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2026 Volume III: Asian American History and the Making of the U.S. Immigration System

Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Heritage Month

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Rationale for Teaching Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Heritage

Since 2000, I have been an elementary teacher in the School District of Philadelphia. I currently teach a diverse group of students from many ethnic and cultural backgrounds. In order to understand and support all of my students and the cultures they come from, I try to use national heritage months as times of celebration and learning. The 2026 Yale National Initiative seminar entitled “Asian American History and the Making of the US Immigration System,” led by Mary Lui, Professor of American Studies and of History presented real names and faces and linked them to real dates, times, and places so that not only was I learning about history, I was learning about people. For me, that’s what this work is all about: people. The *little* people that sit in my classroom ready to learn new things. The *teaching* people that need to open their world views and develop cultural sensitivities. The *administrative* people that need to give time and agency so that teachers can expose students. The people of the past, through their harrowing and amazing examples, can help us strive for *better* in order to create “a more just and prudent life”.

Introduction

National heritage months began as ways to honor, celebrate, and acknowledge cultural and ethnic groups in the United States and their contributions to American history and culture. Often, the months started as days, which became a week, and then a full month; finally being recognized via official presidential acts as heritage months. Groups began their celebrations to recognize their contributions to American culture and history because the American narrative that was so often told was that of Europeans and European Americans. National Native American Heritage Month began as a day in 1916. Black History Month (BHM) began in 1926 as Negro History Week. National Hispanic Heritage Week began in 1968 and became a month in 1988. National Asian & Pacific Islander Month (AAPI) began in 1978. Often, as these heritage groups found a voice on the political front, they were able to pursue national heritage month status and gain recognition:

Heritage months in the United States... are deliberate, important, and usually take years, decades, even a century to be codified into law. While the origin may begin with a small group of passionate people who feel strongly about bringing awareness to historical facts regarding the contributions of a particular people, the process to become an official designation is long, serious, requiring awareness, and appreciation of the people and those in power.¹ (HHRC Maine)

As a teacher, these national heritage months allow for learning about the history and cultures of the students sitting in the classroom. While there are not often school district prescribed lessons in curricula that follow the heritage month calendar, there has been a decades long push for Current Events lessons to “transcend the curriculum” and have “students find meaning and relevance; practice critical thinking; participate in real, organic conversations; and leave with deeper questions than those you asked” according to Romano.² Furthermore LeCompte et. al explains that students “Civic learning curricula often fail to include controversial issues or issues that address current events in communities...in an increasingly global and technologically advanced world.”³

Celebrating heritage months can easily be identified as a way to correct that. However, without lessons readily available, it has been up to teachers to seek out such topics for teaching and find or create lessons. All this depends on whether or not the teacher is ready, willing, and able to do so. This curriculum unit contains resources for teachers to use repeatedly as they celebrate AAPI with their students.

A major objective in celebrating heritage months with young students is to build cultural understanding, sensitivity, and acceptance. That is on top of geography and other social studies standards. However, when the students whose culture is being celebrated are a part of the classroom, the opportunity for teachers to practice culturally relevant pedagogy presents itself. In order for teachers to do this, they must go beyond the lessons they teach their students to build a full and well-rounded understanding of the history and culture they are teaching. To that end, it will be imperative for teachers to be familiar with some of the history and current events that affect those cultural and ethnic groups: the good, the bad, and the ugly. “Not only must teachers encourage academic success and cultural competence, they must help students to recognize, understand, and critique current social inequities. This notion presumes that teachers themselves recognize social inequities and their causes.”⁴

Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT)⁵ has been around for over 30 years. In Gay’s *Culturally Responsive Teaching* she explains that a guiding principle in the theory is “improving the school success of ethnically diverse students.”⁶ The work of Ladson-Billings and Gay stand as the foundation for how teachers should approach teaching today.

