



ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN GLOBAL EDUCATION

Literature Review



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ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENTS IN GLOBAL EDUCATION

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Introduction

In response to globalization, leaders in education have emphasized the importance of study abroad participation in order to compete in the global economy, ensure national security, and increase cultural awareness. Advocates argue that study abroad programs enable students to develop both academically and developmentally; therefore, it should be an integral part of the undergraduate student experience. For example, studies show that students who participate in foreign study have a greater understanding of and interest in global issues, are more open to new experiences and cultures, have stronger intercultural communication skills, gain self-confidence, and increase their overall maturity (Salisbury, Paulsen, & Pascarella, 2011).

The number of students who study abroad in the United States has steadily increased over the past ten years, yet the racial profile of the average U.S. study abroad student has remained unchanged (Institute of International Education, 2018). In the 2016-2017 academic year, 70.8% of U.S. study abroad students were white while 8.2% identified as Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander according to the Institute of International Education (2018). Educators and researchers have focused on understanding the influences and barriers for underrepresented students in study abroad, however, the research has predominantly focused on students of color as whole or solely on African American students. There is little research that focuses on Asian American students and the varied ethnic groups therewithin. This literature review is comprised of the existing research on the factors influencing Asian American students to study abroad and the barriers that may prevent Asian American students from studying abroad.

Who is Asian American?

The Asian American racial category encompasses a broad range of people of varied heritage and history. The term Asian American points to two important qualifiers: ethnic ancestry and a history of immigration to the United States. Within these two qualifiers there is a multitude of cultures and identities. Combining all these identities into a single racial category fails to acknowledge

the heterogeneity of the community. These factors make Asian Americans one of the least understood ethnic groups in the U.S.

The term Asian, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, includes people from the regions of Far East Asia, Southeast Asia, and India (2017). This definition refers to both immigrants from Asia and people of Asian descent. Asian countries include China, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Japan, Cambodia, Vietnam, Philippines, Thailand, and many others. Asian as a racial category is sometimes paired with Pacific Islander, which refers to people from the Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or the Pacific Islands (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). This literature review acknowledges the differentiation between Asian and Pacific Islander and will focus on the Asian and Asian American population.

Ronald Takaki (1990) describes the immigration of Asians to the U.S. in two waves; the first wave coming for economic reasons and the second immigrating due to war-stricken homelands. These two waves of immigration are important to note as they help to unlock some of the differences in the Asian American community. There are Asian American families who have been in the U.S. for generations. These families are more established and had time and resources to assimilate to society and ultimately climbed the socio-economic ladder (Van der Meid, 2003). On the other hand, there are Asian Americans who have come to the U.S. under different circumstances such as refugees from Laos, Cambodia, and Bangladesh (Ahmad & Weller, 2014; Van der Meid, 2003). The differences in immigration history and motivation result in various socioeconomic levels represented within the vast and quite heterogeneous ethnic category of Asian American (Van der Meid, 2003). These differences also influence data on academic achievement and study abroad.

Asian Americans in the United States

Since the conceptualization of the term “Asian American”, the general American public has become fixated on Asian Americans’ high academic and career achievements and their notable accumulation of wealth in the short period of time that they have been in the United States (Chang, 2017). This “model minority” stereotype emerged from national statistics that consistently measured that the percentage of Asians holding bachelor’s degrees was higher than the national average and that of non-Hispanic whites, along with Asian households’ much higher median income than average and that of non-Hispanic whites (Zhou & Xiong, 2005). According to the label, despite the hardships that first-generation Asian immigrants experienced when moving to a new country, learning a new language and culture, and trying to find work, second-generation Asian Americans have been able to succeed in assimilating to U.S. society both academically and financially. As a result of this idea of the “model minority,” the American public has uplifted Asian Americans in an effort to discredit other minority groups’ claims of a racist and unfair society that caters to white Americans (Chang, 2017; Zhou & Xiong, 2005).

