

Study Abroad Advising for Asian American Students

Emily Le
University of California, Los Angeles
for Project for Learning Abroad, Training, and Outreach (PLATO)

As study abroad advisors, our primary challenge is advising a diverse student body on the numerous study abroad and international opportunities available to them. In order to advise students properly, we must be able to understand our students, their desires and goals, both academically and personally. While most college students choose study abroad programs that benefit their professional and academic endeavors, their decision to study abroad is impacted by their families and personal histories. In 2004-2005, over 200,000 college students studied abroad. However, only 17% of those students were minority students, 6.3% of which were Asian Americans.¹

As a study abroad advisor at the UCLA Education Abroad Program, I mainly advised for the Asia study abroad programs in China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, and Vietnam. I obtained my M.A. in Asian Studies and I also studied abroad in Vietnam as an undergraduate student. In working with the Asia programs, my student population is comprised of mostly Asian American students. The UCLA Education Abroad Program (EAP) office is unique to most study abroad programs in that 39% of our study abroad students are of Asian American descent, about half of whom study in Asia. While this is not unique to most University of California campuses, it is for most universities in the U.S. whose Asian American population and participation is closer to the national average. Currently, I am an academic advisor in the UCLA Asian Languages and Cultures department. In this role, I continue to advise Asian American students on study abroad programs in Asia, only now it's through an academic perspective in relations to the student's major or minor requirement.

Throughout my years of advising, I have found that Asian American students are an extremely diverse group. Not many people realize the diversity between each Asian American ethnic group, but these groups are very different in terms of immigration history and culture. Even within the same group, there is a huge difference based on immigration history and dialect or language. While some groups such as African Americans have a sense of unity and shared history in this country, Asian Americans are still trying to figure out their identity and defining what Asian American means to them. Are they Chinese American first then Asian American or vice versa? And where do the Hmong Americans fit into this picture? How many people even know who Hmong Americans are?

Because of their diversity, it can be difficult advising and outreaching to Asian American students to study abroad. The reasons why Chinese American students go or do not go to certain countries are different for Vietnamese American students or Korean American students. Like all students, Asian American students are concerned with academics,

¹ 2006 Open Doors Data by David Comp. <http://opendoors.iienetwork.org>

finances, and family but personal history and family plays a more important role for some Asian American groups than others.

In advising these students, I feel that it is important for us to understand where the students are coming from. I always ask, “Why do you want to study in this particular country/program?” From their responses, I learn that their parents came from that country and they have always wanted to go back and explore their heritage or that they’re from a different country but were more interested in going to China instead. Sometimes I ask them why they do not go to Vietnam if they are of Vietnamese descent. A typical answer could be because their parents fled the country and feel it’s too dangerous. A small minority of students with Vietnamese last names are not ethnically Vietnamese, which may also explain why they do not consider studying abroad in Vietnam. Why are some students willing to go back but not other students? In many ways, it has to do with their immigration history and its impacts.

It is easier to understand Asian American students and where they are coming from if you have a better sense of Asian American history, which I will outline briefly.

Brief History of Asian Americans

Asian immigrants first came to the United States in the mid-1800s as hired low-waged laborers. Most Asian immigrants who arrived during that period were Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, and Koreans. They came to work on the sugar plantations in Hawaii, the mines in California, the transcontinental railroads, and many labor-intensive occupations. The immigrants who came in the 1800’s and early 1900’s became known as the First Wave.

The Second Wave of Asian immigrants began after World War II. The Immigration Act of 1965 abolished previous exclusion acts and national-origins quotas opening the United States up to a massive influx of immigration from both the Eastern and Western hemisphere. As a result of the new immigration law, the Asian American population rose from one million in 1965 to five million in 1985.²

The second wave can be broken down by two groups: those who came as settlers and those who came because of necessity. The first group mainly consisted of Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Koreans, and Asian Indians. Because of different political and economic circumstances in these countries, many immigrated to the United States looking for better employment opportunities. They were educated professionals such as engineers, scientists, teachers, lawyers, and so on. Immigrants brought their wives, children, parents, and other members of their extended family with them. While most of the immigrants were unable to continue their former professions in the United States, many ventured into business opening up their own restaurants and shops.

² Takaki, Ronald. Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans. New York: Penguin Books, 1989, pg. 420.

