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Kawika David
Purdue University

Margaret Palanca
Purdue University

James S. Zhou
Purdue University

See next page for additional authors

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Service-Learning in the Context of Asian American Studies and the AAARCC at Purdue University: Asian/American Business Owners in Greater Lafayette and Indiana

Authors

Kawika David, Margaret Palanca, James S. Zhou, Manabu Taketani, and Pamela K. Sari



SERVICE-LEARNING IN THE CONTEXT OF ASIAN AMERICAN STUDIES AND THE AAARCC AT PURDUE UNIVERSITY

Asian/American Business Owners in Greater Lafayette and Indiana

Kawika David, Margaret Palanca, James S. Zhou, Manabu Taketani, and Pamela K. Sari

STUDENT AUTHOR BIO SKETCHES

Kawika David is an undergraduate student studying neurobiology and physiology with a double minor in psychology and Asian American studies at Purdue University. After graduating, he hopes to pursue neuroscience research in his home in Hawaii. During his time at Purdue, Kawika was involved in multiple student organizations, serving on boards and starting his own student organization, Hawaiian Cultural Club, as a way to increase student engagement and help others from Hawaii find their footing at Purdue.

Margaret Palanca is an undergraduate student at Purdue pursuing a major in speech, language, and hearing sciences. She seeks to enhance her knowledge of diverse communities and backgrounds while looking toward a career interacting with diverse populations. At Purdue, she has been involved with cultural student organizations in organizing events for the Asian American community.

James Zhou is a psychology student at Purdue. He is second-generation Chinese American and has lived in the Midwest for most of his life. James plans to become a therapist and use his background in Asian American studies to better serve a community whose mental health needs are often neglected.

ABSTRACT

The journey of Asian Americans in the United States is vital to understanding the perspective that Asian immigrants take on the way to becoming Asian Americans. Within the past century, Asians in America have played an essential role in communities across the country. In order to understand the efforts it takes for some of these people, our “Internship in Asian American Studies” (ASAM 490) class explored their experiences and lives

by highlighting Asian American and Asian business owners in Greater Lafayette, other areas in Indiana. With a lack of vocalization about this topic, it is crucial to establish this voice for the Asian and Asian American communities. In our service-learning project, we created a narrative over images captured to visualize the history of the Asian Americans we interviewed. Through this narrative, we hope to enable a more established engagement within our campus archives both institutionally and academically in order to showcase the Asian American

community and the successes and triumphs that those in the Greater Lafayette area have overcome.

INTRODUCTION

The “Internship in Asian American Studies” (ASAM 490) course is offered by the Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center (AAARCC) at Purdue University, first in the spring of 2022 and then this semester in the spring of 2023. Cotaught by Pamela K. Sari and Manabu Taketani, the course aims to apply knowledge and expertise on Asian and Asian American history and lived experiences by working with a campus cultural center. This course is also designed as a critical service-learning course. It expands upon students’ interests in Asian America by presenting the opportunity to learn by collecting oral history interviews of the Asian/American businesses surrounding Purdue University.

Each oral history interview was recorded with consent from interviewees and then transcribed. To help us gain more knowledge and skills, an archivist from Archives and Special Collections at Purdue visited our class and led discussions about the importance of oral history and how to prepare and conduct interviews. Our interviews with community partners aimed to create a safe space where each business owner would feel comfortable in sharing not only the stories of establishing their businesses but also their journeys as Asian/Americans establishing themselves in the Midwest.

The interviews were then turned into a cocreation of a business story that took into account community partners and ASAM 490 students’ identity journey. The narratives of our oral history project are tied to existing literature outlining the Asian American experience in the Midwest, and also connected to the personal history and experience of each Asian American undergraduate intern for the spring semester 2023. Preserving these stories serves to increase representation of both our community partners and Asian/American communities at Purdue. These stories can inspire further diverse narratives about lived experiences and contributions of the Asian American and Asian communities at Purdue University.

BACKGROUND WITH LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of archiving the story of Asian/Americans at Purdue can be situated in the larger context of Asians as currently the fastest-growing minority in the United States and the importance of geographically specific narratives of Asian American communities in the Midwest. In connecting archival efforts with student

learning, this class project is situated within Asian American and the Asian American and Asian Resource and Cultural Center (AAARCC)’s efforts in weaving Asian Pacific American stories into campus life. As both as an oral history and a critical service-learning assignment, the project tells Asian/American-owned businesses’ stories as part of the local and regional history of Greater Lafayette and Indiana while situating itself against the backdrop of rising anti-Asian racism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath.

