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## Review of Fighting Invisibility: Asian Americans in the Midwest. Rutgers University Press

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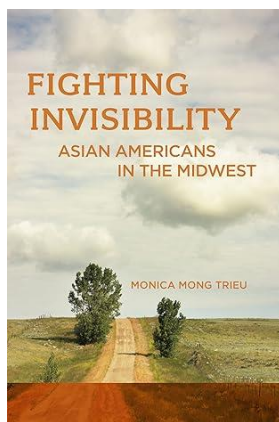
## Journal of Southeast Asian American Education and Advancement

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**Book Review:** Trieu, M. M. (2023). *Fighting Invisibility: Asian Americans in the Midwest*. 180 pp. Rutgers University Press. ISBN: 978-1978834286

Reviewed by  
**Xiang Zhou**  
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Despite the imperative to shed light on the experiences of Asian Americans residing in the Midwest, previous research has predominantly centered around Asians residing on the coasts. This phenomenon, as elucidated by Erika Lee in her concept of “doubly invisible” Midwest Asian Americans, highlights their dual marginalization—they are not only conspicuously absent from mainstream literature but also from the broader discourse on Asian American experiences, which primarily revolves around those on the East and West coasts. However, it is within the heartland of America that we witness one of the most profound transformations in Asian America over the past few decades. Monica Trieu’s book, *Fighting Invisibility*, addresses this critical gap by drawing upon a comprehensive dataset, including 52 in-depth interviews with 1.5 to 2nd generation Asian

Americans residing in the Midwest, census data, and cultural productions from Asian Americans residing in ten Midwestern states. This interdisciplinary research rigorously dissects the demographic landscape of Asian America in the Midwest, unveiling three prominent themes: spatially defined isolation, pervasive invisibility, and racialized visibility.

Trieu's study commences by drawing upon the 2019 U.S. census data to present a comprehensive and descriptive demographic overview of Asian America in the Midwest (Chapter 1). This examination reveals that the leading Asian ethnic groups in the region include Indian, Chinese, Filipinx, Korean, Vietnamese, Hmong, Japanese, Pakistani, and Burmese communities. Notably, the Midwest boasts a particularly robust Southeast Asian presence, with Hmong and Burmese populations standing out due to their higher representation compared to other regions of the country. Furthermore, Trieu delves into the intricate tapestry of these communities’ migration histories, which includes their experiences with political refugee resettlement, education, employment, and family.

In Chapters 2 and 3, Trieu delves deeply into the core thesis of her book, addressing the critical question of how spatial context, encompassing both physical and symbolic dimensions, influences co-ethnic interactions, identity development, and racialization experiences among Midwest Asian Americans. Trieu astutely examines the concept of racial visibility, wherein individuals are consistently perceived as racialized others in their day-to-day lives, as well as the contrasting notion of invisibility, where these individuals struggle to gain recognition at regional



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and national levels. This intricate interplay between visibility and invisibility creates what I would refer to as a “visibility paradox.” This paradox underscores how Midwest Asian Americans grapple with the subtle yet insidious effects of internalized racism during their formative years, often leading them to distance themselves from their own cultural heritage and “Asianness.” Indeed, Trieu's research resonates with recent findings, such as the Pew Research study, which reveals that a significant proportion of Asian Americans—1 in 5, to be precise—acknowledge concealing aspects of their heritage, including cultural customs, food, clothing, and religious practices, from non-Asians. This concealment rate is even more pronounced among 2nd generation Asian Americans, with as many as 38% reporting a tendency to hide elements of their cultural identity.

However, Trieu did not portray Midwest Asian Americans as passive recipients of social isolation. Instead, she meticulously delineated how they “fight invisibility” by developing critical consciousness and taking proactive measures within their isolated environment (Chapter 4). These actions included deepening their understanding of ethnic and racial history, active participation in ethnic organizations, and the cultivation of co-ethnic social bonds. Trieu revisited the profound significance of the murder of Vincent Chin to her research participants, alongside exploring cultural productions by Midwest Asian Americans, such as those created by figures like Christine Choy, Renee Tajima-Peña, and Bao Phi. One of her interview participants from Minnesota, Kanya, aptly expressed the impact of this historical event on their lives: “The whole Vincent Chin thing was also a turning point in my life because it happened in Michigan. It's like, oh, it's not in California, not on the East Coast... that's where I kind of felt like our voice in the Midwest. It is really important,” underscoring the profound significance of regional experiences and the role they play in shaping the collective identity of Midwest Asian Americans.

