

**Author:** Alice Prevezer

**Title:** The Asian American Cultural Center: Its Role and Purpose at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

**Course:** AAS346 Section A(Asian American Youth) Fall 2007 -- Soo Ah Kwon

**About the Author:** I am spending a year at the University of Illinois as part of an exchange program from my university in England. I chose to take this class in Asian American Studies because I have never studied anything on this subject before and I thought it would be interesting and helpful to my studies at home. I chose to investigate the Asian American Cultural Center because I wanted to see its impact on the student population and its role within the community.

**Keywords:** cultural center, asian american youth, education, socializing

**Abstract:** In this project I investigated the role of the Asian American Cultural Center on the University of Illinois campus. Through interviews and observations, I researched the aims and objectives of the cultural center, its role within the whole university community, and importantly, its impact of the Asian Population on campus. My results showed me that the Asian American Cultural Center aims to promote pan-Asian American identity and unity through educational, social, and cultural programs as well as providing a sense of community and improving inter-group relationships among students at the University of Illinois. There is a good social atmosphere at the center, and students are able to learn and socialize in a friendly environment.

**Question:** Early Question 9/18/2007

For this research project I would like to investigate the role of the Asian American cultural house. I think it would be interesting to find out about the function that the cultural house plays, and also the programmes and activities that it provides. I am also interested in finding out how many students use the cultural house and for what purposes.

After reading an article in the Daily Illini I became aware that many of the Asian American students on campus choose to segregate themselves from other students, and I am interested to find out whether they spend time and socialise at the cultural

house.

Overall i think that my question would be: What is the role and purpose of the Asian American cultural house, and what does it offer to students on campus?

**Plan: Initial Plan 10/1/07**

My early question has not changed, I am still interested in finding out the role and purpose of the Asian American Cultural house and what it has to offer students on campus.

For this project I will firstly try to find out the events and activities that the Asian American House provides. I will be looking at the events posted on the Asian American cultural newsletter as well as the UIUC website. I think that this will provide a good overall observation of the activities and aims of the cultural centre. I will be looking at whether the centre provides academic or social programs and if so, what are the key trends in the themes that activities are based on.

I think i will also conduct an interview with a member of the Asian American cultural house and see what they want to get out of their experience, as well as whether or not they feel that the activities and programmes provided are beneficial to them.

I may also interview someone who works for the Asian American cultural house and find out what their aims are to provide students on campus. For example, is it mainly a social organisation? Academic? Both?

I may also conduct a survey in order to find out what the students want from the Asian American Cultural centre.

**11/30/2007**

From the results of my observations and interview I am pleased with the way my research is going. I am going to try and gather some more information by conducting a survey, and then hopefully I will be able to see what the students think of the Asian American cultural center.

**Data (observation): Observation 10/10/07**

For this observation, I have looked at the Asian American Cultural house website and their weekly newsletter, in order to try and discover the range of activities and events that the Cultural

Center provides.

One of the first things that came to my attention was that the University of Illinois has one of the largest and most vibrant Asian American university communities in the Midwest. The Asian American students in campus represents 11% of the total student population and the Asian American Cultural House aims to provide many resources to address the needs and interests of Asian Americans and those interested in Asian American issues. Inside the Asian American Cultural Center there is a lounge, kitchen, resource room and conference room, with space to gather and share the diverse and rich cultures that are a part of the Asian American experience.

Whilst looking at the Asian American Cultural Center website, I noticed that the main mission of the Cultural house is give Asian and non-Asian students an appreciation and understanding of Asian American experiences. It aims to promote pan-Asian American identity and unity through educational, social, and cultural programs as well as providing a sense of community and improving inter-group relationships among students at the University of Illinois.

Whilst walking past the Asian American Cultural House, I noticed that it was not that busy. I did not see anyone enter or leave the house, but I think this is because it was midday and most students were either eating lunch or at their classes. I think if I had watched the house for a longer period of time I would have seen people entering or leaving the house, as the street was quite busy, with many students walking past the house. From the outside the house looks well kept and inviting, a good place to go and meet people and socialize.

