

3.6 - Perpetual Foreigner - Systemic Racism Against Asian Americans

The Asian American Education Project

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Grade Levels	5-12
Lesson Overview	PBS <i>Asian Americans</i> Episode 1 – Breaking Ground (1850s – 1920s). Perpetual foreigner stereotyping is a form of systemic racism used against Asian Americans and other communities of color. They have historically been stereotyped as foreigners in the United States no matter their duration of time living here or whether they were American-born. The perpetual foreigner stereotype is maintained by institutions such as Hollywood, private and public sectors, and elected public officials. Throughout U.S. history, Asian Americans have been scapegoated as the cause of the country’s various problems and catastrophes including economic despair, wars, terrorism, and the coronavirus pandemic.
Lesson Objectives	<p>Students will be able to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learn about and discuss what systemic racism is. • Learn about and discuss the perpetual foreigner stereotype as a form of systemic racism against Asian Americans. • Learn about and discuss the challenges Asian Americans face due to being viewed as perpetual foreigners in Hollywood, public and public sectors, and by elected public officials in the United States. • Learn about and discuss the consequences of perpetual foreigner stereotyping on Asian Americans. • Discuss personal experience with stereotyping and the harms it might cause. • Research stereotyping in various communities. • Discuss how stereotypes are used to pit races or groups against one another, and how certain groups are taken advantage of by those with power and authority. • Discuss why and how to combat stereotyping.
CA Ethnic Studies	<p>Themes: Identity, History and Movement, Systems of Power, Social Movements and Equity.</p> <p>Asian Americans Course Content: Unit 7: Asian American Social Movements (ES)</p> <p>Disciplinary Area: Asian American and Pacific Islander Studies</p> <p>Ethnic Studies Values and Principles Alignment: 1, 4, 5, 6, 7</p>

Perpetual Foreigner - Systemic Racism Against Asian Americans Essay

Stereotyping is used to pit one race or group against another, pushing some to the bottom of the pecking order and allowing certain groups to be taken advantage of. It also prevents people from uniting and advancing together. **Perpetual** foreigner stereotyping is a form of systemic racism used against Asian Americans, who have historically been stereotyped as foreigners in the United States no matter their duration living here or whether they were American-born. Asian Americans were placed into segregated schools and were excluded from immigration and citizenship for over 60 years.

The perpetual foreigner stereotype is maintained by institutions including Hollywood, private and public sectors, and elected public officials. As far back as 1865 during the construction of the Transcontinental Railroad, Chinese workers were seen as inferior labor and placed into unskilled jobs, earning two-thirds what European workers did, and segregated into “section houses.”

In the entertainment industry, the acting career of Anna May Wong was stymied by the **Hays Code**. Instead of Wong, the lead female role in *The Good Earth* (1937)—about Chinese farmers—went to Luise Rainer in **yellowface**. Mickey Rooney also used yellowface to portray a Japanese neighbor in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961). This practice of Asian roles going to white actors instead of qualified Asian actors would later evolve into **whitewashing**, as seen most recently with Tilda Swinton playing an Asian monk in *Doctor Strange* (2016), and Scarlett Johansson as the lead character—originally Japanese—in *Ghost in the Shell* (2017).

During World War II, Japanese Americans were seen as foreigners. Under the pretense of national security, almost the entire population (120,000) of Japanese Americans in the continental United States were incarcerated from 1942 to 1946, and lost their homes and businesses. Two-thirds of them were American-born citizens.

In 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, became a scapegoat for the decline of the American auto industry in the 1980s. Chin was murdered by two unemployed white autoworkers who thought he was Japanese. In 1999, Joseph Ito, a Filipino American, was murdered by an avowed white supremacist for being a person of color. Balbir Singh Sodhi, an Indian American, was the first among many murdered shortly after the September 11, 2001 attacks, because the murderer thought he was an Arab Muslim.

In 2020 during the COVID-19 pandemic, the head of U.S. government and other elected public officials referred to the coronavirus as “the China virus.” This labeling created an environment in which violence and attacks against Asian Americans were more permissible. Thousands of innocent Asian Americans were scapegoated for being the cause of the coronavirus, and faced hate speech, hate incidents and hate crimes in the process.