There are a myriad issues with the “model minority” label. First, this belief arose in the 1960s, when the population of Asian Americans largely consisted of Chinese, Indian, and Japanese immigrants (Ahmad & Weller, 2014; Chang, 2017). Today’s population of Asian Americans is far more diverse, as the Asian population has grown at a faster rate than all other races in the U.S. Asian Americans now include Laotian, Cambodian, and Bangladeshi people, among other South and Southeast Asian ethnicities. These ethnic groups are also among the highest unemployed and highest poverty-stricken populations in the U.S. (Ahmad & Weller, 2014). Immigrants from Asia also have more varied reasons for coming to the U.S. today when compared Asian immigrants in the 1940s and 1950s. Asian immigrants from China and India continue to primarily seek education or employment, while other South and Southeast Asian groups are increasingly asylum seekers (Ahmad & Weller, 2014; Zhou & Xiong, 2005). Relatedly, Asian groups such as the Laotian, Cambodian, and Bangladeshi peoples altogether make up four percent of the Asian population in the U.S., whereas Asian groups with very low unemployment rates and high household incomes make up the majority of the Asian American population (Ahmad & Weller, 2014; Cherng & Liu, 2017; Zhou & Xiong, 2005). These smaller Asian American subgroups that struggle to survive in the U.S. are therefore ignored in the aggregated statistics of Asian American success.

Asian Americans in Education

The most significant problem with the “model minority” label is its effect on Asian American students. Asian families have been observed to value hard work and academic achievement, which is reflected in the stereotype. The stereotype becomes reinforced for Asian American students in the classroom, where teachers report having higher expectations for these students when compared to students of other racial and ethnic identities (Cherng & Liu, 2017). This conflation of race with academic achievement has led to Asian American students feeling incredible amounts of pressure to live up to parents’ and teachers’ expectations all while trying to balance the traditions of their heritage culture with fitting into American society (Chang, 2017; Maxwell & Kwon, 2018; Panelo, 2010). Paradoxically, even though they receive more academic support from parents, Asian American students benefit less from this support than most other racial and ethnic groups. However, their decrease in performance may also be related to teachers who are less likely to recognize that their Asian American students are struggling academically (Chang, 2017; Cherng & Liu, 2017). Especially at the college and university level, these students have reported not knowing how to communicate their academic and personal strife nor to whom, and even fearing seeking help because doing so is believed to be contradictory to the “model minority” stereotype (Ocampo, 2013; Panelo, 2010). As a result, Asian Americans may experience an identity crisis, questioning if they are “really Asian” if they are not succeeding academically, and many other express feelings of depression and anxiety (Ocampo, 2013; Panelo, 2010). The “model minority”

stereotype therefore plays a significant role in Asian American students' identity formation and performance in academic settings.

Motivations for Studying Abroad

Study abroad was once seen as experience limited to those from the privileged white middle class; however, the number of students from underrepresented populations seeking out these experiences is growing. In an effort to democratize study abroad it is necessary to understand the benefits specific to each of these ethnic minority communities, including Asian American students. Most of the literature to date has focused on the benefits for students from underrepresented populations broadly or has focused on African American students. One can assume that many of the factors influencing ethnically underrepresented students by and large would affect Asian American students as well but there is lack of literature to confirm this (Van der Meid, 2003).

A common motivation for studying abroad is heritage seeking, or study abroad for the purpose of learning about one's own ethnic or cultural background. While this is not unique to Asian American students or students of color, this exploration of identity is common in students who desire to become more connected with their ancestry. For example, a Chinese American student from a family that is well established in the U.S. might have a stronger urge to study abroad in Shanghai than a recently immigrated Chinese American student (Van der Meid, 2003). In Van der Meid's (2003) study, Asian American students reported studying abroad in Asia above the national average, with 26% of those who studied abroad traveling to China, Japan, or Taiwan. Thus it seems that Asian American students are more likely to be heritage-seeking than the average study abroad student. Other factors that can influence Asian American students' interest in study abroad include receiving grants and scholarships from their home institution, aspiring to complete a graduate degree, and interacting and making friends with students from diverse backgrounds while in college (Salisbury et al., 2011). Receiving money, whether federal aid or institutional scholarships, and having a diverse group of friends are influencing factors to study abroad that are shared by Asian American, African American, and Hispanic students. Meanwhile, aspiring to complete a graduate degree as a factor that influences one's decision to study abroad is unique to Asian American students (Salisbury et al., 2011).

