

The Asian American Book List that Went Viral

Written by: Xiaole Ni

Translated and edited by: Jing Yao, Ning, Qing Ren, Lin Liu, Qing Zhao, Zack Van Brunt

PHE Canada acknowledges the work of Xiaole Ni in compiling and sharing the Asian American Booklist for both children and adults to further our knowledge of the history and culture of Asian immigrants in the United States. We believe that this resource is also valuable for Canadian educators and the general public to continue the efforts of inclusion, equity and diversity in the school communities in Canada. This booklist has been approved by the author to be shared via the PHE Canada website and social media platform.

Preamble

Following the shootings in Atlanta, a heartfelt post by a Chinese American mother on the social media site WeChat went viral, being shared almost 100,000 times in 4 days. It contained no sensational crime or depressing statistics, but instead a simple reading list, including books for all ages that highlight stories and experiences beyond the stereotypical conception of the Asian American experience. In going viral, it showed the deep hunger that even Asian Americans feel in understanding their identity and history. Originally posted in mandarin, the article and reading list has now been translated into English, and is an incredible resource to people of all races who want to understand what it means to be Asian in America today.

Discrimination and violence against Asians in the country have been on the rise since the pandemic began in early 2020. Last year, we told our families and friends outside of the United States that we were fighting the pandemic by wearing masks and abiding by the health guidelines, and everything would be fine. This year, while concerns over COVID-19 lessen, many feel powerless fighting a different enemy: a wave of anti-Asian hate and discrimination that threatens our safety.

Crime statistics do not capture all that is happening. More and more we hear of passers-by who spit and swear at Asians, and we have learned to shrug it off, and told ourselves that none of this causes physical harm. In the past year, it truly feels like things have escalated, even if you haven't heard about it on the news. In March of last year, a father and son were killed in Midland, TX, and "the suspect indicated that he stabbed the family because he thought the family was Chinese, and infecting people with the coronavirus." In February of

this year a man in San Francisco was slashed with a knife as a mob hurled racist insults at him on a public street, all captured on video. And last week, when six of eight victims of the brutal spa killing in Atlanta were Asian, it seemed that the media finally turned its attention to what has been going on. I cannot remain silent and keep my anger inside anymore.

Because I'm concerned about racial justice, I have deliberately read and collected books about Asians in the United States. When a teacher at my kid's school mentioned to me about writing a letter in support of the Asian American and Pacific Islander community, I proposed that I could make a book list for children.

After the murder of George Floyd last year, we saw a lot of book lists about anti-racism and the history of African Americans. They helped many people, including me, to deepen understanding of the African American community. However, a similar book list for Asian American is rarely seen.

I'm happy to share my book list now, so that families from all cultural backgrounds can take this opportunity to learn more about the history and culture of Asian immigrants in the United States.

The book list, contained below, is divided into two parts: One book list for children, and one for adults. Please note that:

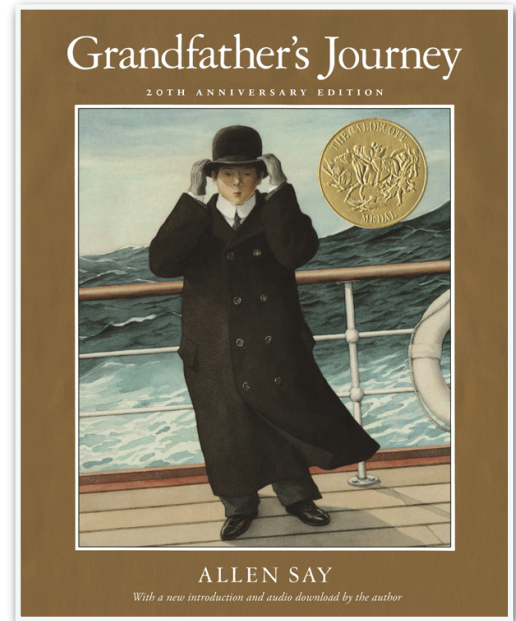
1. The book list mainly focuses on the history, life experience and feelings of Asians living in the United States, especially those coming from East Asia. This is for two reasons. First, we have learned that many East Asians look indistinguishable to people in the west. Second, I am myself Chinese, and the list comes from what I know and is authentic to my experience.
2. There are many excellent picture books about broader Chinese history or cultural stories, but I'm not including those here. There are similarly a lot of books on Asian American topics, and it is impossible to present all of them here. I have listed the ones that I feel comfortable recommending based on my experience and what I've read. I am aware of the lack of fiction and poetry books in this list. There are so many great ones, and they are mostly on my to-read list.
3. This list skews towards authors who are alive today. These are not musty old books. Many of the authors listed are activists on Asian civil rights, and you can find them on various social media platforms. I recommend that everyone interested in these topics subscribe to their updates and continue to follow the Asian civil rights movement.

Part 1: Children's Book List

Children's books are more about general life experiences and feelings than those for adults, but I find that the best children's books resonate with everyone.

