

# MAIN STREET

DARTMOUTH'S ASIAN-AMERICAN QUARTERLY

Vol.1, No.1 - Inaugural Issue

Fall 2000



## Transitions

Asian-Americans at Dartmouth

## A United Korea?

A news analysis of recent developments

## At the Table with Ang Lee

A conversation with the Hollywood filmmaker

## Dartmouth's Asian American Male

Divisions within the Community

## DEAR READERS,

The words “Main Street” typically evoke images of middle America. But the Main Street we know is predominantly Asian. Main Street, Flushing is the hub of an immigrant neighborhood in New York City that we know well. Through this publication, we hope to illuminate the presence of Asians in the Main Streets of America.

Not three months ago, two disgruntled Asian women found themselves agreeing that what this campus lacked was a forum for serious dialogue on issues that hit close to home. Thus began *Main Street*. With the work of five intrepid co-editors, three generous advisors, seven contributors, and the help of two hundred forty-two ounces of Diet Coke, we have produced what you now hold in your hands.

We felt that our inaugural issue comes at an opportune time. The year 2000 has seen much discussion and controversy over America’s changing demographics. The presence of immigrants as well as the growing visibility of minorities in the public eye has grabbed headlines. The infamous Wen Ho Lee case, the 2000 Census, and the seismic shifts in U.S.-East Asian relations underscore that the ethos of our nation is being transformed.

Historically, social change has emerged from the halls of academia. Yet Dartmouth has been relatively quiet. The Wen Ho Lee case, in particular, has raised hardly a peep from the Asian American community; the very fundamentals of civil liberty and justice have been attacked with hardly a challenge.

We want to create an awareness that there is no exclusively “Asian” issue. The reality of race and ethnicity are evident both on our campus and across the nation. In these pages, we seek to give it the discussion it merits.

- The News department will give you an update on often overlooked events at home and abroad.
- Opinion presents varying views on issues related to minorities.
- Features include profile interviews, personal essays, and research done in the classroom by Dartmouth undergraduates.
- The Senior Columnist offers his wisdom.
- The Endpage is a space for us to reclaim missing Asian American history.

In this debut issue, we survey the transitions of the Asian American community at Dartmouth. We take a closer look at where we were, and where we’re going. And we want you to be part of the speculative and retrospective process.

This is not about identity politics — we are not rallying for greater resources, more students, etc. What we sincerely hope for is a change in the implicit acceptance of a monocultural, male-defaulted view of society.

It is not too idealistic to think that change can begin with YOU. Let’s puncture all the rhetoric, cliches, and abstract theories. There is something very concrete and real you can do based on your own personal experiences. Let us know what’s on your mind, and we promise to save some room for you in the next issue.

Happy Reading,

Shirley Lin and Jeanette Park  
Editors-in-Chief

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MAIN STREET

## Cover

### Asian Americans at Dartmouth

The Asian American community has grown and matured over the past two decades. Recent activity within student organizations are the result of new voices on campus and indicate there is more change to come.

BY SHIRLEY LIN & JEANETTE PARK

## Features

### One Man's Vision, One World's Truth

Acclaimed director Ang Lee speaks with Main Street about identity, artistry, and the making of his newest release, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

BY KAREN TANI

### A Pioneer's View:

Urvashi Vaid, head of The Policy Institute of the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force shares her experiences and some expert advice on activism within minority communities.

BY KARTHIK KALYANARAMAN

9

27

33

## Departments

### News

News Briefs 6  
BY SUNG HOON KIM

The Failed Case Against Wen Ho Lee 12  
BY SHIRLEY LIN

The Koreas: Together? 14  
BY SUNG HOON KIM

The Hsia Connection 16  
BY JEANETTE M. PARK

### Opinions

Asian Americans and Affirmative Action: The Call to Coalition 19  
BY HANNAH KWON

A Korean Studies Program 22  
BY TRACY H. KIM & SOON HO LEE

How to Indignify a Nation 25  
BY MICHAEL J. LEE

### Senior Column

Dartmouth's Asian American Male: Perceptions, Myths, Divides 30  
BY SUNGJIN CHO

### Essay

The Bruce Lee Generation 34  
BY MICHAEL S. CHEN

### History Lesson

A Strong, Clear Vision 36  
BY STELLA LEE

# Asian Americans at Dartmouth

## Between Diversity and Coalition

By Shirley Lin & Jeanette Park

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Recent graduate Hoi Ning Ngai drove up to Dartmouth College for Homecoming Weekend. Even in the short interim that she was gone, the Dartmouth Asian American community had undergone a host of changes. For her, the most telling example of change was the banner promoting a community dinner that week in Collis: It read, "ASIAN AMERICANS AND POLITICS: Where Do We Stand?"

It might as well have read "ASIAN AMERICANS AT DARTMOUTH: Where Do We Stand?" The increased visibility of Asian Americans in the larger American landscape has been reflected in recent years on the Dartmouth campus. The school has seen an explosion of activity within the Asian American community within the past few years. Yet the Asian American population has not significantly changed in size during those years.

