Thematic Report on Chinese American Contributions:
Arts and Culture
Arts and culture are vital to the creation of a common national identity. A robust and vibrant culture, driven by diverse and creative minds, increases a society’s wellbeing, opening up new avenues for innovation and growth. As a nation built by immigrants, one of the greatest aspects of American society is the breadth of artistic experience, history and talent arising from its diverse population. Alongside Americans of every race, gender and background, Chinese American artists and creatives have utilized their talents and influence to help enrich American culture and shape its social fabric. They have also helped to build the nation's soft power, which in turn enables constructive and nuanced discourse from which to build relationships and advance national interests.
Overview

As of 2018, more than 30,000 Chinese Americans are active in varied creative professions, ranging from fashion designers and architects to visual and performing artists, writers, and authors (Figure 1). Notably, about one in 20 fashion designers and one in 30 architects are Chinese American. In total, they account for 1.8% of the American workforce in the creative fields, significantly higher than their share of the total US population (1.2%).

Chinese Americans’ interest in creative professions is evident in the fields in which they pursue education. Between 1998 and 2018, one in ten Chinese Americans who obtained a bachelor’s degree or above majored in arts- or culture-related disciplines. They accounted for 3.4% of those graduating in ethnic, culture, gender and group studies, and 1.8% of those graduating in visual and performing arts—in both cases higher than their proportion among the total number of Americans who obtained a bachelor’s degree or above during this period (1.7%).

**FIGURE 1** Representation of Chinese Americans in arts- or culture-related occupations, 2018

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fashion designers</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Architects</td>
<td>3.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Producers and directors</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artists and related workers</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News analysts, reporters, and journalists</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actors</td>
<td>1.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Musicians and singers</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dancers and choreographers</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writers and authors</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photographers</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music directors and composers</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey one-year estimates, public use microdata sample (PUMS); The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.

Chinese Americans have been active participants in American arts and culture since their arrival in the country in the early 1800s, although the artistic focus has shifted and expanded over time. In the earlier years, due in part to the social, legal and professional discrimination they faced, Chinese American artists often focused on their own communities, depicting Chinese immigrants and their lives. The groundbreaking photography of Lai Yong, dating from the late 1860s to approximately 1880, documents
mainly “Chinese gentlemen” in a strikingly informal and youthful manner then unheard of in photography. Other early creative pursuits, such as the many Chinese theatres and pan-Asian art exhibits in San Francisco, though inward-facing, were crucial in shaping the US as a melting pot of artistic styles and influences in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

As the American cultural consciousness turned towards more diverse voices in the 20th century, Chinese American creatives began to bring broader themes into their work. In literature, some Chinese American writers have focused on the intersectionality of identities central to many Americans. In doing so they gain recognition in the mainstream world rather than being relegated to the margins. Amy Tan’s novels, including The Joy Luck Club, employ stories of Chinese Americans to explore themes familiar to many Americans such as faith, family, loss, motherhood and the stark cultural differences often found between generations of families descended from immigrants.

In more recent decades, Chinese American writers have helped to bridge the gap between foreign-language books and American readers. In 2014, Chinese American novelist Ken Liu published a translation of a Chinese science-fiction novel, The Three-Body Problem, which was hailed as a groundbreaking work of speculative fiction by readers ranging from Barack Obama, the former US president, to George RR Martin, the author of the Game of Thrones novels. In 2015 The Three-Body Problem became the first translated novel to win the Hugo Award, one of the genre’s most prestigious honors.

In other areas, including architectural design and filmmaking, some Chinese American creative professionals have used their work to bring intersectional considerations of themes such as multiculturalism, the connection between past and present, and accessibility to audiences across the world. Perhaps the best example of this type of high-profile work is I.M. Pei, a renowned Chinese American architect who integrated Western modernist architecture with myriad cultural traditions. In filmmaking, Ang Lee, known for movies including Life of Pi, Brokeback Mountain and Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, wove together themes of multiculturalism, migration and sexual orientation, achieving critical acclaim in the process.

Meanwhile, younger generations of Chinese American artists have emerged in a variety of media. Ali Wong, a comedian, writer and actress, is best known for her ground-breaking Netflix stand-up specials Baby Cobra and Hard Knock Wife, which draw on the intersection of her identity as a child of first-generation immigrants, a woman and a mother. Awkwafina, a musician and actress at the frontier of rap, is another Chinese American artist who is pushing the creative envelope.