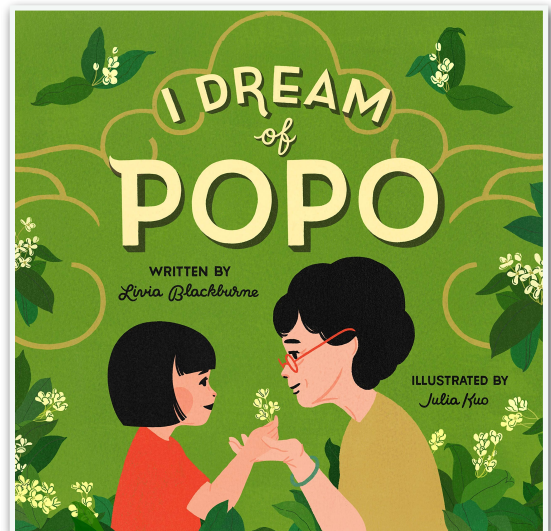
1. Grandfather's Journey, by Allen Say

Allen Say is a Japanese American writer and illustrator. His mother was born in the United States to Japanese parents, and his father was a Korean orphan who had been adopted by a British citizen and grew up in Shanghai, China. Most of his works are related to his own and his family's experience. This book, which won the Caldecott Medal, tells of his grandfather's journey split between Japan and the United States, and his grandfather's search for belonging and connections with both countries. I held this book to my chest after finishing it, triggering complicated emotions that took a long time to calm down.



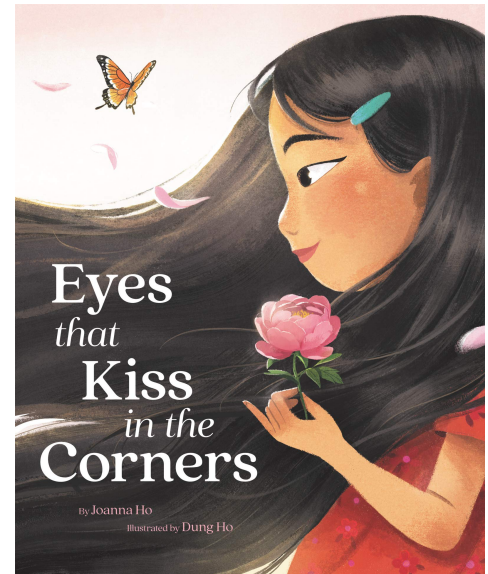
2. I Dream of Popo, by Livia Blackburne

Author Livia Blackburne was a neuroscience researcher at MIT. She switched to writing full-time and creates books for children and youth. As a second-generation Taiwanese immigrant, Livia tells a true story of her own in this book with beautiful language. She spent her childhood with her Popo (grandmother) in Taipei. The two of them grew apart since Livia moved to the US, and Popo eventually passed away. I finished this book standing in a bookstore, tears rolling down my cheeks while I repeatedly read out the word "Popo." This picture book brings comfort to all of us who did not get to say a proper goodbye to elderly family members because of moving to the US.



3. Eyes that Kiss in the Corners, by Joanna Ho

I love this newly published book. It was written specifically for Asians, especially Asian girls with almond-shaped eyes, who are still made aware every time they open a fashion magazine that they do not fit a western conception of beauty. The book's author, Joanna Ho, is a Chinese immigrant who teaches at a high school in the Bay Area and also creates children's books. I thought of the daughters of my friends when I saw this book. Hopefully, they will get to read this book when they go to school and start pondering the implications of mainstream aesthetics. I am also looking forward to Joanna Ho's next book, which will be the story of Yo-Yo Ma.



4. Where the Mountain Meets the Moon, by Grace Lin

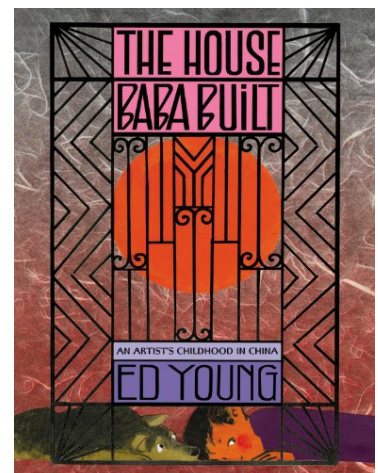
If I'm asked to recommend only one children's book author rooted in Chinese culture, I would recommend Grace Lin, a very productive writer and illustrator. Her motivation is to let Asian kids see themselves and to accept themselves the way they are. Her books also became a channel for more



readers to see and accept Asian kids. This book is one of her most noted books, and has won many awards. It's about a fantasy adventure of a girl inspired by Chinese folklore. In a Ted Talk, she mentioned that when she reads this book in schools, many kids tell her they felt like they are the protagonist Minli.

5. The House Baba Built, by Ed Young

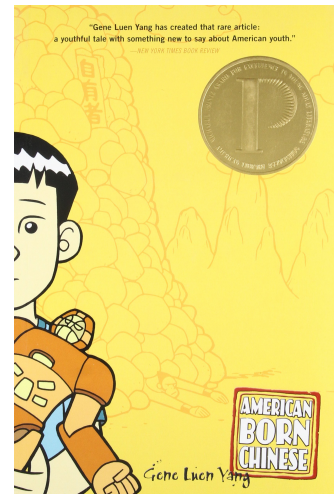
Ed Young is probably the most famous illustrator from an older generation of Chinese immigrants, publishing his first book in 1962. Since then, he's won countless awards for his books including the Caldecott Medal in 1990. His illustrations have strong Chinese traditional styles, and his stories often originate from Chinese folklore, languages, and aesthetics. The House Baba Built



is an illustrated memoir, telling the author's family history of war, childhood, love, and loss through the events that took place in the house his Baba (father) built in Shanghai.

6. American Born Chinese, by Gene Luen Yang

A graphic novel with a straightforward title. The author, Gene Luen Yang, is a Chinese American cartoonist who used to be a science teacher in a high school in Oakland, CA. This cartoonish graphic novel interweaves stories about the Monkey King of Chinese mythology, a first generation immigrant, and a white American boy and his strangely-stereotypical Chinese cousin.



