

Asian American Studies Program Oral History Project

Victor Jew

Interviewed by Cynthia Liu

Date: 11/15/2019

00:00:00:02 - 00:00:04:09

Victor Jew

All right. So I don't know if you remember from AP on AP, we're shooting birds.

00:00:04:12 - 00:00:07:02

Victor Jew

Yeah, that was fun. Yeah. Yeah, I enjoyed it.

00:00:07:12 - 00:00:19:02

Cynthia Liu

Good. The first thing I asked you to do is like starting your name. Yeah. And then, like, your departments. And for this one, it's state. Your name? Department. How long you've been teaching at UW.

00:00:19:05 - 00:00:44:18

Victor Jew

Okay. Oh, sure. Hi. My name is Victor Jew, and I teach for the Asian American Studies Program. I'm a lecturer. I have a Ph.D. I earned my Ph.D. right here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in history. I've been teaching for the Asian American Studies program, various classes like Asian American Legal and Constitutional History, Asian Americans in classic Hollywood and the Introduction to Asian American Studies.

00:00:45:03 - 00:00:56:18

Victor Jew

I've been doing that on and off since 2003. So I have a connection to Madison, but I'm originally from Los Angeles, California.

00:00:58:09 - 00:01:10:20

Cynthia Liu

Great. So we're going to jump right into the class. Sure. So can you tell me a little bit about the Sterling Committee of Minority Affairs in 1987?

00:01:10:23 - 00:01:38:03

Victor Jew

Sure. The the report finally came out in November 1987. It was called the steering committee. But before that, there was a history. And then before that, there's history. The immediate history, as I'm sure many people will share with you, is that in the spring of 1987, made 1987,

there was a fraternity, Phi Gamma Delta figures, who had their annual Founder's Day party founding of Fiji.

00:01:38:03 - 00:02:11:19

Victor Jew

Phi Gamma Delta was May 1st, 1848. And so every year since May 1st, 1848, they would have events, a feature of that fraternity is kind of a beach party, kind of an island party. And so they had their party on Langdon and as part of their tradition, they had this 15 foot figure, horrible figure, actually a caricature of something somebody dark, even black, a bone through the nose, I've been told.

00:02:13:08 - 00:02:49:18

Victor Jew

And it looked permanently savage, permanently primitive. So the next day, May 2nd, there was protests. The Black Student union here at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, Charles Harle. Holly was president of the black student Union. They realized that this figure was not only stereotypic perhaps of Pacific Islanders, but a gesture towards traditional kind of black stereotype. Now, I've thought about it for a number of years and thinking about the incident, and it struck me that it could be that the members of Fire Gamma Delta thought they were being faithful to their traditions.

00:02:50:01 - 00:03:14:06

Victor Jew

There are a lot of traditions in that fraternity, and it was quite possible they were faithful to a lot of traditions of having that kind of figure at their parties. But the African American students got the big picture. They understood the big picture of that. Since the 19th century, since 1829, there have been caricatures put on by white folks of African Americans.

00:03:14:07 - 00:03:51:08

Victor Jew

1829. There was a guy named Thomas TD Rice, Thomas Rice, and in New York, he put on what had become what would become the caricature caricature that would last for centuries thereafter. It was Jim Crow. And so Thomas Rice put on this horrible shambling, badly dressed, shabby looking figure where he would speak in blackface and act in blackface and that's been going on since 1829 through the 19th century, through the era of movies, through television.

00:03:51:18 - 00:04:26:09

Victor Jew

So the African American students got it right. That figure was indeed something that could caricature people in the Fiji Islands, could caricature African Americans, could caricature people of color. Now, from that, protests would come an interesting mobilization. It was called the minority coalition, the minority coalition where students of color communities of color, who formed a coalition to address not just the Fiji incident, but longstanding issues that people of color faced at the University of Wisconsin, Madison faced.