Throughout all of these points in history, Asian Americans have organized in different ways to protest and fight back against these injustices.

Works Cited:

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- James, Meg, David Ng. “In Hollywood, Asian American actors see few lead roles, and pay discrepancies when they land one.” *Los Angeles Times*. <https://www.latimes.com/business/hollywood/la-fi-ct-hawaii-five-0-asian-actors-20170708-story.html>. Accessed 27 Sept. 2020.
- Sodhi, Rana, Harjit Sodhi. “Remembering Balbir Singh Sodhi, Sikh Man Killed in Post-9/11 Hate Crime.” *StoryCorps, Inc.* <https://storycorps.org/stories/remembering-balbir-singh-sodhi-sikh-man-killed-in-post-911-hate-crime/>. Accessed 27 Sept. 2020.
- Yam, Kimmy. “Trump is 'legitimizing' hate incidents against Asian Americans: U.N. experts.” *NBC Universal*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/u-n-experts-trump-legitimizing-hate-incidents-against-asian-americans-n1243791>. Accessed 16 Oct. 2020.

Vocabulary:

- **Hays Code:** a set of rules governing American filmmaking from 1930-1965; among other restrictions, the Hays Code prohibited interracial relationships onscreen¹
- **Perpetuate:** continuing to spread or maintain a certain idea or belief²
- **Stereotype:** a fixed general image or set of characteristics representing a particular type of person or thing, which may not actually be true; often negative³
- **Yellowface:** the usage of makeup and/or prosthetics by white actors to portray Asian characters⁴
- **Whitewashing:** the casting or rewriting of Asian roles for white actors⁵

¹Definition adapted from TVTropes.org

²Definition adapted from The Collins Dictionary

³Definition adapted from The Collins Dictionary

⁴Definition adapted from The Cambridge Dictionary

⁵Definition adapted from The Merriam-Webster Dictionary

Discussion Questions:

1. What are some common images of Asian Americans on TV and in movies today?
2. What stereotypes of Asian and Asian Americans appeared in Hollywood films?
3. How might seeing positive or negative images of a group affect you, especially if you are part of the group being portrayed?

Activity 1: Your own experience with stereotyping

A. Show students the video entitled, “[I Am an American](#)” by Run AAPI. [Run time: 01:34]

1. After viewing the video clip have an entire class discussion on the following questions:
 - Have you ever experienced stereotyping?
 - What difficulties have emerged when others view you differently than you view yourself?
 - What difficulties have emerged when you view others differently than they view themselves?
 - Have you heard of the term self-stereotyping?
 - How do you think stereotypes might impact the way you see yourself?
 - Have you ever experienced other people constantly saying things such as, “you are lousy at math,” and you end up believing it?
 - This constant message/point of view that you may not be good at something, or that you are a certain way, might lead you to believe in something that may not be true. How do you overcome that?

Activity 2: Perpetual foreigner - Systemic racism perpetuated by multiple sectors of society

A. What is Hollywood’s role in systemic racism?

1. Explain and discuss the following terminology with the class:
 - Yellowface, Brownface, Blackface
 - Whitewashing
 - Perpetual foreigner
2. Have students research the following:
 - In 2015, #OscarsSoWhite highlighted Hollywood’s racial inequity problems. What did #OscarsSoWhite reveal about how Asian Americans are stereotyped?
 - Find other examples of yellowface and whitewashing in film/media. (One example: Emma Stone, a white actress, portraying a part-Hawaiian-Chinese character in 2015’s *Aloha*.)

3. After conducting research and viewing the video clip, have a whole class discussion (i.e., large group, think-pair-share, [Socratic Seminar](#)) with students on the following questions:
 - What are some problems that Asian Americans encounter when yellowface and whitewashing occurs?
 - How is the use of yellowface, brownface and blackface problematic?
 - How is whitewashing problematic?
 - Do you think it is acceptable for Hollywood to perpetuate stereotypes?
 - What can we do about it?