I have looked at the weekly newsletter and as well as the events list on the website and I found that the Asian American Cultural House provides lots of different activities and resources for its members. I found that the events could be split into three different groups; cultural, social and academic. Firstly, cultural activities include a number of different talks such as 'Food for thought: A new look at Mahatma Gandhi' and 'Learn Chinese YoYo!' both of which aim to provide a new cultural experience to students. These events aim to provide students with information about Asian culture as well as bringing everyone together to gain a sense of community. There are a number of academic events such as the Asian American Cultural Center Exploring Leadership Program, which aims to teach students about fundraising and the

market in today's technological world.

In addition to these programs, the Asian American Cultural Center provides many social programs for its member. These include things such as 'Community Food Drive,' 'Women's Art Shows,' 'Game Night,' 'Asian Sweets Night,' as well as tutoring, drinking awareness, volunteering, Lesbian/Gay Support groups. I think it is important that these events are social events in order to get students to mix and meet new students, possible of different races and cultures.

From this observation, it is clear that the Asian American Cultural Center aims to provide a relaxed atmosphere with many different events and activities for students to gain a better understanding of Asian culture as well as meet new people. For the next part of my research I will hand out surveys in order to find out if students enjoy the programs as well as the reasons why they go to the Asian American Cultural Center.

**Data (interview): Interview 10/30/2007**

I conducted an interview with David Chih, the Director of the Asian American Cultural Center and also the Assistant Dean of Students. I thought that the interview went pretty well considering that David was ill and has lost his voice! The interview therefore was relatively quick, but I managed to ask all the questions I needed and gather all relevant information. I found out that the Asian American Cultural Center is a unit within the Dean of Students, where all the other cultural centers collaborate and meet, but it is mainly an independent organization.

David Chih has worked at the University for ten years and he has been director of the Asian American Cultural Center since it opened two years ago. I think that this is important because it means that he could give me up to date and relevant information about the Asian American Cultural Center and how it had grown and changed over the years that it has been open. David told me that the Asian American Cultural Center has developed a lot over the last two years, and he feels that the Center provides a safe and relaxing environment for students to come and socialize and learn.

I asked David what he thought was the main role of the Asian American Cultural Center. He told me that it was mainly a community center, somewhere where students can 'share and

learn' in a friendly environment that was not a classroom. He told me that it was important for students to gain knowledge about Asian American culture and experience and incorporate this into the 'cultural mosaic' of the University of Illinois. I also asked David if he felt that the Asian American Cultural Center was achieving this role and he said yes, he hoped so! There has been positive feedback on the Asian American Cultural Center and so it is likely that the center is providing its members with a place that they can share, learn and meet new people.

The next question that I asked was what sorts of activities does the Asian American Cultural Center provide, and whether or not they were academic or social. He told me that the Asian American Cultural Center tries to provide a wide range of activities, which are both social and academic. However, the main purpose of the Center is to provide a mainly educational atmosphere, which educates students about Asian and Asian American culture. It is co-curricular, meaning that it complements, but it is not part of the regular curriculum. It assists learning outside of the classroom.

I also asked David whether or not the Asian American Cultural Center was aimed at being more of a social meeting place or a place to provide academic programs for students. He again said that it was more of an educational center, where people can share and learn about each others different backgrounds and identities, as well as looking at different cultures among the Asian community.

I asked David what types of students visit the cultural center and attend the programs, was it mostly Asian or mixed? He told me that there is a mixed group of people who attend, Asian Americans, Asians, International students, graduates and undergraduates. The most common type of person to be found at the center however is the Asian American Undergraduate student. I also asked David whether or not he thought it was important to have cultural centers on campus and he told me 'of course!' He said it was a 'vehicle to provide a voice for important issues, a venue for people to meet and learn and a place where the university can communicate to the students about issues and programs relevant to Asian Americans.'

I also wanted to discuss one issue with David, which was from an article I had read in the Daily Illini. The article suggested that Asian students tend to segregate themselves on campus and I wondered what his opinion was in regard to this question. He said that he did not exactly agree with it and that people choose to associate with those who they have most in common with and

feel comfortable. He felt that overall, the Asian student population was very integrated into University life.