Alongside a broadening contribution to American performing arts and creative media, Chinese Americans increasingly assume influential roles in journalism, reporting on subjects ranging from financial and business news to societal developments and trends. For example, Betty Liu, an award-winning business journalist who is now executive vice
As of 2018, Chinese Americans account for 1.7% of news analysts, reporters and journalists in the US, notably higher than their share of the total population.

Chairman of the New York Stock Exchange, reported on financial news for Bloomberg TV, while Emily Chang is a journalist, producer and author who has raised awareness of the intersection of digital privacy and the women’s movement. As of 2018, Chinese Americans account for 1.7% of news analysts, reporters and journalists in the US, notably higher than their share of the total population.

Challenge and missed opportunity

The achievements of Chinese American artists and creatives are remarkable, given the long history of marginalization of minority voices in American creative culture. The marginalization arose in part due to legal discrimination against Chinese immigrants, as evident in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. The Act not only prohibited immigration on the basis of race, it also prevented Chinese Americans who had already settled in the US from leaving and re-entering. In the mid-20th century, virtually all prominent Chinese Americans working in the arts, were, like many racial minorities at the time, subjected to racially charged taunts and caricatures. Not until 1965 did Congress repeal the last of the immigration laws that overtly discriminated against Chinese immigrants.

In addition to facing legal discrimination, Chinese American creatives have had to counter the Euro-centric assumption that race and ethnicity indelibly mark artistic production, and thus that artists of Asian descent have to produce art that is somehow inherently “Asian” in terms of themes or aesthetic. Thus, for many decades, Chinese Americans’ art was rarely considered “American,” and was, at best, subjugated to the trope of being a bridge between “Eastern” and “Western” art.

Although Chinese American creatives have gained recognition over time, the historical marginalization of Chinese Americans in the arts continues to manifest in certain areas. For example, while representation of Chinese Americans in the creative industries has increased greatly, the visibility of Chinese Americans at the highest levels of American performing arts remains alarmingly small—those who have managed to break glass...
ceilings are, unfortunately, an exception to the rule, rather than a reflection of broad, fair representation. Only a handful of Chinese American actors have been cast in nuanced leading roles (rather than playing stereotypical generic Asian characters or otherwise acting in non-central supporting roles) or received major awards for their work.

This lack of visibility of Chinese Americans in American arts and culture is a missed opportunity to increase diversity in the US creative industries. In some, such as filmmaking, the lack of diversity undermines the industry’s ability to realize its full market potential. A series of reports published by the University of California-Los Angeles have consistently shown that films with casts reflecting America’s diversity are, on average, the top performers in box office sales. For example, Crazy Rich Asians (2018), the first studio film with an all-Asian cast since The Joy Luck Club in 1993 and directed by Jon Chu, a Chinese American director, was a major critical and commercial success. The film grossed over US$238m worldwide, making it the highest-grossing romantic comedy of the last decade.

US culture evidently benefits from the presence of underrepresented voices such as those of Chinese American creatives. Historically, Chinese American artists have used their talents and influence to help the US in various ways: they have helped to construct and describe a common American identity in times of war and crisis, effected positive social and political change, and increased diversity and representation in the arts and culture at the community and national levels through education and outreach.
Enhancing national identity during World War II

World War II, an ideological conflict, marked a seismic shift in the value of arts and culture as a social and political tool. Although their contributions might not seem as obvious as those who directly served in the military, American artists supported the war effort in numerous and important ways. Artists—particularly in visual arts—not only helped to create an extensive pictorial record of the war, they also aided local and national campaigns to boost troop morale, sell war bonds and encourage national unity among all Americans. Depictions of the war’s battlefields and life at home during wartime incorporated icons of American culture and reinforced an image of a patriotic and democratic people.

Throughout the war, alongside American artists of various backgrounds and ethnicities, Chinese American artists, actors and filmmakers helped to construct a domestic wartime identity that embraced longstanding American nationalistic notions about the national self and the enemy other. During the war years, several well-known, successful Chinese American artists found their work in public demand. These artists mobilized both the unique characteristics of their particular work and the influence of their sociocultural position, perceived as in some ways culturally representative of the US's valued wartime ally, China, to contribute to the American war effort.

One example of this type of artist is Dong Kingman, often described as America's most popular watercolorist in the mid-20th century. Mr Kingman was drafted into the US army in 1944, but Eleanor Roosevelt, a fan of Kingman's work, arranged for his transfer to the Art Department of the OSS, a precursor to the CIA, where he drew maps and charts. Mr Kingman was an especially talented painter of quotidian American life during wartime. His watercolor paintings of American cityscapes and countryside, with their bold colors and unusual use of line that integrated Chinese and Western brush and paint techniques, contributed to the visualization of an American national identity during the war.

