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# Faith

A Study Guide on Race and Faith

PART 1: WHAT IS ASIAN AMERICA AND WHERE ARE YOU IN IT?

The following is a work in progress document under joint development by Epic Movement and the Center for Asian American Theology and Ministry at Fuller Theological Seminary.

Initiated in Summer 2019, these materials reflect content last updated in January 2021.

If you use these studies, we welcome your feedback for incorporation into a final draft of the curriculum that will be completed in Summer 2021. Please direct all comments and inquiries to [jasonchu@fuller.edu](mailto:jasonchu@fuller.edu).

Grace and blessings to you.

# PART 1: WHAT IS ASIAN AMERICA, AND WHERE ARE YOU IN IT?

## Study Introduction

Welcome to *Beyond Model Minority Faith*, a Bible study curriculum on race and the Gospel. Over the next weeks, you'll be exploring some of the many intersections between Asian American issues and the Christian faith.

This study touches on many topics that may be difficult, personal, or new to you. As you begin each session, it may help to go over these ground rules, or refer to them during sessions:

- **Respect** one another's stories. Don't explicitly or implicitly talk down on, judge, invalidate, or criticize someone else's lived experiences.
- Speaking is not a competition; no one member of the group should dominate the conversation. **Hold space** for each other to think and reflect. Don't interrupt, jump in, or rush to have your voice or point heard.
- **Listen well.** Some of the subject matter we'll be covering could be sensitive or trigger past pain and hurt. When the study or another group member brings up emotions or ideas you don't expect, instead of getting argumentative or defensive, treat it as an opportunity to learn more about yourself and others.
- Respect *both personal experience and critical history*. Our lived experiences are valuable and need to be treated with respect. But often our personal life stories only reveal a narrow portion of the bigger picture; remember that what we are learning in this study will help reveal a broader historical context that helps us understand and locate our individual experiences more accurately.

We're excited and hopeful that you and your group will find truth, depth, and community on your journey together.

The Fuller Asian American Center  
November 2020

# SESSION 1:

## WHERE ASIAN AMERICA COMES FROM

In this first session, we'll be exploring two questions: (1) What is Asian America? and (2) Does God care?

### What is Asian America?

*“Do not diminish who you are. Your gender, your heritage, your identity. That’s what makes you unique.”*

**–Kailin Gow, Author of *Bitter Frost***



#### My “Asian America”

- Split up into pairs (or threes if there’s an odd number of people in the study).
- Share for 30-45 seconds each about what you think it means to be “Asian American”.
- As a group, have 2 or 3 pairs share what they talked about. Did anything about their partners’ definitions surprise them or resonate deeply with them?

**Asian America**, on a very basic level, means “every American whose biological heritage comes from Asia.”

This is an immensely diverse group! Asian America spans 170+ years of American history, including people who trace their origins to East, Southeast, and South Asia; first generation through fifth generation Americans; multiracial folks; adoptees; and a wide variety of lived experiences.

**Orientalism:** a racist way of viewing bodies and cultures from the global East, including the Middle East and East/Southeast/South Asia, as exotic, mysterious, abnormal, foreign, untrustworthy, and frozen in time.

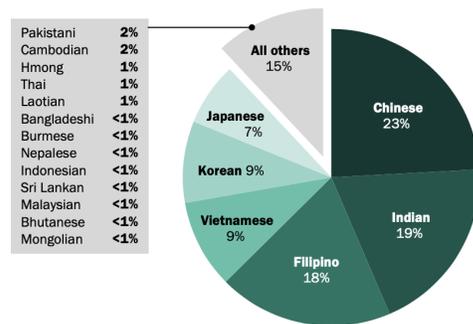
Asian America is so broad that it can be difficult to talk about us as a whole. Statements like “we’re all Confucian”, “we all value education”, “we all eat rice” *do* apply to *some* of us, but fail to capture the rich diversity of Asian America. In fact, despite the best positive intentions to unite or express kinship, such broad stereotypes can often wind up reinforcing an *Orientalist* view of Asian Americans.

**Look at this graph showing the breakdown of Asian Americans by ethnic groups.**

Are there any surprises? Thoughts and reflections?

**Six origin groups make up 85% of all Asian Americans**

*% of origin group among all Asian Americans, 2015*



Note: Chinese includes those identifying as Taiwanese. Category “Other Asian, not specified” not shown. Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding. See methodology for more. Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2015 American Community Survey 1-year estimates (American FactFinder).

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What we **can** definitively say about “Asian America” is that the phrase was coined in 1969 by Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, two graduate students at UC Berkeley, as a way for Americans of diverse Asian descent to organize together for political representation and social activism. Prior to this, there was no shared Asian American community; Filipino Americans, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and other communities organized primarily around *ethno-national origin* and not as a singular *racial community*.