7. Paper Son: The Inspiring Story of Tyrus Wong, Immigrant and Artist, by Julie Leung

“Paper Son” is the name given to those Chinese children who immigrated to the United States with documentation which stated that they were blood relatives to Chinese Americans. The illustrated book Paper Son tells the true story of one such immigrant, the Chinese painter, calligrapher, and Hollywood film artist Tyrus Wong (黄齐耀). He immigrated to the United States through Angel Island in San Francisco when he was only 10 years old, where he was kept in solitary confinement for nearly a month, separated from his father. Against all obstacles he became the rare Asian artist working at Disney in the 1930s and 40s, where among other work he was the lead production illustrator for Bambi, drawing beautiful backgrounds inspired by Song Dynasty landscape paintings. His contribution to many cartoons were largely unknown by the public at the time. It was not until much later in the 20th century that Wong started to receive recognition for his talents and contributions. He died in 2016 at the age of 106.

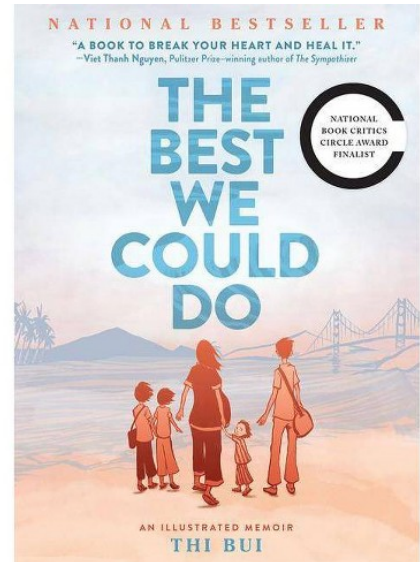


Bonus Reading:

There are several books bearing the same title, “Paper Son.” Some of them are children’s illustrated books, some for young adults, and some are novels for adults. They all tell stories about different people with the same history as “paper son” immigrants. If you’re interested in the history of that particular generation of Chinese immigrants, these stories are a great place to start.

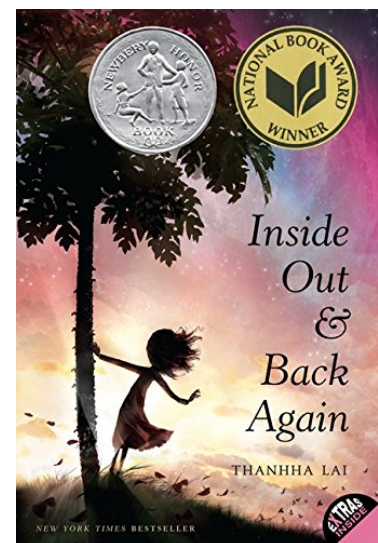
8. The Best We Could Do, by Thi Bui

This is an illustrated memoir, full of emotion, of the long journey of a Vietnamese family who immigrated to American as refugees in the 1970s, fleeing civil war. The author, Thi Bui, has published a number of illustrated novels about Asian immigrants. She herself is an advocate for Asian rights, and is a great follow on social media. As a Chinese American, this book was eye-opening to me and made me appreciate how diverse the immigration experiences are within the Asian American community, and the distinct journeys of Vietnamese Americans.



9. Inside Out and Back Again, by Thanhà Lại

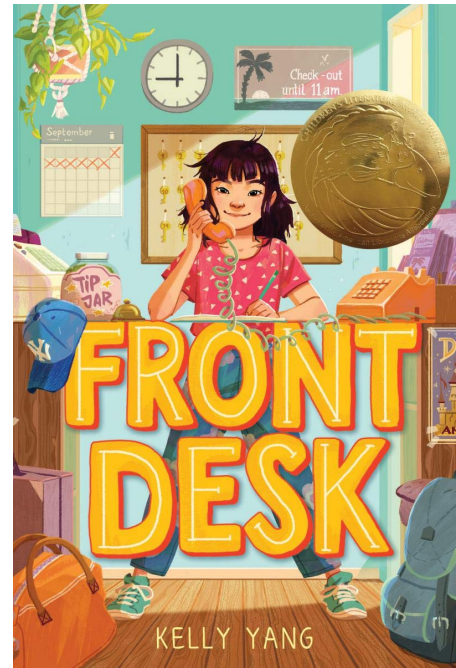
Similar with The Best We Could Do, Inside Out and Back Again is an award-winning novel based on the author, Thanhà Lại’s personal experience. It’s a story about a girl’s loss, healing, hope and growth as she flees Vietnam with her family to dwell in a new country. This story has inspired many people who have shared the experience of leaving their homeland to survive in the United States.



10. Front Desk, by Kelly Yang

Front Desk is the winner of the 2019 Asian Pacific American Award for Children's Literature. It's written by Kelly Yang, who is an active advocate on social media. This story, based on the author's own experience, illustrates a Chinese immigrant family's hardship and resilience when they move to the US, from a young girl's perspective. The top review on Amazon for this book tells a lot:

"One reason why I loved this book was learning about the Tangs' hardships. I think that this book can open the eyes of many people to how immigrating is hard and painful to many. When I learned about what the Tangs went through, I thought about what it must have been like for everyone else like them. More people need to know about these people and what they go through, and how they make America a great and stronger country."



