

Asian American Forum

Fifty Years and Counting

1967-2017

This brief history is dedicated to the many volunteers
who have kept and continue to keep
the Asian American Forum humming,
most especially
Anne Southard, Historian Extraordinary.

THE ASIAN AMERICAN FORUM

FIFTY YEARS AND COUNTING

What keeps a group alive for fifty years? As it turns out, many different things. And the mix changes over time. But the key to success is the knowledge, experience, and enthusiasm of individual members

While the Asian American Forum (AAF) began in the age of the standard black rotary-dial telephone and the manual typewriter, it now boasts a well-established electronic newsletter and a spanking new website. As a reminder to older members and an introduction to newer, the website is at <https://aaforumdc.org>. Please feel free to use it often to keep yourself abreast of the many activities we have going every month of the AAF year.

What we now call the Asian American Forum started out as an offshoot of the Pan Pacific Southeast Asian Women's Association. The PPSEAWA itself was created in 1923 in Hawaii, America's gateway to the Pacific, to foster "friendship and understanding among women of the nations of the Pacific Rim." Their objective was study rather than action and they aimed to hold an international conference on a different theme every two or three years. The 1940 conference had to be cancelled because of World War II, but the association revived in 1949, moved to New York, grew, and developed consultative relationships with various agencies of the United Nations. The wives of American diplomats assigned to the U.N. joined their counterparts from throughout the Asia-Pacific area and news filtered back to Washington, D.C.

AAF Historian Anne Southard sets the scene: "In the early 1960s, a new Women's Liberation Movement was stirring. While women had already won the vote and recognized the value of a first-rate education in pursuing a career, in the aftermath of World War II, many had left their professional work behind in order to marry, have children, and become the stay-at-home partner of a career-minded husband. For the wives of Foreign Service Officers, Washington was a special place where they were always subject to the overseas assignment of their husbands and their career choices were severely curtailed, not to say barred. Husbands' careers may have trumped their wives' aspirations but not their interests in the broader world that would be their home for years at a time. Asia was a region of special interest in the 1960s: the build-up of the Vietnam War, the political isolation of the People's Republic of China moving out of its Great Leap Forward and edging toward the Cultural Revolution, the changing political economies and social values as new Asian nations became independent of colonial rule and found themselves subject to new stresses and adjustments."

So it was natural that interest in a women's organization focused on the Pacific Rim had been growing in the capital area. In January 1963, under the auspices of Mildred Talbot, the wife of the Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern and South Asian Affairs, a tea was held at the home of Mrs. Averell Harriman (the second Mrs. Harriman, not Pamela, the dramatic third), whose husband was then the U.S. Secretary of State. The guest of honor was the head of PPSEAWA, Dr. Persia Campbell, who had just approved the formation of a Washington Chapter, apparently with extremely detailed instructions for its constitution and functioning. The other invitees were women from the Asian embassies as well as American women from the local community, and the idea must have caught fire because the charter was granted in October 1963 and the proto-AAF was off and running.

The meeting format in those days was for a monthly panel discussion (attended by approximately 75 women) followed a week later by a smaller group discussion held in someone's home. The panels were large and formal and involved a lot of coordination to set up. Sally Wriggins, first "chairman" of the chapter, remembered that it took at average of 60 telephone calls to set up each seminar. (Of course, now the Program Committee does much of its work via e-mail, but they have to arrange for all the permutations of audio-visual equipment, different computer formats, and the various linking devices that seem to specialize in incompatibility, so perhaps the organizational challenges remain equal, only different.)

The first set of eight seminars resulted in an impressive pamphlet entitled Roots of Progress. The topics are expansive: What is Happening to the Family in Asia and in America? Education: How Can It Serve as a Guardian of the Past and as an Instrument of Social Change? What is Progress? And the pamphlet prints up the moderator's opening remarks as well as highlights from the comments of the 4-6 panelists, followed by detailed and daunting "discussion guides." For example, how would you answer "Is the search for meaning the same in religion as in art?" (These extremely large and open-ended questions are more likely to be addressed in our small groups nowadays and certainly without a printed outline of blue-book-style exam questions.)