00:04:26:09 - 00:05:04:19

Victor Jew

And I would think Wisconsin. So the communities, the color would be the Black Student union, the Chicano, Chicano, Chicano Students Union, Puerto Ricans to the Puerto Rican students, Native American students, and and the Asian American students And the Asian American students had their early organization through an organization of Asian American women here on campus. And that was called Power for Short, Pacific American Pacific, Asian Women's Alliance, Pacific Asian Women's Alliance with Peggy Choi, Wendy Ho, Jan Masaki as members of that.

00:05:05:05 - 00:05:39:20

Victor Jew

And so for Asian Americans, we had a ready made organization there, not just of students, but of community people, graduate students and undergrads solely of women. But then it expanded to address this particular need. Now, that's the fast history of the minority coalition. The university responded with the idea that students could be a part of a committee which became the steering committee that could report on the condition of communities of color at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

00:05:40:12 - 00:06:10:12

Victor Jew

That's what the steering committee did through the summer of 1987 up to November 1987. That's when the final report was issued or released. But up to then, there was a lot of work. There was a lot of work both as minority coalition members and as steering committee members, because the minority coalition was really very smart and intelligent and strategic about keeping the autonomy of the minority coalition.

00:06:10:21 - 00:06:32:17

Victor Jew

And so there was some crossover. There was overlap for my for myself, being a half member of power, being a part of the Asian American students coalition part, and also being a part of the minority coalition, but also appointed to the steering committee part. We also we all had to keep our roles very clearly distinct, but we are all working towards the same goal.

00:06:33:12 - 00:06:59:20

Victor Jew

Long answer to your question, tell me about the steering committee. Steering Committee was part of this long structure, this long process, and so November, after a lot of work, a lot of work through a very hot summer in 1987 through July, August 1987, September or November, a number of subcommittees reporting on various aspects of being a person of color here at the university.

00:07:00:05 - 00:07:31:02

Victor Jew

And so the subcommittees addressed issues such as the nature of being a faculty person, a person of color, faculty person here at the university, recruiting and retaining faculty, recruiting and retaining students of color, and looking ahead to an ethnic studies requirement. And so here's where history meets. Years later, 2019, here we are talking about something that's still Ramaphosa, something that's still continuing from 1997, 1987, 1987.

00:07:31:02 - 00:07:41:12

Victor Jew

Time out. Am I going too long? I tend to kind of go on and on. You're going to get this anyway, right? You're going to edit it anyway. Okay, We'll be footage before it's okay not to. Okay.

00:07:42:22 - 00:07:49:18

Cynthia Liu

Yeah, that is it's a really interesting history of how many committees have been formed since then.

00:07:50:01 - 00:08:18:04

Victor Jew

Yeah, exactly. And how many faculty committees. Right. Because as more faculty of color have joined the University of Wisconsin-Madison, they become activists in the wake of 1987. Right. They become activists themselves, as well as faculty people in the wake of what happened from that moment. Now, here's something interesting. You know, ethnic studies, we always think of students learning in the classroom, but people who teach ethnic studies also learn.

00:08:18:14 - 00:08:50:04

Victor Jew

So I'm a historian. I tend to do research in archives. And I did some Midwestern Asian American research. And one of the places I did research was Cleveland. And so who knew? Right at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, Ohio. There is a big bunch of stuff about Asian Americans, Japanese-American Citizens League in Cleveland, Vietnamese resettlement in Cleveland, Japanese-Americans resettling in Cleveland, Asian Indians forming a community in Northeast Ohio.

00:08:50:14 - 00:09:25:02

Victor Jew

So I was going through that one summer and wouldn't you know it, I was reading the Japanese-American Citizens League stuff from Cleveland and Chicago, and there was a letter from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the early 1970s, University of Wisconsin-Madison, Asian American students early to mid 1970s, writing a letter to the Chicago Japanese-American Citizens League asking for advice and help about how to deal with issues, how to deal with issues of race and institutional racism and institutions.

