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Mission-Centered Engagement with Asian American Student Veterans

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Abstract

This article draws qualitatively on the experiences, reflections, and expressions of Asian American student veterans through Asian American Studies courses and activities the authors have led in the decade between 2006 and 2016, at an urban public research university that is federally designated as an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institution, and recognized annually among four-year universities as “best for vets.” Beginning with a brief introduction to Asian American military service historically and currently, we note the lack of research and resource materials available nationally that is informed by or responsive to the backgrounds, perspectives, and needs of Asian American student veterans in college. We then provide a synthesis of rich documentary evidence based on Asian American student veterans’ voices, to illustrate the value of Asian American Studies curricular strategies and pedagogical approaches, particularly through digital storytelling, that create integrative contexts for their holistic connections and contributions as Asian Americans, as veterans, and as university students. Beyond the classroom and campus, we also offer concrete examples of community-centered connections through Asian American Studies that enable Asian American student veterans to engage with public sites and local civic organizations that share significant legacies of Asian American veterans’ leadership and service across generations.

Keywords: Asian Americans, student veterans, Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions, Asian American Studies

Introduction

In the blustery wake of the summer 2016 national Republican and Democratic party conventions, which nominated their respective candidates for president and foreshadowed dramatic nationalist shifts in the U.S. political landscape, the life and loss of Pakistani American Army Captain Humayan Khan—posthumous recipient of the Bronze Star and Purple Heart—briefly came into sharp focus for the country. Captain Khan had graduated from the University of Virginia and its Army ROTC program just prior to 9/11. Killed in action in Iraq by a suicide car bomb, Captain Khan’s ultimate sacrifice, as shared through the words and memories of Ghazala and Khizr Khan, his gold star mother and father, momentarily clarified the contradictory meaning of his service to the country as a Muslim American and Asian American veteran.

Captain Khan and nearly 50,000 other Asian American and Pacific Islander women and men, have served in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere worldwide since September 2001. Little has been written about this contemporary generation of Asian American and Pacific Islander veterans, particularly with regard to their increased presence on college campuses. Although, federally-designated Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs)—including Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), Hispanic Serving Institutions (HSIs), Tribal Colleges and Universities (TBCUs), and Asian American Native American Pacific Islander Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs)—enroll high proportions of student veterans of all backgrounds nationally, the specific role of AANAPISIs or other types of colleges and universities, in providing relevant supports and services for Asian American student veterans is not well-articulated.

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This article draws qualitatively on the experiences, reflections, and expressions of Asian American student veterans through Asian American Studies courses and activities the authors have led and documented in the decade between 2006 and 2016 at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMass Boston), an urban public AANAPISI that is also recognized as “best for vets” among four-year universities.

Although our research-for-publication commitments are primarily associated with the fields of education and Asian American Studies, we seek here to engage directly with the growing, interdisciplinary field of veterans studies. In explicitly centering Asian American student veterans as an important focus of attention for the veterans studies field, we have chosen to share an integrative, reflexive, narrative-based case that draws broadly on a decade of programmatic insights grounded in student engagement.

Due to space limitations, we say little about the field of Asian American Studies or the curricular and pedagogical model of Asian American Studies at our own urban, public, minority-serving university, about which we have written extensively elsewhere (Tang & Kiang, 2011; Kiang, 2003). We also do not discuss the broader literature on low-income or first generation Asian American college student persistence that both informs and has been influenced by our long-term educational praxis with UMass Boston’s particular student profile (Tang, 2017; Museus, antonio, & Kiang, 2016; Bitney, 2013; Kiang, 2009; 2002).

Nevertheless, by introducing distinctive voices of individual Asian American student veterans, and by documenting their connections to specific classroom, curriculum, campus, and community contexts that align with their backgrounds as both Asian Americans and Post-9/11 veterans, we are intently urging veterans studies-oriented researchers, teachers, program leaders, service providers, and advocates in higher education settings to recognize the Asian American veterans within their own domains of interest and to connect with them in meaningful, mission-centered ways. This is a relevant challenge for the veterans studies field to address because, as we briefly show below, so little Asian American content is available through existing educational research and policy reports, or online resources that have been developed or disseminated nationally in order to present faces, voices, experiences, and issues of current-generation student veterans.

Given that military service is a fundamental aspect of Asian American and Pacific Islander community realities, both historically and in the contemporary Post 9/11 period, we are also recommending that AANAPISIs be recognized as important educational sites for Asian American and Pacific islander student veterans, especially if AANAPISI student support services and veterans support services are aligned. Finally, beyond service coordination, our case shows that Asian American Studies curricular and pedagogical engagements, can represent a uniquely powerful, mission-centered model of practice for Asian American and Pacific Islander student veterans within AANAPISIs and, perhaps, more broadly throughout higher education.