With more than 22 million people, Asians are currently the fastest-growing minority in the United States (Budiman & Ruiz, 2021). The diversity of this community is also reflected at Purdue University, which has more than 10,000 students identifying as Asian or Asian American, a quarter of its current student population. While this number may render this community hypervisible (Trieu, 2023), Asian and Asian American students face challenges such as struggles with identity, racism, and racial microaggressions (Yeo et al., 2019).

Specifically in the context of the Midwest, scholars have documented Asian/Americans struggling with the sense of invisibility (Lee, 2009). Monica Trieu notes that the lived experiences of being farther from other Asian/American communities (“isolated ethnics”) impacts these individuals’ racial and ethnic identity formation (Trieu, 2023; Trieu, 2018). It is further noted that Asian/Americans who live in the Midwest may be struggling with internalized racial oppressions (Trieu, 2023; Trieu & Lee, 2018). To address these issues, processes such as “education in ethnic and racial history, engagement with ethnic organizations, and developing co-ethnic relationships” may be helpful (Trieu & Lee, 2018). In a university setting, including at Purdue University, these and other important processes take place in academic and cocurricular settings, including university cultural centers.

Our internship class discusses how university cultural centers, in our case the AAARCC, are places on campus where education about and engagement with diverse stories of historically underrepresented communities are cultivated through resource facility, programming, and initiatives. The history of cultural centers in higher education settings in the United States is closely tied to student activism, and scholars have demonstrated how university cultural centers serve as a place of resistance against invisibility and racism directed at communities of color (Patton, 2010; Yee, 2020). Cultural centers represent an institutional commitment to acknowledge history, lived experiences, and diverse representations of these historically underrepresented communities.

Through programming, initiatives, and collaborations with campus units, community organizations, alumni, and student organizations, cultural centers provide a sense of belonging, points of connection with one's and others' identity journey, all while striving for academic and professional excellence.

In documenting the impacts of cultural centers, through both this class project and the daily work of the AAARC, Asian-interest businesses around campus provide services that may not only potentially increase students' feeling of belonging in the Greater Lafayette community but also provide mutual connections between student organizations and service providers. Critical service-learning pedagogy (Mitchell, 2007; Mitchell, 2008; Mitchell, 2015) provides tools to center social justice orientation into service-learning. Service-learning pedagogy can further guide partnerships between university cultural centers and community partners by encouraging a broader look into the systemic (and not just individual) nature of social problems or phenomena. An example of such inquiry that is used in this project is the need for more archives and stories about historically underrepresented and undersupported communities, including Asian/American local businesses, that take into account not only the business history but also the identity journey of these entrepreneurs.

METHODOLOGY

Starting in the spring of 2022, the first cohort of the ASAM 490 course conducted a series of interviews with six local business owners in the Greater Lafayette area or nearby. These businesses are the Latea Bubble Tea and Lounge, the Banh Mi Eatery, Mayasari Tempeh, Sunny Period (previously Menstrual Mates), the Coldstone Creamery, and Wonderland Education. These businesses were identified by AAARCC staff and student staff to reflect the diversity of history and business foci as well as different contributions made to the local community by their Asian/American owners.

Our class would like to thank the spring 2022 cohort of the ASAM 490 course, pictured in Figure 1, for starting the work and conducting some of the interviews with community partners.

In the spring of 2023, the second cohort of the ASAM 490 course conducted a series of more in-depth interviews with two local business owners: Emma Jiang, owner of the 1NY Bakery & Café, and Tina Minjares, owner of the Banh Mi Eatery and VS Nails (Figures 2 and 3). Our class invited an archivist from Purdue



Figure 1. Spring 2022 ASAM 490 Class Was the AAARCC's First Internship in Asian American Studies Class and Also the AAARCC's First Service Class, with Natalie Bonilla, Christopher Godinich, Nathan Gronowski, Elise Hauptert, Mili Jha, Gaurav Khot, Lucy Nguyen, and Carly Smith.



Figure 2. Class Meeting and Interview with Emma Jiang, Owner of the 1NY Bakery & Cafe in West Lafayette. Our Class Also Had the Opportunity to Visit Emma at Her Bakery.



Figure 3. Visiting and Speaking with Tina Minjares at the Banh Mi Eatery in Lafayette. Tina Also Had the Opportunity to Speak with us Further during Our Class Time at the AAARCC in West Lafayette.

Archives and Special Collections to teach and inform us of oral history procedures, though not all interviews were conducted as official oral histories. We also coordinated visit schedules for these two community partners and for our class; sometimes the owners would visit the AAARCC, while other times our class would visit the owners at their businesses. These interviews were transcribed for archival purposes and to be used for further projects.