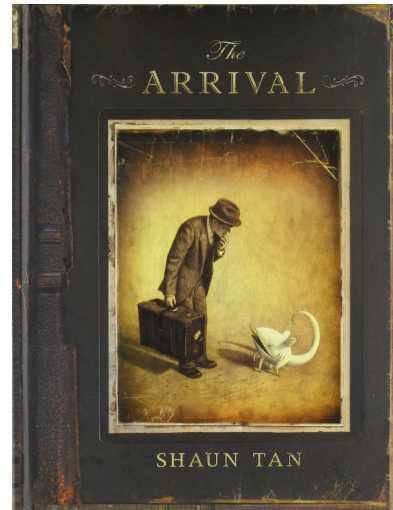
11. They Called Us Enemy, by George Takei

They Called Us Enemy is a memoir from Japanese American actor George Takei, famous for playing Sulu on the original Star Trek. This book talks about how the American government sent 120,000 Japanese Americans to concentration camps during WWII. These American citizens had their property and family stripped away by their own government, as they were sent to isolated camps to live in dismal conditions far from their homes. George spent his childhood in such a camp. As an adult, he has worked hard to pursue justice for the people affected, pushing the U.S. government for apologies and compensation. This is history for all Americans to know, not only Japanese or Asian Americans.



12. The Arrival, by Shaun Tan

Unlike the rest of the books on this list, *The Arrival* is not written directly for or about Asian Americans. But this illustrated book strikes the chords of all hearts far away from home. The author, Shaun Tan, is a second-generation Chinese immigrant in Australia. He is married to a Finnish woman, and he is the son of a Malaysian Chinese father and an Irish immigrant mother. This entangled and complicated family background has created a unique focus on outsiders and cross-cultural issues in his works.

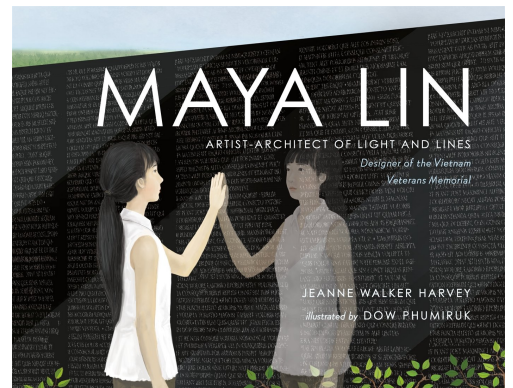
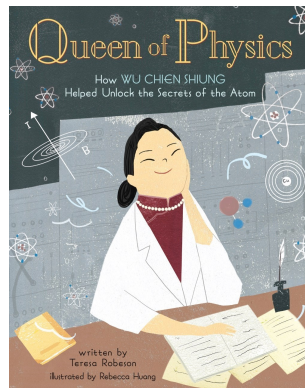
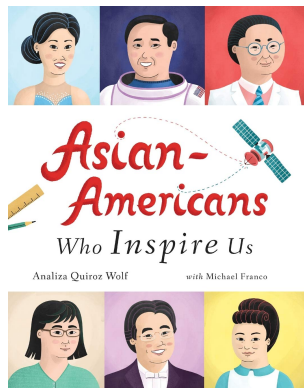
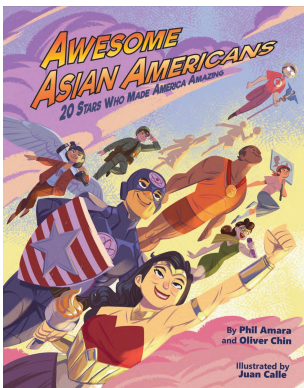


13. Awesome Asian Americans: 20 Stars Who Made America Amazing, by Phil Amara and Oliver Chin

14. Asian Americans Who Inspire Us, by Analiza Quiroz Wolf

15. Queen of Physics, by Teresa Robeson

16. Maya Lin, by Jeanne Walker Harvey



These four picture books share the commonality of telling the stories of outstanding Asian Americans to children. Kids everywhere can see themselves in these Asian role models.

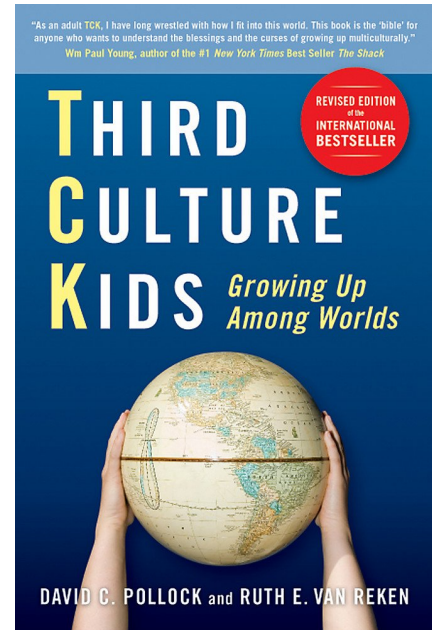
Part 2: Adults' Book List

Nonfiction that Focuses on Asian Experiences:

1. Third Culture Kids, by Ruth E. Van Reken , Michael V. Pollock , and David C. Pollock

This book is important to me personally, and I want to talk about why.

I wonder if any other immigrants share this similar feeling: The longer I live in the U.S., the more homesick I feel, but the harder it is to search for the home in my memory. Like many immigrants, I moved frequently when I first arrived, and never really felt like I had a hometown here. I would meet other immigrants and share a bond with them, but then they're moving a lot too, and the relationships do not last. At times I feel alienated, like I do not belong here. Then when Trump became president, this feeling grew stronger and stronger with his anti-immigrant rhetoric.



I once shared my feelings with my husband's colleagues, who are twin sisters from a mixed-race family, born and raised in Jamaica and then immigrated to the US. I opened my heart and told them I wish I could feel like I have a home. They immediately recommended the book "Third Culture Kids".

