

Tonight I will focus on how Americans learn about Asia in terms of what forms cultural interactions take and how we develop understanding and knowledge (directly and indirectly) about other cultures.

According to Ethnic Studies professor Elaine Kim, America almost always thinks about people of color as either “exotic” or “faithful servants.” As to the latter, she calls it “the Driving Miss Daisy” mentality. In looking at our international relationships, Kim notes that historically Americans wanted to *colonize* the Asian world –in the Philippines, Vietnam, Korea, and China –and that, in the present day, political leaders perpetuate a myth that America has the power to stabilize and rehabilitate the Asian world. She also notes that, in America, we fundamentally identify with white male leaders and ignore the laborers who built the roads, bridges, buildings, water, and sewer systems that we use daily.

Taking this into account, I looked for Asia, across America, in unexpected places. I steered away from the obvious –California, New York, and Hawaii— and looked instead more or less “randomly” in Alaska, Idaho, New Mexico, Louisiana, Illinois, Georgia, Maryland, and Maine.

My goal was to find examples that illustrate the texture of Asia as it affects our everyday lives. Instead of focusing on places where you would *expect* to find Asian influences, I aimed to find *different* layers of connections and interactions. As I look over the examples for tonight’s lecture, I see a variety of features as to how Asia became part of America – that involve economics, politics, culture, human curiosity, and fear of “the other.” In this presentation, I hope to intertwine several examples, both past and present, to illustrate the features of America’s experience with Asia.

Special thanks to Steve Philips for inviting me to give this lecture and to Bee Thebpanya who created the beautiful maps for the power point presentation. By using the maps, I am able to show you the route I am taking in this lecture. I start with Alaska, and then move to Idaho and New Mexico in the West, over to Louisiana in the South, up to the Midwest to Illinois, back down to the South to Georgia, then to the East to Maryland, and Northeast to Maine. By the time we arrive in Maine, I hope to have described many layers and levels to represent the diversity of America’s experiences with Asia. I will show the route when we move to the next state.

**On your handout –**

Thelma Garcia Buchholdt was a pioneer who helped people understand the oldest story in America – how people came to America in search of a better life and economic opportunities. Buchholdt gives us the story of how *Filipinos* came to Alaska.

Born in 1935 in a small fishing village in northern Philippines, Buchholdt came to the United States to attend college and teach school. Moving to Alaska in the 1960s, she developed a multi-faceted career -- as a community activist, lawyer, politician, historian, public speaker, and author. In the process, she became:

- The first Asian American elected to the Alaska State Legislature (1974)
- The first female Filipino American elected to a legislature in the United States (1974)
- The founder of the Boys and Girls Clubs of Alaska (1966)
- The first female to be elected President of the Filipino Community of Anchorage, Inc. (1973)

- The first Asian American elected to serve as President of the National Order of Women Legislators (1980)
- Founder of the Asian Alaskan Cultural Center (1980)

Buchholdt was elected to the Alaska House of Representatives for **four** consecutive terms, from 1974 through 1982. In addition, she researched and wrote a 200-page history of Filipinos in Alaska. "On June 27, 1791," she begins, "two Spanish corvettes, the Descubierta and the Atrevida arrived at Yakutat Bay, Alaska. To verify the existence of the Northwest Passage, the king of Spain had ordered the trip; and Captains Alejandro Malaspina and Jose Bustamante y Guerra carefully selected the members of the crew. Four were Filipinos."

Buccholdt also writes about how, one hundred years after this initial exploration, Filipino Alaskeros carved a niche by developing Alaska's fishing industry, including salmon. Between 1880 and 1937, canned salmon produced in Alaska had greater value than the total value of minerals mined in the territory during the same period. In fact, generations of Alaskeros worked in the salmon canneries, as did newly arrived Japanese Issei.

Throughout her career, Buchholdt promoted and recognized the **contributions** of Filipino laborers. As a result of her efforts, today, many Filipinos work in state or local government and throughout the public school system and, in some regions, voting ballots are in Tagalog.