Military Service in Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities

A modest body of literature and visual media has documented the experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander veterans throughout U.S. history, focusing predominantly on World

War II-era Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans (Center for Minority Veterans, 2013; Del Rosario, 1999). During the Vietnam War era, roughly 35,000 Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders served directly in-country, most of whom were U.S.-born Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans, along with Native Hawaiians, Chamorros, and other Pacific Islanders (Kiang & Loo, 2006). The names of at least 250 U.S. Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders appear on the national Vietnam Veterans Memorial designed by Maya Ying Lin (Kiang, 1991).

Community-based oral histories, newspaper accounts, and clinical assessments represent important sources for Asian American and Pacific Islander veterans' voices, perspectives, and experiences from the WW II and Vietnam eras to the present (Moy, 2014; Loo, 1998). New resources are frequently shared online via the public Asian Pacific American Veterans *facebook* group, which was created and is co-administered by co-author Seto. Relevant national data have also been compiled in reports by governmental agencies such as the Center for Minority Veterans (CMV) under the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

In addition to scholarly and print materials, flowing lyrics by contemporary Filipino American hip hop artists with military family backgrounds, such as Deep Foundation, Geologic, and especially Bambu—a Marine Corps veteran himself—acknowledge recent deployments and long-standing demands for Filipino WWII *veteranos*' benefits (Villegas, 2016). One segment of Maria Hinojosa's 2016 public television series, *America By The Numbers*, further highlights the extraordinary service record and urgent needs of Pacific Islander veterans from Guam where as many as one in eight adults is a veteran, and roughly 20% of the Iraq/Afghanistan-serving veterans have PTSD.

These multiple sources reveal complex and contradictory motivations for Asian American and Pacific Islander military service historically and currently, ranging from proving loyalty on behalf of family and community, to following ancestral legacies and indigenous beliefs (Shavelson, 2010). Specifically, for the Post-9/11 generation within an all-volunteer context, the culture and structure of discipline and organization in military units, the value of educational benefits accrued through military service, and, for some, a potential pathway to citizenship (Phillips, 2018), represent compelling factors that lead many to enlist.

Post-9/11 veterans and college

The total population of Asian American veterans across all generations in 2017 was 297,891 while Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander veterans numbered 33,981 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). Among a total of 53,457 active duty Asian American military personnel, 4% are officers and 3.8% are enlisted members (Center for Minority Veterans, 2013). Among current women veterans, Asian Americans represent 2.3% (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2016). However, the experiences, needs, and assets of Post-9/11 Asian American or Pacific Islander veterans have received little attention from researchers (Tsai, Whealin, & Pietrzak, 2014; Tsai & Kong, 2012).

Nationally and locally, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) operates as the primary infrastructure of care and service delivery for veterans of all backgrounds, but Asian Americans and Native Hawaiians/Pacific Islanders have relatively low rates of usage of Veterans Administration programs (National Center for Veterans Analysis and Statistics, 2012). While face-to-face contact and peer outreach models of community-based, VA-funded Vet Centers have been standard practice since the Vietnam era, the more recent online presence of the VA for the Post-9/11 generation is notable, both in providing a 24/7 access point to menus of services and in enabling story-sharing content through digital media platforms such as *YouTube*. VA-supported websites such as *Make the Connection*, are intended to offer resources and stories that will be meaningful to diverse veteran populations, their families, and support networks. For example, the online video resources described

in the next two paragraphs were all publicly available and assessed by the lead author on 7 August 2016.

When examined closely, a total of 304 four-minute personal stories of Post-9/11 veterans were accessible in the video gallery and also available via *YouTube*, including one Army veteran and two Air Force veterans who visually appear to be Asian American men: [Aaron](#), [Mitchell](#), and [Josh](#). Three out of three hundred is proportionately far less than the percentage of Asian Americans among Post-9/11 veterans noted above.

Furthermore, these three stories do not explicitly reveal any specific racial or cultural aspects of Asian American identity as part of the individuals' military experiences or readjustment processes, though each example offers a valuable lesson in resilience. For viewing audiences who are Asian American, however, simply seeing individuals who look like oneself represents one strategic means of personal connection and potential engagement. Aaron, for example, recalls his initial return to higher education at an unnamed campus in the Bay Area—the site of several AANAPISIs—when he was not ready. He describes being hypervigilant in the lecture hall, maintaining clear line of sight to the exits, and other symptoms of PTSD that led him to realize, through conversations with other veterans, that he needed to deal with the effects of his combat experience before he could do well in school. Though the issues raised by these short videos with Asian American veterans primarily highlight VA-related services rather than college-going experiences, they do provide relevant perspectives for AANAPISI faculty and staff to understand.

The VA's *Make the Connection* site also includes one [specific group video](#) focusing specifically on student veterans, titled "VA Student Veterans and Stories of Growth," featuring interviews with six student veterans, of whom four are white, two are Black, and five are male. For student veterans, an additional online resource is provided by Student Veterans of America (SVA). Among profiles of student veteran achievement highlighted online through text and photographs by SVA, the only Asian American or Pacific Islander is Army veteran, [Sherry Shi](#), who leads a campus student veterans organization and states that she "loves to break stereotypes" as a woman veteran and Asian American.

