

# Teaching the Asian American Experience: Lesson Plans and Teacher Resources

## LESSON PLAN:

# Chinese American Contributions to Art and Film



*Chinese American artists have made lasting contributions in the art and film industries by advocating for change in representation, bringing awareness to sociopolitical issues, and achieving mainstream popularity.*



**Committee of 100**



## LESSON PLAN:

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## Overview

This lesson plan supports the Committee of 100's report entitled, "[From Foundations to Frontiers: Chinese American Contributions to the Fabric of America](#)." It addresses the sections entitled, "Strengthening American institutions" (p. 33) and "Threading the Social Fabric" (p. 43). More specifically, these sections focus on Chinese American contributions to art and film.

In this lesson, students will learn about Chinese American pioneers in the art and film industries. Students will read about various Chinese American actors and artists who have used their platforms to highlight their own experiences and to express the sociopolitical realities they face.

## Lesson Objectives

Students will:

- Identify the contributions of Chinese Americans in art and film
- Identify the challenges Chinese Americans faced in art and film
- Explain why accurate representation in art and film is important

## ESSAY:

# Chinese American Contributions to Art and Film

The United States has had a big impact on global culture and arts. It is considered an [epicenter](#) of modern English-language [cinema](#). It is also a key force in [innovations](#) in musical genres. For example, the United States developed jazz, rock, and folk. Many groups have contributed to this cultural richness. Groups include Black American, Latinx, Asian, and Jewish communities. Chinese Americans have received less attention as a cultural force. But, they have made great contributions. For instance, they have impacted [fields](#) ranging from photography to [animated film](#).

In Hollywood, there was Anna May Wong (1905-1961). Wong was a Chinese American actress. She launched her career in the 1920s. She is considered the first Chinese American actress to gain international recognition. Despite this, Wong faced many setbacks. In 1935, she was denied the lead role of O-Lan in the film *The Good Earth*. O-Lan was a Chinese character. Instead, a white actress played the role in [yellowface](#). Wong struggled to fight against the [Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype](#). In March 1924, she had enough. She created Anna May Wong Productions. She wanted to make her own films about her culture.

Another distinguished Hollywood actor of Chinese descent is Beulah Ong Kwoh (Quo) (1923-2002). Kwoh played over 100 roles in television and film. Early in her career, she changed her last name to Quo. This is because people constantly asked if KWOH was a radio station. In 1965, Kwoh co-created East West Players. This is the country's first Asian American theater company. East West Players allowed Asian American actors to tell their own stories.

Chinese Americans have been a [longstanding](#) voice in the arts in this country. Many artists sought to document the Chinese immigrant experience. They eventually created art to bring awareness to [sociopolitical](#) issues.

Artists and creative thinkers have protested the injustices of anti-Asian racial [discrimination](#). They have raised awareness of the struggles faced by new immigrants. They have fought for positive social and political change. For instance, Jim Dong and Nancy Hom are Chinese American visual artists. They created a "[portable mural](#)" in 1976. The mural is entitled *The Struggle for Low Income Housing*. It is a large-scale artwork. It [protested](#) the destruction of [low income](#) communities in San Francisco. It advocated for increased [civil rights](#) for the city's diverse immigrant populations.

By the late 1900s and early 2000s, Chinese American artists achieved popular [acclaim](#) and [mainstream](#) status. Ang Lee (born 1954) is one of these pioneers. Lee is best known for his movies *Life of Pi*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Jon Chu

(born 1979) is another pioneer in filmmaking. He directed *Crazy Rich Asians* (2018). This film was loved by critics. It also made over \$238 million. It became the highest-grossing romantic comedy of the decade. Ali Wong (born 1982) is another modern pioneer. She is a comedian. She is of both Vietnamese and Chinese descent. She achieved mainstream popularity with two Netflix stand-up comedy specials. Her shows are entitled, *Baby Cobra* and *Hard Knock Wife*.

Chinese American filmmakers and performers bring unique ideas and perspectives to the screen. They have helped U.S. cinema to be more [inclusive](#) and relatable. Their stories connect to both Asian and non-Asian audiences.

*\*This text is an excerpt from the Committee of 100's report entitled, "From Foundations to Frontiers: Chinese American Contributions to the Fabric of America." It has been adapted for reading accessibility and clarity.*

# Vocabulary<sup>1</sup>

## Acclaim

Enthusiastic and public praise

## Animated Films

Motion pictures made from a series of drawings, computer graphics, or photographs of inanimate objects (such as puppets) and that gives the appearance of motion by small changes in each frame

## Cinema

The business and art of making movies

## Civil rights

Personal rights of a citizen guaranteed by the Constitution

## Discrimination

Unjust treatment based on differences, especially categories such as ethnicity, age, sex, or disability

## Epicenter

The central point of something

## Fields

Disciplines or areas of study

## Grossing

Earning a particular amount of money before taxes are paid or costs are taken away