Third culture kids live in a culture that is different from their parents' culture or the culture of their original nationality, and feel like they are part of neither culture and yet both cultures. Since I moved from China to the United States, where I have spent a significant part of my life, I am a grown-up third culture kid. My Chinese culture is fading while I develop a new cultural identity. I understand how it feels to live in China and live in the U.S., but my friends and relatives who are in China do not understand what I go through living in the U.S., and my U.S. friends do not understand how it feels to be Chinese in this country. This makes me feel lonely, especially when the political relationship between these two countries that I love grows more tense.

The book “Third Culture Kids” helped immensely. Knowing that I am not alone in this journey makes me feel validated. People like me, who celebrate more than one culture, have existed for generations. This book discusses many studies about the unique experiences and the consequent psychological effects of third culture kids and adults. Being a third culture kid is not a lack of identity, it *is* our identity. This book is on the top of my book list because it was so important to me. It provides a foundation for people like me, who are shaped by different cultures, to put our experiences and feelings in words. I hope this book brings light to your life as it has to mine.

2. Minor Feelings, by Cathy Park Hong

This is an essay collection by Cathy Park Hong, a Korean American poet and writer. These essays illustrate a variety of “minor feelings” experienced by Asian Americans, especially Asian women, due to stereotypes and biases. The topics are excellent, and the narratives beautiful. This essay collection became a hit in 2020, representing Asian women’s experiences and thoughts through the lenses of ethnic and gender identities.



3. Chinatown Pretty, by Andria Lo and Valerie Luu

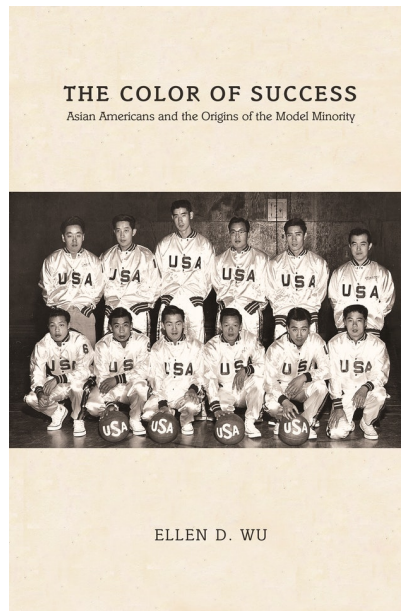
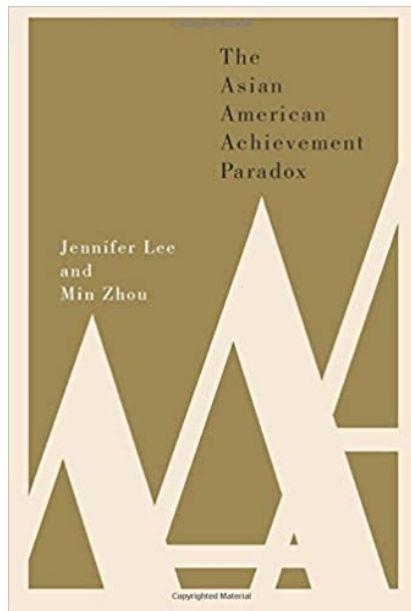
Elderly Asians have been notably targeted in the current wave of Asian hate crimes. When a video surfaced of an old Chinese lady fighting back with a wooden board, she became a hero in everyone’s heart. I often wonder what kind of challenges the seemingly relaxed and silent seniors in Chinatown have been through.

This book is a collaboration by two young Asian female photographers. Featuring vivid portraits and touching stories of seniors across six Chinatowns, this book challenges our stereotypical image of Chinese elders and allows you to discover the uplifting spirit and uncanny humor of those Chinatown grandmas and grandpas.



4. The Asian American Achievement Paradox, by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou

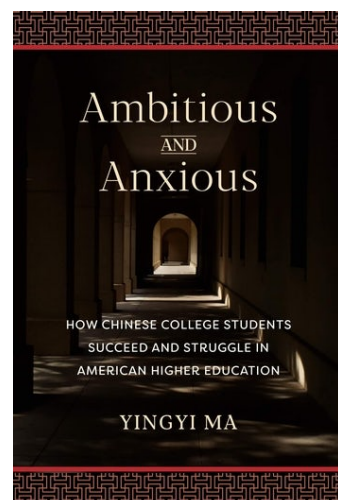
5. The Color of Success, by Ellen D. Wu



These two books are quite similar. They are both about how Asian immigrants succeeded, and how they became “model minorities” at the same time. These two books broke lots of stereotypes and provided new perspectives of the model minority myth. They are especially good for Asian parents who are anxious about education policy reforms.

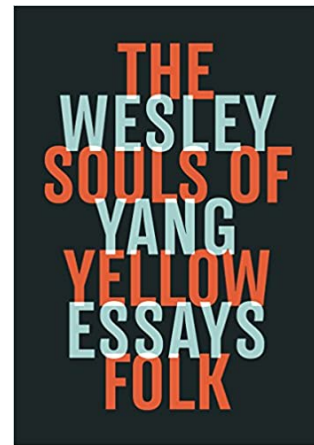
6. Ambitious and Anxious, by Yingyi Ma

The author Yingyi Ma is an associate professor of sociology at Syracuse University. This is a rare book about Chinese students who came to the U.S. in recent years for higher education: their lives here, their successes and losses, their ambitions and anxieties. The COVID-19 pandemic, which spread in the U.S. right after this book was published, took away many Chinese students’ path to higher education in the U.S. Maybe eventually, this book will be not only a sociology study, but a record with historical value.