After transcription, our class worked collaboratively to create a business story for these two entrepreneurs as our collective project. After the drafts were completed, the AAARCC worked with a professional editor to review the story, and our class made edits based on the review. In addition to this collective effort, each student chose one of the spring 2022 community partners to write a business narrative on as individual projects. These stories will be used as part of the AAARCC social media features and other possible publications.

RESULTS

Our spring 2023 collective business stories on Emma Jiang (owner of the 1NY Bakery & Cafe) and Tina Minjares (owner of the Banh Mi Eatery and VS Nails)

provide glimpses into how these entrepreneurs build communities in Greater Lafayette, navigating their identities in the middle of a place they now call home. Both narratives reflect stories of first-generation Asian migrant women whose business interests stem from relations with the closest people in their lives and whose vision pours out from doing something they enjoy and learning constantly as they go.

Both business stories connect with experiences of ASAM 490 students and instructors as part of the Asian/American communities at Purdue. Our class conversations with community partners provided a multiplicity of answers to the question of it means to be Asian/American. Although community partners do not often use terminology such as “model minority myths” and “perpetual foreigner myth” that Asian/American studies scholars try to address, we discussed what it means to adhere or break free from the molds of familial expectations within Asian communities. Tina Minjares, in discussing her nail salon, said that businesses should stem from the rarity of service (quantity or quality), combined with our identities and passion in offering such services. Emma Jiang spoke about her undergraduate time at Michigan State University when she was inspired by bubble tea shops that she frequented and said that although these stores sold similar beverages,

unique creativities and innovation were at the center of the trade. We also discussed the reality of ever-evolving intersectionality within the communities that drives creativity on the side of our community partners, with Emma responding to requests for an Asian vegan menu, for example, and Tina giving us the news that VS Nails would be evolving into Polished Nail Bar, with new techniques offered at this new store at a new location.

Community Impact

Our ability to work with, talk to, and learn about these community leaders has allowed us to further understand those who helped build the community of which they are a part. Jack Hsiao, owner of the Latea Bubble Tea and Lounge and one of the community partners for Spring 2022 service learning project, stated that building a community here in Greater Lafayette involves the important step of understanding each of our individual and community histories. He wants to help others figure out who they are and use this understanding to connect with each other: “I [was] a foreigner. But now I live in [Indiana]. I work in [Indiana], but I’ll never forget where I came from. . . . I figure out who I am, where I came from, what I represent. But at the same time, I want to play in the culture, try to understand each other, because I think through that, it will resolve a lot of conflicts and bring positivity to people.”

At the time of this interview, COVID-19 was still a very prevalent issue in the community. Around this time, discussions on anti-Asian hate continued to happen, and the impact on the Asian and Asian American community had many concerned about more than just their health. Hsiao wanted his boba shop to be a safe place and feel like a home for the community to come together and bond over a simple beverage. Beyond bridging the gaps in the community that were caused by COVID-19 at the time, Hsiao wanted members of the community to experience an environment that he was able to have he was an exchange student in high school: a place for gathering with friends to enjoy life while feeling that extra bit of nostalgia from the products he provides.

All these years, Jack Hsiao has been actively helping Asian-interest student organizations at Purdue University. As a Purdue alumnus who was active in the Asian Student Union Board leadership as an undergraduate student, he understands different needs in regard to providing a welcoming presence at events, share diverse Asian and Asian American stories, and even organize fundraising activities. Hsiao welcomes different partnerships with student organizations to introduce the Latea

Bubble Tea and Lounge while also giving back to the Purdue community.

Another example of the impact that this project has produced came in the form of a newer addition to the community in Lafayette. Emma Jiang, owner of the 1NY Bakery & Cafe, has only recently become involved with the Asian/American community here, having moved here and started her business in 2020. Emma expressed that the intention behind her business was to provide for the community. She offers a variety of dishes that reflect her background as a Chinese immigrant. Emma refers to her store as a “one-stop shop” in which you can get a meal, a drink, and a dessert all in one place. She understands that convenience is important for the community, as it can be a time constraint to go out of one’s way to find each item individually. On top of this, the 1NY Bakery & Cafe offers custom-baked goods and even adds items to the menu at the request of customers if the demand is sufficient.

After meeting with Emma and getting to know her history and how she got to where she is now, beyond just providing a service, she commented about her experience partnering with the students on their class project. “The partnership has benefited me and will benefit me in multiple fields including raising the popularity of my own business among students and faculties, providing insightful guidelines for future investments, [and] getting to know the potential market better as a business owner.”