**On your handout –**

Lalu Nathoy (aka Polly Bemis) enriches our understanding of what it was like to be a woman from China and **forced** to leave her homeland. Nathoy came to Idaho in the mid-1800s just before xenophobia (**fear of the other**) was in full bloom and the Chinese exclusion laws of 1882, forbidding Chinese laborers to enter the United States, were enacted. She was “sold” three times – first, a Chinese merchant bought her for a few bags of grain from her parents in the middle of a famine in southern China in the mid 1800s.

Next, as part of human trafficking, she was sold to a Chinese saloonkeeper in Warren, Idaho for \$2,000; and, finally, she was used as collateral in a poker game and handed over to the winner, Charlie Bemis. The poker game story has been disputed, but her popularity certainly is not. In 1894, Nathoy married Charlie Bemis and taking the name Polly Bemis, ran a boarding house in Salmon River Country in Warren, Idaho. She spoke English, wore Western clothes, cooked American food, loved children (though she did not have any of her own), was an expert angler, and a sharp gambler with an excellent memory.

In the 1920s, seizing upon a moneymaking opportunity, Captain Harry Guleke ran a scow down the Salmon River to Lewiston and conducted tours for *National Geographic*, which included taking his passengers to have their pictures taken with Polly. In 1923, the Countess Eleanor Gizycka (a colorful character in her own right) published the first article about Polly in *Field and Stream*. She wrote: “Polly stands not much over 4 feet, is as neat as a pin, wrinkled as a walnut, and at 67 is full of dash and charm.”

Polly Bemis became a legend. In the 1980s, a book and movie, both titled “A Thousand Pieces of Gold” was based on her life story. Most recently, a Chinese-American artist, Hung Liu, used historical photographs of Polly Bemis to produce a series of paintings, which she created to honor the many forgotten immigrant Chinese women who were sold in the United States.

**On your handout –**

Debu Majumdar writes about his adjustment from India to Idaho in a book titled “From the Ganges to the Snake River: An **East Indian** in the American West.” “Once about a hundred years ago,” Majumdar writes, “people lined up along the Ganges River near Calcutta to see an ochre-robed sadhu (or sage). He had spent decades in the Himalayas meditating and had acquired so much power that he could walk on water. I think of this story whenever I drive by the Snake River (in Idaho) and especially in winter when it is frozen white. In India, it is hard to imagine that a river can become solid. I didn’t meditate in the Himalayas but I could walk on the Snake River in winter.”

Majumdar has a quite a sense of humor. “People told me that Idaho has its own beauty...so tell me, what is good there besides potatoes?” “What about trout?” “That was intriguing. I grew up in Calcutta eating a small piece of fish floating in a soupy curry sauce with rice for both lunch and dinner. Going to a supermarket and being able to buy fresh fish would be like going to heaven for a Bengali. Hmmm, fresh trout. Later, I found out that, in Idaho, you can’t buy trout. It’s free. You have to catch it. Go, buy a fishing rod.”

Finally, he writes about two Mormon missionary boys who visited his home. “I thought about the boys (in India) who lived in the ashram with their guru, obeyed

him, and served him with devotion. The guru taught them about life, living, and death, and the spiritual wisdom, which “enables one to hear the unheard, think the unthought, and know the unknown.” But here these Mormon mission boys came all the way to Idaho Falls and gave their two years, going from door to door; and in that process matured by bantering with Catholics, Presbyterians, Evangelists, and even a few Hindus. What a way to grow up!”

**On your handout –**

Elementary School children in Santa Fe New Mexico gained an understanding of what it was like to be an alien (the “other”) by learning about Japanese internment during World War II. In 2006, they discovered that, over 50 years ago, their neighborhood had been a Japanese internment camp facility. This led the Santa Fe Opera, teachers in the Carlos Gilbert Elementary School, and the New Mexico Office of the State Historian to work with the students to produce an opera, funded by The History Channel, about the internment camp experience, titled “The Face of the Enemy.”

According to the press release: “This story is global and national in its reach and yet it is also local, which is what makes it so specific to New Mexico, Santa Fe, and the Casa Solana neighborhood.” Andrea Walters, director of education and community programs for the Santa Fe Opera, wrote: “The children gained such an incredible mastery of the material through their participation.” This serves as an example of how creative arts can be used to teach the history of Asians in America.