Despite our differences in ethnic culture, home life, social settings, and more, Asian Americans share certain experiences: feelings of dislocation in American culture, stereotypes about our families and bodies, migration narratives, and so on. The phrase “Asian American” describes the common identity of people with these experiences who choose to come together and fight for our mutual concerns, as well as supporting each other in the particular struggles of our individual ethnic American communities.

## Discussion Questions

- How can identifying as “Asian American” help Asian Americans feel free, be seen, and find community? Can it be hurtful or limiting to be seen as “Asian American”?
- What benefits are there to different ethnic groups (Hmong, Chinese, Bangladeshi, Khmer, etc.) sharing an “Asian American” identity? What drawbacks?
- Which ethnic or racial group’s history did you learn the most about in school? What was the group whose history you learned the second most about?
- On a scale of 1 to 10, how much Asian American history did you learn about in school?

1      2      3      4      5      6      7      8      9      10

- How might it affect your awareness and perception of America, or of Asian Americans, if “American” history is assumed to not include Asian American history?

## A God of People

*“I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.”*

**–Exodus 6:7**

Throughout the Christian Scriptures, God is revealed to be deeply interested in knowing and relating to human beings. From all of humanity; to nations, tribes, and communities; to particular families and individuals, God actively works, guides, and intervenes in specific circumstances.

This is important! The Christian God is not an abstract ethical idea or vague guiding moral principle, but a living Person who desires loving relationships of care and interaction with the people in their own circumstances.

The Book of Exodus describes God saving the Israelites from slavery in Egypt. Early in the book, God gives Moses the following message for the people of Israel:

*“I am the Lord, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God. Then you will know that I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians.”*

**–Exodus 6:6b-7**

Faced with a specific social situation, God does not tell the Israelites a universal moral platitude or general philosophy. Instead, God speaks into *their* particular situation at *that* specific moment: “I will free you from being slaves in Egypt”.

This is the kind of God that we believe in as Christians: One who hears the cries of human beings and responds by entering into our personal and communal history to save us from wickedness, oppression, and suffering.

## Discussion Questions

- Have you ever deeply considered that God might see, know, and love **your** personal history and journey through life? And **your community's**? And **other communities** that aren't yours?
- God is a God of history who values our stories and journeys. Does that change your view of history and the value you place on learning the history of Asian Americans and other racial communities?
- In what way could learning about *Asian American* history be a spiritual exercise?

## Closing Reflection

Asian Americans have belonged in the US for over 170 years. We have literally shaped this country by contributing to culture, science, politics, law, transportation, architecture, and more. Despite this, Asian American bodies, names, and cultures are often seen as outsiders and foreigners.

The same God that saw Israel suffering in Egypt sees and knows Asian America. God values your past, your family history, and every moment of your life journey. God knows your deepest pains and your highest triumphs, and embraces even the pieces of your personal and communal history that you find most difficult to accept.

**Take some time this week** to reflect or journal on the fact that God is a God of history who values your past, your family history, and your ongoing journey. Think about how this affects your own view of your past and family history.

**Reflect on** the history and journey of Asian Americans in the US. How does this impact your own journey, history, and future?

## **Additional Resources**

*How Asian American Came to Be: The Making of Asian America* by Erika Lee

*American Born Chinese* by Gene Luen Yang

*Ethnicity and the Incarnation* - <https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/ethnicity-and-the-incarnation-kevin-doi/>

*This Is 2016: Asian Americans Respond* - <https://www.nytimes.com/video/us/100000004706646/thisis2016-asian-americans-respond.html>

## SESSION 2: WHERE AM I?

Welcome back to *Beyond Model Minority Faith!* Last week, we covered two key points:

- (1) What is Asian America? and
- (2) God loves and embraces people, communities, and humanity, through the specific details of their lives and stories.

This week, we'll dive deeper into an idea hinted at last week: the importance of *context* or *social location* for Christian faith. We'll start with a short game that can illustrate just how bizarre stories can become when they lack context.



### *Movie Plots That Miss The Point*

- Spend a minute coming up with the most ridiculous summary of a movie that describes it without being descriptive.
- For example: *Star Wars* can be described as “a farmer boy’s trip to the city takes many surprising turns”. *Crazy Rich Asians* could be described as “an NYU professor plays mahjong”. *Harry Potter* could be “a boy with glasses gets bullied at school”.
- Go around the group, sharing your summaries while the other group members guess what movie you’re describing.

## A God of the Details

*“And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*

**–Esther 4:14b**

The God of the Bible knows, loves, and partners with people in their particular times, places, and social locations. For example, there is the story of Esther: a Jewish woman who winds up as the queen of the powerful and misogynistic king Ahasuerus in the Persian empire.

**Social Location:** the position that an individual occupies in a society, including their perceived and actual gender, race, age, wealth, education, geographic location, religion, ability, etc.

The story of Esther starts with her as an orphan taken in by her uncle. He brings her to the court of King Ahasuerus, where the king is basically running *The Bachelor* after kicking out his ex-wife. Esther rises above all the other women competing to become queen of Persia.