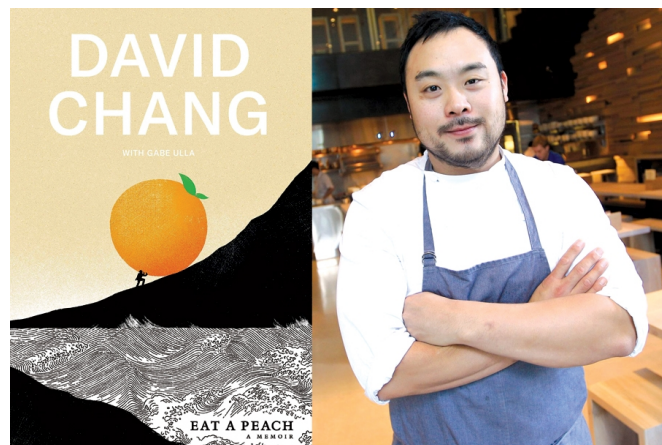
7. **The Souls of Yellow Folk: Essays, by Wesley Yang**

A few essays in this book from Wesley Yang are the best I've seen about Asian males' experience in the United States. It's a very good reference if you want to learn more about that little-discussed experience.



8. **Eat a Peach: A Memoir, by David Chung and Gabe Ulla**

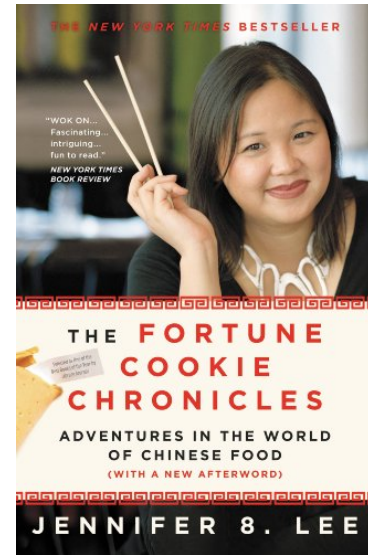
This book is a memoir by the Korean American chef and founder of Momofuku, David Chung. It's a book about how he created his business across restaurants, publishing, and entertainment in an American restaurant industry dominated by white people. In this book, he discusses not only his career, but also about being an Asian man, an underdog who disobeyed family expectations and struggled with depression and suicidal intentions, and his transformation into a dad who accepts himself, loves and accepts being loved.



There are several similar memoirs from prominent Asian Americans of his generation. Whether Ali Wong, or Jimmy O. Yang, they've all talked about the struggles of climbing the social ladder in American mainstream culture as an outsider, while ironically as an outlier not being accepted by their own Asian family.

9. **The Fortune Cookie Chronicles**, by Jennifer 8. Lee

Fortune cookies are a unique invention of American Chinese restaurants. The author Jennifer 8. Lee is a second generation Chinese American, and grew up in New York. After graduating from Harvard she went to study at Peking University in China, and then came back to the U.S. and worked as a food journalist for the New York Times. She mentions her middle name 8 symbolizes prosperity in Chinese culture. This book tells the story of the creation of fortune cookies, and within it tells the story of Chinese food and how American Chinese food developed. If you are looking for a relaxing book, this is a good choice.



10. **All You Can Ever Know**, by Nicole Chung

A large group of Asians living in the U.S. are adoptees. They are frequently considered as “the lucky ones,” but the immense self-doubt, struggle, trauma and guilt they deal with are unknown to many. Their identities often intertwine with discrimination, and their Asian appearance may feel foreign to the experiences and cultures they grow up with in their adopted families.

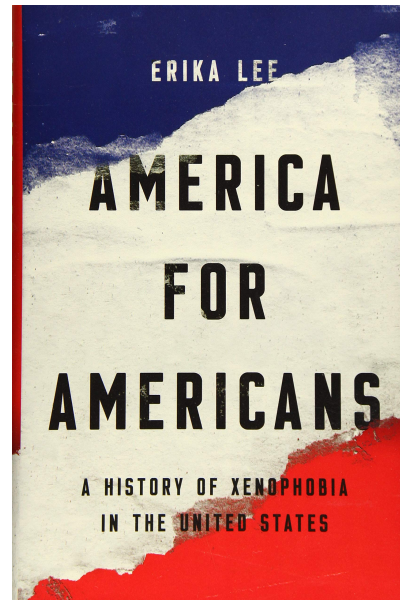
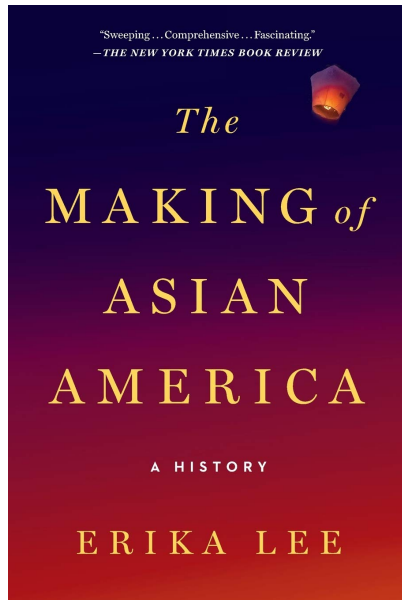


In this memoir, Nicole Chung tells a beautiful story of a journey to understand her identity, reuniting with her family, and healing her wounds when she becomes a mother.

Nonfiction that Focuses on Asian History and Culture Studies:

11. The Making of Asian America, by Erika Lee

12. America for Americans, by Erika Lee



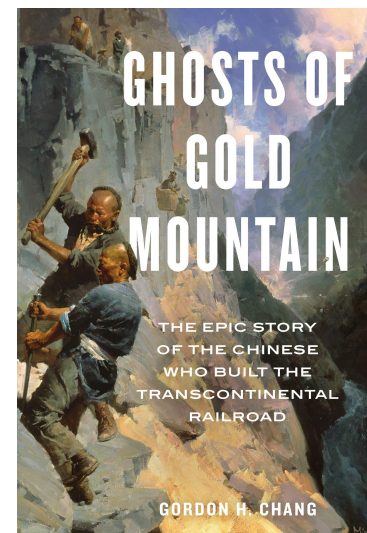
These two books were both written by Erika Lee, a professor of history at the University of Minnesota. Her research specialties include immigration history and Asian Americans.