Another Chinese American who mobilized his artistic talents in support of the war effort was James Wong Howe, one of the world's leading cinematographers in the pre-war period. During World War II, Howe made documentary-style dramatic films such as Air Force (1943) and Objective Burma! (1945) that helped the American public to imagine the Pacific battlefield. His work during these years confirmed his reputation as a pioneer of realism in American cinema.

Cultivating social and political change (1950s-today)

In the decades following World War II, the US experienced a groundswell of social and cultural unrest, with a growing civil rights movement and serious division over the country's involvement in the Vietnam War. The repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943
removed longstanding barriers to immigration, citizenship and civil rights for immigrant artists and creatives. The influx of immigrants of all nationalities and races created an artistic and cultural environment that sought to highlight multiculturalism, celebrating the myriad benefits of diversity and cross-cultural communication.26

Chinese American artists’ work during this period is incredibly diverse, both ideologically and visually. One common theme that weaves through the larger body of Chinese American art from this period is the social consciousness sparked by the injustices of anti-Asian and wider racial discrimination, and the economic and social struggles faced by new immigrants.27 Thus, Chinese American artists often explored narratives of immigration, poverty, war, race and ethnicity in their work.28

Jim Dong, a graphic artist, painter, muralist and photographer, and Nancy Hom, a graphic artist and poet, are particularly representative of the type of socially directed, often overtly political visual art typical of this period. Together, they produced a “portable mural” entitled The Struggle for Low Income Housing in 1976 that protested the destruction of low-income communities in San Francisco, advocating for increased civil rights for the city’s diverse immigrant populations.29

Following in the footsteps of Mr Dong and Ms Hom at the community level, some notable Chinese Americans used their art to bring awareness to sociopolitical issues and create an identity around artistic culture at a national level. One example is Maya Lin and her feature work, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC, designed in 1981. The memorial’s dramatic, dark cut into the earth asks visitors to not only remember those that died but to pause and meditate on the tremendous cost of this and other wars. Because of the immersive, thought-provoking experience that Ms Lin created with her design, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial is one of the most visited monuments in the country, with an estimated 5.6m annual visitors, second in attendance only to the Lincoln Memorial.30 Ms Lin remains active to this day: a committed environmentalist, she
is currently working on a multi-site artwork-cum-memorial, entitled *What is Missing?* in pursuit of bringing awareness to the planet's loss of habitat and biodiversity.31

Another artist bringing awareness to social issues is David Henry Hwang, a playwright whose work deals with issues of immigration, assimilation and racism. These themes are evident in his Tony Award-winning 1988 play *M Butterfly* and his 2019 musical *Soft Power*, a sharp commentary on historical stereotypes of Asians expressed through musicals like *The King and I*.32 Mr Hwang deliberately uses these stereotypes in order to subvert them, while embracing the dual complexity of ethnicity as it relates to both national identity and ethnic history.33

In addition to raising awareness of social and political issues through art, Chinese Americans also bring vital knowledge directly to the public via journalism and other work in the news media. In 2002, Michael Luo, a Chinese American investigative journalist, won several awards for a series of articles on three Black Americans with intellectual disabilities who were wrongfully imprisoned for killing a baby who likely never existed. As a result of the series, two of the men were cleared of all charges and released from prison (the third remained in prison on a separate charge).34 Today, Mr Luo oversees the digital presence of *The New Yorker*, helping to bring the publication to new readers and redefine the role of news magazines in an increasingly online world.

Another industry leader is Richard Lui, a journalist and news anchor for MSNBC, who has focused his reporting on bringing awareness to humanitarian issues including gender equality, human trafficking and affordable housing.35 His journalistic achievements have informed his extensive charity and humanitarian work. In 2018 he was recognized by the Foundation for Gender Equality for his advocacy and humanitarian efforts around gender equality, anti-trafficking and human rights.36

Reinforcing social diversity and inclusivity (1960s-today)

In the 1960s and 1970s, as American artists and creatives rallied against widespread social and political inequity, they began to challenge the representational norms of American arts and visual culture that were often rooted in racism and the oppression of minority voices.37 Since then, progressive thinkers and creative professionals, including many prominent Chinese American artists, have called for increased diversity within the arts, advocating for the inclusion of previously silenced voices and perspectives in the mainstream American cultural consciousness.38 They have used their art to bring untold stories to the fore and forgotten injustices to light, in addition to working to expand access to arts programs in disadvantaged communities.

