

ASIAN AMERICAN AND PACIFIC ISLANDER HERITAGE MONTH (in Three Vignettes)

May is Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage Month in the United States.

The month of May was chosen to commemorate the immigration of the first Japanese people to the United States on May 7, 1843, and to mark the anniversary of the completion of the transcontinental railroad on May 10, 1869.

The majority of the workers who laid the tracks on the project were Chinese immigrants.



Activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee

Origins of the Term Asian American

The term Asian American was coined by former UCLA students and activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, in the 1970s. The word came to signify both a political and social identity aimed to unite Asian people, advance pan-Asian solidarity, and capture experiences of exclusion, such as feelings of being a "perpetual foreigner" or the imposition of the "myth of the model minority" in the US. However, the term is not without critique. In her article *[The Inadequacy of the term Asian-American](#)*, writer Li Zhou introduces key reasons the term is inadequate; it fails to encompass the diversity of Asian people globally, it centers primarily East Asians, and lumps together many ethnic groups in the Asian diaspora, preventing them from receiving specific social or governmental consideration, as well as capturing distinct statistics on each group. The name of this month itself perpetuates a monolithic view of not only Asian people but also Pacific Islanders who have a racial/ethnic history separate from Asian communities who do not experience the same history of colonization and militarization. The terms were initially conjoined so Pacific Islanders and Native Hawaiians could be represented and heard given their small population size.

Exploring Hyphenated Identity

In her article, *[The Power of Reclaiming my Asian Name](#)*, journalist Marian Chia-Ming Liu, (Chia pronounced with a J, like Jiā. Liu like Leo) describes her fear of being targeted after seeing victims of violent anti-Asian hate crimes. Though Liu easily called out racism in the articles she wrote, she was hesitant to do so publicly, fearing that she too, would become a target, especially after hearing stories of anti-Asian attacks from the people she interviewed. Liu essentially erased the middle two words of her name to further conceal her heritage and her race. However, inspired to fully embrace her identity, her culture, and her life, she returned to her roots by honoring her name and embracing it, in its entirety. Liu graciously breaks down the beautiful significance of her name and also details the historical construction of Chinese names; "First up is the family name, known as the last name in many Western cultures and similarly taken from the father's side. This is followed by a name that is shared with your generation, often paternal cousins. Finally, there is the person's individual name. These names literally show not only our ties to family and history, but how we put them first." This meaningful tradition is starkly contrasted with a need to protect oneself and family by assimilating, often through anglicizing or shortening one's given name. Keeping one's original name could result in mispronunciation at best and public degradation/bullying, or barriers to social mobility at worst. However, by embracing her name Liu is able to stand proudly in her heritage and teach others to do the same. [Read her story here.](#)



Representation and Stereotypes

In his documentary, *The Problem with Apu*, comedian Hari Kondabolu analyzes the negative social repercussions that arose following the creation of the role of Apu on *The Simpsons*. He reveals a striking issue with the representation, or lack thereof, of Indian and South Asian people on television. Kondabolu argues that Apu, having been the only Indian character, or the one-dimensional rendering of one, on TV, for the former half the 30 years the show has been on, has greatly shaped how South Asian people are viewed and treated not only in Hollywood but throughout the United States. Kondabolu primarily takes issue with Hank Azaria, the white actor who voiced Apu from 1989 to 2020. Kondabolu views Azaria's portrayal as an act of brown face, akin to the white American tradition of minstrelsy. But the patronization of South Asian people through Apu does not simply end onscreen. The now memorable, patronizing phrase, "Thank you, come again" has been used as a tool to characterize, and bully South Asian people, as evidenced by testimonies of Kondabolu's guests in the documentary. The problem with Apu lies in the distilled representation of South Asians from complex people with innumerable experiences and stories, to a trite, overused bit, and a stereotypical accent. *The Simpsons* have since shrugged off Kondabolu's critiques, remarking that the show stereotypes every race and ethnicity; they claim that Apu's characterization is not unique. But the lack of representation of South Asian characters more broadly, resulted in Apu being weaponized against South Asian and Indian people specifically and perpetuated a monolithic view of one of the largest diasporas across the globe. Though indignant by the lack of care and concern *The Simpsons* have for South Asian lives and representation, Kondabolu is hopeful that more South Asian stories will be told, as they should, by South Asian people. [Watch the full documentary here.](#) And for further reading and analysis on *The Problem with Apu*, [check out this article](#), by Jeet Heer.