Overall, I felt that this was a good interview, and David provided me with all the information I needed. I think I will not conduct a survey in order to find out the opinions of the students on campus, and their views on the Asian American Cultural House and student life on campus.

**Analysis: Analysis 11/31/07**

From the research that I have done so far, I think that the investigation into the role and purpose of the Asian American Cultural Center is going well, and there are a number of things that have been established. Firstly, the Asian American Cultural Center has a specific goal and the activities and programs provided all intend to achieve this goal. It aims to promote pan-Asian American identity and unity through educational, social, and cultural programs as well as providing a sense of community and improving inter-group relationships among students at the University of Illinois.

I feel that from my observations and interview, it is clear that the Asian American Cultural Center is a place to establish a community for students to talk, listen and learn about Asian Culture. It is a friendly environment and in which students can gain knowledge about Asian American culture and incorporate this into the 'cultural mosaic' of the University of Illinois. The articles that I have chosen seem to suggest and prove what I have found in my research, which is the idea that in order to progress and develop knowledge about a culture, it is important to have a community atmosphere where everyone can learn and share. I would argue that the Asian American Cultural Center provides this important atmosphere.

The first article that I can link with my findings is "General Introduction" from *The Subculture Reader* by Sarah Thornton. In this article, Thornton talks about the definition of a 'subculture' and its relation to the wider community. She argues that 'subcultures' are "a group of people that have something in common with each other (i.e. they share a

problem, an interest, a practice) which distinguishes them in a significant way from the members of other social groups.”<sup>1[1]</sup> She argues that a community is different from a subculture yet both of these represent groups of people who have things in common. I agree with this concept and I feel that my research seems to prove that a group of people will come together if they have similar beliefs and ideas, and the Asian American Cultural Center provides an atmosphere for these people to meet and discuss different aspects of the culture they share. It is a home for the ‘subculture’ to meet and share their ideas and gain a sense of community amongst themselves. The article by Min Zhou, “Coming of Age at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century: A Demographic Profile of Asian American Youth,” provides an understanding of the diversity of the Asian population in the United States. “Asians are enormously diverse in national origins and socioeconomic backgrounds.”<sup>2[2]</sup> The article explains how the culture and society in which today’s (2004) American Youth grow up are more “open than ever before and certainly more tolerant of cultural diversity than a century ago.”<sup>3[3]</sup> The article then mentions how in the area of education, opportunities have become increasingly available for Asian Americans. This seems to reflect what I have found in my research, the very fact that the University of Illinois has the largest number of

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<sup>1[1]</sup> Cheng, Andrea.  
“Asian American Center  
Removes Stereotypes.” in  
*Daily Illini* (9/13/07)

Asian American students on campus, representing 11% of the total student population shows this. The cultural diversity and willingness to learn about other cultures reflects what Zhou argues in the article.

The next article that I feel relates to my research is by Stacey Lee, chapters 1 and 2 of *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype*. In these chapters, Lee discusses the different self-defined Asian American identity groups at an American High School, and how each one of these different groups fits in with the model stereotype. She also points out the ways in which the different ethnic groups come together in response to academic and social life. She argues, "Pan-ethnic groups consist of individual ethnic groups that have united in order to promote collective interests despite distinct cultural, tribal, or national histories."<sup>4</sup>[4] The Asian American Cultural Center aims to promote pan-ethnic identity and organize itself around those who share "common concerns and experiences."<sup>5</sup>[5]

The article also talks a lot about the way in which the different Asian identified groups conform to the 'model minority' stereotype. Whether or not the Asian students on campus do conform or rebel towards the stereotype, it is clear that the Asian American Cultural Center aims to provide an educational environment, so that students can learn and extend their knowledge. This seems to suggest and agree with the article that education is an important factor to the Asian community.