### Toward Cultural Awareness at Dartmouth

The recruitment of minority students became a priority when President James O. Freedman assumed presidency of the College in 1987. Since his tenure, the Asian population has reached ten percent of the undergraduate population, becoming the largest minority group on campus. Today the number of Asian and Asian American-related organizations has climbed to 15 — a substantial component of total cultural groups at Dartmouth.

However, the presence of Asian Americans at Dartmouth cannot be quantified by numbers alone. Freedman's efforts have indeed resulted in a greater physical presence, but their voices have until recently been absent. In 1997, after a roundtable with concerned Asian American students, Dean of the College Lee Pelton said, "If progress is to be made in meeting the needs of

Asian-American students...we need some clarity about what those needs are" (The Dartmouth 1/22/97).

Pelton, as well as other administrators, tacitly acknowledged that the Asian American community at Dartmouth conformed to the model-minority myth. Asians have historically been perceived as "successful" despite their minority status. Their academic and economic success has contributed to the belief that Asian Americans are self-sufficient and have little cause for complaint. At the student-administration roundtable, students expressed the frustration at being labeled "over-represented" at Dartmouth.

Unlike other minority groups, the Asian American community had yet to establish itself through organizations with political objectives. Jun Whang '85 says, "Looking back, [the Asian student organization] functioned more as a social group than anything else... I wish that we had been more aware of [Asian American] issues and voiced our opinions." The first signs of activism came in 1989, with the founding of KASA, the Korean American Student Association. KASA was founded namely to establish a Korean Studies Korean Language at Dartmouth, but was unique in its non-social pursuits.

In contrast to their muted presence on the political field, Asian Americans have been a very visible cultural resource. Culture nights have traditionally been the most cohesive and well-attended events for Asians at Dartmouth. For many Asian culture groups, the event has

Comparing Notes: Minority populations at other campuses

Source: The Princeton Review: The Best 331 Colleges, 2000

Name	% Minority*	% Asian	% Asn/Minority
Dartmouth College	38	10	26.3
Columbia University	51	13	39.4
Princeton University	39	14	35.9
Brown University	30	15	50
Yale University	42	16	38.1
Cornell University	34	18	52.9
Harvard University	54	19	45.2
University of Chicago	39	22	56.4
University of Pennsylvania	33	23	69.7
MIT	46	28	60.9
UC Berkeley	69	41	59.4
Univ. of Hawaii (Manoa)	86	78	90.7

\* Determined by subtracting % Caucasian from 100%. This figure is significantly larger than the actual % Minority. For example, Dartmouth is 23.7% African/American, Latino, Native American, and Asian/American, but subtraction was only uniform way of looking at schools' self-reported statistics.

evolved into an annual or semi-annual effort. Music, food, and other performances of culture are a convenient entrée to Eastern culture for Asians and non-Asians alike. As a result, such culture nights easily draw audiences of more than 100 each.

The culture nights also encouraged members of an organization to collaborate with each other and other cultural groups, leading to unity at more than one level. The popular Dartmouth Asian Organization's Culture Night, a joint effort among the Chinese, Korean, Japanese and Indian culture groups, performed before an audience of 400-plus in a night of two shows last February.

Producers of recent culture nights have been making a conscious effort to incorporate issues that hit close to home for Asian Americans. The DAO Culture Night this past winter featured students' perspectives on self-identity. This movement toward a deeper exploration of what it means to be Asian American is part of a larger trend among Asian American students.

### Voicing Concerns

In the early 1990s, Asian American activism received attention mainly in answer to campus controversy. Asian-American students lobbied the administration for an Asian student advisor like those available to the black, Hispanic/Latino, and gay communities. However, these efforts would not come to fruition for several years.

In early 1996 two Asian-American men and two Asian-American women discovered racist epithets including "chink" scrawled on their apartment doors in two separate incidents. Amid this and other race-infused controversies, it became increasingly evident that Asian American students had needs that

were not being addressed by the college. Asian American students were being actively recruited to Dartmouth, yet the resources that were provided did not reflect this increased presence of Asians at Dartmouth. In the context of such incidents, Asian American activism gained a higher profile and in response, the College decided in 1997 to introduce Asian-American studies into the curriculum. As a visiting professor, Vernon Takeshita taught the first two courses in Asian American history at Dartmouth and provided key support to the Asian American community. He has since joined the history department on a tenure track.

While Takeshita's support was crucial for Asian American student activism, there was still a need for an administrative liaison. Leaders of various campus Asian organizations rallied again for an advisor, and instead received a Pan-Asian student intern for 1998. It was around this time that the leaders of Dartmouth's seven Asian organizations formed a political confederation — PAC, or the Pan-Asian Council. Through such events as community dinners and panel discussions, PAC has worked closely with faculty, administrators, and staff to increase awareness of Asian American issues.

One such issue that PAC worked especially hard on is the expansion of Asian American course offerings at Dartmouth. Says Jennifer Chon '99, former PAC co-chair, "The presence of people of color at Dartmouth is no accident, and sooner or later people have to recognize that what we learn has to be influenced by who is learning it — who's participating in the discussion."

