

PBS' 'Asian Americans' proves the community is more than 'American enough'

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The four-part, four-hour documentary "Asian Americans" is not telling new stories. But most of them have never been heard by most PBS viewers.

"Our old stories are new stories to most Americans," said comedian Hari Kondabolu, who is interviewed in the documentary. "Like, they didn't let us talk for a really long time and share our points of views and our family stories. So stuff that we've known, experienced [and] has been part of our culture in this country — it's new to everybody else. So I think now it's almost like we're doing some catch-up."

Actress Tamlyn Tomita, who narrates along with Daniel Dae Kim, agreed. "You get a new set of glasses to see the world that we all inhabit and share our stories."

And executive producer Don Young correctly called the documentary "serious, clear-eyed American history" that is "long past due."

And it's told from the perspective of Asian Americans themselves, "as opposed to other people who are hearing it secondhand or imagining what our lives are like," Kondabolu said.

"Asian Americans" tells a larger story by telling a series of smaller ones. How one family was affected by the exclusionary laws designed to keep Chinese immigrants out of the United States. How rampant racism in Hollywood and beyond thwarted the careers of Asian American actors and hurt their families. How the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II destroyed lives and broke up families — including one family of 10 siblings.

(That's personal for Tomita, whose credits include "Karate Kid 2," "The Joy Luck Club," "The Good Doctor" and "Star Trek Picard." Her father was interned in the Manzanar camp in California.)

Did you know that a Chinese American born in the U.S. who was denied reentry into the country took his case to the Supreme Court and established that everyone born here is a citizen?

Did you know that American laws allowed only whites and blacks to become naturalized citizens? And that when the Supreme Court ruled Indians weren't white, many had their citizenship revoked and lost their property — because only citizens could own property?

Did you know that, during the Vietnam War, a wounded, Japanese American Marine was ignored by American doctors and medics who said they assumed he was a "g-k," using a pejorative term to describe the enemy?

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"We're the perpetual foreigner," said producer/director Grace Lee. "These are the kind of things that Asian Americans have to deal with in terms of mistaken identity. You're not American enough."

However, the documentary focuses less on the discrimination and racism than on how Asian Americans fought to overcome it.

"This is by no means a story of grievance and victimization," said producer Renee Tajima-Peña, whose documentary "Who Killed Vincent Chin?" was nominated for an Academy Award. "It's really how Asian Americans met this challenge in the courts, at the ballot box, in the culture, in the streets, and how they really pushed for a more perfect union. ... So it's the story of America."

"I'm just so happy to see that we are continually witnessing progress," said Tomita. "It may not happen as speedily as I would like — as most of us would like — but at least we are moving forward."

"Asian Americans" is four one-hour documentaries combined into one, airing Monday and Tuesday at 8 p.m. and 9 p.m. Utah appears in each of the first two hours — last year's Golden Spike 150th anniversary is in the first; and Topaz, the Japanese American internment camp near Delta, is in the second.

The four hours cover a lot of territory, with stories of Filipino Americans, Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, Korean Americans, Indian Americans, Vietnamese Americans and more. "Obviously, it's not a monolithic experience," Lee said. "It's not just one narrative. It's a multitude of narratives."

"That's what I really appreciated about working on this series, is to see for myself that history is complicated and that our stories are complicated. And to get some of that complexity out there."

"Asian Americans" is revelatory not just for other ethnicities, but for Asian Americans themselves.

"I grew up thinking, 'Well, Asian Americans, we're always kind of on the margins. We're always on the outside,'" Tajima-Peña said. "But doing the series blew my mind. I mean, we've been at the center of the story for the longest time."

Just maybe not at the center of the stories taught to us in schools.

"Toni Morrison once said, there's been a master narrative of the American story, but a lot of chapters have not been written," Tajima-Peña said. "So we're writing those chapters. That's what this series is about — writing those chapters."

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