**On your handout –**

Also in New Mexico, it is possible to empathize with **political refugees** and the challenges they face in resettlement. New Mexico became a place of sanctuary for those who had to leave Tibet in the 1960s for fear of political persecution. Thirty years later, the U.S. Government designated the Santa Fe/Albuquerque corridor as a "cluster site;" and the resettlement project developed an art program to help Tibetan children adjust to their new home. One painting, by a Tibetan child, Tsetan Chompel, has the following caption:

**Remembrance of My Friend:** "That's me, standing in the road. It is the time that I am leaving Tibet. I am on the right, in blue, and this is my friend. We are saying goodbye. I am offering him a kathak (auspicious white scarf). We use them during Losar (New Year), on His Holiness's (the Dalai Lama's) birthday, or on a special occasion like this when someone is leaving and saying goodbye."

I was particularly moved by this child's words because it reminded me of how difficult it is to leave behind the people and places you love.

**(Show route map)**

In Louisiana, Asian connections to America began shortly after the Civil War. In the 1870s, laborers from China relocated there after a railroad construction project in Alabama failed. While it is common knowledge that Chinese laborers built the transcontinental railroad, there were other railroad construction projects that didn't work out so well, which forced Chinese immigrants to find new homes. Also after the Civil War, in 1869, the Arkansas Valley Immigration Company commissioned Captain George Gift to travel to China to entice Chinese laborers to

come to Arkansas to help rebuild plantations, work in the cotton fields, and make up for the loss of African American slaves. Commissioner Gift was to pay the Chinese laborers in opium but, according to University of Arkansas Professor Shih-Shan Henry Tsai, when the price of opium skyrocketed, the plantation owners had to let the Chinese laborers go. Many relocated to neighboring Louisiana.

**On your handout --**

The second major migration to Louisiana occurred one hundred years later, in the 1970s, and involved Vietnamese refugees who relocated there after the Vietnam War. Today, they have become an integral part of the fishing industry, just as Filipinos and Japanese did in Alaska. As a result of the recent oil spill, the Vietnamese community suffers a great deal. But the community definitely is part of Louisiana's modern landscape. In fact, in 2009, Louisiana elected its first Vietnamese American to serve in the U.S. Congress, Republican Anh "Joseph" Cao who defeated the nine-term Democratic congressman, William Jefferson.

**On your handout –**

In Illinois, I found a Chinese connection to a quintessential American art form, poetry. Downstate in Springfield, Illinois's most famous poet, Vachel – with the Scottish pronunciation of an "r" instead of "v" sound – Lindsay, grew up in a house that was a center of civic activity and had once belonged to Mary Todd Lincoln's sister. Lindsay learned about China from his sister Olive who, from 1905 to 1927, served as a China missionary for the Disciples of Christ. Olive sent Vachel books and artifacts from China and, in 1915, he composed a poem titled "A Chinese Nightingale."

Vachel hoped that Olive would perform "A Chinese Nightingale" across the United States and in China. When you listen to Vachel's 1931 recitation, you probably will wish you could hear Olive instead: Vachel doesn't have the best speaking voice, and the recording is crackly. **(Refer to your handout for the words to the poem.)** In "A Chinese Nightingale," Lindsay tells us about a Chinese laundryman ironing away and dreaming about his homeland:

<http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Lindsay.php>

I use Lindsay as an example of American connections to Asia because of the way literary critics interpreted his work. The critics touted Lindsay as the one person who "rarified human experience." They proclaimed: "The Chinese laundryman is the spirit of centuries of Chinese culture. *A Chinese Nightingale* is a fantasy and Lindsay draws a sketchbook of social history. He brings poetry down to the specific problems of their day, seeking the ideal liberal democracy and evangelizing for human rights..."

In the early 1900s, the founder and editor of Poetry Magazine, Harriet Monroe, discovered Lindsay, and, at the same time, published translations in English of Chinese poetry. I wondered why... At that time, American immigration laws excluded Chinese laborers from entering the U.S. and anti-Chinese sentiment was rampant.

I found the answer in Harriet Monroe's autobiography. It turns out that, in 1910, she visited China and became entranced with the cosmopolitan lifestyle led by so-called American "pilgrims of pleasure" in Beijing. At the numerous social events she attended, Monroe rubbed shoulders with the U.S. minister to China, William Calhoun (a lawyer from Illinois) and "plunged" into Chinese art with Charles Freer.