Culturally Responsive Teaching is a Best Practice

Ladson-Billings first coined the phrase “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy” in the 1990s, which later became known as Culturally Responsive Teaching as more strategies were added, in response to the fact that so many African American students were underachieving academically.⁷ She asked: “Why is it that Black children are struggling to get a good education?” When she began her research she found that there were teachers that never even expected their Black students to do well in school. She later concluded that successful teachers of Black students had high expectations for academic achievement, were culturally competent, with fluency and facility in their own, and had a critical consciousness.⁸

Gay suggests clear ways to improve the classroom experience for multicultural students.⁹ First, teachers need to know the cultural characteristics and contributions of ethnic groups. Second, they need to go beyond respect and move to “acquiring detailed factual information about the cultural particularities of specific ethnic groups (e.g., African, Asian, Latino, and Native American). This is needed to make schooling more interesting and stimulating for, representative of, and responsive to ethnically diverse students.”¹⁰ The third essential component to Gay’s shift towards better teaching practices is to learn and then teach about the contributions of different ethnic groups in history. These criteria can be met with thoughtfully crafted lessons during heritage months for certain.

Much of the early literature on CRT started with and focuses on African American teachers and students. Still, the principles developed along with the theory ring true for all teachers. In 2001, Gay reported that “Teachers may know little or nothing about the contributions of Native Americans and Asian Americans in the same arenas,”¹¹ In 2026, there is little evidence that that is no longer true. Teachers need to value students’ cultural identities, always have high expectations for students as evidenced by providing a rigorous agenda, practice nonexclusionary pedagogy, be determined to build strong relationships with all stakeholders, and empower students via skills acquisition to face and challenge injustices in the world.

In order to prepare teachers to become CRT teachers, Harmon suggests that college programs and school districts do more to prepare teachers with professional development, be taught by culturally aware professors and school leaders, and other learning and experimental activities, and districts need to recruit more African American teachers.¹² These suggestions, however, can apply to teachers and students of all ethnicities. Additionally, although much of the preparation would come from college or district initiatives and programming, teachers can play a part in building their cultural sensitivity and knowledge. Furthermore, it should be understood that attitudes and feelings can affect the outcomes for teachers tasked with being culturally responsive and therefore those who are not actively trying to engage in suggested practices have and will fail. In other words, when a school district decides to make CRT a part of its “Best Practices”, teacher buy-in is crucial for its success. Additionally, Abacioglu et. al suggests that in order to engage in CRT, teachers must be open to the perspective of others, while simultaneously having a greater awareness of and appreciation for other cultures.¹³ Their study shows that teachers need to be willing and able to learn before they can teach. Exposure is a key factor and teachers should seek out experiences that put them in direct contact with the culture of their students. While one’s awareness of and appreciation for other cultures may be rather easy to demonstrate, perspectives can be a little more tricky. A person can gauge their perspectives by taking one of Harvard’s Implicit Association Tests (IAT).¹⁴ These tests allow one to see where they are in terms of unconscious bias. Identifying the issue is the first step in tackling it.

Culturally Responsive Teaching looks like books, bulletin boards, posters, and the scenarios in word problems and reading passages which reflect the ethnicity and culture of the students in your classroom. Culturally Responsive Teaching looks like a teacher familiarizing themselves with different social norms that exist outside of their own culture so that behaviors aren’t deemed disrespectful when they are just expressing a different norm. For example, eye contact is something many teachers want when reprimanding a student, but many cultures do not approve of kids making direct eye contact with an adult. It is important to know this before concluding that a student is just “ignoring” you.

One more look at Culturally Responsive Teaching in practice shows us that the way students learn and engage with learning can be different across cultures. Although educators should be careful so as to avoid complications: “the application of broad national descriptors of learning style may lead to national

stereotyping and the possible inappropriate use of certain learning, teaching and assessment strategies”¹⁵ , recent studies have shown that it is better to at least know about some ways that different cultures interact with the learning process so that delivery of information can be varied and meet the styles of learners. When Lopez and Bobroff looked at Diné students of different tribal or clan affiliations, the Navajo cultural core value of community played a large part in best practices:

Community collaborations provide exciting experiential education opportunities for students that help improve positive sense of self, positive associations with peers, and healthy beliefs as well as establish clear standards for behavior, ultimately keeping kids healthy, decreasing dropout and drug use rates, and minimizing depression among our students.¹⁶

CRT ties into heritage month celebrations because not only do they connect to the broader ideals of the theory, they provide a chance for students of any heritage to learn about other cultures. These new aspects of culture are often interesting and engaging to students as they provide a deeper understanding of things they may have heard about only tangentially or only seen but do not fully comprehend. This peak in interest and engagement about a culture can translate into cross curricular engagement as well. Korosidoua and Griva found that when they worked with students in a multicultural classroom writing digital narratives as a way to improve writing abilities, students felt more connected to other students who had shared autobiographical stories.¹⁷