## Inclusive

Including everyone, especially people who have historically been excluded (because of their race, gender, sexuality, or ability)

## Innovation

A new method, idea, or product

## Longstanding

Existing or continuing for a long time

## Low income

A social class categorized by an individual or family making less money than the federal poverty threshold

## Mainstream

Reflecting the popular attitudes and values of a society or group

## Mural

A large painting or picture on a wall

## Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

A stereotype that suggests a person is not considered to be “American” despite being born in the United States or descending from generations of Americans; this stereotype is mostly applied to people of color

## Portable

Easily carried or moved

## Protest

To make a statement or gesture in opposition to something

## Sociopolitical

Relating to social and political factors

## Yellowface

The use of makeup and prosthetics by white actors to portray Asian characters

<sup>1</sup>Definition is adapted from [Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)

HANDOUT:

## Discussion Questions

What did early Chinese American artists and actors have to endure in industries like Hollywood?

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Who was Anna May Wong?

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What was the impact of the creation of East West Players?

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What were the motivations of Chinese American artists to create art for positive social change?

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## ACTIVITY 1:

# Introduction to Chinese American Media Representation

(Suggested Time: 20 minutes)

**Anna May Wong in *Daughter of the Dragon*, where she played a stereotypical “Evil Chinese” character.**



- A. Give students 2-5 minutes and have them brainstorm a list of all artists, musicians, actors, and filmmakers that they can think of.
1. Have students star the Asian American folks.
  2. Have students circle the Chinese American folks. Encourage students to conduct internet research to confirm ethnic heritage.
  3. Have students share their list in small groups and identify the similarities and differences. Have them discuss what accounts for the differences.
- B. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
1. What are patterns that emerged from your lists?
  2. Which ethnic heritage was most represented on your lists? Why is this the case?
  3. Which ethnic heritage was least represented on your lists? Why is this the case?
  4. How easy was it to identify Chinese American folks? Why is this the case?
- C. Show this video entitled, "[Perpetual Foreigner – Systemic Racism Against Asian Americans.](#)"
1. What is the main point of the video?
  2. How were Asian Americans depicted in films at this time?
  3. Why would Helen Zia, a Chinese American, feel like she didn't belong after watching how Asian Americans were depicted in films?
- D. Tell students: "Asian Americans have greatly contributed to industries like art and film, but don't get much recognition. In fact, some of their representation in industries like TV and film, have been harmful stereotypes. In this lesson, we will be learning more about the successes and struggles of Chinese Americans in art and film."

Photo credit: "Anna May Wong in *Daughter of the Dragon*" via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public Domain Image)

## ACTIVITY 2:

# Struggles and Successes of Chinese American Artists

(Suggested Time: 60 minutes)



*Left - Beulah Ong Kwoh (Quo) was a prominent Chinese American actress who was one of the founding members of East West Players, the first Asian American theatre company in the United States.*

*Right - Chinese American artists have contributed to the field of visual art.*

- A. Have students read the essay. Consider the following options:
1. OPTION 1: Have students read the essay independently either for homework or during class time.
  2. OPTION 2: Read aloud the essay and model annotating.
  3. OPTION 3: Have students read aloud in pairs or small groups.
- B. Facilitate a class discussion by asking the following questions:
1. What did early Chinese American artists and actors have to endure in industries like Hollywood?
  2. Who was Anna May Wong?
  3. What was the impact of the creation of East West Players?
  4. What were the motivations of Chinese American artists to create art for positive social change?
  5. How have Chinese American artists contributed to a more inclusive film industry?
- C. Distribute the worksheet entitled, "[Struggles and Successes](#)." Have students complete the chart. Encourage them to use both the text and internet research. Review student responses. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions?
1. What similarities emerged? Did the people mentioned share similar successes and struggles? What were they?
  2. What differences emerged? What accounts for those differences?
  3. How did these Chinese Americans impact the global or U.S culture?
  4. How did these Chinese American artists highlight or challenge the sociopolitical conditions of the time?

Photo credits: Left: "The 7th Dawn (1964) Press Photo of Beulah Quo" by United Artists, via [Wikimedia Commons](#) (Public Domain Image). Right: Art Supplies Artist" by freephotocc, via [Pixabay](#) (Free for use under the Pixabay [Content License](#))

### ACTIVITY 3:

# Significant Chinese Americans in the Arts

(Suggested Time: 60 minutes)

Director Ang Lee, best known for directing and producing movies such as *Life of Pi*, *Brokeback Mountain*, and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Teachers can have students complete one or more of the following options:

- A. OPTION 1: Divide students into small groups. Assign each group to one of these disciplines: TV, Movie/Film, Theater, Dance, Music, and Art. Have each group research 3-5 Chinese Americans that have made a significant impact in their assigned discipline. Have students create a poster of their findings.
- B. OPTION 2: Distribute the worksheet entitled, "[Significant Quotes](#)." Have students complete the chart. Have students combine all the quotes into one inspirational statement. Have students create a poster illustrating the statement.