The other group consists of the Southeast Asian immigrants, mainly from Vietnam but also from Laos and Cambodia. Most of them came, not out of any real desire to leave their country for better employment opportunities but because of necessity. The political turmoil in their countries as a result of the Vietnam War forced them to emigrate as refugees.

Prior to 1975, most Southeast Asians who emigrated were highly educated professionals, students, diplomats, and the wealthy upper-class. They were also few in numbers. After 1975, refugees from all classes were fleeing their countries. Immediately after the fall of Saigon in 1975, the first group of Vietnamese refugees was mostly South Vietnamese military personnel, Americans supporters, collaborators, and their families. Most were educated, prosperous, and Catholic. They planned to return and many did not even realize they were leaving until the moment they were aboard the aircraft carrier. All of them did not know where they were headed and what was in store for them.

The second group of Vietnamese refugees started after 1978. This continued until the mid 1980s. This group was called the boat people because many of them fled on boats in the middle of the night with their immediate and extended families. Many left hoping to return one day. Most of them fled for either political or economic reasons or a combination of both. The refugees that survived the journey arrived in Thailand, Hong Kong, Malaysia, the Philippines, and sometimes as far as Japan where they were placed in refugee camps until they were assigned a permanent destination.

In Laos, the Pathet Lao regime replaced the previous U.S. backed regime. This started a mass exodus of Lao, Mien, and Hmong people who had supported the U.S. government. They trekked across the dangerous wilderness to Thailand to escape persecution. The same was happening in Cambodia as the Khmer Rouge took power. The government started persecuting former U.S. supporters and anyone who was educated. Many want to return but realized it would be close to impossible to return to their previous lives.

Southeast Asian Americans are a very diverse group from different countries and cultures. But all of them immigrated because of necessity. They did not come to the U.S. voluntarily to seek their fortune and settle here. Most Southeast Asians were driven by circumstances and the results of war. Most had no time to plan and prepare for their move and they fled not knowing their destination. Many of them experienced trauma and stress due to their experiences during the war, refugee camps, and resettlement. While many have tried to adapt to their lives in the United States, some groups such as the Mien and Hmong have had a harder time. This is exacerbated by the fact the most Americans do not know who they are and mistakenly believe they belong to other Asian groups.

Counseling Asian American students

How does understanding the history of Asian Americans help in counseling Asian American students? For starters, it gives you a better understanding of their family histories. While not all Asian Americans go through the same exact experiences, most of them are similar enough that they can relate to each other. As evident in the brief history

above, Asian Americans are a complex group, consisting of different countries, cultures, and immigration histories.

In order to properly advise and outreach to Asian American students, it is important to understand the differences that exist among them. These differences help us understand why some groups are willing to study abroad, why some aren't, why some study in their country of heritage, why some would never consider doing so, etc. While these generalizations may not be applicable to all Asian American students, I will try to outline some of the differences among Asian American students.

In my brief history of Asian Americans, I've distinguished two groups of Asian Americans: those who came as settlers and those who came because of necessity. In many ways, belonging to one of these two groups can really define who you are. For most part, Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indians, Thai and Filipino Americans are those who came as settlers. For some, their families have lived in the U.S. for at least for three generations. Even those who recently immigrated did so as business and career ventures. Asian American students from these backgrounds are generally from more established families, with higher income and education. As a result, they are more likely to study abroad without the worry of finances and lack of parental support. They also tend to study abroad more if they have family members who have done it before. They have aunts, uncles, and grandparents who studied abroad or at least attended college and understand the value and benefits in an international education.

Recent immigrants also keep close ties with their native country, returning to visit often. Asian American students who have close, positive ties to their countries of heritage are willing to study abroad there. Many of my students still have family abroad, whom they may have visited once or twice. For some of them, they feel more secure studying abroad in a country where they have family to support them.

When discussing Southeast Asians who immigrated because of necessity, I'm mostly referring to Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and other Southeast Asian ethnic minorities. Advising Southeast Asian American students requires more sensitivity and cultural awareness because of their immigration history. Southeast Asian American students tend to be first generation college students. They are recent immigrants whose parents do not speak or have limited English and depend on their children to translate. As a result, there is a stronger sense of family duty and obligation. Most children feel obligated to stay close to home to support the family and parents are reluctant to let their children go away for college, let alone go to a different country, especially a country from which they escaped.