00:09:25:12 - 00:10:13:15

Victor Jew

And so I learned I learned going to that archive. But it's that long circle, right? It's that long circle getting involved back in 1987, keeping added teaching ethnic studies. But with that ethnic studies perspective, going into archives with all that raw stuff and then saying this is significant. There's a lot of paper, there's a lot of paper in all those collections, and suddenly that one single piece of paper just stood out for me so much, not only because it was the University of Wisconsin-Madison and Asian American, but ethnic studies perspective tells me, Oh, a moment here of early mobilization and mid 1970s, early seventies that preceded 1987.

00:10:14:03 - 00:10:26:02

Victor Jew

But in some ways, power and Asian American students in 1987, even though we never knew about that letter, we were continuing it. Spooky, but historical.

00:10:27:05 - 00:10:38:06

Cynthia Liu

Yeah. And so Serling committee did the entire Holly report in 1987, and then the requirement didn't come around until the 2000.

00:10:39:11 - 00:11:03:02

Victor Jew

I believe. So now here's where I'm sketch. You write because I was really very involved in minority coalition and the steering committee and the Holly Report. You know, there's the advice that's given to graduate students when they do activism and undergrads When they do activism, you got to do activism. But then there are times when you pass it on to the next group because you have to go back.

00:11:03:12 - 00:11:32:05

Victor Jew

And in many of us, all of us, all the graduate students on the steering committee and the minority coalition, there were many graduate students on both committees that helped give an interesting perspective to the activism and all of us put our work on hold, all of us put our masters theses on hold, in our dissertations on hold. And so putting it on hold, you know, you're kind of putting things away from the clock, but you're still on the clock, right?

00:11:32:19 - 00:11:56:07

Victor Jew

So there comes a time when you get advice. And I got this advice in 1988 while the next stage was happening. I was at a meeting of historians and I met one of the foremost Asian American historians back in the eighties and still today is Professor Su Chang chan and Professor Su Chang Chan taught at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

00:11:56:21 - 00:12:21:08

Victor Jew

I went to this big conference and there actually was a session on Historians of Color. Wow. And this was at the Organization of American Historians meeting. Su Chang Chan was on that panel, the only Asian American on that panel. I was the only Asian American in the audience. And afterwards, I had to tell her, you know, some things are going on at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and there's this Holly report.

00:12:21:13 - 00:12:48:16

Victor Jew

And I was on the steering committee and the minority coalition, and Professor Chan, in all her wisdom, looked at me. She listened and she said, it's about time you return to your dissertation. And so I took that to heart. It's about time you return to your dissertation. So I did, although I was still, you know, there right in spirit, especially as the Asian American Studies program proposal was being put forth after 1987.

00:12:49:03 - 00:13:12:00

Victor Jew

So this is just a long caveat of saying to you, I know 1987, I kind of remember 1987. I went through the Holly Report last night. But thereafter, I would like to hear from Professor Leslie BOE, and I would like to hear from Professor Peggy Choi about more of that implementation stage. So that was kind of a long Hey, flag morning.

00:13:12:01 - 00:13:14:03

Victor Jew

Okay. Yeah, no worries. Okay.

00:13:14:15 - 00:13:20:10

Cynthia Liu

Um, and you I want to kind of like jump a little bit to, like, now teach ethnic studies.

00:13:20:10 - 00:13:20:19

Victor Jew

Yeah.

00:13:21:03 - 00:13:36:00

Cynthia Liu

And I know that that's something that, like, you have to kind of teach to. Mm hmm. Yeah. What is that like? Like being, like, forming a class where you know that a lot of students are taking it for an ethnic studies requirements.

00:13:37:06 - 00:13:57:03

Victor Jew

Yes. I have to walk a tightrope. Right? You put it perfectly. It is walking a tightrope. Very much so. For a person of color teaching, um, the way I've negotiated it is because I often teach the

introduction to Asian American studies. I see it as that great opportunity, right? I mean, kids who have never heard of Asian America.

