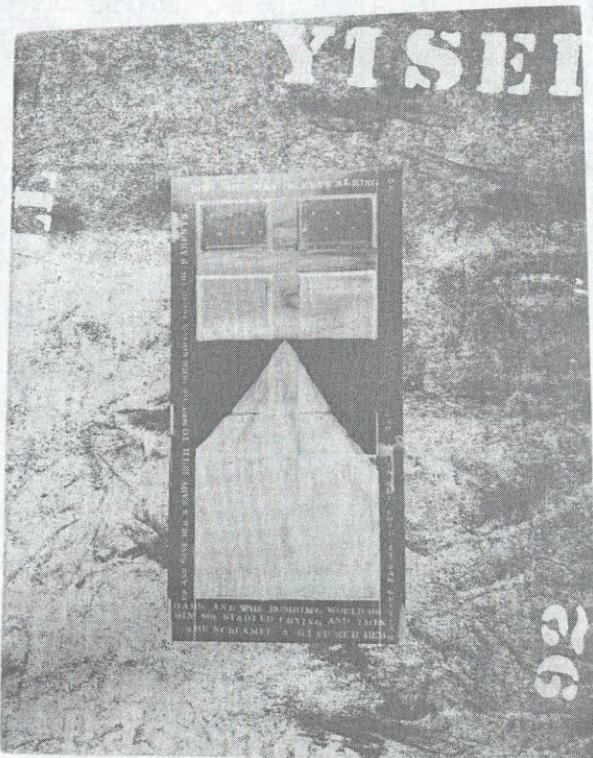


## The Second Second Generation

by Helia Woo '26



At the end of February, the librarian at the Asian American Studies Center showed me a Korean American student magazine from Harvard University, published in the 90s. It was called *Yisei: Notes from the Second Generation*, and our Center housed a few of the middle issues—none of the first ones from when the magazine began in 1988 (a significant year for Koreans, as Seoul hosted the Olympics that summer), and none of its last issues circa 2001 (a significant year for me, as I was born that summer). The name *Yisei* sounded distinctly Japanese to me until I read the Korean script: 이세, or, second-generation. A more Korean romanization would be *Yisae*.

"I think it's important to start with what's personal to you," she said. "I think you have to start at the beginning."

She was right. Even just flipping through the pages felt striking.

I wanted to know how this had fell into our hands—according to her, UCLA had the biggest collection of these *Yisei* magazines outside of Harvard.

"Well, we probably just saw them somewhere and requested copies back then." It had clearly been a long time ago.

"And has anyone looked at them before now?" I asked.

She smiled a little. "No."

*Yisei*, vol. 6, no. 2, spring 1993.

Charles C. Lee, '94. "Asian Americans do not share a history to which they can look back. Such an absence keeps Asian Americans from being a true community in any meaningful sense."

Daniel H. Choi, '94. "Paradoxically, Asian American economic and educational successes will work against the survival of Asian American ethnic identities...Where there are isolated ethnic enclaves—as in Chinatowns, Koreatowns, and in ghettos—ethnic identities run strong and deep. But as Asians and other ethnics move into more affluent American suburbs, their ethnic identities become more diffuse, more symbolic, less meaningful, and *less necessary*."

I met the librarian, Marji, at the Los Angeles Archives Bazaar the previous October. She was tabling for the Center and had her gray-white hair tucked under a navy blue beret, and it made an impression on me. I wasn't sure I made an impression on her, but she said I was asking the right questions and collected my email address.

I couldn't find a good excuse to actually talk to her again until a few months later, when my class made a visit to the Center and I stuck around afterwards to reintroduce myself. She had promptly forgotten about me. But we had more time now, and after taking a photo with me to make sure she'd remember my face, she had me sit down so I could really tell her who I was. We spent the next hour learning about each other. I learned she was generous with smiles. I noticed a brown spot on her cheek that reminded me of my grandmother, and it made me blink back tears.

That Saturday, I came to a meeting in Chinatown at her invite. It was for the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, and for obvious reasons it seemed to everyone there of utmost importance to always include the period between each letter, like "C.A.C.A." It was the weekend after Lunar New Year, so people kept saying "Gung hei fat choi, gung hei fat choi," to each other as they filed in. "You know what they say to my brother sometimes," Marji said, with her characteristic smile. "Gung hei, fat boy." A man in a bright orange shirt and suspenders guffawed.

I learned from the pamphlet that a gray-haired man in glasses, Rick, gave to me that C.A.C.A. had been established at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in San Francisco and has since then expanded to several chapters, called lodges, across the United States. The Los Angeles lodge is headed by Monterey Park city councilmember Henry Lo, who arrived late to the meeting straight from completing a marathon at Disneyland. He talked so quickly his words collided against each other and melded into one long

utterance, and he had a habit of laughing uncontrollably in an onomatopoeic fashion: "Hahahahaha." I liked him instantly.