Given the dramatic increase in numbers of student veterans of all backgrounds attending colleges and universities, including AANAPISIs, many resources and rubrics have been developed with intentions of maximizing student veterans' educational outcomes while minimizing their difficulties in transition and adjustment. Print and online resources for college personnel to work more effectively with student veterans are readily available, albeit with no specific mention of Asian Americans or Pacific Islanders (Osborne, Arndt & Coleman, 2015; Rose, 2010). Similarly, the American Council on Education (ACE) has played a leadership role in convening national stakeholders to make recommendations designed to shift institutional perspectives and capacities from being "veteran-friendly" to becoming "veteran-ready" (American Council on Education, 2015a), and to develop more sophisticated approaches to conducting research on student veteran outcomes in higher education. However, none of ACE's work on student veteran issues mentions Asian American or Pacific Islander populations, AANAPISIs, or other MSIs (American Council on Education, 2015b).

AANAPISIs and Student Veterans

AANAPISIs constitute a small but noteworthy sector within U.S. higher education comprised primarily of urban or island-based community colleges and four-year schools that enroll high percentages of low-income Asian American or Pacific Islander students (Tang, 2017). AANAPISIs represent less than 1% of all colleges and universities in the US, yet enroll 20% of all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (Teranishi et al., 2014). Moreover, AANAPISIs conferred 47% of

all associate degrees and 25% of all bachelor's degrees to Asian American and Native Hawaiian Pacific Islander students in 2010 (California College Campaign, 2015).

AANAPISIs, by definition, represent critically important higher education access points for under-served, low-income, first-generation Asian American and Pacific Islander students and communities nationally (Maramba, 2017). As expectations grow for AANAPISIs to play stronger roles in relation to research, policy, and practice (Teranishi, Alcantar & Underwood, 2018; Tang, 2017), the contributions of AANAPISIs that also enroll large numbers of student veterans deserve special attention, such as California State University Sacramento, Coastline Community College, Guam Community College, and the University of Guam. In 2014, for example, UMass Boston—the only AANAPISI research university in New England—enrolled a total of 586 student veterans, an increase of 14% since 2010. UMass Boston and Bunker Hill Community College in Boston, also a designated and funded AANAPISI (Ashford, 2019), are the top two schools in Massachusetts enrolling student veterans overall (Rocheleau, 2014).

Although many issues of post-military separation and transition to college are relatable and adaptable for student veterans of any racial or cultural background, distinctive Asian American aspects of identity and experience are, nevertheless, important to recognize. For example, given the nature of engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, many returning veterans must cope with the effects of traumatic brain injury and other moderate to severe disabilities. Yet, Lee (2010)'s study focusing on Asian Americans with acquired brain injury clearly showed that their coping strategies were strongly influenced by collectivist cultural values and reference points related to family and community ecologies, which sharply contrasted with predominant theories/practices in the field that emphasized fulfillment of individual needs as the key to coping success. Culturally rooted, group-centered relations with family and community, represent strong sources of both support and stress for Asian American students overall (Bitney, 2013; Xia, Do, & Xie, 2013), and are clearly referenced in specific narrative examples provided in subsequent sections below.

Moreover, staffing profiles and priorities of campus units providing veterans services and disability services are typically not well-aligned and may not effectively engage with Asian American student populations, particularly among immigrant students for whom linguistically and socio-culturally responsive relationships are especially important. Therefore, AANAPISIs—with explicit, federally recognized, institutional missions and capacities to serve Asian American and Pacific Islander populations—should be at the forefront of addressing the complex, intersectional needs of Asian American and Pacific Islander student veterans, students with disabilities, and others.

Despite the availability of MSI funding streams for targeted student support services, a basic challenge facing AANAPISI staff is how to reach a profile of students who do not typically utilize the institution's services, campus facilities, and extra-curricular opportunities. Like students at other urban, predominantly commuter institutions, AANAPISI students often maintain demanding work schedules and difficult immigrant family responsibilities. Furthermore, many Asian American students, including student veterans, are older, have attended several higher education institutions, and cannot afford to waste time or money in their calculations of time-to-degree completion. Offering Asian American Studies courses, particularly those that fulfill general education and diversity course requirements, therefore, can maximize instructional time in strategic ways that are economically efficient and educationally effective as well as emotionally therapeutic for student veterans.

Among AANAPISIs, UMass Boston's Asian American Studies Program has modeled an integrative approach between university academic affairs and student services, long before the official AANAPISI designation was legislatively authorized through the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008. Historic connections between Vietnam veterans and Southeast Asian refugees at UMass Boston in the 1980s and 1990s are well-documented, particularly in relation to "pedagogies of

PTSD” in Asian American Studies classrooms (Tang & Kiang, 2011; Kiang, 2003; Loo & Kiang, 2003). Building on such practices, more recent examples with new generations of student veterans are highlighted in the following sections.