However, I feel that my research does in a way challenge the idea that most Asian students will segregate themselves from the rest of the wider community at school or university, due to their academic success (or failure). From my interview, I came to understand that many Asians are heavily involved within the student life on campus, and there is a wide mix of students who visit the Asian American Cultural Center on a regular basis. In Nancy Lesko's article "Denaturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations," she describes the different characterizations of teenagers or youth. She argues that they seem to be "peer orientated or prone to cliques and gangs."<sup>6</sup>[6] This seems to affect the economic, social and cultural lives of youth. However, from my research I think that although different youth groups maybe more comfortable associating with those that they have most in common with, it does not suggest that these are the only people that they hang out with. The students at university are either at the end of the adolescence stage or young adults and I think that they want to learn and absorb information about different ethnic cultures and the Asian American Cultural House provides programs and activities so that students can



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7[1] Thornton, S. "General Introduction" in *The Subculture Reader*, eds. Ken Gelder and Sarah Thornton. (London: Routledge, 1997). P1

8[2] Zhou, M. "Coming of Age at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century: A Demographic Profile of Asian American Youth," in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*. (New York: Routledge, 2004). P33

9[3] Ibid., P48

10[4] Lee, S. *Unravelling the "Model Minority" Stereotype*. (New York: Teachers College, 1996). P16

11[5] Ibid., P16

12[6] Lesko, N. "Denaturalizing Adolescence: The Politics of Contemporary Representations," in *Youth and Society*, vol.28. P157

### **Research Research Proposal**

**Proposal:** For this research project, I have been investigating the role of the Asian American Cultural Center. My research was focused on finding out the main purpose of the Cultural Center, as well as looking at the types of activities and programs provided to the students. I was interested in finding out whether the Asian American Cultural Center was more of a social place, or if it was more a place to learn and teach students about the Asian ethnic identity. I intended to look at how many students use the cultural center, and for what reasons and find out their views on what they think the purpose of the cultural center was.

I first became aware of the Asian American Cultural Center after reading an article in the Daily Illini. It said that "the mission of the center is to provide information in educating the student population about Asian American issues through programs and cultural events."<sup>13</sup>[1] This statement probably seems to answer my research question. However, when I read further on in the article, it came to my attention that the Asian Population on campus faced some difficult issues, for example, racial stereotyping and violence against Asian Americans. After reading this I felt that my research needed to find out exactly what the purpose and aim of the Asian American Cultural Center was, and whether or not it was achieving this aim. It is important to educate students about Asian and Asian American culture, in order to stop discrimination happening on campus.

For this research proposal I think that it is important to extend the research I have been doing, and investigate whether or not the Asian American Cultural Center has succeeded in educating students about Asian American issues and tackling the problems of racism and stereotyping that some Asian students face on campus. In addition I feel that it would be necessary to provide programs and activities for all students on campus, so that they

become aware of other identities and ethnicities apart from their own. Do the students who have attended programs at the Asian American Cultural Center feel that they have learnt things about different cultures, and does this give them a greater awareness of the problems other people may face on campus? I think that my question would be, has the Asian American Cultural Center achieved its aims? Do the activities and programs provided make a difference to student life on campus? Does more need to be done to bring about awareness of these issues?

Although I have found that the main purpose of the Asian American Cultural Center is to educate students about Asian American culture and experience, it would be interesting to see what the students view the cultural center to be. In order to incorporate everyone into the 'cultural mosaic' of the university, it is essential that students understand and appreciate the values and beliefs of others. I think that from my interview with David Chih, I can really see that the activities provided by the center are focused around education through a friendly and social environment.

My research plan would involve interviewing a wide range of students on campus, of different ages, backgrounds and ethnicities. I think questions asked should focus on asking what the student wants from the Asian American Cultural Center, and if they have attended programs provided by the center, if they feel that they have provided them with what they want. I would also suggest a detailed survey, which could be given to students in all the undergraduate dorms so that a wide range of data could be gathered. The questions would ask the students whether or not they visit the cultural centers on campus, not just the Asian American Cultural Center, if they think it is a good idea, why it is important to have places like these on a university campus. The results of the survey and interviews would give the researcher an idea what the students really think, and at a university the opinions of the students are one of the most important.

In my preliminary findings I came across a number of articles that we studied in class that seem to relate to my overall research project. Sarah Thornton in her article, "The Subculture Reader," talks about the definition of a 'subculture' and its relation to the wider community. For the research proposal I think it is important to see if the Asian American Cultural center has achieved its aims of educating students about different Asian cultures and my research so far seems to prove that is the case. Thornton's article talks about a group's beliefs and the relation to the wider community which is one of the aims of the cultural center; to provide education to the wider community about the Asian identity. The Asian American

Cultural Center provides an atmosphere for people to meet and discuss different aspects of the culture they share and does this help to educate students and gain a sense of community amongst themselves?

