

PBS Series Documents The History Of Asian Americans Over 150 Years

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AILSA CHANG: Blame China - that is what the Trump administration has done as the coronavirus has spread across the U.S. And while China has been receiving the criticism, so too have Chinese Americans and, it seems, anybody who looks like them.

Asian Americans are reporting a surge in racist harassment and violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. And that brings new urgency to a five-hour documentary series now airing on PBS stations. The series is called simply "Asian Americans," and it traces the discrimination these communities have faced in the U.S. over the past century and a half. Renee Tajima-Pena is the series producer of "Asian Americans," and she joins us now. Welcome.

RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: Thanks so much for having me on.

AILSA CHANG: You know, I really appreciated your series because, as an Asian American kid growing up in the Bay Area, I became way, way more familiar with the story of the civil rights struggle for African Americans than I ever was for Asian Americans, and I feel like that's still the case for lots of young Asian Americans today. And I'm curious, why do you think that is? Why do you think the Asian American story has always been more obscure in this country?

RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: Well, where would you learn it?

AILSA CHANG: Yeah.

RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: You know, we're still pretty much invisible in the popular culture. I think more and more you see movies come out, these great episodic television shows, sitcoms. It's changing, but still, it's so embedded in the American psyche and imagination that we are a model minority. So as a model minority - you know, compliant, turn the other cheek, pull yourself up by your bootstraps and do not engage in protests and movements for equality.

So that idea is just so much a part of the way people see Asian Americans that the story of Asian Americans, which is - you know, the biggest labor strike in the United States was mounted by Chinese immigrant railroad workers.

AILSA CHANG: Yeah.

RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: I mean, it goes back since we started arriving here. But people don't know it.

AILSA CHANG: So for this particular series - I mean, it's five hours long. You had to make so many decisions to fit - what? - a century and a half's worth of Asian American history into five hours. Can you just describe for me the themes, the threads behind what you ultimately selected to tell?

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RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: We were looking at the real story of Asian Americans, not the model minority. It's a story of race, xenophobia, immigration, as well as real resilience. My family, for example - I'm Japanese American - my grandparents came in the early 1900s, smack in the middle of the anti-Asian exclusion era. They lived through the Great Depression. Then the depression was over; it was World War II. They were incarcerated behind barbed wire in American concentration camps.

And yet they thrived, yet they had families. They are part of building communities, and that's really been the Asian American story. It's really a story of resilience.

AILSA CHANG: And one of the hard truths that you take on is this idea that - you know, discrimination against Asian Americans in this country, there's something about it that keeps repeating. Like, in times of crisis, for example, Asians get blamed, whether it be Japanese Americans during World War II or South Asians and people from the Middle East after 9/11 and now Chinese Americans during this pandemic. Does it feel cyclical to you, this scapegoating?

RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: I'm not sure that's cyclical; I think it's just embedded in American society, and that's where the fight is. So for Asian Americans, it's - we're not exceptional. You know, all people of color in this country face racism and have since the beginning of the republic. When we look back in that history, there's no coincidence that Jim Crow and anti-Asian Exclusion happened at the same time. I mean, it was the same, you know, roots of racism in the country.

But I think in terms of the scapegoating, you know, one thing we wanted to do with the series is look at these fault lines of race and xenophobia, and during times of crisis, those fault lines erupt.

AILSA CHANG: I mean, one of the threads I found most interesting in this series is how the Asian American struggle bumps up against the African American struggle in this country. The communities have, at times, buttressed each other but also have been at odds.

And you drew, you know, a century and a half later, a very powerful connection between the murder of Vincent Chin - the Chinese American man who was beaten to death by two white men in Detroit in 1982 - you draw a connection between his death and the killing of Latasha Harlins, an African American girl who was shot by a Korean store owner in LA in 1991. What are the parallels that you saw there?

RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: You know, I think that the Vincent Chin case, for Asian Americans, really stands out as being a turning point, when a lot of people realized, yeah, we do face discrimination and racism. But also, Asian Americans of all different nationalities came together to fight for justice. But I think that's tricky because a Vincent Chin happens in the African American community, it happens to black and brown people almost every day, you know.

What we want to say as filmmakers is, you know, we're a country that's increasingly diverse, but at the same time more divided. So how do we move forward together? I mean, that's a real question of the series. How do we move forward together? And there's a lot in the Asian American story that helps us see how we can move forward together. I mean, that's what we really want the audience to take away.

AILSA CHANG: Renee Tajima-Pena is a professor of Asian American studies at UCLA and the series producer of "Asian Americans" from PBS. Thank you so much for talking with us today.

RENEE TAJIMA-PENA: Thank you.

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