

2/26/21 Interview with Jeff Leong Transcript

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Ethan: “Welcome to our podcast with Jeffrey Leong. We are super excited to have him as one of our interviewees. He was one of the people who led the 1968 proposal for the first Asian American Studies course at UC Berkeley, and he has a wealth of knowledge to share with us. We have a lot of great questions to ask him. To get us started, we’ll do a quick round of intros. Our group will do quick intros about our year and our names, and then we’ll pass it on to you, Jeff, to give a quick intro about yourself.”

Ethan: “So I’ll start, I’m Ethan. I’m a third year CS major, and this has been the first Asian American course I’m taking, I’ve loved it so far. That sums it up then.”

Dustin: “Thank you Ethan. My name is Dustin. I’m a second year studying Business with minors in Asian American Studies and Education and I will give it to Phibi.”

Phibi: “Hi my name is Phibi. I’m fourth year and I’m studying Cognitive Science and Asian Americans Diaspora Studies.

Lawrence: Hi everyone, my name is Lawrence Su. I’m a fourth year majoring in Political Science and minoring in Asian American Studies.”

Kristina: “Hi, I’m Kristina. I’m a fourth year studying Microbial Biology and like Ethan, this is my first Asian American history class I’m taking. As a fifth generation Asian American, this is really interesting for me. And Jeff, would you like to say a few words about yourself?”

Jeff: “Hi, I’m Jeff Leong and as Ethan said, I was around in the late ‘60s when Asian American Studies first started in UC Berkeley, and I’m very pleased to be with you tonight. I’m pleased to know that there’s such interest in the Asian American Studies program.”

Ethan: “Thank you for that - I’ll pass it to Kristina who will lead us off with a few questions.”

Kristina: “Yeah, I think we want to start off with one of the questions that we sent you already, which is kind of just, you know, **about the beginning of the first Asian American studies class and proposal, and especially, like how did the political events in the fall of 1968, when you were at UC Berkeley, affect the impetus for proposing Asian American studies at UC Berkeley?** So that kind of includes, you know, the political background of assassinations of MLK Jr., Robert Kennedy, riots and stuff like that.”

Jeff: “This was in the fall of 1968. So on my six-month hiatus from Berkeley that spring, both the assassinations of Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert Kennedy took place, in April and June. And also that was the summer of the riots at the Democratic National Convention in Chicago. There was a lot of political turmoil and unrest. I came back to Berkeley in that environment in fall of ‘68, as a returning sophomore, even though it was really my junior year. I signed up for a class called Social Analysis 139X.

That class was really an eye-opening experience for me, to learn about the African American experience. I'd taken a few classes before I'd left school, but the Cleaver class was really eye-opening. So we basically were auditing. We didn't receive any credit for the class. But I learned a lot. That was the environment in the fall of 1968. For me, it was personally shocking because I went from playing music in coffee houses as a pseudo hippie to being immersed in issues of Black Power at the university and student activism.

And that's when I first got involved and met folks from the Asian American Political Alliance, or AAPA as it's called. I met an Asian American by the name of John Chang. When he discovered that I was against the Draft and Asian American, he invited me to a meeting of the Asian American Political Alliance. That was my first introduction, and they supported me through that experience.

I went to a meeting at the home of Yuji and Emma Ichioka, two of the founders of the Asian American Political Alliance. I believe it was in early November. I met Yuji and that was really another eye-opening experience because that was the first time I learned personally of the existence of the Japanese American internment camps. I was at that point 19 years old, and I had never heard of that. I know it's harder for people to believe now, but it was really erased from American history books and from our university education. That was the first time and I was really kind of shocked. Yuji was very patient with me and encouraged me to be involved with AAPA. He mentioned that one of the things that AAPA was doing was drafting a course proposal for an Asian American studies history and culture class at UC Berkeley, and this would later become Asian Studies 100X which was first offered in January of 1969.

My partner was Alan Fong, who later became one of the early teachers in Asian American Studies. He and I divided up the tasks to write up a prospectus for the course to submit to what was called the Board of Educational Development or B.E.D. This route for student-initiated classes was created after the Free Speech Movement in 1964 to allow students to generate their own courses.

We came up with a general outline for the course which focused first of all on the history of the major Asian American groups at that time, which were primarily Chinese American, Japanese American and Filipino American. Of course, the definition and the number of groups have greatly expanded certainly since 1965 and the change in immigration law. But at that time we focused on those specific groups to talk about the history of immigration but also of discrimination against those groups with the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Japanese-American internment, the Filipino farm workers' strikes which were going on actually at the same time. So that became sort of the introduction to the course.

