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Immigration, imagined communities, and collective memories of Asian American experiences: A content analysis of Asian American experiences in Virginia U.S. history textbooks[☆]



Yonghee Suh^{a,*}, Sohyun An^b, Danielle Forest^c

^a Department of Teaching & Learning, Old Dominion University, USA

^b Department of Elementary and Early Childhood Education, Kennesaw State University, USA

^c Department of Curriculum, Instruction and Special Education, University of Southern Mississippi, USA

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how Asian American experiences are depicted in four high school U.S. history textbooks and four middle school U.S. history textbooks used in Virginia. The analytic framework was developed from the scholarship of collective memories and histories of immigration in Asian American studies. Content analysis of the textbooks suggests the overall narrative of Asian American history in U.S. history textbooks aligns with the grand narrative of American history, that is, the “story of progress.” This major storyline of Asian Americans – that they suffered from nativist racism and discrimination for a long time, overcame these obstacles through their hard work and efforts, and achieved the American dream – fits well into the master narrative of American progress, highlighting the process of their belonging to the U.S. as citizens. This storyline misrepresents the realities and diversity among Asian ethnic groups and their migration histories as well as the fluid nature of their identities across national borders. These findings stress the continued challenges in representing Asian American experiences as well as other marginalized groups in U.S. history textbooks.

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Introduction

During the last few decades, U.S. classrooms have experienced dramatic demographic changes. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, the nation's immigrant population reached 40 million, the highest number in the nation's history. With ever-increasing numbers of immigrants, students in U.S. schools are becoming more and more diverse (Darling-Hammond, 2010). In this context, one of the challenges of teaching U.S. history becomes how to represent and teach about minority groups so that students can better understand and work with the diverse groups of people constituting American society (Hong, 2009; Merryfield, 2001). This new circumstance requires curriculum scholars to make more concerted efforts to include the voices of people of different races and ethnicities, ideas, and beliefs in teaching U.S. history. A body of scholarship in social studies

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* Correspondence to: 145 Education Building, Old Dominion University, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA.

E-mail address: ysuh@odu.edu (Y. Suh).

education also suggests that teaching history from multiple perspectives, which involves teaching conflicting historical narratives, is beneficial to both white students and students of color (Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011; Howard, 2004; Martell, 2013; Martell & Hashimoto-Martell, 2012; Wills, 1996). One such benefit is that, as suggested by findings from various empirical studies, it helps students to develop a positive attitude toward the particular group being studied, challenging any surrounding stereotypes and misconceptions (Epstein et al., 2011). In addition, when taught more explicitly about the histories of their racial or ethnic groups, students of color can more personally connect to history in developing their identities (Martell, 2013).

Teaching a national history that is inclusive of *all* voices is not an easy task, however. The U.S. history curriculum has been criticized for its focus on the stories of white, Anglo-Saxon, and male heroes, marginalizing the stories of “others” such as women, African Americans, Hispanic Americans, Native American Indians, and Asian Americans. Among these marginalized groups, this paper focuses on the Asian American experience as represented in the U.S. history curriculum. Asian Americans and their experiences have a unique position among the marginalized groups in America (Chan, 1996, 2007; Daniels, 1966). Despite the long history of Asian immigration to the U.S., Asian Americans continue to be excluded by being asked questions such as, “Where are you *really* from?” and by being viewed as the “perpetual foreigner”: those who are regarded as foreigners rather than “true” Americans, no matter how long they live in the U.S. (Park, 2011). Most importantly, due to ethnic affiliations to countries of origin and varying migration patterns, a close look at Asian American experiences allows us to uncover the complex face of the U.S., enabling the nation to identify as “a nation of immigration” (Gonzales, Riedel, Williamson, Avery, Sullivan, & Bos, 2004) and to “[move] beyond an older paradigm based on immigration and assimilation to examine how continuing transnational cultural and economic interactions shape the experience of minority groups within the United States” (Foner, 2001, p. 102).

So far, relatively little research has been conducted on the case of Asian Americans, whereas much of textbook research on minority representation has focused on women (Schmidt, 2012), African Americans (Brown & Brown, 2010a, b), Native Americans (Loewen, 1995/2007), or more recently, immigration in general (Hilurn & Fitchett, 2012; Journell, 2009). Given the long history of Asian immigration to the U.S. as well as Asians being the fastest-growing immigrant group today (Semple, 2012), it is critical to examine what is currently being taught about Asian Americans in U.S. history classes. Building upon but advancing earlier work, we ask a much broader question: How does the U.S. history curriculum produce collective memories (Wertsch, 2002) about Asian Americans and their experiences within the grand narrative of U.S. history? In what follows, we first review research on Asian American representations in the curriculum. Then we present the theoretical framework of the study and how we collected and analyzed the textbook narratives on Asian American experiences. Lastly we report our findings and discuss the theoretical and practical implications of the findings.

For the purpose of this study, we define Asian Americans as Americans who describe themselves as those of Asian descent, such as a person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010) – although we will later come back to this notion of “Asian American” and discuss its socially and historically constructed nature. By definition of the U.S. Census, “Asian American” comprises those whose ethnic backgrounds originate in Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

Literature review

Representation of Asian Americans in U.S. social studies curriculum

In discussing collective memories about Asian American experiences in the U.S. curriculum, a few but interesting studies have been conducted. As early as 1969, Zuercher criticized the omission and misrepresentation of Asian Americans in U.S. history textbooks in an article titled “The Treatment of Asian Minorities in American History Textbooks,” published in the *Indiana Social Studies Quarterly* (Zuercher, 1969). Almost two decades later, even after the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, textbooks seem to have not made much progress in their representation of Asian Americans. Chin’s (1984) study examined five fourth-grade California state history textbooks and concluded that the textbooks failed to reflect the past or present realities of the Asian American experience. Little improvement seems to be made today in the 2000s as Harada’s (2000) and Chan’s (2007) research suggests. Harada (2000) analyzed high school U.S. history textbooks used in Hawaiian schools, where the percentage of Asian Americans is particularly high, and found that the textbooks included little about the history of Asian Americans. Though conventional attention was paid to the Chinese and Japanese, other Asian American groups were seldom addressed, and Asian Americans were largely depicted as passive victims rather than as active agents in the history of the U.S. Similarly Chan (2007) examined two high school U.S. history textbooks and found the textbooks lacked breadth of coverage, particularly of Korean, Asian Indian, Filipino, and Vietnamese Americans, and lacked in depth of coverage as well, specifically by not including Asian Americans in the main storyline, failing to represent insiders’ perspectives, providing inadequate historical context, and posing few critical thinking questions.

Among Asian American experiences, the Japanese American internment during the Second World War has received the most scholarly attention. However, Romanowski (1995) analyzed U.S. history textbooks published in 1988 and 1992 and found that the textbooks failed to provide students with more complete, accurate information of the Japanese American internment. Later, Ogawa (2004) found that the textbooks still tended to describe the causes of the internment simply as “fear” and defending “national security,” without discussing other underlying issues in-depth, such as racial discrimination

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