While Asian Americans make up a larger percent of the U.S. study abroad population each year, the increase has been small over the last ten years. According to the Institute of International Education's (2018) data, Asian American and Pacific Islander students made up 8.2% of the U.S. study abroad population in 2016-2017 academic year, up from 6.7% in 2006-2007, the smallest increase for almost all racial minority groups in the ten-year time frame. In order to understand this level of underrepresentation for Asian American students in study abroad, it is important to understand the unique barriers to study abroad that they face.

Obstacles to Studying Abroad

Higher education scholars have long examined why students of color remain underrepresented in study abroad opportunities (Carter, 1990; Cole, 1990; Jarvis & Jenkins, 2000; Norflores, 2003). Rigid program structures, lack of course requirements, length of study, lack of family and community support, fear of the unfamiliar, and anxiety about racism in a foreign country have historically been identified as the primary causes behind why students of color hesitate to study abroad. More recent scholarship has also found that students of color are less informed about study abroad opportunities, less likely to understand the relevance between study abroad benefits and career objectives, have fewer role models who support participating in study abroad experiences, and are less likely to receive support from peers and family (Jarvis & Jenkins, 2000; McLellan, 2007; Norflores, 2003).

Van der Meid's (2003) article used a quantitative approach with 153 self-identified Asian American undergraduate students to explore factors that influenced Asian American students to study abroad or not to study abroad. Of the 153 participants, 78 wanted to study abroad and 75 did not want to study abroad. The study found that nearly one-third of non-study abroad participants were either immigrants themselves or children of immigrant parents. Nearly 76% of the non-study abroad participants recently arrived in the United States and, therefore, had less opportunity to establish themselves. Vietnamese students, for example, were of the least likely ethnic groups to study abroad. This finding supports the notion that a shorter amount of time residing in the United States decreases the chance a student will study abroad given that most Vietnamese families immigrated to the United States within the last 30 years.

The same study found that the top five factors influencing Asian American students to not study abroad were: 1) study abroad did not fit into academic program; 2) affordability; 3) lack of time; 4) lack of interest in programs offered; 5) concern about language difficulties while studying abroad (Van der Meid, 2003). Fifty-seven percent of the non-study abroad participants cited "didn't fit into academic program" while 31% included "could not afford to go." Contrary to findings from studies on African American and Latinx students in study abroad, factors that did not prevent Asian American students from studying abroad were fear of cultural differences and lack of support from friends. In addition, non-study abroad students were more likely to describe themselves as "cautious" compared to the study abroad participants, who described themselves as "adventurous." This highlights that students who are less inclined to take risks in their lives would be less likely to have studying abroad as one of their primary goals of attaining an educational degree.

Lastly, two important barriers are revealed in Salisbury, Paulsen, and Pascarella's (2011) study. First, while male students are underrepresented in study abroad in all racial and ethnic categories, identifying as Asian American and male significantly decreased these students' likelihood of

studying abroad, even when compared to white American male students. This finding suggests that there may be societal influences that decrease Asian American males' interest in studying abroad. Finally, the study found that an increase in Asian American students' parents' education attainment correlated to a decrease in the likelihood that they would study abroad (Salisbury et al., 2011). Due to the “model minority” belief that the parents are likely to have grown up with and enforce on their children, educated Asian American parents might have a specific definition of a successful undergraduate career, which does not include study abroad. Therefore parental influence may be a significant factor in Asian American students' likelihood or ability to study abroad.

How to Support Asian American Students

As existing literature on Asian Americans in study abroad endeavors is lacking, the first suggestion on supporting Asian American students is to produce more scholarly articles on this very subject. In Van der Meid's (2003) seminal work, the most reported reason that students did not go abroad was that study abroad did not fit into their academic plans. However, in this study, the majors represented in the group of students who went abroad and the group of students who did not go abroad were very similar, which suggests an underlying reason as to why Asian American students do not study abroad. The second most common reason was that they felt that they could not afford it, despite generally being aware of the financing options for study abroad (Van der Meid, 2003). These findings are in alignment with those on students of other racial and ethnic backgrounds (Norflores, 2003; Salisbury et al., 2008), but more research is needed on underlying factors that may turn Asian American students away from study abroad. As for students who have gone abroad, there are three main takeaways from Van der Meid's (2003) study. First, many Asian American students reported being misidentified and having to defend their American identity. This was true for those who studied abroad in Asian countries where they might resemble locals and in other locations where they looked “foreign”. Second, the participants of the study rated the overall student services that they received as “average” (Van der Meid, 2003). Finally, returned students reportedly did not share their study abroad experience with others. This data suggests that more effort needs to be made in preparing Asian American students for challenges unique to them that they may face while abroad. Additionally, connecting students who have returned from abroad to resources of interest to them, such as prospective Asian American study abroad students and other returned students of Asian descent, could be beneficial.