Institutional Context and Asian American Student Veteran Identities

Consistent with AANAPISI characteristics, UMass Boston’s undergraduate Asian American students are predominantly first-generation and financially-modest. Many come with transfer experiences from other post-secondary institutions (i.e., local community colleges), most commute to school and also work part-time to full-time while taking care of numerous bilingual responsibilities within their immigrant/refugee families. Reflecting the demographic profiles of metro Boston’s Asian American communities, the two largest cultural identities of Asian American students are Chinese and Vietnamese (Lo, 2017; Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2013). In addition, ethnicities ranging from Korean, Khmer, and Filipinx to Pakistani, Indian, Nepalese, and others also have significant presence on campus. Asian American student veterans’ ethnic and cultural identities reflect those of the Asian American student body overall, although the portability of GI Bill benefits enables some Asian American student veterans from out-of-state to also enroll.

Drawing on our long-term commitments to research, teaching, and advocacy with urban, high-need, under-resourced Asian American students (Kiang, 2009; 2002), we view the background contexts of Asian American student veterans multidimensionally:

- as Asian American individuals with specific cultural, linguistic, and spiritual values, traditions, and practices expressed within family and community contexts;
- as immigrants or children of immigrants with shared familial experiences of language/culture barriers, adaptive sacrifices, and gendered, inter-generational conflicts, along with multicultural strengths and robust sociocultural networks;
- as refugees or children of refugees (for those who are Hmong, Khmer, Lao, Vietnamese, and some ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia, for example) with shared familial experiences of forced displacement, intergenerational trauma/loss, and resilience;
- as racial minorities with personal and familial experiences of discrimination and violence, racialized categorization, and community resources aligned with advocacy and empowerment;

Additionally, Asian American student veterans experience racist, gender-specific harassment, and victimization in military settings (i.e., boot camp) that reflect both historic and contemporary characterizations of Asians—including many of whom are also Muslims—as “enemies” of the U.S. which deepen the multiple, intersecting layers of traumatic stress and resilience in distinct ways not shared by non-Asian student veterans (Kiang, 2003). Asian American student veterans’ diasporic connections to extended families and homeland roots that might also be stereotypically or ideologically associated with threats to U.S. security, such as China, Korea, and Pakistan, are similarly important to acknowledge.

We are not aware of any formal research study ever conducted with a cohort of Asian American student veterans at any U.S. college or university. As an alternative, our own programmatic efforts have prioritized ongoing classroom and curricular contexts with robust campus and community connections that are engaging and empowering for Asian American student veterans and students of all backgrounds at our urban, public, minority-serving university. In course-based educational environments throughout the decade of 2006 to 2016—supported by a stable Asian American Studies curriculum with 7-10 courses offered each semester—Asian American student veterans’ narrative voices, reflective writings, co-produced digital stories, and other documentary projects have offered rich insights into their experiences and perspectives, individually and collectively, as the following sections reveal.

Creating Curricular Contexts of Connection

Regardless of subject area, compelling classroom interactions and the organic building of in-person trust, respect, and understanding throughout a semester/quarter, are critically important to the recruitment, retention, achievement, and well-being of under-served Asian American students, including student veterans. Yet, complex classroom dynamics due to differing demographic profiles and subject-positions, as well as cultural and ideological differences are also daily realities in AANAPISI and MSI settings. For example, student veterans of diverse racial, cultural, and religious backgrounds have been deployed in countries and regions that are the homelands of immigrant/refugee classmates. What has been experienced or viewed as imperialist intervention by one, might mean strategic defense for another, or simply following orders for still another. To address such complex multi-vocal realities, one example of embracing shared connections while highlighting differences in perspective and promoting collective healing among Post-9/11 refugee students and student veterans at UMass Boston was facilitated by two student leaders from the Asian American Studies Program—a Chinese American Marine Corps male veteran and an Iraqi female refugee—who worked closely together in 2010 to organize a campus-wide gathering and panel discussion led by Iraq war student veterans and Iraqi refugees. After this remarkable event, the Iraqi student wrote:

I already knew that the Iraqi refugees are facing homelessness due to the lack of jobs and the little benefits they receive from the government. But I was surprised at the fact that Iraq War veterans are also facing homelessness, an issue that was raised and discussed by a veteran at the forum. Another struggle the veterans talked about is the instability that they feel as a result of the war. Why are Iraq War refugees and veterans suffering? Why do we deliver people to wars and then act as if they do not suffer? We tend to imagine that they are fine, but the panelists' stories and experiences do not show that they are fine. Their tears do not show that they are fine. In fact, the panelists left the people in the room asking themselves what their role should be to help the affected people, a goal I wanted to achieve (Al-Edanie, 2010, p. 26).