(The Smithsonian’s Freer Gallery in Washington, D.C., is named after him.) In fact, Monroe believed that, within her mission of popularizing poetry in America, was the *romance* of China.

**On your handout –**

In contrast to Harriet Monroe and Vachel Lindsay of the early 1900s, today, Tatsu Aoki combines Asian and American cultures to develop a new art form. Aoki is a prolific artist, composer, musician, and filmmaker. Born in 1957 in Tokyo to an artisan family of agents who booked and trained Japanese Geisha ladies; at 4 years old, he became part of the performance crew. In the early 1970s, he was an active performer in the Tokyo Underground Arts movement, moved to Chicago in 1977, and in the early 1980s, used his position as a musician to advocate for and bolster Chicago’s Asian American community. Aoki performed his most important ensemble piece, titled “Rooted: The Origins of Now,” at the Chicago Jazz festival and was named Chicagoan of the Year for merging ancient Japanese music with experimental American jazz. Here is a short clip of his music under the title “East Meets the Rest...”

**On your handout –**

Just as American children in New Mexico were *unsettled* by the history of the ground beneath them, historians in Georgia were *startled* to discover Asian roots in Savannah’s city plan—an example of Asian footprints on American souls.

Savannah was founded in 1733 by James Oglethorpe, an early leader of the colony of Georgia, the last English colony to be established on the American “mainland.” In the 1960s, in the course of researching the city’s history, (In particular, the origin of the four city squares), historians discovered that James

Oglethorpe had modeled it after the ancient Chinese city, Peking (or, Northern Peace), now called Beijing.

Professor Laura Palmer Bell (1964) published this discovery in an article titled “A New Theory on the Plan of Savannah.” She used a 1770 architectural drawing by the Deputy Surveyor General, Thomas Shruder, to demonstrate that Oglethorpe had actually developed the city plan for Savannah, Georgia after the “Peking City Plan,” which originally was published by the Jesuit missionary priest Gabriel Malgalhes in “*Novelle Relations de la Chine*” in 1688. Oglethorpe was known to be a prominent philanthropist and patron of intellectual circles in London who were, at the time, studying Chinese art and architecture.

**On your handout –**

In addition to this example of Chinese footprints on American souls, I also found American footprints on Chinese souls. In the late 1800s, one of the most prominent China missionaries from Georgia, Young John Allen (1836-1907), decided that the best way to evangelize was to appeal to Chinese intellectuals’ curiosity about Western culture and ideals. He did this by publishing magazines in China with articles on international relations, economics, and the natural sciences. This turned out to be a very powerful tool, as Chinese reformers were searching for ways get rid of the inefficient dynasty and form a modern system of governance. One of Young John Allen’s protégés was Charlie Soong, the father of the future “first lady” of Republican China, Madame Chiang Kai-shek (aka Soong Mei-ling.)

**On your handout –**

Young John Allen encouraged Charlie Soong to study in the American South. When it came time to send his daughter, Mei-ling, to high school, Soong sent her and

her sister to Macon, Georgia, first to boarding school and then to Macon's Wesleyan University. Mei-ling's "education" included adopting a deep Southern accent, which she carried with her when she studied at Wellesley College in Massachusetts –and when she testified before the U.S. Congress as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, to garner support for the Nationalist Guomindang Party, which as you know moved to Taiwan in 1949.

Long-time U.S. speaker of the House of Representatives, Sam Rayburn, was captivated by Mei-ling's Southern charm and described her effusively as "one of the outstanding women of all the earth." She also captivated Henry Luce, publisher of Time Magazine (also from a missionary family) and President and Mrs. Roosevelt, who invited her to stay in the White House when she visited the United States. While Americans eventually grew to dislike Mei-ling (and her husband, Chiang Kai-shek) after the Chinese Communists took over the mainland in 1949, it seems to me that Mei-ling embodies all of the elements of Asian interactions with America mentioned in the beginning of this lecture – political, economic, culture, human curiosity, and the "other." She represented the loss of America's political investments in China. Mei-ling raised money in America to bolster Republican China and, at the same time, was deeply influenced by American culture – identifying herself as more American than Chinese. On the other hand, she appealed to America's interest in Chinese exotica by almost always dressing in a traditional qipao, Chinese dress. And, to the end, she supported Chinese immigrants and laborers in the United States and was an outspoken critic of America's Chinese exclusion policies.