Lastly, literature on how to support Asian Americans in higher education in general reveals several key points that can be applied to supporting Asian Americans in study abroad. Due to the “model minority” stereotype, Asian American students feel great pressure to succeed (Chang, 2017; Maxwell & Kwon, 2018; Panelo, 2010). More importantly, both parents and teachers reinforce this stereotype with their high expectations and lower ability to detect Asian American

students' academic struggles (Cherng & Liu, 2017; Panelo, 2010). Thus, abandoning the "model minority" label is most pertinent. Some steps that teachers and parents can take include engaging students in discussion about the stereotype, their academic goals, and how they can better support students in academic endeavors. As parents play a significant role in Asian American students' academic lives, it may also be beneficial for parents to listen to their children about their academic interests and their interests in study abroad (Panelo, 2010). In addition to the "model minority" label, Asian American students often report grappling with their identity in college and while studying abroad, and not knowing who to turn to discuss their feelings (Ocampo, 2013; Panelo, 2010; Van der Meid, 2003). Asian American students, and Asian American adults in general, also report feelings of anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts at higher rates than the national average (Maxwell & Kwon, 2018; Lipson, Kern, Eisenberg, & Breland-Noble, 2018; Panelo, 2010). Of all racial and ethnic groups, Asian Americans are the least likely to seek mental health care. Mental health therefore seems to be a common issue within the community, and should be addressed at the community level. Two reasons as to why mental health may not be prioritized in Asian American communities are the stigma within certain Asian cultures against mental health issues and the language and cultural barriers (Maxwell & Kwon, 2018; Lipson et al., 2018). It would be best to provide Asian Americans in general with information about mental health within each individual's cultural context and in the native or dominant language of that individual. As the act of speaking with a therapist is stigmatized in both Asian and American societies, and is doubly reinforced with the "model minority" stereotype, providing Asian American students with resources that are more familiar to them would likely increase the utilization of such resources (Maxwell & Kwon, 2018; Lipson et al., 2018; Panelo, 2010). Some examples include a tutor or academic mentor who is also trained in counseling services, an advisor to Asian American students who also identifies as Asian American, and a group of Asian American students with whom they can identify and connect. In particular, connecting with a group of Asian American students could benefit students who have studied abroad and those that are preparing to study abroad (Salisbury et al., 2008; Salisbury et al., 2011; Van der Meid, 2003). Given the collective nature of many Asian cultures, connecting Asian American students to a community that they identify with is imperative not only to support them in study abroad, but to support this population as a whole in higher education.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Asian Americans come from numerous ethnic, cultural, and migratory backgrounds. These significant differences within the Asian American racial group result in significantly different lived experiences in the United States which are not represented in aggregated statistical data. There is no one way to cater one's advising practices to all Asian American experiences, and it is therefore helpful to learn about the histories of the various Asian ethnic groups in the United States. Additionally, knowing about the "model minority" stereotype, how it affects Asian American students, and breaking away from this stereotype are important steps in supporting Asian American students in higher education and study abroad.

Gaps in Literature

As mentioned above, there is not enough literature focused solely on Asian Americans in study abroad endeavors. Van der Meid's study, the most significant literature that analyzed Asian Americans' study abroad interest and participation, features data from the early 1990s. An update on her research using data from the 2010s is required. Additionally, due to the lack of literature on Asian American students in study abroad, it is difficult to draw evidence-based conclusions. There is a lack of robust feedback from Asian American students who have gone abroad and from those who did not go abroad. Future research should include more in-depth responses from students so that more inferences and conclusions can be drawn with regards to Asian American students' motivations and obstacles to study abroad.

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