00:13:57:03 - 00:14:19:12

Victor Jew

And that's so true. Every semester, students from the Midwest. Very much so. From Wisconsin, Chicago, Saint Paul, they've never heard of Asian America. They don't have a good idea. But that's that opportunity, right? That's my place to jump in and say, oh, so much more interesting and complex and it's so vital. And I always like to share that.

00:14:19:12 - 00:14:43:21

Victor Jew

My favorite number. My favorite number two favorite numbers 24 Asian derive communities in the US as a whole, but in the Midwest there are 19, there are 19 different Asian derived communities here in the Midwest, where it's a place where Beth Winn, who recently joined us here at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Professor Beth Wen, who's a novelist, wrote *Stealing Buddhist Dinner* and two novels.

00:14:44:09 - 00:15:07:13

Victor Jew

She once said at a meeting, talking about being in the Midwest. She grew up in Grand Rapids, Michigan. We're here. We're we're not supposed to be. Well, many of us do have that sense, but things are changing. There are 19 different Asian derived communities that's so fun to teach to people who've never heard of Asian America. So fun to teach to people who are Asian American.

00:15:07:23 - 00:15:28:01

Victor Jew

Because I have discovered that Asian Americans in the Midwest need to learn and are hungry to learn. They're so hungry they never had it in high school to learn about Asian America in general and Asian America in the Midwest. People in California need to hear that. People in New York need to hear that. People in Atlanta need to hear that.

00:15:28:12 - 00:15:57:15

Victor Jew

So it's a tightrope. It can be very discouraging at times, but it's a tightrope you walk and you realize maybe five years down the road the effect will kick in and someone will say, you know, I didn't fully understand what you were saying five years ago, but I think I understand now. And that actually happened story. I was on my way research trip to Dane County Airport had to catch the early flight.

00:15:57:15 - 00:16:16:19

Victor Jew

So there I am off the square. God I have to catch the bus to go to North Transfer point to catch the bus to the airport. So I go into that coffee shop off the square and getting that fast coffee and someone said to me, The person who's not a person of color, not Asian American, she said, Don't you teach at the university?

00:16:17:02 - 00:16:39:18

Victor Jew

I said, Yes. And she said, I think I took one of your classes, took Asian American. I said, okay, yes. And she said, Oh, I think you had an immigration section in that class. And I said, Yeah, yeah, very much so. I'm glad you paid attention at that point. And she said, I don't really remember a lot, but I'm leaving Madison.

00:16:39:19 - 00:17:04:15

Victor Jew

It was in the summer, I'm leaving Madison. I'm going to the university of Oregon in a few weeks. I'm resettling in Oregon. I'm going to University of Oregon Law School, and I'm specializing in immigration law. And your class helped. And she was not a person of color. She was white. I think she grew up in Wisconsin and she said, I'm going to Oregon law school and I'm going to specialize in immigration law.

00:17:05:08 - 00:17:25:05

Victor Jew

And who knows? It's that stretch of years, huh? I don't I'm not saying it had a direct effect, but it had an effect. And so I guess those kinds of stories kind of keep me going. I have to keep telling myself over and over again. So, yeah, it's a tightrope.

00:17:25:05 - 00:17:35:08

Cynthia Liu

And is there anything that you wish, like ethnic studies a requirement would like? Is there anything that you would change about the requirement, something which was implemented?

00:17:35:13 - 00:18:00:12

Victor Jew

Oh, well, many people will say more, right? Because it's it's not just more in that more people will have things to teach, but it's valuable. Oh, it really has merit and intrinsic worth and integrity. Oh, some people might assume, oh, ethnic studies, people sitting around a coffee table and having a screed and just jotting things down the night before.

00:18:01:10 - 00:18:21:18

Victor Jew

It takes a lot of work in sociology. It takes a lot of work in anthropology. It takes a lot of work and literature takes a lot of work in history. Every person of color, every ethnic studies requirement, person that I know who teaches ethnic studies, requirement, classes, they draw upon their experience, they draw upon their research, they draw upon their learning.