Teaching *Asian American Studies* Meets an Underserved Need

Asian American Studies in high schools is a relatively new program and looks different in different places. However, considering the United States has educated nearly 2.7 million ethnically Asian students a year since 2022,¹⁸ one could argue that these programs are late in coming. Additionally, Asian Americans are the fastest growing minority,¹⁹ so this number will continue to grow. In regards to elementary and middle school students, this unit can be a part of creating a bridge to high school learning for younger kids not quite ready for all the themes and elements for those higher level programs, such as stereotypes, imperialism, and institutional racism. Certainly it can be a starting point for teachers to engage with Asian American history as preparing for engaging in AAPI heritage month celebrations.

Content

Asian American Immigration and Naturalization History

The Naturalization Act of 1790, which established the “free white persons” clause, guaranteed citizenship to free whites only.²⁰ So the 1790 Naturalization Act, which was even before California and most of what we call America existed (Fig. 1), meant that *by law* all other groups would be excluded from being citizens, including the Native Americans who were already here and the descendants of Africans forced to come here. California eventually became a state in 1848, the Gold Rush was on, and men from many parts of the world came to find their fortune. The transcontinental railroad began construction in 1863 and the Chinese became the main source of labor given the limited options for laborers to travel to the west coast in the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1869 the transcontinental railroad was completed. By then, Chinese immigrants were coming into the country in large numbers to help with this expansion and development. The Labor Law of 1862, also known as the Anti-Coolie Act, through US legislation, helped protect Chinese against indentured servitude, but characterized Chinese as “unfree coolie” labor in opposition to “free” European immigrants.²¹ However, at the same time, through California legislation, taxes like the Foreign Miner’s tax of 1852 was imposed on those Chinese that were legally working in order to limit them as job competitors with white miners. This contradictory approach to legislation addressing Chinese immigrants was the beginning of over a century of unfair treatment of immigrants while simultaneously desiring immigrant labor in the United States that brings us into our current day. Federal law after federal law was enacted to restrict immigration from Asia.



Figure 1: A 1797 map of the United States.²²

The 1875 Page Act targeted Chinese labor migration by ensuring all immigration from the “Orient” was “free and voluntary” and not the result of “illegal importation.” The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act specifically targeted Chinese laborers and some women, this time with a 10 year travel restriction. With the 1888 Scott Act, twenty- to thirty thousand Chinese residents were left out of the country without a way to return when the US voided their re-entry certificates. In this way, those previously admitted were kept from the promise of return. Chinese immigrants did not stand idly by and watch the government change its mind on their ability to be a part of what America had to offer. In the Supreme Court case of *Chan Chae Ping v. the US* in 1889, Chan’s lawyers argued that the promise of re-entry should have been honored because it was already in place and in practice, however the Supreme Court’s ruling ended up giving Congress unfettered power over decisions regarding immigration and allowed the shut-out to stand. This landmark ruling informed future case outcomes and set the precedent that exclusion laws were legally justifiable. A few years later, the 1892 Geary Act extended the Chinese Exclusion Act for another ten years. This would be the second of two more such extensions. Eventually by 1910, the US built Angel Island Immigration Station to “handle” the Asian immigrant “problem”.

Asian Immigration and Angel Island

In 1892, 10 years after the Chinese Exclusion Act, European migrants were welcomed at Ellis Island with relatively open arms and in abundance, starting with 400,000 European immigrants being processed the first year. By 1907, this number peaked at 1.2 million.²³ Then in 1910, the federal government erected an immigration station on Angel Island in California to screen and process immigrants mostly from Asia who were

looking for a new homeland in the U.S.. Knowledge of Ellis Island might lead one to presuppose that Angel Island was an efficient complementary waystation on the west coast that helped immigrants begin their journey to citizenship by welcoming the "huddled masses yearning to breathe free" with open arms as well. Even the word "Angel" in Angel Island makes one think of the divine, however, experiences were far from heavenly.