Most of the other attendees moved at a more leisurely pace than Henry—they were much older. Behind me, a someone was already asleep. Routinely throughout the meeting he would jolt awake, yawn, and scratch at his closed eyelids like a claw machine vying for a toy. One woman trailed off in the middle of her sentence, and the room waited patiently until she threw up her hands and declared, "I'm old," to which the man sitting across from me grunted, "We don't say the 'o' word." Everyone spoke over everyone else, and then asked each other to repeat themselves because they couldn't hear.

At some point during the three-hour meeting, Marji pressed her hands against my shoulders and asked how I was doing. Earlier, she had introduced me to the group like this: "I just met her myself, but she came up to me the other day and wanted to hear about what I do. Which was her first mistake. So I invited her to this, and she actually wanted to come! Can you believe it?" But I was really enjoying the meeting. I barely understood any of the discussion topics, and had nothing exactly to contribute, but I couldn't imagine being anywhere other than here in that moment.

I kept feeling a sense of amazement observing the group—something was very jarring about it. Then it occurred to me that I'd never been around so many Asian elders who spoke fluent English. Until this point most older generations of Asians I knew here were first-generation immigrants—like my parents, and my friends' parents, and the restaurant and grocery store workers in Korean enclaves around California—who communicated in accented speech. It was comforting to realize there are people who look like me who have managed to live out their whole lives in America, from birth to the beauty of old age.



A few weeks later, I came by the Asian American Studies Center library to properly look over *Yisei*. Marji cleared the room for me, having set up tables in the hallway to work there herself instead—the place was so tiny, there wasn’t enough space for multiple people to sit with materials at the same time. I started with the first issue we had, which was from 1992, and worked through the rest of the collection to 1997.

The writing was revelatory. Some sentences I thought I could have written myself; others put my own thoughts into words I hadn’t dreamed of

stringing together. And yet others made up entire passages of ideas I had never considered in my life. It’s during moments like these that reading becomes intimate. I learned for the first time a history of the arrival of Koreans in the United States, beginning in 1885. Until the 1960s, Korean migrants to the U.S. consisted mainly of political refugees, laborers, and “picture brides.”

After that, great numbers of young, usually educated, Koreans started to settle in the Americas. And then they kept coming. Soon it was my turn.

*vol. 6, no. 1, fall 1992.*

Susan Lee, '96. "I think I may have pinpointed at least one cause of my ongoing confusion: the lack of knowledge concerning my own background."

I didn’t agree with everything *Yisei* published. There were certainly pieces that made the magazine hard to take seriously, like one in the 1997 issue written by a white student who identified as Asian (it was very funny—alas, the writer was dead serious). And there were some essays that, while skillfully and thoughtfully written, took a highly theoretical approach and neglected, I thought, the narratives of Asians in the U.S. who might not have the language, time, or other means to pen their own reflections.

Then again, these essays were published alongside others that argued the opposite, and then there were creative pieces that threw theory out the window to express a more sensual interpretation of the Korean American experience. All of these, compiled into one issue, suggested exactly the tensions and contestations, the expansive imaginings and

possibilities of ethnic identity. *Yisei* dared you to think, and then think again.

At another point in my life, I might say that *Yisei* isn’t much at all, and maybe I was taken by it only because I had quite literally never seen anything like it before. Which is partly a fault of my own. Why had I waited so long to seek out the voices of Korean Americans? Well—I’m not American, I’m not technically *yisae*, I meander between the first and second generations like a kid who doesn’t want to go home from the playground. But that didn’t really paint the whole picture, nor was it a great excuse. Still, more important than the shame of not having known about something like *Yisei* is the fact that I now do know about something like *Yisei*. I have many places I can go from here.

WINTER 2025 / OJKII · YISEAE



In modern Korean history, any period of time is notable. The breakneck speed at which this country collapses and develops its sociopolitical landscape is almost farcical. But to my knowledge 1988 was always an especially remarkable year, very much due to the Olympics. I grew up hearing '88 constantly referenced. My aunt lives next to Olympic Park, named after the event, in an apartment building called the Olympic Village Apartments, opened in 1988 for the athletes who lived there that summer. My dad told me once that it was only after 1988 that international travel restrictions lifted in South Korea. Before then, when he went on business trips outside the country, he would have to attend trainings on what to do in case he encountered North Koreans.