As rewarding as these seminars were, the Washington Chapter was soon disenchanted with the rules emanating from New York. On May 26, 1967, the Washington Chapter voted to secede from PPSEAWA and establish itself as the Asian American Forum. Among the first set of AAF officers, Martha de Wilde, Selma Janow, and Sheena Campbell each went on to become president (no longer "chairman"). Many of these early members continued on the rolls for 30 more years, surely a resounding endorsement of the Forum from its earliest days. And while academic panel discussions have ceased to be the preferred format for the monthly meetings, the Forum still addresses relevant issues in a variety of ways. In the last decade, most presentations have been by single speakers addressing the group with the help of photographs or PowerPoint slides. We have continued the practice of collecting written

questions from the audience to present to the speaker—a practice no longer seen many places but which keeps the focus on the guest and moves the program along.

In considering the history and traditions of the Asian American Forum it is interesting to consider how they also reflect the parallel development of two important historical trends in the United States: the growth of the women's movement and the rise of the People's Republic of China.

On a basic level, the 1967 membership list showed the names of women, unless they were unmarried, under the husband's name. A decade later, members appeared under their own names (with the husband's name in parentheses). We currently have several married couples with different last names in the directory and we deal with it using a "see also." (And, of course, men are now full-fledged members and have risen to positions on the Board—as high as Vice President—but so far not to the top post).

The relationship of food and friendship in a female-founded organization is more convoluted. Anne Southard articulated the "civilizing value of sharing food, and although the Forum has never had a bake sale, the importance of food has always been recognized. At-home meetings always included food, either a snack or a full meal, but never without a nibble or more. Dinners and lunches out are popular; lunches with speakers are regularly scheduled...the culminating event of the year was the Annual Pot Luck Lunch, a gala affair with wonderful food, all donated." The end-of-year potluck is still going strong although it has gone through ups and downs. What should appear here are Instagrams of the amazing dishes that members bring—not only tasty but beautifully presented and succinctly described on accompanying notecards to cater to varying dietary requirements. Over time, meetings in people's homes may have lightened the menu in quantity and shifted from heart-stopping pastries to fresh fruit, but the act of providing physical sustenance remains as essential a component to an AAF discussion as the intellectual nourishment generated. And nowadays, we may add a close-by restaurant meal in place of a home-cooked one to the end of a gathering to talk about a book or film, but food remains central to sharing. In fact, details of what would be on offer at the speaker's lunch have been a recurring topic at Board meetings even in the most recent past.

The Asian American Forum has made its home in a variety of venues, recalled with varying degrees of fondness, from meeting rooms at the American Association of University Women to upstairs at Guy Mason recreation center, from the Saint Luke's church basement to the Georgian splendor of Strathmore Hall, and the list could go on. Our latest home at the Kenwood Golf and Country Club is probably the most comfortable, with the most easily accessible parking, but it does not permit food to be brought in from the outside. So the early tradition of hauling huge coffee urns up and down stairs and providing cups and paper goods, let alone homemade pastries, has passed into history. We pay for the coffee and tea but we no longer carry the supplies and do the cleanup ourselves. You can't say we don't move with the times.

And sometimes, AAF has been in the vanguard. The Forum acquitted itself honorably with regard to what in earlier years might have been a taboo subject in the United States foreign policy community: the People's Republic of China, also referred to as The Mainland or even "Red" China. China was the topic of a panel discussion in the first year of the new Asian American Forum. It was entitled "What is happening in China? What does it mean for Asia and the Pacific?" Relevant in 1967 and still relevant today. AAF's second year started with another discussion of China entitled "Life in the People's Republic of China—how it goes on the street and on the land." Again, a topic that would have an audience today. And China has continued to have a prominent place in general meeting topics, followed closely by India, but AAF takes care to be inclusive of all Asian countries. But we haven't always led from the front. As Anne Southard observed: Sometimes a review of the programs given at the Forum is interesting for what is NOT there. I couldn't help noting that the Forum somehow managed to remain aloof from America's national agony of the Vietnam War until October 1978 when John Yarling...gave a talk concerning Vietnamese refugees." The Board works hard so that a similar observation cannot be made today.

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In its 50th anniversary year, the Asian American Forum has settled comfortably into its decade-long home at the Kenwood Country Club and boasts more than 200 members. And while yin is still a larger component of the membership than yang, there are men on almost every page of the membership directory and participating as Board Members and discussants in the various small groups that make the strength of AAF. So, the group that started out for the ladies also welcomes the gentlemen, and has since the 1980s. As both men and women are working longer and most professional women are working fulltime throughout their careers, our daytime programs are not an option for many younger members. It must be said that our membership is amazingly loyal and active, but it is aging and the elevator at Kenwood is not just a luxury. We are always looking for new members who share a love and life-long interest in Asia and who are eager to join AAF and contribute their own talents to our continuing journey into all aspects of the life and culture of Asia.