As a group, Southeast Asian American students are considered less likely to study abroad than East Asian American students. Through the UCLA EAP office, roughly 15% of the Asian American participants are of Southeast Asian descent, which is considerably high compared to the national average. One reason why they do not study abroad is because there are very few programs in Southeast Asia. There are less than a dozen study abroad programs to Southeast Asia open to all college students. Most of these programs are

offered by CET Academic Programs, Council on International Educational Exchange (CIEE), and School for International Training (SIT). Even if there were more programs, the next challenge is convincing them to study abroad in Southeast Asia or anywhere. I found that returned students are the best resource when recruiting heritage students for these programs. Students trust their peers and will be more likely to consider a program if they hear about the experiences from other students. For most of my students participating on the Vietnam program, the tipping point was their friend or classmate who participated on the program a year or two earlier.

Another is because their parents are very reluctant in letting them go abroad to any country. They consider U.S. education the best so why should their children study anywhere else? Study abroad is also considered a leisure activity that does not directly contribute to potential career and professional goals. This is in part due to the fact that they do not have experience with higher education themselves. If parents are aware of the benefits of study abroad with respect to their child's professional career, they will be more supportive of the idea. I often emphasize the academic relevance of the study abroad programs to the student's major and professional goals.

Finances are also an important factor. Most Southeast Asian immigrants are from a low socio-economic background and many are on welfare. Because most were from rural areas and had not planned on immigrating, they did not have the job and language skills necessary to find better employment in the U.S. Many students work to support themselves and to help support their families; therefore, studying abroad is seen as a luxury. While the student may want to study abroad, he/she can not afford to do so. If there were more financial aid and scholarships available, it would be more feasible for them to go abroad. For this reason, I always promote any and all study abroad scholarships to my students. Over the years, I have seen an increase in the number of students applying and an increase in the number of recipients. For example, about a dozen of my students, most of whom are either Southeast Asian Americans and/or studying abroad in Southeast Asia, received the Freeman-Asia and Benjamin A. Gilman Scholarships.

An important point to keep in mind when advising Asian American students is the student's ethnicity. Southeast Asia is extremely diverse for the size of the region. Vietnam alone has 54 ethnic minorities, including Hmong, Chinese, Cham, Mien, Mao. Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand also have a considerable number of ethnic minorities. Many Chinese-Vietnamese have Vietnamese last names. This is the same for the ethnically Chinese in other Southeast Asian countries. You can't always assume the student is from a certain ethnicity because of their name, which is something I became aware of after talking to many students with Vietnamese last names who say they want to study in China partly to reconnect with their heritage.

Conversely, some students from ethnic minority groups tend to identify themselves by nationality or country of origin instead of ethnicity. Since most people do not know who Hmong, Cham, Mien, and Mao are, they prefer to say they are Vietnamese or Thai instead of having to explain their ethnicity. Although a student may indicate he/she is

Thai, the student's ethnicity is important. Different ethnic groups have adapted and acculturated differently. While most major Asian ethnic groups have assimilated into their new life in the U.S., the ethnic minority groups have had a harder time. There are very few ethnic minority groups who attend college and for those who do, studying abroad is the last thing on their mind for the reasons outlined above. However, with guidance and proper outreach to parents and the community, they can become more open to studying abroad. With the Hmong and other minority students, family and friends play a big factor in their daily life, which is why parental and community outreach is very important.³ With the proper outreach, it is possible to encourage all students to study abroad as long as you understand your students and their needs.

Ethnicity vs. Nationality

As we prepare students for their study abroad experience, we must address the issue of ethnicity vs. nationality. In the US, our identity is comprised of both our ethnicity and our nationality. Therefore, we are labeled as Chinese American, African American, Irish American, etc. Abroad, while ethnicity plays a factor, your nationality defines who you are. In Vietnam, Vietnamese Americans are not simply considered Vietnamese. They are Americans with roots in Vietnam. When students are asked where they are from, they can not simply answer that they are Vietnamese. They must say they are overseas Vietnamese.

There is often a higher expectation placed upon Vietnamese Americans than their Caucasian American counterparts. They are expected to be familiar with Vietnamese customs and language even though they grew up in the US. This is also the same for Chinese Americans who study in China and other Asian American groups in their respective countries. The expectation for "heritage students" is different. They are expecting to be welcomed home and the locals expecting them to behave as if the students grew up there. Students may be criticized for not being able to fluently speak the language or being disrespectful to their elders because of expected customs. As more and more heritage students study abroad, this perception is slowly changing and students will be received positively abroad.