B. How does perpetual foreigner stereotyping in various sectors of society lead to systemic racism?

1. Have students read this lesson's essay; then have a [Socratic Seminar](#) discussion.
 - How is the perpetual foreigner stereotype in Hollywood films also used in the public sector and by elected public officials? Give examples.
 - How is the perpetual foreigner stereotype also used in the private sector and in private companies? Give examples.
 - How do these different sectors reinforce one another and lead to systemic racism?

Activity 3: The consequence of stereotyping

A. What are the consequences of perpetual foreigner stereotyping on Asian Americans?

1. Have students discuss the following questions:
 - What happened to the Japanese Americans during World War II?
 - What happened to Asian Americans when the U.S. automobile industry lagged behind fuel efficient Japanese cars in the 1980s?
 - What happened to Asian Americans during the 2020 coronavirus pandemic?
 - What happens to Asian Americans' chances of advancement in the workplace?
 - How are these events consequences of the perpetual foreigner stereotype?

Students may use the following resources to respond to these questions:

- The Asian American Education Project Essay entitled, "Japanese Americans and Aleuts Incarceration Constitutional Violations." <https://asianamericanedu.org/japanese-americans-aleuts-incarceration-constitutional-violations.html>
- The Asian American Education Project Essay entitled, "From Outrage to Organizing: The Impact of the Vincent Chin Case." <https://asianamericanedu.org/vincent-chin-legacy.html>
- "Stop AAPI Hate Reports." *Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council (A3PCON)*. <https://www.asianpacificpolicyandplanningcouncil.org/stop-aapi-hate-reports/>
- "Stories – Stand Against Hatred." *Asian Americans Advancing Justice* <https://www.standagainsthared.org/stories>
- Taylor & Francis Group. "Asian-Americans do better at university, but face barriers in the workplace." *American Association for the Advancement of Science*, 21 Mar 2019.. Accessed 18 Mar 2021. https://www.eurekalert.org/pub_releases/2019-03/tfg-aad031819.php

B. What are the consequences of stereotyping in other communities?

1. Have students research the consequences of stereotyping on two additional communities. A community can be an ethnic community, racial community, gender community, LGBTQ community, disabled community, religious community, undocumented community, low-income community, or homeless community, etc.
2. Have students research the following questions: When did the stereotyping of the community that you selected begin? Who created it? What purpose did it serve? Who benefits from it?
3. Have students discuss how stereotypes are used to pit races or groups against one another, and how certain groups are taken advantage of by those with power and authority.

Activity 4: How to combat stereotyping

A. Have students discuss the following questions:

1. What are the repercussions of the perpetual foreigner stereotype? Why is it important to combat the stereotype?
2. What can individuals do to reduce stereotyping?
3. What can institutions do to reduce stereotyping?
4. How would you respond to the perpetual foreigner stereotype?

Further Information:

The Asian American Education Project lesson entitled “From Outrage to Organizing: The Impact of the Vincent Chin Case”: <https://asianamericanedu.org/vincent-chin-legacy.html>

Kwoh, Stewart. “A Family Educates to Prevent Hate Crimes: The Case of Joseph Ito.” *Asian Americans Advancing Justice-LA*. <https://asianamericanedu.org/educate-to-prevent-hate-the-case-of-joseph-ito.pdf> Accessed August 19, 2020.

Leong, Russell. *Moving the Image: Independent Asian Pacific American Media Arts*. Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center and Visual Communications, Southern California Asian American Studies Central, 1991. Print.

Smith, Stacy L., Marc Choueiti, Katherine Pieper, Kevin Yao, Ariana Case and Angel Choi. “Inequality in 1,200 Popular Films: Examining Portrayals of Gender, Race/Ethnicity, LGBTQ & Disability from 2007 to 2018.” *USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism*, September 2019. <http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/aii-inequality-report-2019-09-03.pdf>. Accessed August 19, 2020.

Zia, Helen. “Vincent Chin - Lily Chin: The Courage to Speak Out.” *Asian Americans Advancing Justice-LA*. <https://asianamericanedu.org/vincent-chin-story-lily-chin-the-courage-to-speak-out.pdf> Accessed August 19, 2020.