Then we talked about the second section about communities: the different things going on in Chinatown, Manilatown and J-Town, issues of housing for seniors, for new immigrants, particularly youth. And finally we ended up with a more generalized identity section, talking about what it means to be Asian American. I think probably that first course was an introductory overview, encompassing a lot of things that many more classes expand upon now under the umbrella of Asian American Studies. The first week of January, we had a waiting list. We had our full one hundred students and more people that wanted to take the class. So the need was there, and that's sort of how we got it initially organized.”

Kristina: “Yeah, thank you so much for sharing all that. That's really interesting. So what I kind of want to segue into now is like, you kind of mention the political setting for this class. **How you started as the founders, how you developed the curriculum. But also did you experience any pushback when you first started to implement this class?”**

Jeff: “We in AAPA were actually known as the radicals. We were sort of the progressive Bernie Sanders and Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez fringe of the UC Berkeley campus at that time. There were many Asian American students who were either apolitical, or immigrant students who wanted to focus on their education and rightly so, to be able to find a profession and earn a living in their lives. And we did too, but we were more attuned to the social issues. So that was, I think, one of the initial, not so much conflicts, but challenges. When I say that the initial enrollment to Asian Studies 100X was one hundred and there was a waiting list, we were pleased because there were not one hundred students in AAPA.

Part of this organizing effort that AAPA had was that the Asian Studies classes would be an opportunity for people to learn more about their cultural background, and to perhaps get involved either in the communities or with teaching of Asian American studies. That it would be an expansion of knowledge that we were trying to share. There was a conference called the Yellow Symposium that took place the first week of January, that actually served as a vehicle to get a lot of students who were not actually AAPA members interested.

That was one thing that happened in terms of within the Asian American student community. But outside of that community, we were really linked to, and watching, other students of color on campus—the African American students and the LatinX students—because the University really was not enthusiastic about having ethnic studies on campus.

The BED program was a vehicle for having experimental courses, but we were really on the fringe of the University. These were one-time only courses, taught by faculty who wanted to donate or contribute to something experimental, but it was by no means a permanent part of the University. That eventually led to the Third World Strike in 1969 and the demand for a Third World College. I think those were some of the barriers to organizing Asian American studies and ethnic studies on campus. And I guess the last thing I'll mention is Berkeley then, as it is to a certain extent today, has always been an elite school that serves the interests of the business and power structure in the United States.

It was not very diverse in any way, in terms of social class, gender, sexual orientation, or racial and ethnic groups. It was a very alienating environment in some ways. We were working, trying to encourage our fellow Asian American students to be aware of their cultural history, but also realizing that there was a larger university community that was not that friendly towards the idea of ethnic studies.”

Kristina: “**So then how did this Asian American studies course become permanent? So did you, was it taught the next year and beyond, or was there some pushback to bring it back, or what was that situation like?”**

Jeff: “All the students got together, and we were inspired by the original Third World Strike at San Francisco State that started November 1968. So when we came back to campus, we knew that there was a

possibility that the students of color would organize and unite on the Berkeley campus to start our own Third World Strike for similar demands, the primary one being what we called the Third World College. Professor Dong might have mentioned that to you folks. Basically, the core principle of which was self-determination. We believed that students of color on campus needed to have access to their own courses on history of ethnic groups in the United States, on their communities, but also that the courses be taught by faculty of color and that the administration be managed by people of color too.

So that was fairly radical, and as you can imagine, in an elite, primarily white, campus community, including the Academic Senate, the professors, it was a very challenging kind of proposal to make. And so what happened was, we actually got some leaders from San Francisco State come to Berkeley saying, *Why don't you start a strike of your own? Or can you support us?* Because their strike lasted over six months, it was the longest student strike in American history.

So we talked amongst our groups, and we did something that was unique at that time at Berkeley, and I think unique just in general, because of that gathering of circumstances, we actually formed a coalition, and it became a collaboration between groups that normally don't necessarily see themselves as having something in common, meaning Asian Americans, African Americans, Latinos, and eventually Native Americans. Despite historical differences, despite any kinds of conflicts between communities, at that particular moment we decided that a united front, emphasizing what we had in common, which was our frustrations in implementing any kind of ethnic studies curriculum for our own respective groups at Berkeley, we decided to band together. And the vehicle for that was the Third World Strike.