Photo credit: "LIFE OF PI - Ang Lee- 35th Mill Valley Film Festival" by Cindy Maram/Dig In Magazine, via Flickr ([CC BY 2.0](#))

## ACTIVITY 4:

# Chinese Americans in TV and Film

(Suggested Time: 60 minutes)

### A theater showing *Crazy Rich Asians*, the highest grossing romantic comedy of the 2010s

- A. Ask students: “Who has seen a TV show or movie that featured Asian American characters? What was it? How were they portrayed?”
- B. Distribute the worksheet entitled, “[TV or Movie Watching Guide](#).”
  1. Divide the class in half. Have one half of the students select a TV show or movie that features a Chinese American in a leading role.
  2. Have the other half of the students select a TV show or movie that features a Chinese American in a supporting role.
  3. Have students watch their TV show or movie and complete the worksheet.
- C. Have students work in pairs with one partner who examined a leading role and the other partner who examined the supporting role. Have students discuss their findings and analyze the similarities and differences.
- D. Facilitate a discussion by asking the following questions:
  1. What are some problematic portrayals of Chinese Americans?
  2. What are positive portrayals of Chinese Americans?
  3. How do TV and movies influence your perception of Chinese Americans?
- E. Have students write a paragraph about the importance of representation for a marginalized community.

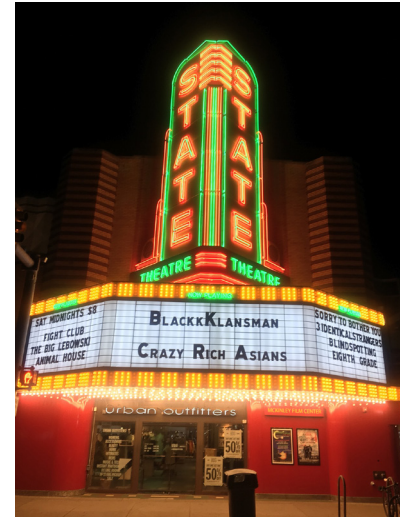


Photo credit: “State Theater in Ann Arbor, Michigan August 2018” by Michipedian, via Wikimedia Commons ([CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

# Extension Activities

(Suggested time per Option: 30-60 minutes)

- A. Have students learn more about “Yellowface” and its history by reading the article entitled, [“Yellowface, Whitewashing, and the History of White People Playing Asian Characters.”](#) Have students select and watch an example of yellowface or white-washing and create a video (i.e., TikTok, YouTube) identifying at least three problematic issues and how they can be remedied.
- B. Have students identify and research a Chinese American artist (i.e., painter, sculptor, etc.). Have students identify at least 3-5 techniques or characteristics of the artist’s work and then mimic the art.
- C. Have students create a program for a film festival where they curate 3-5 films. Have students select a theme and the films. Have students create an agenda and include a description of all of their selected films.
- D. Have students identify at least three problematic portrayals of Chinese Americans in TV and film. Have students create their own TV show or film that aims to remedy these problematic portrayals. Have them create a movie trailer. Encourage students to use platforms such as [Animoto](#), [iMovie](#), and [Windows Movie Maker](#) to make their trailer. Encourage students to incorporate multimedia such as music, images, and even voiceover. Host an event in which students can share their videos.
- E. Have students re-read the first paragraph of the essay. Have them research the contributions that communities of color made in musical genres like jazz, rock, and folk. Have them present their findings to the class.

## Additional Fictional Resources

- A. *Dream, Annie, Dream* by Waka T. Brown (Quill Tree Books, 2022) - Have students compare Annie's experiences with theater to those of Anna May Wong, Beulah Ang Kwoh, and other individuals they have researched. Have them write about similarities and differences related to the context, media landscape, and struggles and successes of each person.
- B. *Not Your All-American Girl* by Madelyn Rosenberg and Wendy Wan-Long Shang (Scholastic Inc, 2022) - Have students discuss the title of the book and create a bubble map about beliefs they hold around the phrase "All-American" within art and film. Have students consider how Lauren's Chinese and Jewish American identities add complexity to her story.
- C. *Stand Up, Yumi Chung!* by Jessica Kim (Puffin Books, 2021) - Have students consider how stereotypes around comedy and Asian American girls are represented in the book. Have students research Asian American female comedians and compare them to Yumi.
- D. *The Magic Fish* by Trung Le Nguyen (Random House Graphic, 2020) - Have students examine how the main character uses storytelling (specifically fairy tales) to communicate with his Vietnamese immigrant parents. Have students discuss how art can be used as a platform to express identity and culture.

## Further Information

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Breaking the Color Line in Hollywood: Beulah Ong Kwoh, Actor](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Actress Anna May Wong](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[APIDAs on the Big Screen](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Generation Rising, APIDAs Contribute](#)"

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled, "[Perpetual Foreigner - Systemic Racism Against Asian Americans](#)"



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