Interacting with these business owners has had a profound impact on not only us as students but also on the businesses themselves. Each business owner has shared a desire for a deeper connection to the surrounding community, including a connection with student communities. As a result, we have seen that some businesses have become more active on social media, engaging with their followers and showcasing their business. Social media platforms allow students and members of the community to get an inside look at the business and a deeper understanding of the business history. Prior to Jack Hsiao’s interview, the Latea Bubble Tea and Lounge had sparse posts on social media, only posting for special events or important announcements. Having been inspired by the opportunity to share his story through the partnership with the class, after the interview, Hsiao confirmed his desire to use social media to share about the personal history of the products at Latea and their connection to his Asian identities. Currently, the homemade boba that was passed down from Hsiao’s grandmother often became a central theme in Latea’s social media outreach. This has resulted in a significant

increase in engagement online that has benefited his stores in both West Lafayette and Culver City, California.

STUDENT IMPACT

Kawika: This project helped me learn about the steps needed to organize events and meetings with community leaders. I learned about what it takes to run the events put on by the AAARCC and how to manage the logistics and time months prior to the event. Being able to conduct interviews is another experience in which I learned a lot. Building my understanding of the community members while being able to properly represent them through our collective work helped me further appreciate the need for archiving and visualizing Asian American history.

Documenting the success stories of the business owners in the community is a task that takes many hands to do well. Recognizing the business owners in the Lafayette area, both those who have been community members for decades such as Tina and those who are newer such as Emma, helped me see what it takes to be successful and give back to the community you are a part of. It is much more fulfilling to see the faces of the people you work with and to see their stories from their perspective. And being recognized by more than just our peers and our instructors for the work we've done through our digital story project helped me see that others can also see the importance of our work done here.

Margaret: Prior to this internship I had never interacted with Asian American culture in this way, and it was extremely rewarding to have a hand in preserving that history at Purdue. This was my first time collaborating on writing academic articles and creating other forms of media. I gained valuable experience collaborating on this essay and the project for the Digital Summit, and it was extremely rewarding (and surprising) to earn first place for our piece of media at the summit. This was achieved through the support of my peers and the guidance of Dr. Pamela Sari and Manabu Taketani. There was a lot of creative freedom with each project, which was very new to me as a student. It gave me the opportunity to fully explore each topic and present it in a way that was very personal to my experiences.

This experience has helped me grow professionally in many ways. Learning how to conduct interviews was one of the important aspects. I learned how to create a safe space during interviews to allow the interviewees to feel comfortable and open to sharing their stories. Hearing each story meant a lot to me as an Asian American

woman; it was inspiring to learn about their journey to success and about how they established themselves in their field and in a new location. I was able to create deeper connections to each of the owners in an unexpected way, which aided me personally while writing their narratives. In creating these narratives, I felt an improvement in my writing as well. I learned how to use my voice in a way that was informative but also representative of my personality and personal experience. Having this tie to personal experience is what made this project the most rewarding. In taking Asian American studies courses my goal was to learn more about the history in and the efforts to feel closer ties to my culture, and this project achieved that goal in every aspect.

Overall, this was an amazing opportunity to learn from the business owners and to collaborate with my peers with the guidance of Dr. Pamela K. Sari and Manabu Taketani.

James: This project has helped remind me of the value of building and maintaining connections. So often relationships are transactional, with one or both parties hoping to get something out of it. While our interviews are done with certain end goals in mind, it is refreshing that the primary intention of our interactions with community members has been to get to know each other better as people. Yes, it serves important archival and narrative purposes, but the single most valuable product of this project has been the personal bonds formed. As the business owners become familiar with the AAARCC and the people there and vice versa, good things naturally happen.

This project also strengthened my ability to handle uncertainty. Unlike a qualitative project with strict protocols, our project had a very loose structure and allowed us a great deal of fluidity in how we conducted and used our research. This made it difficult at times to keep track of the big picture, and I had to become comfortable with adapting to new circumstances and directions.

Additionally, because we worked with real people, it was essential to let them define their stories. Though I may have had ideas going in about how I would share their narratives, I needed to remain flexible about not constraining myself for the sake of convenience. People's lives are multidimensional and messy, rarely following a predictable plot, and we needed to let our project reflect that complexity.

CONCLUSION

To build on and create a more robust archival record of the Asian American and Asian entrepreneurs of the

Greater Lafayette area, students in the ASAM 490 course interviewed members of the community and visited their business to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges they experienced and how they have worked through them. Utilizing photos and videos they took while visiting the businesses and employing a visual narrative approach, the students created a video showcasing the unique experiences of the business owners, sharing the histories of the challenges they faced and how they have worked to overcome them. This video was submitted to the digital story category of the annual Engagement & Service-Learning Summit (Purdue University, 2023) in the spring of 2023 and won first place in the category. Throughout the process of partnering with local businesses for this class, students learned about the significance and impact of elevating personal and communal stories. This project invites further exploration and sharing of Asian American and Asian entrepreneurs from the local community and inspires others to document experiences from within their communities.

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