### A New Connection

A milestone in Dartmouth Asian American history was the full-time appointment of Nora

Yasumura, Advisor to Asian American Students, in the Fall of 1999. Though Asian American students at Dartmouth appear to have reached a critical mass, continuity of leadership, energy, and history has been a considerable challenge due to the "D-Plan," where upperclassmen are required to spend two quarters "off-campus." Yasumura provides continuity and the emotional support as a permanent liaison to the administration.

Gerald Lam '01 notes that "the Asian American voice has changed a lot recently, with Nora around. She gives it a whole new dimension that we didn't have before...It's definitely grown with her being around, and ...I've noticed more enthusiasm among students for driving issues, programming discussions and what-not."

Yasumura's role is also that of counselor. Recalls Ngai, Yasumura was one of the "biggest advantages during my time here. She was helpful in getting you mentally there, while pushing for things from the administration."

The addition of Yasumura to the team of minority student advisors is just one indication of the increased support for diversity at Dartmouth. The school achieved parity with other institutions in hiring an administrator specifically versed in Asian and Asian American issues. Yasumura has worked hard to unify the leaders of the many Asian-related student groups on campus, mainly through the Pan Asian Council.

The past few years have also seen the emergence of the female voice within the Asian American community with the creation of AASPIRE, an informal discussion group on Asian women's issues, and the Pan Asian Council Sexual Assault Committee.

Like the Pan Asian Council, the Asian American acting troupe Far Off Broadway (FOB) was formed

MAIN STREET

out of a need to comment on political issues. Lam, a co-founder of FOB says, "We're not super political Asian guys shouting BS nonsense, but we take a chance at creative stuff, fun stuff. [What] we've performed is a direct reflection of what's talked about these days in Asian America: negotiation of identity, between generations and what-not."

### Political Disconnect

This flurry of activism, however, has been largely local in scope. The disconnect between the currents in national dialogue and those on campus has been a problem at Dartmouth, yet some students feel this applies more to the Asian American community than to other communities. Even when the national spotlight has shifted to Asian Americans, Dartmouth students have been slow to take notice.

As a whole, Asian Americans on this campus are probably a bit less politically aware because they came from backgrounds where they don't necessarily have to be," says Basil Kim '01. "Asians have the mentality where standing up to authority is looked down upon and that plays a role in the lack of Asian American protests."

The Wen Ho Lee case broke in 1999, but failed to elicit reaction from the community. Only recently has a panel discussion on the case materialized at Dartmouth. Jordyne Wu '03, who organized the event, said the idea was "on the plate" with the other programming for the Daniel Webster Legal Society and proposed co-sponsorship with the Dartmouth China Society.

There are signs that the community is growing aware of its limited knowledge of larger issues. The PAC dinner on Asian Americans and

Politics underscored the relative quiescence of Asians in politics, both at Dartmouth and nation-wide. Professor David Kang, faculty advisor of KASA and scholar of Asian government, was the featured speaker at the discussion. The dinner ended on a hopeful note; as Lam believes, "If it needed to, the community would snap out of [its apathy] in a second."

### What Lies Ahead

In its struggle for recognition and a greater voice, the Asian American community can identify with other minority groups. However, it has yet to build strong relationships with these communities. Says Dean Stuart Lord of the Tucker Foundation, "Some of the same issues that Asians struggle with are the same as those of Africans and Latinos. What affects one of us affects all of us...When you enhance the quality of life for one group, you enhance the quality of life for all students."

Diversity has been highlighted at Dartmouth, but first-year student Amy Kim measures diversity differently, "You don't see a lot of integration so it doesn't seem that diverse," she says.

Asian American activism has not approached more general issues affecting the minority community as a whole. So far, different minority groups have been working independently to advocate for greater social space, programming, and academic support. As Natsuko Ikeda '02 points out, "There's a fine line between segregation and identification...An attempt to self identify and say 'We have a stance' sometimes tends to push everyone else out of the way."

The changing demographics of the U.S. makes it probable that Dartmouth students will graduate

into a multicultural society. The administration has taken several measures in hopes of better preparing students for this society. As part of the Student Life Initiative, the World Culture Initiative has the potential to create immense change in the ways communities interact at Dartmouth. However, its vaguely worded provision leaves much to be desired.

One related petition, long advocated by KASA, is the establishment of a Korean Studies and Korean Language program at Dartmouth. The issue of Korean language instruction, currently student-led, is still being advocated through the KASA Korean Language Task Force. Students have responded favorably to the initiative in light of its implications on learning at Dartmouth. International Students Association president Candice Ling '01 believes it will "force students to acknowledge and hopefully appreciate different cultures from around the world, which is not only great in itself, but also extremely useful for future professionals in a globalizing economy."

It is increased minority involvement, reinforced by efforts on the part of the administration, that has contributed to that unique environment in which students can explore their own cultures as well as those of others.

As Lam advises underclassmen, "Take advantage of these 4 years, and how lucky you are to be in this playground. I just think about whether it will be this easy after I leave." ♦

*SHIRLEY LIN and JEANETTE PARK are both co-Editors-in-Chief of Main Street.*