Angel Island was notorious for interviews that were more like interrogations, forcing many to use coaching books to come through them successfully. There were lengthy stays during "processing" and deplorable living conditions while they waited. On top of that, families were separated by sex (sons over 14 had to go in the men's barracks) for the length of the detention. Some of the stories of those who passed through and those who did not are collected in the book "Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America" by Erika Lee and Judy Yung²⁴. The book also relates one very powerful aspect of the experience for passersthrough: poetry.

Given that the laments and longing the poems communicate come from people both hopeful and hopeless, Angel Island poetry is distinctive. Due to the aggressive nature of prolonging the entry of immigrants on Angel Island, many Chinese immigrants experienced despair while awaiting their acceptance or denial. Faith has been defined as the hope for things unseen, and in the case of Asian immigrants arriving on Angel Island looking to make a new life, a successful life in America, much of what they were working with upon arrival was faith. Treated like prisoners although they had broken no laws, Chinese and other immigrants told their tales of heartbreak and pain through poems that they carved by hand with whatever tool was capable of digging deep enough to leave an impression on the barrack walls that acted as a prison. (Fig. 3)



Fig. 3: Digital overlay of a wooden wall in Angel Island barracks shows three carved poems.²⁵

In 1943, after 60 years of racist policies that only targeted immigrants from one part of the world, Congress passed the Magnuson Act and repealed Chinese Exclusion in support of the new wartime alliance with China against Japan. The act set a quota of roughly 100 Chinese persons per year instead of outright refusal to admit. Then in 1946 the Luce-Cellar Act repealed the exclusion of Filipino and Indian immigrants and allowed them to apply for citizenship. Prior to this allowance immigration from India was barred through the 1917 Immigration Act and in 1935, the Filipino Repatriation Act sought to send all Filipinos home.

In 1910, the treatment of Asian immigrants, very much unlike the treatment of European immigrants, was not good. They were met at the immigration processing center, Angel Island in San Francisco Bay, with mistrust and suspicion often fueled by immigration officers' racist beliefs. They were interrogated, kept for up to four months at a time, and checked for diseases before many were actually sent back without admission. "Ellis

Island enforced American Immigration laws that restricted, but did not exclude, European immigrants....Angel Island... was characterized by American immigration policies that excluded Asians and barred them from becoming naturalized citizens.”²⁶ The degrading experiences of Asian immigrants coming to Angel Island and their willingness to continue pursuing their dreams in America is a testament to a resolve that informs those taking notice of their character.

A Korean immigrant named Mary Paik Lee, in her memoir *Quiet Odyssey*, tells of her life as a child leaving her home in Korea in 1905 and traveling to Hawaii and then California, where she spent decades traveling from town to town with her family as her father found work to support his growing family.²⁷ She faced racism in school and at church from adults and kids, lived off the land for subsistence, and even witnessed the murder of a Chinese immigrant in the street that went without question. However, her family’s love and optimism helped her pay her way through school and Lee eventually got married and was able to provide her children with the dreams she had once had.

This is just one example of immigrants whose pathways were unbelievably difficult and incredibly heartbreaking. Their resilience and success to overcome the challenges faced by Asian immigrants is not to imply that their moral character could handle it and therefore whatever had been set as an obstacle they could overcome. That would undermine their strength and determination and let the U.S. and its immigration system off the hook for their treatment of people coming from Asia historically from the exclusion era to the present. Many Americans were horrible to Asian immigrants, but the real tragedy is that these racist sentiments were codified into an immigration bureaucracy of laws, policies, and practices that continue to shape the rough treatment of non-European immigrant groups today. Not all of them have success stories like Mary Paik Lee. Many died, gave up, and lived very difficult lives, whether sent back to their home countries or they stayed in the U.S. and struggled for their daily survival. These stories give us insight into the will-power of people that want to pursue happiness.

Native Hawaiian/Kānaka Maoli

Shortly before the start of the story of Mary Paik Lee is the story of Hawai’i becoming a state of the United States in 1959. This Pacific Islander story begins in 1853 with the ouster of King Kamehameha III and then the 1893 coup of Queen Lili’uokalani. This archipelago was annexed as a territory for its natural resources and fertile lands to produce sugar, and to this day has a vast number of native peoples, known as Kānaka Maoli, seeking independence and sovereignty. As this curriculum unit seeks to explore the cultures of several Asian nations all in one festive celebration, the Hawaiian luau will be that celebration. Although there is a difficult history of colonialism and immigration, Hawai’i is a crossroads of Asian ethnicities and cultures and native peoples living together. If this unit is taught with the intent to have “cultural competence”, students will learn and grow an appreciation for others. Still, for all the excitement and celebration the luau has come to represent, without background knowledge, any celebration of this event will be appropriation of a beloved Hawaiian tradition. Additionally, there cannot be any intention to just mix different Asian cultures with indigenous Hawaiian cultures for the sake of a party, as that would ignore the complicated history of Hawaiian sovereignty undermined by U.S. imperialism.