Another article by Min Zhou suggests that the culture and society in which today's (2004) American Youth grow up are more "open than ever before and certainly more tolerant of cultural diversity than a century ago."<sup>14</sup>[2] The article then mentions how in the area of education, opportunities have become increasingly available for Asian Americans. This seems to reflect what I have found in my research, the very fact that the University of Illinois has the largest number of Asian American students on campus, representing 11% of the total student population shows this. Therefore in the wider research project it is critical to find out if there is enough awareness of cultural diversity on campus, and if not, what is being done to promote the understanding of different identities?

Previous EUI projects have explored the roles of other cultural centers on campus. For example, one investigation aimed to find out what the Latino/a population felt about the role and purpose of La Casa Cultural Latina. This project, entitled, 'What does La Casa Cultural Latina mean to its active student population,' identifies the problems Latino/a student's face when entering the university and how these problems differ from majority/other minority cultures. It would be interesting to use this project and find out problems that Asian students face when entering university and then compare the results. It would enable us to gain a greater understanding of the different types of students that come to the University of Illinois, and try to solve any problems that arise during the first few months at university.

This can be linked to another EUI project entitled, 'Is there an Invisible Boundary between the Races at UIUC?' This student found that the University of Illinois is not as diverse as it makes out. Most ethnic groups do segregate themselves on campus and this is because these are the people they feel most comfortable with. Perhaps in further research, the problems of segregation could be investigated, and maybe the cultural centers could be used to try and bridge the gap between the different ethnic groups on campus. The author of this project mentioned that she did not feel that the cultural centers were used to their full advantage and this is another area that could be looked at in more detail. Why are they not

used more regularly by students? What do students really think about the cultural houses?

15[2] Zhou, M. "Coming of Age at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century: A Demographic Profile of Asian American Youth," in *Asian American Youth: Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity*. (New York: Routledge, 2004). P48

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### **EUI Links: Exploring EUI archives 9/12/07**

For this assignment I have chosen to analyze a project entitled "Cultural Mapping of Dorms." The Students based their project on social and cultural mapping of the dormitories, on and off campus accommodations. The project discusses the trends of distribution of students based on race, sex and socio-economic status within the dorms and what impact these trends have on accommodations within the dorms and in the greater university area.

The research was mainly based on two accommodations PAR/FAR and the 'Six Pack', which are both undergraduate residence halls on campus. The results of the investigation showed that the 'Six Pack,' typically known as the most popular residence halls, houses mostly white students, while PAR/FAR houses mostly minority students. The students who were investigating this project found that the root cause of this was that students are not assigned housing until they have secured adequate financial aid. Thus, students requiring financial aid are placed at a later date. In addition to this, students self-segregate themselves based on race and ethnicity.

The students used a number of different methods in order to complete this investigation. One of the methods used was to

conduct an interview with over 40 individuals of different gender, race and ethnicity in order to gain clear results. I think that this was a very good method to use because it provides the students with a wide range of results and makes it a fair investigation. They interviewed a certain amount of students from a certain race and kept the number of students from each equal so the information was not biased from any side.

The research questions were quite broad, requiring simple answers from the participant, which I believe is essential in an interview. They required the participant to reflect on whether or not they believe the dorms were segregated and I felt that this was an important issue, because it is the students who live there and observe what goes on. It is important to have opinions because they provide real evidence for the research project. The project was intriguing to me because I live in an undergraduate residence hall but I have not noticed any specific ethnic divide. I will look more closely from now on!

### **EUI Links 11/6/07**

For this part of the research project I have found a number of articles in the IDEALS archives that seem to relate to my investigation. The first article is titled 'What does La Casa Cultural Latina mean to its active student population' [1] by Ryan Files, a student at the University of Illinois.