For heritage students, they often realize that going back does not really mean going home. They are returning to a place where their ancestors are from and while they are familiar with some of the customs and language, they are still an outsider because they did not grow up there. For my NAFSA 2006 region XII presentation on Asian American students, I sent a survey to UCLA EAP returnees who self identified as Asian American. Among 31 respondents, most students felt more in touch with their identity, both with their Asian side and their American side after their study abroad experience. They were developed a great appreciation of their Asian heritage while being American.

³ This was addressed in Thuy Doan's thesis. Doan, Thuy. Asian American students: Study abroad participation, perspectives and experiences. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN. 2002.

Encountering biases abroad

Another issue we should address is the perception of Asians abroad as non-heritage students. How are Asian Americans viewed in China, especially if they are not of Chinese descent? As Asian students studying in a non-heritage Asian country, they may be initially mistaken to be of that country's ethnicity. Once that misconception is cleared, they may receive some negative treatment depending on their ethnicity. Because of the history of between the Asian countries, there are existing stereotypes and biases against certain ethnicities. Japanese American or Korean American students may encounter some biases while in China. Many Chinese people still remember the Japanese invasion and the Sino-Japanese war in the 1930s and 1940s and may not be as welcoming of Japanese or Korean students, even if they are nationally Americans. There are similar biases of Southeast Asian minorities in Southeast Asia due to historical prejudices.

Of course, we also have to address how Asians or Asian Americans are viewed in Europe, Latin America, Africa, and other non-Asian countries. Abroad, there is no defined concept of "Asian American." The general assumption of seeing an Asian person abroad is that they are from Asia, not necessarily from the United States or another non-Asian country. Not only will students encounter stereotypes, racism, and biases due to ignorance or lack of understanding and exposure to Asia, but they must also confront and often defend their identity as an American. While these issues are very sensitive, we should prepare the students as best we can.

The Asian American students in my survey who studied abroad in Europe expressed some frustration but also realized that most people were not being racially insensitive out of malice but rather lacking of understanding and experience with Asian or Asian Americans. Some students indicated that they wished the issue of race was addressed at orientation so they could be better prepared for their experiences abroad.

Growing up in California and attending UCLA, where over 38% of the undergraduate student population is Asian American, they are part of the majority. Abroad, they gained a better understanding of what it feels like to be a minority. As an under-represented minority abroad, they must deal with issues of race and perception based solely on the color of their skin. While there is a constant struggle to explain to people that they are Asian but also American, they gained a better appreciation of their identity as an Asian American.

Despite some negative experiences, all of the students enjoyed their time abroad. When asked what advice they would provide prospective students, the predominant advice was for the prospective students to go abroad with an open mind. Prospective students should be aware of the cultural biases and prejudices but understand it is from a lack of understanding rather than malice. They should also be proud of being Asian American and take that opportunity to help others gain a better understanding of Asian Americans as they learn about the host country.

Conclusion

While more research needs to be done on Asian American students, I hope I was able to provide some insight on Asian American students and what historical factors impact their decision to study or not study abroad. Other research has been done on Asian American students and the factors contributing to study abroad namely Scott Van Der Meid's and Thuy Doan's thesis. My goal is not to re-address those issues but to emphasize that family and immigration history defines who Asian Americans are. While it is important to understand Asian Americans as they are in America, it is also important to understand the history of the country they emigrated from and their own history there.

References

Barnes, Jessica S. and C. Bennett. 2002. *The Asian Population: 2000, Census 2000 Brief*. US Census Bureau: <http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/c2kbr01-16.pdf>

Chandler, D., W. Roff, J. Small, D. Steinberg, R. Taylor, A. Woodside, and D. Wyatt. 1985. *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Chongchit, Jane, E. Le, and A. Yuen. 2006. *Asian Americans Abroad: Assumptions, Academics, and Ability for International Study*. Las Vegas: NAFSA Association of International Educators Region XII Conference.

Doan, T. 2002. *Asian American students: Study abroad participation, perspectives and experiences*. Unpublished Masters thesis, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN.

Fong, T. 2002. *The Contemporary Asian American Experience: Beyond the Model Minority*. New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc.

Takaki, R. 1989. *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. New York: Penguin Books.

Van Der Meid, S. 1997. *Asian Americans: Factors influencing the decision to study abroad*. Unpublished Masters thesis, Lesley College, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Yu, H. 2001. *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.