The first book focuses on the immigration history of Asian immigrants from different countries. The second book is a comprehensive history of perpetuated xenophobia in the United States as a country of immigrants. Early arrivers discriminate against latecomers. Light-skinned immigrants discriminated against those with dark skin. And so on.

13. Ghosts of Gold Mountain, by Gordon H. Chang

This book, about the Chinese workers who arrived in America to build the Transcontinental Railroad, has a dedication page which reads, "For the forgotten." The author, Gordon H. Chang, is a Stanford professor who specializes in China studies and history, and I thought the book would be an academic piece with a tragic plot. It turned out to be a lively book of stories.

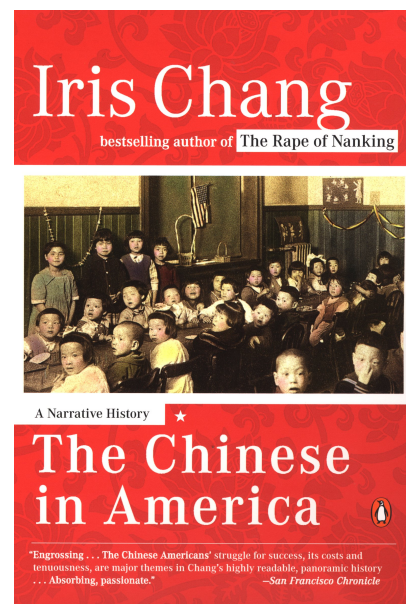
In this book, the author has shown the rich variety of these



early Chinese immigrants' life experiences. At times hated and disrespected, there were also times when they were respected and admired. The group of largely Cantonese immigrants managed to prepare decent food for themselves in the rough terrain of the American west. They made salted fish, soups, herbal teas, and even roasted whole pigs. Their tents were full of soup ladles. It was somewhat comforting reading this. After the Chinese workers finished building the railroad, their accomplishments were briefly acknowledged. However, once their labor was no longer needed, the United States restricted Chinese migrant labor in the latter half of the 19th century, ultimately giving birth to the only law ever made in the United States prohibiting immigration from a specific country or ethnic group, the Chinese Exclusion Act.

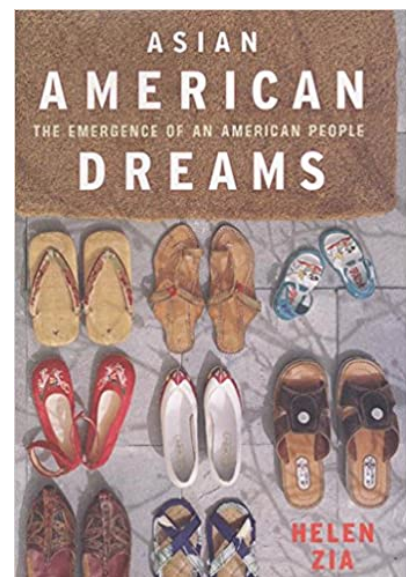
14. The Chinese in America, by Iris Chang

This is the third book by Iris Chang, the author of the widely-recognized *The Rape of Nanking*. On a book tour, the author met with many Chinese Americans from different generations who told her of their experiences, and it inspired her to write this book providing a broad narrative history of Chinese immigration over 150 years. It tells of the Chinese immigrants' great journey forging an identity in a new land, often against great discrimination, to find success and prosperity.



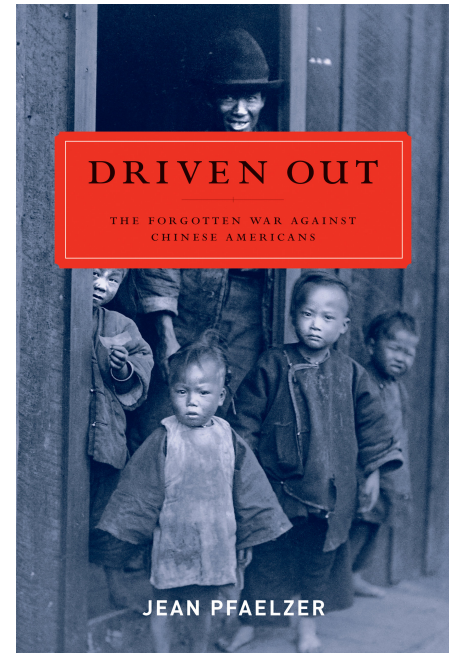
15. Asian American Dreams, by Helen Zia

Helen Zia is a journalist covering Asian communities for a long time, and an Asian civil rights activist. She is a second-generation Chinese immigrant and was one of the first female graduates of Princeton. She actively participated in the civil rights movement while she was in school. Later she worked as a reporter covering the murder of Vincent Jen Chin in Michigan, a turning point in the Asian civil rights movement. As a lesbian, she has also been actively involved in LGBTQ and feminist movements. This book is largely about the history of social movements among Asian groups in the United States.