While comparable campus gatherings are possible to convene as one-time events without curricular support, the organizing process in this case already had a foundation of analysis and relational trust-building, through the two organizers' extensive Asian American Studies coursework. Pedagogical building blocks of family and peer interviews, reflective writing, historical and community context-setting, and project-based synthesis have enabled numerous Asian American student veterans to develop and deepen their clarity and capacities, to embrace and synthesize their identities in relation to migration history and family legacy, as well as military and re-integrated civilian contexts, from the past to the present while looking ahead to the future.

For example, in a lower-level course on Southeast Asians in the US in 2008, one student veteran reflected on becoming more critically aware regarding the Vietnam War era: "As a veteran of the US Army, I had mixed emotions about my own service and what it meant as a Chinese American. The more I learned about US history, the more I am disappointed about what this nation has done to others in their own country and outside of the US. My heart is heavy right now just thinking about it."

In a different introductory course, Asians in the US, also taught in 2008, a Caribbean American student veteran interviewed his classmate, a Chinese American veteran, and noted: "He left for boot camp for the Marine Corps in Jan. 2001. In boot camp, he was one of only three Asians in a group of almost 80 recruits. While in the military he also experienced racism, when he heard others refer to Asians as 'communist chinks.'"

Two years later, in the course, Southeast Asians in the US, a female Army student veteran also reflected on feelings of ambivalence and contradiction, openly describing experiences with

racism in the Army, especially as an immigrant from Vietnam speaking with an accent that was often ridiculed. At the same time, she readily acknowledged that she “learned a lot from my experience and they paid for my college tuition and gave me benefits,” which were important to her financially as a single mother raising a daughter. Furthermore, her educational experience and connection to veterans’ resources on campus also enabled her to cope more effectively and purposefully with PTSD—unforeseen benefits that she also revealed in class discussions.

Four years later in 2014, a Korean immigrant student wrote in his initial reflection essay for the Asians in the US course:

I started to become Americanized since 6th grade, English started to become more comfortable than Korean. Most importantly, it was unpleasant to see my parents constantly demanding a traditional Korean way of thinking and life style.

Communication between my parents and myself crumbled away as an enormous hate arose inside my heart. I could not stand their standard of my academic, as it seems like I could never satisfy them even with the Honor Society certificate. My delinquent behavior started in 9th grade...I decided not to go to school anymore. Even a suicide became possible option to end everything. I could not find any happiness or purpose in my academic life. I suffered corporal punishments but my mind already left the school.

I dropped out of high school and obtained G.E.D and entered the United States Army.

These examples illustrate how Asian American student veterans’ perspectives and experiences have been engaged, documented, and reflected on through Asian American Studies coursework. Themes of high school disengagement, family communication gaps, family histories with war, racism in the military, intentions to be in college, and processing of war experiences are clear in these examples, and may resonate for other Asian American and Pacific Islander student veterans as well.

Digital Storytelling Narrative Construction and Identity Reintegration

The complex process of integrating and narrating Asian American student veterans’ identities has been more intensively engaged through advanced Asian American Studies courses such as Asian American Media Literacy. Through co-author Tang’s digital storytelling co-production process, which she began teaching in 2005, students utilize media tools to craft first-person narratives that reflect their personal, family, and community “real-life real stories” products (Tang, 2017; 2010). Several Asian American women and men have taken the Asian American Media Literacy course and co-produced powerful, highly integrated narratives related to their military service.

For example, a Chinese American student veteran majoring in sociology with a concentration in Asian American Studies took Tang’s course in 2007. The oldest daughter among four girls, her video project explores the intergenerational and cultural conflicts in her family that led to her decision to leave home and join the military at the age of 18. Her video challenges mainstream media portrayals of Asian American women as eroticized, subordinated, or evil, as she narrates her two-generation family history from the perspective as an American-born Chinese female veteran who has demonstrated her Post-9/11 sense of duty through military service. It also shows how an Americanized young woman eventually comes to terms with the traditional Chinese values of her father.

A Vietnamese immigrant student in his final semester before graduation in 2010, used his digital storytelling project to explore the deep sense of lost direction he felt, especially in light of the severe economic recession in the US during that time, and the pressures of his family’s expectations versus his own aspirations. On one hand, he wanted to fulfill his refugee father’s plan that he become a dentist. On the other hand, he strongly wished to enlist in the US military, in part to ensure stable income, employment, and further funded education during the economic downturn. His parents’

refusal to support this choice—presented aurally in Vietnamese with English subtitles for the viewer—brings the video to a climax when his father states:

Don't you think that one day your young brother and cousins will follow you? Have you ever thought maybe one day your cousins might die in the battlefield and your uncles and aunts will blame you for their children's deaths?

His mother, also in Vietnamese, tearfully adds:

I was a little kid when your uncles join the military during the Vietnam War. I still remember that my mother cried every night and had to pray for her children to come home in one piece. I remember the day that your second and third uncles came home with the yellow flag on top of their coffins. Your grandmother did not eat and drink for two days. She did not cry at all because she had no more tears. Whenever I look up at the ancestral altar, I have a scared feeling that one day my children will be like my brothers.