**On your handout –**

I was intrigued by the numerous Asian connections to America in Georgia. One final example, for now, is Beatrice Hood Stroup (1908-2006) whose portrait is prominently displayed in the Georgia Historical Society. According to the description of her personal papers, Stroup was one of the few women during World War II to be promoted to the rank of major in the Women’s Army Corps, and promoted to captain after working intelligence in **Japan**. Not only was she active in the Eastern front in **Japan** but she also served on the Western front in Germany and on the home front in Washington, D.C. In this respect, she is an example of the experiences of many who served in America’s wars in Asia.

Interestingly, Stroup went on to become a prominent civic leader in Savannah and establish the World Affairs Study Group and the Poetry Society, among other things. In addition to her portrait in the Georgia Historical Society, her words are memorialized in the National Museum of Women in Military Service in Washington D.C. In response to a question about why she chose to enter military service, she said: “It isn’t just my brother’s country or my husband’s country, it’s my country as well. And so the war wasn’t just their war, it was my war, and I needed to serve in it.”

**On your handout –**

In the course of conducting research for a project titled “Asia Matters for America” for the East-West Center, I examined the U.S. State Department’s records for all American ambassadors who served in Asia and discovered that Maryland Congressman Chris Van Hollen’s father was a foreign-service officer in India and Pakistan and an ambassador to Sri Lanka. I also found out that his mother, Edith

Eliza Farnsworth, was a distinguished linguist and analyst for South Asia in the U.S. State Department.

In setting up an interview with the Congressman, I learned that his mother had been a particularly important role model. Through Congressman Van Hollen, I learned that Farnsworth was blessed with a tremendous linguistic ability and easily learned French, Russian, Bengali, Hindi, Urdu, Turkish, and Sinhala. (Something the Congressman regrets he did not pick up.) Her real challenge, which required a tremendous amount of focus and discipline, was policy analysis.

As for core values, Farnsworth believed that people should, first, express their views and, second, they should try to understand the perspectives of others (whether in the United States or abroad, in the State Department where she worked, or in her immediate community). As chief analyst for Afghanistan in the Bureau of Intelligence and Research at State, Farnsworth became so adept at analysis that she was one of the few experts to predict the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and warn of the dangers of becoming too closely tied to the Taliban and extremist Islamic groups.

It was interesting to learn that, no matter where she lived, Farnsworth immersed herself in local culture, believing that everyone should be treated with dignity and respect; and that citizens should become involved and "not complain." One can observe her vitality and commitment, as she was the center of grass roots door-to-door efforts for her son. In essence, Farnsworth is significant to learning about Asia in America because she acted upon her convictions both in her work on South Asia and in American politics. To her, they were closely related.

**On your handout –**

Maryland also has historical and economic ties to China through Captain John O'Donnell (1749-1805), who brought his trade with the East India Company to Baltimore.

In 1785, O'Donnell sailed into Baltimore's harbor bringing with him the first shipment from the Orient. The cargo of teas, china, silks and satins attracted the attention of George Washington, who dispatched his friend Colonel Tench Tilghman to Baltimore with money and a list of purchases to be made, but “only if great bargains are to be had.”

In the China trade, O'Donnell accumulated a vast personal fortune, which was not uncommon for the time, but was new to Baltimore. He immediately became a celebrity, entertaining Baltimoreans about his adventures. For example, he presented himself as a daring adventurer who, in making his way overland across India, was captured by Saudi Arabians and kept as a slave until he managed to escape four years later. The significance of this story is not whether it was true or false but rather that Baltimoreans were captivated by high adventure in the Far East.

An Irishman from a prominent Presbyterian family in Limerick, O'Donnell married a woman from Fells Point and, in 1786, purchased an eleven-acre plantation that he named Canton, which today is touted as “a fast-changing shoreline stretching from Harris Creek around to Lazaretto Point and then to the east to the Dundalk Marine Terminal.”