Trieu's book admirably addresses the longstanding need for a more comprehensive and nuanced understanding of Midwest Asian American experiences. I found her exploration of geographically based identity formation processes particularly intriguing. As a psychologist (trained in the Midwest state of Minnesota), I have been well exposed to psychological theories on identity, including Erik Erikson's psychosocial identity theory, James Marcia's identity status adaptation, Henri Tajfel and John Turner's social identity theory, and Dan McAdams' narrative identity theory. However, these intrapsychic-oriented theories often prove insufficient when examining the macrolevel influences, such as geographic location, on the identity development process. This leads to important questions regarding the impact of the Midwest on Asian Americans' identity formation, especially considering the significant heterogeneity within the region. If geographic isolation plays a central role, how does the presence or absence of a co-ethnic community, as discussed in Chapter 2 (isolated ethnics vs. everyday ethnics), or the distinction between urban and rural environments differentiate the experiences of Midwest Asian Americans? For example, how does secondary migration among Hmong and Burmese communities, as they relocate from other regions in the U.S. to the Midwest to build a strong ethnic tie, impact their experiences? Furthermore, how do the cultural values and beliefs prevalent in the Midwest, such as self-reliance and stoicism, intersect with and influence the development of Asian American identities?

Taking this line of inquiry a step further, I contemplate the significance of place identity or identification as a Midwesterner among the participants in Trieu's study. The social constructivist theory of place identity can be understood as the process by which individuals integrate places into their broader self-concept (Proshansky et al., 1983). Within Trieu's book, several participants articulated their sense of differentiation when relocating to the West Coast. For instance, one participant recounted her return to the Midwest from California, explaining, “Midwest is harder,

but I know how to do it. I know the language, and I've done it. And it's harder, but I like being able to connect to lots of different people because we have empathy for each other.” Simultaneously, it is essential to examine how their salient place identity and racial identity co-exist, given the pervasive and institutionalized racism (see a recent example in 2022 with Purdue Northwest Chancellor who mocked Asian languages upon commencement) can at times be “fervently defended as part of Midwestern history and culture.” I contend that this process underscores the challenges of identity formation: the moment when seemingly contradictory identities intersect, necessitating the harmonization of these identities for their coexistence, or the suppression of one in favor of the other. This process is facilitated through the development of critical consciousness, allowing individuals to navigate the complex interplay of multiple, sometimes conflicting, aspects of their identity.

After completing the book, I find myself returning to the notion of a pan-ethnic Asian American experience in the Midwest. While there has been a growing body of Asian American studies situated in the Midwest, including focused studies on Korean adoptee experiences and Hmong ethnic studies, the idea of a pan-ethnic theme in the Midwest has been seldom explored. In Trieu’s book, she utilizes the self-ascribed identity labels provided by the participants, such as “Asian American, Chinese-Vietnamese” or “Cambodian American,” and “Half-Korean, hapa.” It becomes apparent from the narratives that many participants did not actively embrace a pan-ethnic 'Asian American' label. This leads me to wonder about the extent to which the perceived isolation from co-ethnics (or lack thereof) might influence the development of a pan-ethnic Asian American identity. Nonetheless, there appears to be a sense of shared fate among Midwestern Asian Americans, leading to intraracial solidarity and activism. The solidarity and activism, so well documented in Trieu’s book, open up a discourse of critical consciousness raising targeted towards Asian Americans, which is severely lacking in the current educational system, even as it transforms Midwestern Asian Americans’ invisibility and counters internalized racism. Trieu’s book provides a strong rationale for centering the experiences and agency of Midwestern Asian Americans and pushes us to reimagine a thriving Midwestern Asian America.

### About the Author



**Dr. Xiang Zhou** is an Assistant Professor of Counseling Psychology from the Department of Educational Studies in the College of Education at Purdue University. His work seeks to understand etic and emic factors underlying health disparities and minority youth development, and in turn, develop culturally adapted interventions, particularly among Asian and Asian diasporic communities. He has conducted community-based participatory research with Hmong, Somali, and Burmese communities.

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