00:18:21:18 - 00:19:02:18

Victor Jew

It's learning. That's what this place is supposed to be about. That's what the university is supposed to be about. It's learning and it's learning that's hard earned for sociologists. They're going through their data, right? And they're crunching their numbers through SPSS. For anthropologists, they're doing their fieldwork. And I know Asian American anthropologists who are interviewing people, students, everyday folks in particular situations in Chicago in the Argyle District of Chicago, which is the Vietnamese-American community in North Chicago, which is the Korean-American community in Chinatown on 22nd Street, they're doing that ethnographic interviewing.

00:19:03:03 - 00:19:27:00

Victor Jew

I told you about the archives. I'm going to archives in Cleveland and Chicago, in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and Detroit, trying to find stuff that's not there. But the great thing is we do find things and it's such a great opportunity to teach just to share these new things that people never knew, like 19 different communities in the Midwest, Asian American.

00:19:27:12 - 00:19:51:10

Victor Jew

That's a joy. And that's why the University of Wisconsin, Madison, is the kind of university it is because it's the place where you actually can share that cutting edge stuff. You don't have to recycle, you don't have to rehash. You can actually say, you know, there was a letter sent in the early 1970s from the Asian American students at the University of Wisconsin that the Japanese-American citizens League in Chicago.

00:19:52:12 - 00:20:16:15

Victor Jew

It's that kind of reward. And I'm hoping, yeah, more classes, more faculty, more teaching allows more opportunities to share that learning and more students get the benefit. Not everybody can. If you get a degree from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, you're getting the benefit of people are asking new kinds of questions like is there an Asian America in the Midwest?

00:20:16:15 - 00:20:46:20

Victor Jew

Did you know it goes back to 1870? That's 150 years of Asian America in the Midwest. Overall since 1820, it's 200 years of Asian America in the United States as a whole. Do you know how many people in California don't know that? Do you know how many people in Los Angeles and San Francisco don't know that? But here at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, students who've never heard the term can find these amazing new things.

00:20:47:14 - 00:20:58:05

Victor Jew

So I guess I'm a big fan of more. So I would say, you know, that's that's my answer. How am I doing?

00:20:58:11 - 00:21:01:18

Cynthia Liu

Check time real quick. Okay. I can have like maybe one more question.

00:21:02:10 - 00:21:18:06

Victor Jew

Um, we saw it on on tape or has the issue. We're never short on tape. Right on time or space. Oh, my God, You're right. We have 20 minutes. You're right. Okay. And did you want to debrief two or level one? We go on with the next question. Yeah.

00:21:19:01 - 00:21:24:03

Cynthia Liu

Um, I'm trying to pick one. Do you have, like, a question.

00:21:27:11 - 00:21:38:08

Speaker 3

I would want to. I mean, you said more. Yeah. Looking forward, you know what? What, what does the university need to keep an eye on? What do we need to do? Jeez.

00:21:38:20 - 00:21:40:16

Cynthia Liu

Is there something that university is not doing enough?

00:21:40:17 - 00:21:42:19

Speaker 3

Oh, God.

00:21:42:19 - 00:22:01:19

Victor Jew

Yeah, maybe not that. Yeah, okay. But it's a good question. Sure. And why don't you prep Paige High and Lesley? Well, I'm sort of stuck in the classroom, in the archives. You know, sometimes I have to kind of get my head out for a while, and that's one of those kind of big get my head out type of moment.

00:22:01:19 - 00:22:12:10

Victor Jew

So let me think. Maybe down the road I'll give you an answer. Okay. All right. So now, if it's a good question. No, really, what should the university be on the lookout for?

00:22:12:10 - 00:22:16:08

Speaker 3

Or more optimistically, like in your realm, You know, look, what's the future?