The 1960s and 1970s saw the proliferation of ethnic community-based arts organizations that contributed to diversity of medium, subject and form within American
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Arts at a granular, local level. One example is Kearny Street Workshop, a multidisciplinary Asian American arts organization founded in San Francisco by Mr Dong alongside two other Chinese American artists, Lora Joh Foo and Mike Chin, in 1972. Kearny Street Workshop provided the surrounding community with classes in silk-screening, photography, video, crafts, music and dance, alongside an Asian American jazz program and mural projects, helping to create a visual culture that responded directly to the changing times and varied experiences of immigrant communities. Alongside their Asian American focus, the workshop demonstrated a firm commitment to maintaining ongoing connections with other communities of color, collaborating with a Latino arts organization, Galería de la Raza, to highlight the commonalities among immigrant groups in their struggles to understand their identity, heritage and role in American society.

Another example of Chinese American-founded community arts organizations, this time on the opposite coast, was Basement Workshop, a seminal institution in the cultural history of New York City. Founded around 1969 by a group of Chinese American artists and creatives, it was the first cross-disciplinary Asian-American cultural space on the East Coast. Much like Kearney Street Workshop in San Francisco, Basement Workshop provided New Yorkers with free classes in visual arts, dance, music and writing. In addition, it served the local immigrant population with English and citizenship classes.

Members of Basement Workshop trained for acts of civil disobedience demanding healthcare, jobs and resources for communities of color, as well as designing and printing flyers and pamphlets for those actions.

As Chinese Americans work to expand inclusion in creative industries and as their representation in these domains increases, the door opens for many diverse and talented creative professionals to contribute to American culture. When Chinese Americans working in the arts are given the opportunity, they not only contribute to the richness of American arts and culture, but also give back to society through philanthropy and community involvement.

Many of today’s most successful Chinese American artists, performers and musicians promote multiculturalism and inclusiveness in the arts through special programs and initiatives. One notable example is Phillipa Soo, an actress who reached stardom at the age of 26 for her performance as Eliza Schuyler Hamilton in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s hit Broadway show, Hamilton. Rather than resting on her laurels, Ms Soo, inspired by the character she played in Hamilton, started the Eliza Project initiative in partnership with Graham Windham, a private orphanage in Brooklyn that was founded by Eliza Schuyler Hamilton. Through the program, Ms Soo plans to provide students at the Graham School with acting, dancing and rap workshops. The Eliza Project is open to the nearly 4,000 students at Graham Windham, teaching children to turn to the arts as an outlet for personal expression and experience, and to uplift the creative spirit.
Another Chinese American creative professional who has used his success to effect social change is Yo-Yo Ma, a world-renowned cellist known for his celebration of multiculturalism and diversity. Mr Ma has used his success and influence to establish programs that increase inclusiveness in the performing arts by bringing musical education to schools and communities in the US and globally. In 2018 Mr Ma established the Bach Project to collaborate with artists, students and activists in exploring culture's contribution to social progress.45

Conclusion

Chinese American artists and creatives have applied their talents and influence to contribute to the development of American arts and culture in myriad ways: by helping to construct and describe a common American identity in times of war and crisis, advocating for positive sociopolitical change, and increasing diversity and inclusion in the arts at the community and national levels. Following in the footsteps of previous generations, Chinese American artists and creative thinkers continue to use both art and philanthropy to effect social change and protest injustice. They elevate the voices and stories of previously underrepresented Americans of all races, classes, genders and sexual orientations, and in doing so, celebrate the diversity, richness, and vibrancy of American culture and society.
1 US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, public use microdata sample (PUMS), The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.
2 The disciplines include visual and performing arts, history, ethnic, cultural, gender, and group studies; communication and journalism; foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics; English language and literature; and philosophy and religious studies. Chinese Americans include both citizens and permanent residents.
3 Department of Education, IPEDS Completions Survey; The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.
4 Artists and related workers include art directors, craft artists, fine artists (i.e. painters, sculptors and illustrators), special effects artists and animators. Producers and directors include people who produce or direct stage, television, radio, video, or film productions for entertainment, information, or instruction.
14 US Census Bureau, 2018 American Community Survey 1-year estimates, PUMS, The Economist Intelligence Unit analysis.
15 “Bouncy, buck-toothed little Dong Kingman” was how a 1945 Time magazine review introduced the Chinese American painter’s work. See “Dashing Realist,” Time, September 3, 1945, http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,855245,00.html.
17 The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 eliminated an earlier immigration quota system based on national origin (which limited the number of Chinese immigrants to 105) and established a new immigration policy giving preference to family reunification and skilled labor. (Source: “U.S. Immigration Since 1965,” History.com, June 7, 2019, https://www.history.com/topics/immigration/us-immigration-since-1965.)


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