The organizational framework was adopted from San Francisco State, so we called ourselves the Third World Liberation Front. It was composed of those four organizations representing those four particular groups. Initially the Native Americans because of their small number were not involved, but within a couple of weeks, LaNada War Jack became a member of the Central Committee, and they were officially part of the Third World coalition.

Because the timing of what had happened at San Francisco State and with the frustrations at UC Berkeley, we saw the continuation of Asian American studies, we meaning APA, but the other groups for their own communities, saw that the Third World Strike would be the means to achieve our goal. So that's sort of how things coalesced at that particular moment.

So in that kind of effort in running the strike, we sort of created some frameworks for the launch of Asian American, I'm sorry, the ethnic studies program which was approved at the end of the strike. The Academic Senate voted, I think it was 590 to 3, to adopt an ethnic studies program at UC Berkeley."

Kristina: "Yeah, thank you. So also kind of in relation to the Strike, how did the Strike and also the formation of the first Asian American studies course, how did those both change? Like how did those change the attitudes of people towards Asian Americans either on Berkeley campus or in the Berkeley city and beyond?"

Jeff: "We saw that the UC Berkeley campus itself was a community and that organizing on campus meant teaching Asian American studies. And so we saw that as a way of not only educating our fellow

students and ourselves, but also the university community and establishing a permanent kind of foothold for Asian Americans at Berkeley and in academia. We saw Asian American studies as having something to offer to all kinds of students, not just students who were going to be directly involved in teaching or helping directly in the community, but helping people to be proud of their heritage and to speak out for themselves and for their communities as Asian Americans in the American society, no matter where you are working.”

Ethan: “Piggybacking on what you just ended with about like your, your whole perspective about this topic, like how has the curriculum and structure like changed over time for Asian American studies? Like you mentioned that you literally started from scratch with Alan when you were writing the first prospectus and you're really inspired by the class you took with Cleaver about like African-American studies, and like the whole journey of protesting took, you know a while, like standing in the front lines. Like, I guess that whole experience, how has that changed, I guess, your views on how Asian-American studies should be taught? Like you mentioned, it should be taught by people of color, for example, **were there any other additions to the curriculum or structure of Asian American studies over time?**”

Jeff: “Yeah, that's a great question. You know, I think I acknowledge and I think it needs to be acknowledged, that the pressures of being at an elite university like UC Berkeley are tremendous upon an academic department. The pressure is to find faculty or a program that would sponsor research and academic research, you know historical research, et cetera, to bring more prestige to the university, because of those academic pursuits. And the risk of that we knew from day one of the fall quarter of '69, that there would be this pressure to, sort of the system to perpetuate itself, to continue its own mission, its own goals. And so we were sort of the resistance.

And it's all part of the larger story. You know, it's the dominant, white society that tends to define Asian Americans in one or two brush strokes, but in actuality we're all different, and all of our stories are different. And that's what's so important. If anything Asian American studies can do is to make us discover who we are as individuals and who, and what our differences are and what our similarities are.

Because I think it's dehumanizing to think of Asians as all cookie cutter people. You know if you're Vietnamese American, or if you're Lao, or if you're Filipino, you're all in the same. Well you know, you're not all the same. And if you're first generation second, third year all the same, that's not true either.

But you know, for all of us regardless of what generation you are, to be able to know who you are and your background—and particularly, your ethnic background, because that's so much a part of your identity—is your birthright, is something that you own. Everybody has a right to that as a human being. And so you know, it's essential and wonderful to be able to learn more.”

Kristina: “For our public service announcement, we'd like to highlight UC Berkeley's proposal to close the South and Southeast Asian Library, the only space dedicated to the celebration of South and Southeast Asian cultures. This decision would have converted the South and Southeast Asian Library into office space. But after pressure from over 20,000 students, the University announced the withdrawal of this proposal. Going forward, UC Berkeley students must remain vigilant in our fight to preserve Asian representation on our campus.”

Ethan: “In this podcast we interviewed Jeff Leong who spoke to us about how political events, like the Third World Liberation Front, motivated the formation of the first Asian American studies course, how they overcame pushback from campus administrators, as well as how he thinks Asian American studies can improve and grow in the future.”

Phibi: “Now we’d like to close this podcast with a special thanks to Jeff Leong for taking the time to talk with us, to Professor Dong and Gaby Arreola for their support, and to all of you for listening to our podcast.”