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A Note on Asian American Studies at the University of Chicago 1991-1994

Sorting through some old archived paper files, I recently came across a number of leaflets and flyers relating to Asian American studies at the University of Chicago where I was Assistant Professor in the East Asian Languages and Civilizations Department from 1990 to 1994.

At the time, I was becoming increasingly interested in the Chinese Diaspora and in particular in the East Asian communities in the USA which had their own particular trajectory. While the city of Chicago itself had significant Asian communities, unlike other major universities, the University of Chicago had no department or teaching programme in Asian American studies. But then, even though the university was located in the heart of Chicago's South Side largely populated by African Americans, there was no African American studies programme either. Chicago prided itself on its cutting-edge intellectual prowess, and ethnic American studies, just like popular culture, seemed to be insufficiently "serious" and not theoretical enough.

Chicago had two particularities: its system of workshops which brought together professors and graduate students interested in a particular line of inquiry, and its cross-disciplinary Committees that encouraged and facilitated intellectual work across epistemological boundaries. I decided to set up an Asian American Workshop using the institutional umbrella of the Center for East Asian Studies. The Center was to run a major conference in 1991 entitled the "Challenges of an Asian Century", one of a series of events celebrating 100 years of the University of Chicago. It seemed like a good opportunity to get Asian American studies on the academic agenda at the University of Chicago. It seems that I must have persuaded William Parish, a sociologist specializing in China studies and Director of the Center, to put Asian America on the conference programme, since on the first day of the two-day conference (18-19 November 1991), the printed conference schedule has me chairing a two-and-a-half-hour session on "Representation of Asian American Experience". The session featured some of the major names in Asian American writing at that time. Shawn Wong and Lawson Fusao Inada who had been responsible, together with Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan, for the ground-breaking book *Aiiieeeee!*: An Anthology of Asian-American Writers (1974), were both on the panel. They had recently brought out a second anthology *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991). They were joined by the writer Jessica Hagedorn who had just published *Dog-eaters* and was working on a Penguin volume *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Asian American Fiction* (1993).

I quickly followed up the conference event with a session of the newly founded workshop focussing on "Asian American Writing" (25 November 1991)

for which the readings were: Michael Fischer, “Ethnicity and the Post-Modern Arts of Memory” and Deleuze and Guattari, “What is a Minor Literature”. On 12 February 1992, Shawn Wong returned Chicago to present a workshop on getting Asian American studies into university curricula. He was joined by Stephen Sumida of the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor. The event was entitled “Not Chop Suey and Kung Fu: Asian American Studies and the Curriculum”. I recall Shawn Wong provocatively defending chop suey as quintessentially Asian American. On 8 May the remarkable Japanese American novelist Cynthia Kadohata read from her novel *The Floating World*. There followed a discussion, a reception and, as I recall, a visit to a Chicago blues bar. Later in the year, I recall Elaine Kim, then Professor of Asian American Studies at the University of California, Berkeley came and addressed us about her current research. Subsequently, over the next year or so, regular sessions with students and invited guests took place.

Even at the time it seemed incongruous that a European should be the convenor of a workshop on Asian American studies, but the story of Asian America was deeply imbricated with the history of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries on the other side of the Pacific, and indeed with my own interest in the Chinese diaspora, particularly in Britain but also elsewhere around the globe.

In the Spring of 1993, the workshop programme was elevated to the status of Committee. In my archive is a flyer relating to a presentation I gave entitled “Fear of Drowning or The Construction and Erasure of the Celestial and the Chimaera”. The flyer notes: “This is the first in a new series of activities sponsored by the Committee on Asian-American Studies”.

However, in the summer of 1994, I left the University of Chicago for the University of Hong Kong. Unfortunately, it seems that the Committee and its workshops did not survive for very long after that.

St-Michel l’Observatoire
25th July 2019