**On your handout –**

There is another a Maryland connection to Asia via William T. Walters, for whom the Walters Art Gallery is named. With the help of an art dealer, Walters traveled to Europe to learn about Chinese and Japanese art. Returning from buying trips to London, Paris, and Vienna, he became committed to the mission of interpreting Asian art to Americans, and explaining why Chinese ceramics was far superior to anything produced at the time. He and his son, Henry, bought their entire Asian collection in Europe (Paris and London), in New York through the international expositions in Philadelphia, Chicago, Saint Louis, and San Francisco, and finally through dealers who frequented the Eastern seaboard. So, in contrast to John O'Donnell, Walters was not so flamboyantly rugged, but he wanted to show Americans that China was worthy of attention because of its superior artistic skill.

**On your handout –**

As representative of New England's economic development, Maine has a long history of China trade. Just like Captain John O'Donnell in Baltimore, many New England fortunes were made through careers in the East India Company. The Maine Historical Society has access to a variety of books and documents on this subject including, for example, the sea journals of fur trader, Ralph Haskins, and a speech written in 1880 by William Pierce Frye on China trade and Chinese immigration. (Frye was a lawyer and politician of Lewiston, Maine, who during the height of anti-Chinese “fever,” served in the state legislature, U.S. House of Representatives from (1871-1881), and U.S. Senate (1881-1911).

To wind up my presentation, I will discuss side-by-side two other examples of Maine’s connections to Asia—one in the Henry Wadsworth Longfellow museum and the other at Bates College.

Between 1871 and 1874, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s son, Charles Appleton Longfellow, spent three years in Japan and returned to Maine with many Japanese objects that are now on display in the Wadsworth Museum. He also wrote a book on his travels in which he describes a love affair with a Japanese woman. This inspired his father, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, to write a poem about Japan in his anthology, “Poems of Places.” In this image, Charles is dressed in a full Japanese garb.

One hundred and thirty-five years later, one finds a different display of Asian clothing gracing the lawn at Bates College. That is, a steel rendition of Chairman Mao Zedong’s jacket, a 4-ton metal sculpture, formally named “Legacy Mantle.” A contemporary Chinese artist, Sui Jianguo, created the statue. According to Melissa Chiu, museum director at the Asia Society: “the iconic Mao jacket symbolizes Mao's legacy and may be viewed as both nostalgic and critical, mirroring the views of the artist and many Chinese of his generation.” What an incredible contrast and message about the vast changes in international relations and world affairs – from Charles Appleton Longfellow’s travels in Japan to a statue by a Chinese artist to remind us of China’s “Great Helmsman.”

## **Conclusion**

In this presentation, I have provided numerous examples of men and women, Asians and non-Asians who helped define America’s connections to the Asian world.

Half of my examples dealt with China, and the others focused on Japan, India, the Philippines, Tibet, and Vietnam.

Clearly, Asia and America come together at different levels and in different formats, from white Americans who perceived and related to the Asian World to Asian immigrants and Asian Americans who are such an integral part of American industry, history, culture, and society.

Through this, it is clear that we ought to appreciate and celebrate the cultural differences as Professor Elaine Kim says ... that we clearly **need, in order to remember** that Asian cultures and Asian Americans are not “foreign” but, rather, an integral part of American history; and that in the present day, in both our relationships on American soil, and with such countries as China and India, we should promote tolerance of other cultures and follow Edith Eliza Farnsworth Van Hollen’s example and appreciate differing points of view.

#### **Honorable mentions: Birchmore and Burma**

Fred Agnew Birchmore focused on telling Georgians about his travels around the world. Born in 1911, into a prominent Savannah family, Birchmore followed family tradition by graduating from the University of Georgia in 1934 with a law degree. Then, instead of settling into a comfortable law practice, he decided to travel around the world for two years, on a bicycle. His book on his travels includes descriptions and reflections on the places he visited in Afghanistan, Burma, India, the Philippines, and Thailand. (Incidentally, Mr. Birchmore is still alive at 101 years old; and his bicycle, which he named Bucephalus after Alexander the Great’s warhorse, is on display at the Smithsonian.)