The University of Hawai’i Manoa School of Law chronicles the timeline of Hawai’i’s legal history.²⁸ The 1853 ousting of King Kamehameha III was not the beginning of Hawai’i as a nation up for the taking. In 1778, Captain James Cook of England “discovered” the archipelago and named it; thus from first contact, native peoples and interests were not a priority for foreigners. Missionaries arrived in 1820, which began several changes in governance by the royal family and started to cede power to non-Hawaiians in all things political.

By 1826, Hawai'i's resource potentials were beginning to be seen and the US made a "Treaty of Friendship, Commerce and Navigation" (agreements that set the stage for trade) as sugar plantations, often owned by the descendants of U.S. missionaries, started to proliferate on the islands. The middle decades saw great political instability for the Hawaiian monarchy as the economic power of plantation owners grew on the islands. By 1887, King Kalākaua ended up being forced to sign the Bayonet Constitution, along with several white men and other non native Hawaiians, which almost completely took his power away and left the country at the mercy of foreigners. King Kalākaua died within six years. His successor, Queen Lili'uokalani, was overthrown by a coup d'etat in 1893. Proclaimed the "Republic of Hawaii, the new government was run by white businessman and plantation owner Sanford Dole (whose cousin, James Dole, started the Hawaiian Pineapple Company that would bear his name). In 1896, President McKinley was convinced that Hawai'i should be annexed and up to that point, Queen Lili'uokalani was powerless to stop it, so in 1898 all land was given to the US. In 1900 Hawai'i became a U.S. territory, along with Dole becoming the governor and the Organic Act ensuring the voting rights of non native Hawaiians. Hawaiians were no longer in control of their own country. In 1959, Hawai'i became a state.

As the many kings and queens came into power, there were political party conflicts and royal family weakness. The goal of sovereignty clashed with the bid to be a part of the wider global market. With different factions pushing for their interests, the US split votes and statehood eventually happened. All along, Asian immigrants were coming to work as laborers on the sugar plantations with large numbers of Japanese immigrants beginning in 1885.²⁹

Early on, disease ravaged the native Hawaiian population, including their royalty, followed by the influx of immigrants from Japan, China, Korea, and the Philippines coming to work the plantations. Hawai'i's native population consistently declined as immigrant numbers grew:

A census by the Hawaiian Kingdom in 1853 provided a benchmark for this tumultuous change. In that census, Hawaiians made up 96 percent of the population. By 1884 Hawaiians made up only half of Hawaii's population, and by 1896 barely a fourth. Soon the remaining Hawaiians -- living in a sea of immigrants who have been brought by the Planters -- were to become a minority not only of the resident population but also of the electorate.³⁰

Thus it must be understood that although Hawai'i is a melting pot of Asian cultures and interracial marriage is the highest there of any state³¹, it is so for reasons that undermine Kānaka Maoli sovereignty and independence. To use their luau celebration as a vehicle for student learning, this bitter history and the continued sovereignty movement for Hawaiian independence today must be acknowledged.

The Hawaiian luau started as a dinner allowing men and women to eat together at a celebratory feast for the first time; prior to 1819, men and women ate separately. Luaus were held to celebrate births, victories, and other momentous occasions. Today, although they can be viewed as tourist magnets, luaus still feature traditions that hold significance in Native Hawaiian culture. Foods include poi (smushed taro root), sweet potatoes, and reef fish. Hula dancing and fire spinning may also be a part of the festivities.³²