By voicing and visualizing these actual cross-generational family legacies of survival and loss from war in his video project, he clarifies the cost-benefit calculations at stake for low-income, refugee/immigrant families regarding college major and career choices. Indeed, with no resolution, he ends his video with a final message speaking directly on-camera in Vietnamese with English subtitles for his parents to see and hear, apologizing for causing them worry while asking for continued communication and trust in his capacity as their son to make responsible decisions. Although not yet a student veteran, his digital story conveys critical dimensions of decision-making that point both toward and away from enlistment during a period of economic recession and active duty combat deployment. As his case shows, the crux of conflict between Asian American students' goals and their refugee/immigrant parents' expectations, cannot simply be juxtaposed between students' desires for individual liberal arts freedom and parents' pragmatic pressures that rigidly prioritize economically viable job options. The final message of bilingual communication in this digital story, then, reflects a curricular and pedagogical process of learning that—with practice over time—creates the capacity for the student to persist, despite an unclear future and unresolved family context.

The curricular structure and pedagogical support of this advanced Asian American Studies course successfully integrates the unique, multi-sensory nature of the digital storytelling medium with the emotional depth that typically characterizes personal narratives of student veterans. The co-production process leading to exhibition of the finished product at the end of the semester, is highly impactful for each student individually and for the entire class collectively. Furthermore, the use of these completed digital narrative examples co-produced by Asian American student veterans, as well as other examples of student work available through the Digital Storytelling in Asian American Studies archives described more fully elsewhere (Tang, 2017), represent valuable resources for faculty and staff professional development, especially in critical AANAPISI support areas such as advising, counseling, and student development.

This student-centered curriculum and pedagogy of Asian American Studies represents a model of AANAPISI praxis that engages and supports Asian American student veterans within secure, highly structured educational environments where they are able to narrate, contextualize, re-integrate, and share their own experiences in relation to larger themes of history, identity, and community, as part of a collective knowledge-co-production process (Chua & Evans, 2018). The development of student-centered, Asian American Studies and Pacific Islander Studies curricular resources and opportunities for AANAPISI students, including student veterans, cannot be overstated (Museus, Wright-Mair, & Mac, 2018).

Connecting Community Contexts

An additional hallmark of Asian American Studies, pedagogical practice connects students experientially with communities through targeted field trips and other strategies (Kiang, Suyemoto, & Tang, 2000). One site, in particular, located adjacent to UMass Boston, is the Dorchester Vietnam Veterans Memorial (see Figure 1). Inspired, in part, by Maya Ying Lin's vision for the Wall in Washington, D.C., the Dorchester Vietnam Veterans Memorial's arching granite stones preserve eighty names of US Vietnam veterans from the local, working class, Dorchester neighborhood of Boston.



Fig 1. Photo of UMass Boston's Spring 2014 Southeast Asians in the US class field trip to the Dorchester Vietnam Veterans Memorial, adjacent to the campus. Photo credit: Peter Kiang

In addition, the memorial also formally honors the collective service of those who gave their lives for and from the Republic of Vietnam, and includes four large granite benches along the perimeter that highlight the regions of South and Central Vietnam such as Chu Lai, Nha Trang, Tay Ninh, and Can Tho, where each of the U.S. I-IV Corps military forces established operations. Not coincidentally, these are also ancestral village sites for many Vietnamese refugee and immigrant families who settled in the same local Dorchester neighborhood since the early 1980s (Bui, Tang, & Kiang, 2004). The memorial provides veterans and refugees with connections to a shared past, just as they now live in this urban, multiracial neighborhood with their own families, sharing the present. It also has special meaning for Asian American student veterans, such as this Army veteran who wrote, following a field trip in the Southeast Asians in the U.S. course:

I have never been to the Dorchester Vietnam Veterans Memorial before, but I have seen pictures of it. I have to say that I had mixed feelings when I was there because I didn't really know what to think or feel at first. Everything I saw reminded me of all the experiences I had in the military. When I saw those names on the arch, I thought

of the people I knew that died in Iraq and all those that are still serving over in the Gulf. I think about when the war ends over in Iraq and Afghanistan, will they ever have a Gulf War Memorial with my friends' names on them. I wondered what these other students are feeling and thinking. I thought about the Vietnamese students in the class and what this memorial meant to them. Did they care? Did anyone in the class care that there were people who fought for their freedoms and mine? And besides all the politics, did anyone care about those that are serving right now in Iraq and Afghanistan? I just don't know. I guess it is hard for anyone to understand, when they never experienced it. I am one of the lucky ones to be home again. Sometimes, I wonder what this generation takes for granted... but since taking this class and going to the memorial, hearing my classmates speak and truly seeing the connection we share, I am glad that I am was a part of it all.

