of Korean immigration to the United States with a couple of figures and pictures. One of the few pictorial representations of Korea is a map depicting the war routes during the Korean War. The textbook otherwise fails to relay any human stories of Koreans, nor does it sufficiently discuss the subsequent flow of them to the US. Introducing Park Yong-man into American history textbooks would serve to unveil critical information about Korean Americans. He was a Korean nationalist and independence activist, who created various Korean nationalist organizations and united many Korean Americans in the United States. His impact on uniting the Korean American community created an identity that banded Korean Americans together (Limited, 2022).

Vietnamese Americans

Though Vietnamese representation was minimal in *America's History* textbook, it was slightly better in the *American Vision* textbook. A whole chapter is devoted to the Vietnam war and how Americans were mired in the war. However, despite the nearly 1.4 million Vietnamese residents in the US, there is also almost no mention of them in a context outside the Vietnam War. The Vietnamese American people are nonexistent in the two textbooks (Batalova & Harjanto, 2021). In order to capture the essence of a positive Vietnamese role model, one suggestion is the inclusion of Lê Xuân Nhuận, a prolific Vietnamese American poet. He was an avid fighter for human rights and opposed his home country's communist rule. His efforts to spread his ideals had a positive impact on the Vietnamese population and elevated the status of the Vietnamese people ("Lê Xuân Nhuận," 2022).

Conclusions and Future Research

Although there have been some improvements in the portrayal of Asian Americans as compared to previous decades, there are still significant areas for improvement in modern US history textbooks. Asian Americans continue to be portrayed as passive agents and the lack of diagrams and historical figures is contrary to a robust multicultural education. Publishing companies and school districts should better understand and employ those from diverse communities and reform the current US history curriculum to include more Asian American voices. Future research should focus extensively on understanding the diversity of Asian American perspectives within the US.

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