Due to the influx of immigrants from all over the Pacific Rim and beyond from long ago, Hawai'i has other foods that are now seen as staples, although they did not originate there. Some examples of this are "Filipino pancit noodles, Portuguese chorizo sausage, Puerto Rican pasteles, Chinese choy sum cabbage, Korean

kal bi ribs, Okinawan andagi doughnuts, and Hawaiian lomi-lomi salmon” (salmon is not indigenous to Hawai’i).³³ Other dishes are a mix of cultures, like the “Mixed Plate, a popular meal of foods from different cultures served on a single plate with the common ingredient, rice. Two scoops rice, macaroni salad, teriyaki chicken, or kalua pig and side order kim chee is our contemporary soul food.”³⁴ Another example is poke bowls, which are now popular all over the US and are “cubed raw fish seasoned with sea salt, seaweed, and kukui nut. With influences from Japanese and Korean cuisine, poke expanded to include soy sauce, sesame oil, chili peppers, and green onions. Today, the types of poke available reflect both Hawaiian tradition and modern creativity.”³⁵ Students may have even had poke bowls and that would be a connection they can make to what is being learned.

In order to ensure that the experiences students have are as enriching as possible, lessons about Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander cultures and the luau need to start with an understanding of what “culture” and “history” are. The following questions are places to start. The expected answers to these questions should be scaffolded across grade bands and seek to ensure students know what the words *culture* and *history* mean and how they can be identified and studied. Once these questions are answered, they can then move on to more specific questions for this unit. These essential questions are:

What is culture?

What is history?

How does history shape culture?

What is my culture?

Why should I learn about the history and culture of others? (CRT)

How can I learn about the history and culture of others?

What is it like in the homelands of Asians, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders?

What was the experience of those coming to the US from Asia?

How can we celebrate Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander cultures?

In the curriculum unit “Hispanic Heritage Month for All: 31 Days of LatinXellence”³⁶ there are four proposed questions that could also be a part of the understanding teachers have as they build their CRT. These questions could also guide the approach students take as they interview family or research other cultures. These questions would be best used for older students:

Essential Question: What events, people, ideas, and movements should be included?

Are there any historical or present day events that are important to your culture? These could be celebrations, moments in history, or any event that you get excited about.

Who are some people or organizations that are important to your culture? Why? Who are the people in your family that are shown lots of respect? Why?

Cultural beliefs and values come from how we are raised and shape the kind of people we become. Are there ideas and/ or beliefs that are very important to you and your family?

Throughout history, groups of people have gone through struggles. Oftentimes that struggle is to be treated fairly. Was there a struggle that brought pride because it was overcome?

For teachers of older students, one last bit of history may indeed help inform the need for CRT and the brief histories I am sharing in this unit: multicultural topics in teaching have not always existed in the ways that you think it does. And when it has existed, it was often in a way that portrayed nonwhite subjects as “others” in unflattering or down-right derogatory ways. When Mary Paik Lee went to school in the early 1900s, the history was very focused on Americans aka white European Americans as the heroes and all others in need of rescue or worse yet, as villains. So much of what had been taught in this country bent towards the positives of European, European American, and their American stories and accomplishments. The hard histories remained untold. The celebrations remained untold. Race had been the dividing line between what was worthy of textbooks and what was easily forgotten. For example, in 2023 Johns Hopkins did a study that found that American high school textbooks were missing 87% of pivotal historic events pertaining to the Latino community.³⁷ Students, desiring to be seen and represented, fought to have curriculum pathways to learning about cultures and accomplishments and so much more when it comes to ethnicities outside of white Americans in 1968. That was when a group of California college students in San Francisco went on strike to change the stories that were being told. Theirs is a complex story of resistance, resilience, self-determination, and inclusion where fighting to be seen and heard in the classroom had to become a protest to be accomplished.³⁸ Sometimes when we desire the truth, we have to seek it out and uncover it-- not everyone may want us to do those things.

What does all this history add to our view of Asian immigrants today and those of Asian ancestry sitting in our classrooms? Some teachers may have the idea that Asians are the so-called “model minority”. This stems from two very different, but equally powerful sources. First, the Asian American community itself adopted this mindset to contradict the Cold War stereotypes of communism and illegality.³⁹ It was possibly the idea that if you can’t join them, beat them. Secondly, during the Civil Rights movement, divisiveness was a means to undermine the reality of systemic and institutional racist policy and procedures by prompting the propaganda movement to sell the false narrative that success for people of color in the United States is possible *if you just work hard, case in point: look at the Chinese*. But particularly as teachers on the front line of the academic portion of this stereotype, we should know better than to make assumptions, even if we think they are positive, as no ethnic group is a monolith. Additionally, the racial stereotype of the “model minority” is a myth that has created a tremendous burden on Asian immigrant and refugee students to always be a whiz kid, regardless of their individual circumstance or economic and educational background. ⁴⁰