Moreover, given that students of all racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds take Asian American Studies courses, non-Asian student veterans also find relevant meaning and connection, as this 2013 reflection by a white student veteran in the Southeast Asians in the U.S. course similarly reveals:

[T]hank you for bringing us to the Dorchester Vietnam War Memorial today. I think it is a great experience. It makes me happy to know that there are people out there who appreciate and respect the troubles that service men/women have gone through. I apologize for not being able to say more, as you may have noticed I have extreme difficulties talking about my experiences in the Army. As I mentioned, I still, and probably always will be, trying to adjust to life outside of the military and especially life outside of a war zone. My memories and anxiety are still the biggest obstacles and right now I just do not feel comfortable speaking about them in front of others. I am sure you can understand that.

Centering veterans' legacies experientially through community-engaged field trips in the curriculum, is a simple but effective pedagogical practice embedded within several Asian American Studies courses. More ambitious community engagement strategies are also possible to develop through collaborations with active veteran-centered organizations in ethnic based communities ranging from Japanese, Chinese, and Filipino to Vietnamese, Hmong, Chamorro, and others.

Community Leadership Legacy

The American Legion Boston Chinatown Post 328 offers one such community-based example. The post was founded by local Chinese American veterans immediately after World War II and later sustained by Korean War and Vietnam War generations. More recently, younger generation Asian American veteran leaders from the contemporary Gulf War Iraq/Afghanistan era—including several who graduated from UMass Boston with concentrations in Asian American Studies—have revitalized the ranks of Post 328. In 2009, two Chinese American student veterans, invited Chinatown Post 328 members (see Figure 2 next page) to participate in an Asian Pacific American Inter-Generational Veterans Forum, sponsored by the Asian American Studies Program at UMass Boston. In describing the event, co-author Seto wrote:

A packed filled room full of professors, faculty members, staff, and students were present to see and listen to the stories and experiences of Asian Pacific American veterans across generations of the old and new. As an Asian American veteran myself, I created this event to recognize and acknowledge those that have served proudly and honorably for their country. We hear very little about Asian Pacific Americans serving in the military. Their sacrifices and efforts have made tremendous contributions throughout American history...The event also gave a space and a gathering of different generations to come together in one setting to talk and discuss about their

experiences within the military and now as a veteran. Many topics came out of the panel discussion. Examples of racism and prejudice were presented. War was talked about and the issue of identity surfaced.



Fig. 2. Annual installation ceremony in Boston Chinatown for the American Legion Chinatown Post 328 in 2013, including Chinese American veterans of the WWII, Korean, and Vietnam Wars, along with five Post-9/11 Asian American veterans who are UMass Boston alumni. Photo credit: Peter Kiang

Following their respective graduations from UMass Boston, Seto and Army veteran Amy Au, became successive Post Commanders themselves from 2013 to 2017. Au made special history in 2015 as the Post's first female Commander (Chin, Ching, Fong, Yee, Seto & Dong, 2017) and both demonstrated how local Asian American and Pacific Islander community-based veterans' organizations, can represent longer-term, mission-centered opportunities for leadership and service by new generation student veterans beyond campus.

Career Military Service and Asian American Studies Alumni

Finally, it is important to recognize that some student veterans continue serving in the military after university graduation, typically through career trajectories as officers. In such cases, the structure and definition of leadership and service remain coherent, and the campus role in the operational world of the Asian American or Pacific Islander student veteran, is far less influential than that of the military itself. Yet, even in such cases, the impact of one's Asian American Studies experience can still resonate, as evidenced by this email communication from a Korean American student veteran who graduated in 2006 and initiated his own reconnection while deployed in Iraq one year later:

I was sifting through some old emails, and of course I had some that involved assignments for school. My life is so different now from when I was in Boston... I've been in Iraq [for six months]. It's been quite the experience. I've had some good times, lots of terrifying times, and a few sobering experiences. I will never forget holding my friend's bloody possessions in a bag after he had been killed...I will also never forget the comradery and the shared misery that I have shared with my men. The sleepless nights on rooftops, the dryness of my mouth and cold sweat trickling down my back,

hoping that we don't step on a mine. My first contact with the enemy was like a slow lethargic dream. I have helped rebuild the municipal governments in our areas, helped rebuild fish and chicken farms, then the same night go on a raid to capture Al Qaeda...It's rare that I have more than an hour off, but I seem to have a lot of spare time today. Hopefully, you still use this email.

After another two years, the same alumnus reached out once again with a fresh update and reflection:

I make Captain in the next month or two. I'm switching specialties from Infantry to Intelligence, so I'll enjoy the change...I do plan on grad school, if I stay a few more years, the army will make me go and pay for it as well...I swear I'm smarter since I've left school, I'm more apt at critical thinking... I actually can see myself in the army for the long haul...honestly, all those AA [Asian American] studies classes really opened my mind in thinking outside the box.

By remaining in contact long after graduating, this Korean American alumnus clearly communicates how his classroom experiences of respect and relevance in Asian American Studies earned his lasting trust and loyalty.