In 2012, *Reply 1997*, a Korean drama on the nostalgia of first loves in 1997, aired and became so successful it spawned a series. *Reply 1997* was rapidly followed by *Reply 1994* and then *Reply 1988*, the last of which experienced unprecedented viewer ratings. Though people speculated there would be a fourth drama for the year 2001, the series ended there, almost as if the producers thought nothing before nor after 1988 was necessary of reminiscing. And yet people would also make deprecating jokes like, "What is this, 1988?", implying 1988 was still prior to the progression of Korean society. The implication seems to be that the pivotal event in 1988 is what changed everything—it divided not just the year in two but also the entire timeline of South Korea. Before the summer Olympics, Korea was *then*, after the Olympics, Korea became *now*.

Of course, none of this is really researched; I draw only from my own life. I could be very wrong about the connections I've strung together about Korea from my pieces of my personal observations, which are already fragmented as a result of holding diasporic identity. But it's specifically through the diasporic identity, through physical and emotional distance to the cultural knowledge of the homeland, that personal observation takes on greater meanings. I find it significant, then, that the publication of *Yisei* ran from this seminal year to my birth year. It's as if the torch has been passed to me, and it's now my task to continue writing notes from the Korean American experience. If I think about it, it makes perfect sense. I have been doing this my entire life.

*vol. 6, no. 1, fall 1992.*

Daniel H. Choi, '94. "Only our parents really know why they came to America. The *yisei* know only that we are here."

*vol 6, no. 2, spring 1993.*

Hyun Kyung Chung. "I think this is a tough time for many Korean women. There is an Asian curse: 'You are going to have a very interesting life.' But I would like my students to say: 'Do you want to have a boring life? Have an interesting life. Live dangerously and discover who you are.' ... This is an exciting time for Korean women."



I have lived in the United States since I was four years old. I've never had stable status. For a long time I was a dependent on my dad's visa; I aged out when I turned twenty-one and had to begin presenting myself as an "international student."

As an international student, one must prove their worth through labor. To continue the life I've built here, an American institution or company must decide I have extraordinary skill, and that they're willing to shell out money for me. Unfortunately, my skills lie in places that the status quo makes invisible. My skills lie in the ways I observe and imagine and love and give, and none of these can be measured quantitatively. I'm not attractive to American capitalism.

When I was younger, I gave myself a lot of grief for it. Why couldn't I be better, what was wrong with

me? In my misery, I arrived at a deep distrust for perseverance and possibility. I also neglected to fully reckon with the privileges I held in relation to my situation. The shift came when I started engaging more analytically, radically, with my surroundings, and developing my skills in seeing them through the frameworks of oppression. Ironically it was knowing more about the systems of white supremacy, capitalism, colonialism, and heteropatriarchy that gave me some reassurance. There's nothing wrong with me, I mean there is, but my immigration trouble—if that's what it even is—is systemic. This isn't the world we want, and it's not totally outlandish to me to believe we can find another one. Create it, even.

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I could say this essay is about *Yisei*, or about Asian Americans, but really it's about the librarian who introduced it to me, Marji. Half of my asking to see the magazines again was merely an excuse to stay in contact with her. I'd only truly known her a few weeks, but already our relationship was precious to me. And, I have a respect for commitment. I want to always be building something. I understand that it can take a lot of time. These are also ethics of activism and resistance.

Even then, I guess, what I'm writing is not actually about Marji. It's about relationships—aren't they at the core of everything? In a less philosophical sense, community is formed by dedicating time, energy, and care into relationships. We speak of ethnic communities sometimes like community is a natural byproduct of their shared identity, but I want to bring attention to communal *deliberation*, when ethnic groups build relationships with purpose. We then learn politically and culturally and socially from these relationships in ways nearly impossible in

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institutional spaces. Often these lessons outside the classroom are more important. After all, an education shouldn't be only theory, but also a personally transformative process.

The act of relationship-building itself is educational, too, and a practice in creativity. Gathering with community requires the same spontaneity, openness, commitment, and reflection as does the creative process. There's also often a tension inherent in community spaces—race and ethnicity are fundamentally in tension with all sorts of things. Like with my readings of *Yisei*, I sometimes disagree with the points made in community discussions, or with their lack of notice to certain topics. But navigating this is especially informative.

If you asked Marji or any of the members of C.A.C.A. (who I've resolved to see monthly now), they'd probably deny they've taught me anything except their names. (Honestly, maybe they'd have a different answer—I don't know them that well!) I

feel like I've already learned a lot from the community they've made with each other, though, and I also feel capable of adding to it.

I can imagine the ways the writers of *Yisei* learned from their created community as they gathered ideas together, wrote in conversation with each other, took turns editing others' pieces. Their readers are part of this communal deliberation, too, including me. In 2025, I'm not sure if anyone reads *Yisei* now. I guess I'm one of the *yisae*, the second generation, of *Yisei* readers. I find this parallel so encouraging—the second generation is a unique position, and the challenges they face equip them for an unusual strength. Now I'm part of it. ♦