“Pacific Islander” as a Heritage Group

The term “Pacific Islander” is very broad in that it is used to describe every person living in the entirety of the Pacific Ocean, which is 60 million square miles. There are nearly 3,000 islands and about 2,000 are inhabited. Although the term describes the geographic location of this group of people, using the term to celebrate culture means that students will have to learn about 14 sovereign nations that are not only in very different locations, but have different cultures. That is not to say the same is not true for the Asian countries written about in this unit, but one glaring difference is that those from the Pacific Islands are popularly described as a

monolith or one people instead of comprising individual nations:

Melanesia: Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu.

Micronesia: Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Nauru, and Palau.

Polynesia: Cook Islands, Niue, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu.

When learning about “Pacific Islander” culture, students need to know that these nations are distinct cultural and ethnic groups. As a touchstone for students, you can discuss the main character in the film *Moana*, who is an amalgam of polynesian cultures. Students can find different characteristics of different cultures in the film: the houses look Samoan, the demigod Maui is from Māori culture, and the landscape itself looks like its inspiration: Tahiti.

One Last Why

This unit has two purposes. The first is to *educate teachers* about Asian immigration, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander history in the U.S. The second purpose is to teach kids about the cultures of Asia, Hawai’i and the Pacific Islands. The two go-together in order for teachers to teach these fun and engaging lessons while also treating the heritage of these cultures with respect and not just appropriating the ideas. Celebrating Chinese New Year, Dia de los Muertos, or having a Hawaiian Luau is not about commercial products that are cool, spreading propaganda, or just an excuse for a classroom party. Enriching your students' lives with history lessons about these cultural celebrations are ways to increase their global mindset and make them aware of the vastly magnificent world we live in.

Teaching Strategies

Objects hold our memories of the past. They can share our dreams of the future. We collect and display them, hide them away, or give them as gifts. Yet, such objects also raise questions. Do we know the whole story? How and to whom do we tell our histories?

-Erika Lee⁴¹

This quote is the first thing you read when opening up the book “Smithsonian Asian Pacific American History, Art, and Culture in 101 Objects.”⁴² Erika Lee, co-writer of *Angel Island: Immigrant Gateway to America*, starts the forward with these powerful words and describes the significance of things, but not in terms of their financial value, but their value as physical representations of our lives which mark that we were here. Through her words, one can see the importance of objects as a treasure trove of both information and inquiry. To hold something and examine it, to turn it over in your hand and look closer, is to see a time and place where such things existed and to move one step closer to understanding the people who existed in those times and places.

The overall teaching strategy in this unit is active and experiential learning through hands-on activities. Students will participate in hands-on, project based activities that allow them to engage with some type of artifact. In other words, each activity will have them either create something based on an artifact they touched or participate in another type of physical activity, such as dancing and singing or make something with their hands, like a pattern for a piece of fabric.

This unit consists of a group of lessons which highlight an aspect of Asian or Pacific Islander culture that is tangible in order to answer the essential question: What are the ways to celebrate Asian American & Pacific Islander cultures? Students will either handle an artifact (or replica) and/or create an artifact. There will be postcards, fabrics, food, spices, and poems.

Additional and alternative materials could be used as objects in this unit, so please do not see this limited grouping as the only possibility. The goal is to put things in students' hands. There could be a lesson on the history, geography, and variety of chopsticks and allowing students to try them. Teachers could allow students to learn surf lingo and practice moves on a surfboard (i.e. towel or yoga mat on the floor). Students could paint a cherry blossom tree using a stamping method/ wood block or paper that the students made in the style of the first paper that was made in China. From origami to playing Kumu Hula Says (Simon Says) to hula dancing, a luau as a celebration of Asian American and Pacific Islander culture using actual objects can be an amazing learning opportunity for students!