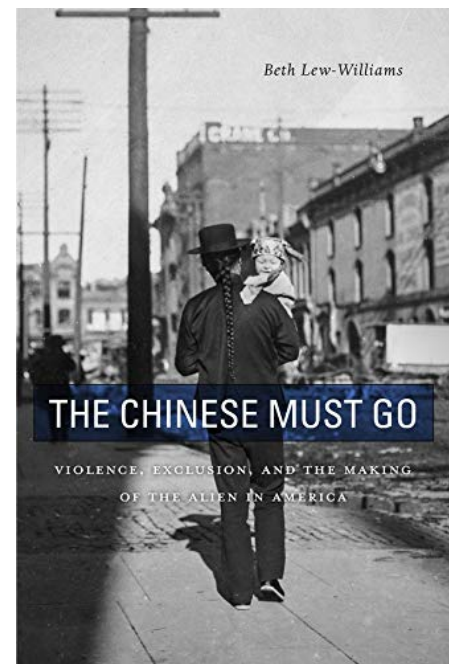
16. Driven Out, by Jean Pfaelzer

When you open the cover of the book, you can find the more straightforward Chinese title of the name - "Paihua" (meaning Chinese Exclusion). The author, Jean Pfaelzer, is a professor of English at the University of Delaware, focusing on women and gender studies and Asian studies. This book focuses on the history of Chinese labor from 1848 to 1900. Because of the author's background, the book reads more like a historical report. Through individual stories, readers can appreciate the contributions of early Chinese immigrants to American infrastructure, in spite of massacres and oppression of their race, and their continuous attempts to fight for a brighter future.



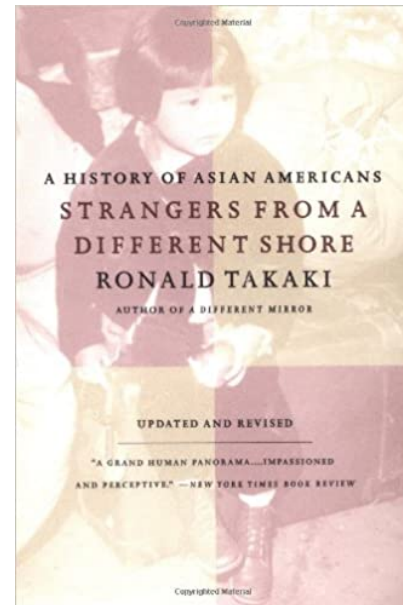
17. The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America, by Beth Lew-Williams

"The Chinese Must Go" is a book by Beth Lew-Williams, a historian of race and migration in the United States. She is Associate Professor of History at Princeton University. I attended a seminar by the author about this book. She described the anti-China violence that broke out across the West Coast of the United States in the 1850s. From California, to Oregon, to Washington State, the government and general public of the United States expelled, oppressed, and even killed Chinese. This book is helpful in understanding the feelings of first generation immigrants from this time, how these experiences took root in Asian American feelings on social issues, and how the feeling that everyone should "bow their heads and behave" came to be passed on within the Asian community.



18. Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans, by Ronald Takaki

A classic on the history of Asian immigrants, published in 1989. The author, Ronald Takaki, received his Ph.D. in history in 1967 from UC Berkeley. He later became a professor of ethnic studies. He established the major of ethnic studies in Berkeley and had a number of students who now continue to strengthen ethnic studies in many academic institutions across the United States. Professor Takaki also promoted teaching the history of Asian immigrants in American K-12 schools. His UC Berkeley obituary stated that “his work has changed the way American history is taught.”

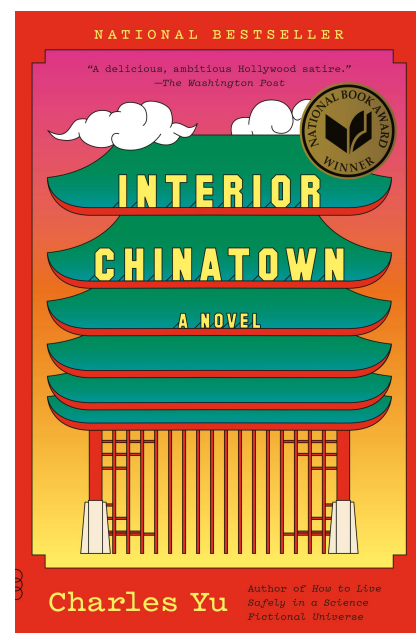


Fiction

Interior Chinatown, by Charles Yu

Interior Chinatown won the 2020 National Book Award for Fiction. Its unique storyline overlays the experiences of new Chinese immigrants with older generations of immigrants. It's an important reading experience especially in the past year. It highlights the astonishing similarities of the seemingly very different journeys of older and newer immigrants.

This is the only fiction book in this list because of my own limitations, since I myself prefer reading non-fiction. However, I've read this novel twice and still keep it at hand. Other fiction on my to-read list includes but is not limited to the following authors: Chang-Rae Lee, Lisa Ko, Min Jin Lee, Viet Thanh Nguyen, and of course, Amy Tan.



Final Thoughts

I strongly recommend a documentary called Asian American from PBS. If you don't have time to read, this documentary provides a good introduction to Asian American history. The authors of several books mentioned above were interviewed in it.



I'd like to recommend a bookstore at Berkeley called Eastwind Books. This bookstore focuses on selling and publishing minority-related, especially Asian-related books, and has been an organizer within the Bay Area's Asian community. COVID has hit their business hard. Eastwind Books provides pickup and mailing services, and if you plan to buy the books mentioned above, please consider supporting them and purchase from their website.



Lastly, the rising violence against Asians in America hopefully has one silver lining: while Asians are frequently the “quiet” minority, staying out of the mainstream American news, suddenly people are noticing we exist. I hope we do not waste this moment. The injustices and fights many generations of Asian people have endured should not be ignored or forgotten. I hope we can understand the shared history of Asian Americans, what we've been through, where we are today, and where we're headed.