00:22:16:13 - 00:22:46:18

Victor Jew

Things are changing, right? And there are 19 different communities in the Midwest. How many people know that it's keeping ahead of the curve? And I think teaching ethnic studies and thinking imaginatively about offering ethnic studies and offering a good institutional home, a strong institutional home for both ethnic studies and various initiatives that can come from ethnic studies that is keeping ahead of the curve and isn't an amazing University of Wisconsin-Madison.

00:22:47:06 - 00:23:19:01

Victor Jew

For so many years, the state of Wisconsin and the university took pride in that word for word forward. Looking ahead, the Wisconsin idea, what a great way to implement that idea. That goes back to 1900 forward the Wisconsin idea. But to do it for the 21st century and institute so that Wisconsin can better deal with the 21st century and a changing America.

00:23:19:01 - 00:23:20:01

Cynthia Liu

I think that was perfect.

00:23:20:14 - 00:23:21:16

Speaker 3

Beautiful. Yeah.

00:23:22:10 - 00:23:25:05

Cynthia Liu

Okay. Is there anything else that you want to say?

00:23:25:20 - 00:23:55:04

Victor Jew

Oh, I had so many things I prepped. Maybe we can do more with another video or a B-roll. Yeah, since we're here. Yeah. I don't know if you want to use this, but it's kind of back story, and so I'm so glad we're here at the Great Hall because back in 1987, May 2nd, there was the protest. May 1st was the Founder's Day party of Phi Gamma Delta, May 2nd, the protests.

00:23:55:04 - 00:24:19:12

Victor Jew

And then that week there was a emergency meeting that the university called to have students of color talk about what it's like to be a student of color at the university. And so there they were. I don't know if you call this the well or the the main ballroom area, but students of color stepping up one by one, going to the microphone and sharing.

00:24:20:11 - 00:24:47:10

Victor Jew

I came late because I'm always late, but because I came late, I was I didn't have a seat here in this area. I took a seat in the back. So it's interesting to sit in the back sometimes because you can see and hear with the main show. But you also see what's happening behind and what happened behind. I think it was the fraternity, Phi Gamma Delta and a sorority that they were associated with.

00:24:47:17 - 00:25:18:18

Victor Jew

I don't know for sure if it was that fraternity, but it was a non minority fraternity, white fraternity with white sorority. And they ringed the area with seats sitting in the back with the students of color sitting here in the great Hall, giving witness bearing witness to what it was like. And what struck me as I sat there, both listening to the students, but watching the fraternity in the sorority as I sat there was how much they disrespected.

00:25:18:18 - 00:25:38:23

Victor Jew

They were there to disrespect what was going on. And I saw one guys talk to his brothers and, you know, talk to his brothers and say, hey, you racist, I'm a racist. Hey, you racist. I'm a racist. And they weren't listening. They weren't listening to the students of color talking about what it meant to be here at the UW.

00:25:40:05 - 00:26:01:04

Victor Jew

And they were laughing and they spent the time laughing. And so when I saw that sitting in the back and seeing them, hearing them not listen, not caring to listen, I said, I got to get involved. I got to do something. I got to join whoever is getting involved. The next stage that's happening, I got to do something.

00:26:02:05 - 00:26:15:01

Victor Jew

And so that's my own kind of personal story. And I'm so glad we got here. The Great Hall in the background, sitting in the back again here in the background, just to share that with you. Okay.

00:26:16:07 - 00:26:17:10

Cynthia Liu

Perfect. Thanks.

00:26:17:17 - 00:26:33:15

Victor Jew

Sure. I just post thing, laugh. We got it. We'll do a bro shirt. Thank you very much. Thank you for both. And you know, the echo is wonderful. I like the sound. Yeah.

00:26:35:00 - 00:26:41:06

Speaker 3

But that was actually what I had to do at the end of the interview, was to do a clap. So you just did it. Okay?

00:26:41:06 - 00:26:42:16

Victor Jew

Yeah. Okay.