But Esther has a secret she's been hiding from the king: she's Jewish. And in Persia, the Jewish people are a marginalized ethnic minority. Haman, one of the high-ranking officials in the Persian court, was even scheming up a plot to commit a racist genocide against them.

Esther's uncle hears of this trouble brewing and sends word, telling Esther to go to the king and beg for mercy for the Jews. Warning her, he says:

*“Do not think that because you are in the king’s house you alone of all the Jews will escape. For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father’s family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?”*

**–Esther 4:13b-14**

*For such a time as this.* The details of Esther's life and social location matter! There's a reason this young queen came from the ethnic group she did, raised by the uncle she had. There's a reason she won the love of the king and so has the opportunity to beg for him to help save her people – which, after some finessing and drinking, he does.

The book of Esther is a little odd, because it is one of only two books in the Bible that don't have the word "God" in the Hebrew or Greek text! But yet, one of the reasons it's included in the Bible is that it illustrates a key point of how God works: through specific people, in specific places, at specific times, for specific reasons.

There are many similar stories in the Bible of women and men like Esther: Rahab, Mary, Moses, Paul, Hagar, the Ethiopian eunuch, and others. Their particular social locations give them specific experiences of ethnicity, culture, gender, language, education, and poverty/wealth. These experiences become unique opportunities for them to show God's love, mercy, grace, justice, and care for the world around them.

## Discussion Questions

- At first, Esther does not want to reveal to the king that she has been hiding her ethnic identity from him. Can you empathize with this? Have you ever hid your racial or ethnic identity and culture, fearing it might be used to shame or hurt you?

- As Esther’s uncle points out, “deliverance for the Jews” could have come from anywhere – a prophet, a general, a miraculous vision or dream. But God *chose specifically* to have a dating contest winner orphan girl be the one to save her people here. What might this choice tell us about God?
- Can you think of any other Bible stories where the specific details of someone’s social location become a way for God’s love, justice, or other attributes to be revealed? Share them briefly, if there’s time.

## How’s the Water?

*“Nosce te ipsum (“Know thyself”)*”

**–Plato, *The Dialogues***

*“Know yourself, know your worth.”*

**–Drake, “0 to 100”**

In a speech entitled “This Is Water”, the late writer David Foster Wallace shares a metaphor:

*“There are these two young fish swimming along, and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says, “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes, “What the hell is water?”*”

Sometimes, the things closest to us are the things that we think about the least. How we speak, what we consider “normal” behavior at home, what we wear when we go out, what we eat, how we address different people – they are like water to a fish, flowing in and around us but without us ever noticing it.

And yet, those things – our social location and personal experiences – are so crucial to understanding ourselves and our place in the world and its history. From dating, to the workplace, to being in a car pulled over by police, our experiences will change based on the expectations that we have for the world around us, and the expectations that the world has for us.

Maybe sometimes we can imagine that there “is no water” – that people are treated the same no matter what. But try going to a place with a new and alien culture to you, and you will quickly see how pervasive and suffocating the “water” of cultural expectations can be!

**Asian Americans** swim in very particular water. We face a complicated history of 170+ years of economic exploitation and business success, cultural production and racial stereotypes, discrimination and immigration, and more. The more that we learn about this context, the more that we can know and love ourselves and our communities.

Why do many Asian ethnic communities embrace certain careers and promote education? Why are there so many Asian adoptees? Why are certain foods (sushi, pad thai, chai) so popularly adopted by “mainstream” America, while others (durian, angel wings, red bean) not? There are good answers to each of these questions, and the more we explore them, the better we can know ourselves and find unique ways to play a role in the world around us.



### Great “Asian American” Expectations

- Get into groups of 2-3.
- Spend 5-10 minutes in your groups, sharing answers to any of the following questions. If something is too personal or intimate, feel free to simply pass:
  - Do you ever feel like people expect certain behaviors from you because of your gender? What are those behaviors? How does it feel when you encounter these expectations?
  - What was the first time you realized you were “Asian”, or whatever race you are? How did that feel?
  - Have you ever traveled to a country beside your homeland? If so, how did that feel? Did you notice any behaviors that you felt were strange or alien? Did you feel strange or alien?

## Closing Reflection

Whatever your social location is, God loves you. God embraces you not *despite* the details of your social location, but in it and *through* it. Maybe there are aspects of your social location that are painful or even traumatic. We are not saying that the pain and the trauma are good; but we *do* believe that God wants to heal and hold all of you, even the parts of your life that have been sources of hurt and frustration.

More than that, we believe that your unique experiences in your body, family, community, time, and space, can be special opportunities to share the love of God with others: to

connect to people, empathize with them, know them, grieve with them, and comfort them. But in order to do this, you need to be grounded in an embodied and historical knowledge of your own life story.

It's just like our opening game: movie plots are unrecognizable without their details. Just so, if you run away from the details of your life, your purpose and mission will become confused and incomprehensible.