The main aims of this student's investigation were to find out what the Latino/a population felt about the role and purpose of La Casa Cultural Latina. He also looked at the problems Latino/a students face when entering the university and how these problems differ from majority/other minority cultures. He also investigated how the programs at La Casa differ from those at the AACP and AACC. The student conducted eight interviews, did participant observation, and mapped La Casa spaces. His results indicated that a lot of the students perceived the role of La Casa differently, but the different functions appeared to be complementary to each other .

The student's findings seem to agree with and extend the results of the investigation I am carrying out. First of all he found that La Casa Cultural Latino has a comfortable and welcoming atmosphere for students to relax and socialize with fellow students, which is the same sort of atmosphere I felt when I walked into the Asian American Cultural Center. An interesting point is that this student also found that the main purpose of La

Casa Cultural Latina was to educate its members. In an interview, he found that La Casa felt it was important to promote education, academic achievement and political dialogue. He mentions that the students who use La Casa find it a good way to make friends who have similar ethnic backgrounds and see it as a 'cultural sanctuary' which is specifically catered to their needs. The programs provided are educational, social and cultural, which is similar to the programs provided at the Asian American Cultural Center.

Overall, I feel that this research project has found similar results to my investigation. One thing that the author mentions is the fact that there is not much awareness about La Casa Cultural Latina, there seems to be an advertising problem. This is something which I had not thought about in my investigation so it would be interesting to see if the Asian American Cultural Center had encountered the same problems.

The next research project I looked at was called 'Is there an Invisible Boundary between the Races at UIUC?' [2] by Ashanti Barber. Even though this project does not directly link to my research, it is interesting because it looks at the idea of different perceptions of race in creating social spaces and the different interactions between racial groups.

In her research project, the student argues that even though there is an office of Minority Student Affairs and Cultural Affairs and many Cultural Houses on campus, she does not feel that the University of Illinois is as racially diverse as it makes out. From her observations around the University, she notes that nearly every group seems to segregate themselves on campus, and nearly all of her interviewees struggled and still struggle with notions of identity in the wider community. During her interviews she asked why the students choose to hang out with people of the same ethnicity as themselves and the answer was based on the idea that these people are the only ones that they feel comfortable to be with.

Throughout the investigation the student mentions that she found it very difficult to associate herself with the Asian American groups on campus and she linked this with the idea of the Model Minority Myth; how these students segregate themselves in order to escape the pressures from other ethnic groups about working hard and doing well at university.

Overall, she felt that the Cultural Centers on campus were not

used to their full advantage, they are there for people to be able to discuss issues of race, power and privilege on campus, but these topics are not dealt with sufficiently. This seems to challenge my findings, however, this student is looking at this from a racial viewpoint and I had not really investigated this angle. It would be something to consider in a wider research project.

[1] Files, Ryan. <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/1817> (11/6/07)

[2] Barber , Ashanti . <http://hdl.handle.net/2142/1815> (11/8/07)

**Reflect: Reflect**

I have really enjoyed researching this EUI project. I have never done anything like this before, and as a student from England, it has been very interesting to study and gather information about student life in another country. I felt that the assignments were well explained and spread out well over the semester and I think that clear guidelines were given as to how to carry out the research.

I enjoyed the research project itself because it gets you out of the typical classroom environment, and allows you to work in your own time. I find working online quite easy, as everything is explained and easy to use. I found conducting an interview a little scary, but once I got into it, it was fine and went pretty well! I found it very interesting to look and see past EUI projects that other students had done, and see what types of things they were researching, and what the results were. I did not have any problems with IRB compliance and I would happily archive my work for others to use in the future.

**Recommendations:** Overall, I felt that the Asian American Cultural Center was doing a good job and providing an atmosphere on campus where students can learn and meet new people. However, I think that the students could be made more aware of the Asian American Cultural Center itself, for example, where it is and what aims it has for students on campus. In addition, more publicity could help to promote the programs and activities the center has to offer, as well as it being simply a place to go and meet new people. I noticed in my research and from comments made by fellow students that some did not know much about the center, or that it even existed! I attended one of the programs that the Asian

American Cultural Center put on, and it was mainly Asian students that attended. It is important that a wide range of students come to these programs to learn about Asian Culture but i do not feel that there is enough publicity about it.