This year's AAF Program Committee has organized monthly meetings on topics as different as Burma and bonsai, China's one-child policy and North Korea's nuclear ambitions. Over the years, the big three (China, India, and Japan) have probably occupied the most space on the AAF monthly meeting agenda, but we don't ignore the geographically smaller (Singapore) or the culturally more distant (Iran) when we draw up plans for the year. And we have members who are fierce advocates for more coverage of their own favorites. The Program Committee has from the beginning depended on members suggesting speakers and topics and providing introductions to populate our podium. In a metropolitan area where there are many larger or more publicly recognized groups that host lectures, AAF exerts a surprisingly powerful draw for speakers who appreciate an audience that knows and cares about their topic. The Forum has drawn on experts from Asian embassies, the World Bank, the U.S. State Department, Brookings and SAIS, but also from Pulitzer Prize winning authors, museum

directors, and dancers. Moreover, one of the most rewarding aspects of our wide-ranging membership is that when scheduled speakers are unexpectedly called away (and it DOES happen, if not often), we always have a knowledgeable member who can step into the breach.

But if our General Meetings are a monthly highlight, the real jewels in the crown are our discussions in small groups. This is the beating heart of the Asian American Forum, where we meet in one another's homes to discuss books, films, and cross-cultural topics to explore different perspectives on our shared world. This is where we get to know the quiet person who doesn't reach out during the tumultuous coffee hour. This is where we learn that we have misunderstood a cultural practice we are unfamiliar with. This is where we re-learn that, underneath deep cultural differences, human beings share qualities that are instantly understood across the miles and across the ages; that while some jokes don't travel, others do, and that people laugh and cry at many of the same things. Our small groups are meant to incubate cross-cultural friendships that extend beyond the AAF year and they are remarkably successful.

As past-president Maya Malhotra (1991-93) observed at the 30-year mark for AAF: "It's a privilege to be a member of the Forum. It's a reminder that one never stops learning. To make friends through associating with work on the Board is a personal reward. And it feels nice to wear a past-president name tag. And then again, perhaps this experience in the Forum is not unique. Its esprit de corps comes from sharing Serendipity—the wonderful isle that, as you round the horizon on the way to somewhere else, there it is, just for you."

Of course, small groups are not all intense discussions. We have had cooking classes and shiatsu sessions, excursions to museums, galleries, and private collections.

A glance at the website will produce a complete list of the books read this past year, always a highlight of the monthly calendar. Likewise, the website features selected films, events, and discussion topics from our other groups. And the lively newsletter keeps members informed of AAF programs and dates, along with the occasional mention of Asia-related events in the metropolitan area.

Truly, to bend a famous dictum, "Who is tired of AAF, is tired of life."

So a grand salute to the original ladies in hats and gloves who started us off on this path, and thanks to the hundreds of faithful members who kept us going over the years, and welcome to the new members who will join us as we start our next fifty.

Respectfully submitted,

Danielle M. Beauchamp
Past Board Member (in various capacities)

PAST PRESIDENTS

Martha de Wilde	1967-68	Nancy Carolyn Reagan	1989-90
Selma Janow	1968-69	Anne Woodward	1990-91
Sheena Campbell	1969-70	Maya Malhotra	1991-93
Marie Tobler	1970-71	Anne Southard	1993-94
Berta Gruen	1971-73	Keiko Kimura	1994-95
Anita Sen	1973-74	Bobbie Seligmann	1995-97
Alice Schmidt	1974-75	Sally Lilley	1997-98
Sheena Campbell	1975-76	Sudha Gallagher	1998-99
Ruth Hunsberger	1976-77	Patricia Morgan	1999-00
Jane Griffin	1977-78	Molly Schuchat	2000-02
Martha de Wilde	1978-79	Roca Lau Harding	2002-04
Lorita Fisher	1979-80	Padmini Gulati	2004-05
Suvira Kapur	1980-81	Judith Clark	2005-07
Jeanne Barnett	1981-83	Nancy Mannes	2007-09
Tin Mala	1983-85	Pat Reilly	2009-11
Susan Ingraham	1985-86	Rita Hadden	2011-13
Cecilia Chang	1986-87	Lee McBride	2013-15
Mary Shivanandan	1987-88	Sally Werner	2015-17
Christine Murakami	1988-89		
	President-Elect	Elvi Moore	2017-18