Classroom Activities

The first artifacts to introduce are postcards. Postcards are a great primary source document to use with younger students because of the picture(s) and the very small writing sample. From a teaching perspective, they are short, but filled with enough information that students can use them as examples to do their own short writing. Additionally, you can discuss the image(s) and what the designer of the postcard was trying to convey. Does the postcard image seem to say: this place is full of natural beauty, there are many things to do here, or look at these cool places I visited? In essence, a postcard is an intersection of communication and tourism, so while the message on the back has meaning from the writer, the back could be quite different in what it is trying to communicate. Postcards are also great artifacts to see which places drew people to them. Students will read some postcards and create one about a place they might like to visit.



Figure 4: Postcard sample template made in Slides using public domain images found online

Artifact	Postcards: The artifacts can be actual postcards made to look old or print out in color some old ones front and back.
Lesson Objective	SWBAT make a mini book with facts about a country IOT create a postcard as if I have traveled to a different country.
Student Activity	Students research a country. Students observe, examine, and read postcards. Students write a postcard, imagining they visited that country and choose things they saw based on their research.
Scaffolding	Watch videos→ Be read to→ Read a book→ Read a website
Artifact	Asian Fabrics: Chinese silk, Persian/ Indian paisley, Indian Banarasi sarees, Japanese chirimen crepe, Philippine Inaul.
Lesson Objective	SWBAT design patterns on fabric IOT mimic the designs of a country with a history of textiles.
Student Activity	Students make observations of fabrics/ clothes from all over Asia. Students identify and color different designs. Students compare traditional to modern designs and materials.
Scaffolding	Coloring page of cultural designs→ Design own
Artifact	Food: Poi (Poin pounder and board) and/or Hawaiian Sweet Rolls
Lesson Objective	SWBAT narrate a sequence IOT by following the steps necessary in making poi in the traditional Hawaiian way.
Student Activity	Students listen to "Ohana Means Family" by Ilima Loomis and Kenard Pak. Teacher writes the steps to making poi. Students can draw or write the steps in a sequencing "How To" activity.
Scaffolding	Number a picture sequence→ Label a picture sequence→ Write a sentence for a picture sequence→ Draw and label a picture sequence
Artifact	Asian Spices: Spices from Asia were very famous and valuable, at one time inspiring an entire global industry before the invention of modern transportation to get it. And many of those spices are now staples in restaurants around the world.
Lesson Objective	SWBAT taste and smell different spices IOT use adjectives to describe foods from Asia.

Student Activity	Students smell spices from all around Asia. Students try to differentiate and then guess different spices.
Scaffolding	Just smell→ Smell and guess the spice→ Smell, taste, describe the spice, guess the spice
Artifact	Lyricism: Angel Island Poems and Japanese Holehole Bushi songs
Lesson Objective	SWBAT read and analyze poems and songs written by immigrants IOT create a poem about a hardship they overcame.
Student Activity	Teacher distributes and reads several poems from Angel Island (please preview all poems for age appropriateness). Teacher plays a video of Holehole bushi singing. Students create their own poems or songs about overcoming hardships or how they plan to remove an obstacle to success. (Carving a word into a malleable material would show them the time it took to do a whole poem in wood.)
Scaffolding	No syllable pattern→ Count the syllables used→ Use a syllable pattern

Appendix on Implementing District Standards

2026 Commonwealth of Pennsylvania Standards Aligned System Standards for 8.4: World History

K Standards

8.4.K.A Explain how cultures celebrate.

8.4.K.C Identify different celebrations of different cultures from around the world.

1st Standards

8.2.1.C Identify holiday and cultural celebrations in a community and why they are celebrated.

8.2.1.D Identify historical conflict in the community.

8.4.1.A Explain why cultures celebrate.

2nd Standards

8.4.2.A Explain why cultures have commemorations and remembrances.

8.4.2.C Identify how cultures have commemorations and remembrances.

3rd: Standards

8.3.3.A Identify and describe the social, political, cultural, and economic contributions of individuals and groups in United States history.

8.3.3.B Identify and describe historical documents, artifacts, and places critical to United States history.

8.4.3.A Identify the elements of culture and ethnicity.

8.4.3.B Identify the importance of artifacts and sites to different cultures and ethnicities.

8.4.3.C Compare and contrast selected world cultures.

4th Standards

8.3.4.D Distinguish between conflict and cooperation among groups and organizations that impacted the history and development of the United States.

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This website gives an historical perspective on why national heritage months exist and how they are developed.

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<https://teachers.yale.edu>

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