Conclusion

On the eve of the Lunar New Year of the Horse in 2014, a multiracial, multigenerational crowd filled a local Cambridge, Massachusetts church to celebrate the life of William (Bill) Cobham, a Korean War Army veteran of mixed Afro-Caribbean-Chinese heritage with a lifelong commitment to service spanning nearly 84 years. Among his still-active duties at the time of his passing, Bill Cobham was the immediate past Commander of American Legion Chinatown Post 328. In this solemn, yet celebratory moment marking his life passage, an extraordinary, albeit little-recognized community leadership transition also came to attention.

The remarkable procession of Bill Cobham's Chinese American veteran peers from the WWII and Korean War generations advanced slowly—showing signs of their own age and health conditions as well as their ceremonial deference. Walking in formation with them to the rear, wearing the same symbols of Chinatown Post 328, were several young generation Chinese, Khmer, and Vietnamese American male and female veterans of the Iraq and Afghanistan operations—all of whom also happened to be affiliated as former or current Asian American Studies students at UMass Boston.

Folding the flag twelve times and presenting it to the Cobham family, one of the younger generation Vietnamese American Post members—a matriculated UMass Boston student veteran with impeccable posture in his Marine Corps dress blues—faithfully followed military protocol and repeated those words of gratitude and appreciation on behalf of the nation for Bill Cobham's honorable service two generations earlier.

To a critical academic scholar in the contemporary Asian American Studies field, the peer-regulated tendency to complexify might lead one to analyze such a scene through themes and theories of multiple migration circuits, cultural memory, collusion with empire, or relations to Blackness. From an AANAPISI Asian American student veteran perspective, however, the scene's meaning may be better understood simply in relation to honor, community leadership, and the cycle of life.

UMass Boston's Asian American Studies Program emerged initially in the mid-1980s, due to the remarkable convergence of commitments, visions, resources, and needs that connected the urban public university's mission with the educational pathways and capacities of Vietnam-era veterans and Southeast Asian refugees. Two decades before AANAPISI designation, the university was home, not only to the largest percentage of Vietnam veterans returning to college, but also to the largest percentage of Vietnamese refugee students in the region (Kiang, 1998). At that time, we did not expect to witness another generation of soldiers and student veterans who had experienced large-scale, active duty deployments, combat, terror, and trauma in the name of the country. But since the

mid-2000s, a new generation of student veterans has indeed enlisted, served, survived, separated, and resumed life trajectories in college, including some who have attended AANAPISIs like UMass Boston and re-engaged with personal, family, and community purposes within Asian American Studies classrooms and related settings (see Figure 3).



Fig 3. Congressional Gold Medal recipient and WWII Japanese American Army veteran, Susumo Ito (now deceased) with Cambodian American Marine Corps. Veteran of the Iraq War, Richard Sann, at UMass Boston's 2014 Student Veterans Day annual recognition event. Photo credit: Peter Kiang

Throughout this time, we have found that educational environments can provide culturally responsive contexts, within which Asian American student veterans are able to make meaningful connections between their past experiences and current or future commitments. Research, documentation, and cultural production with current and future generations of student veterans—some of whom ironically are themselves children of refugee survivors of previous wars in Southeast Asia—are important to support and sustain, especially in AANAPISI settings with robust Asian American Studies classroom structures, supports, and commitments such as the examples described above.

For researchers, educators, service providers, and advocates across the veterans studies field, then, we urge wider and deeper recognition of the following:

1. military service is a fundamental aspect of Asian American and Pacific Islander community realities, both historically and in the contemporary Post-9/11 period;
2. federally-recognized Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving institutions (AANAPISIs) are important post-secondary educational sites attended by Asian American and Pacific islander student veterans;
3. campus student support services should be aligned responsively to both the racialized, sociocultural backgrounds and military experiences of Asian American and Pacific Islander student veterans;

4. curricular and pedagogical engagements in Asian American Studies coursework can uniquely support the reconstruction and integration of grounded identities with fresh missions of community leadership by Asian American and Pacific Islander student veterans at any college or university where they are present and accounted for.

Regrettably, 75 years passed before surviving Filipino veterans of World War II were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal for their military service and sacrifice in 2017 (Fuchs, 2017) and still-living Chinese American World War II veterans were themselves honored with the Congressional Gold Medal most recently in 2019 (Iskra, 2019). Similarly, in Kiang's prior research as part of Loo and colleagues' (2001) pathbreaking empirical study of race-related PTSD among Asian American and Pacific Islander Vietnam veterans—a project conducted roughly three decades after the veterans had completed their military service in Vietnam—one participant reflected with both relief and impatience: “this study should have been done a long time ago”; and another added, “this is the first time I know of anyone that has done a study on Asian Americans” (Loo and Kiang, 2003, p. 39). By sharing voices of current and future generation Asian American student veterans, and specifying some of the Asian American Studies curricular contexts through which they have gained fresh opportunities to coherently re-integrate their identities and re-align their service missions in civilian community contexts, we hope current and future generations do not have to wait so long for their own, much-deserved recognition and authentic engagement in US higher education and beyond.

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