



Hearing Home Through a Podcast of Asian American Tales

by Fariha Khan, Margaret Magat,
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As folklorists and colleagues working inside and beyond academia, we are dedicated to building the field of Asian American folklore. In late 2021, we launched "Yellow and Brown Tales: Asian American Folklife Today," a podcast that highlights the longstanding and rich diversity of Asian American experiences. Our venture was born from our growing awareness of the dearth of scholarship on Asian American folklore and the marginalization faced by Asian American folklorists both in the academy and in public sector work. With this podcast, we have created a space for connecting, sharing stories, and finding a sense of home through discussions of foodways, music, and migration journeys. We are fortunate to have established a supportive base for the podcast within the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania, in partnership with the Department of Global Cultural Studies at Willamette University in Oregon.

Getting Started: Why an Asian American Podcast?

Despite the long history of people of Asian ancestry in the United States, Asian Americans have struggled for visibility and access. Starting in the 19th century, Asian immigrants were enlisted to provide the labor through many different periods of U.S. growth while at the same time being subjected to racist violence and exclusionary legislation that limited their social, cultural, and physical mobility. Across most of the 20th century, their experiences were often not recognized—they were overlooked and even erased by the U.S.'s prevailing Black-White racial binary. In the 1960s, during the Civil Rights Movement, the emergent field of Asian American Studies, and a coalitional pan-ethnic identity, began to emerge. This was inspired and shaped by the work of students of color—Asian, Black, Latinx, and Indigenous—working in solidarity on college campuses in California to call for representation of their communities in the curriculum.

Grounded in this history and heritage of protest, Asian American Studies continues to grow not only as an academic discipline, but also as a social justice movement. We are encouraged by this, but we also recognize that there is yet much work to do to develop and strengthen the concerted

study of the folklife and the folklore of Asian Americans. The “Yellow and Brown Tales” podcast brings together Asian American Studies and folklore in a multidisciplinary approach to uplift diverse experiences and identities. It centers people’s personal stories and makes their voices audible, literally. In the podcast, Asian Americans reframe the perceptions of their communities. Through their words, we hear the merging of different historical threads—the heritage of activism and the persistence of Asian American invisibility. Their diverse voices point us toward new paths that more dynamically account for Asian American folklife and folklore.

The stories we have featured cover a wide range of experiences—reflecting our varied areas of research as well as our different social networks. But all address how people expressively showcase heritage and sustain cultural practices and how these forms of knowledge are shared in person through face-to-face interaction as well as via forms of media, including emergent digital platforms. Over the years, "Yellow and Brown Tales" has evolved into a unique gathering space for those who identify as Asian American. And as we have embarked on this critical endeavor—learning along the way—we have discovered a multitude of purposes for the podcast: It evokes personal nostalgia, fosters a sense of group identity, showcases collective Asian American experiences, and contributes to convening listeners with related interests. We also see the educational opportunities this resource offers teachers looking for an alternative to text-based study, with first-person narratives centering diverse Asian American experiences. The podcast is about the stories of many different people, and it is simultaneously the story of four folklore friends and our efforts to highlight the place and significance of Asian American expressions and experiences in American folklore studies.

Themes and Stories

As of September 2024, we have published 22 episodes. [A full list can be accessed here](#). In our inaugural Episode 1, we emphasize that there is vast diversity among Asian Americans and how they inhabit the U.S. landscape. People take different types of agencies and make different choices. And these prompt challenging questions, for example, Who takes the agency to continue a practice? Who has accessibility to language, to food products, to vital cultural resources? How do people make decisions about how to practice and showcase their cultures? Below, we highlight a selection of the themes explored in some of our episodes.



“Bad English”
Accent and
Language

In Episode 16, we explicitly address what we mean by “hearing home” through the comedy of Frankie Marcos, who blends his Mexican and Filipino heritage into "Mexipino" culture. Interviewed by Margaret Magat, he explains, "It's a strong part of my identity...that represents both sides." As a comedian, Marcos selectively highlights his Filipino heritage during some of his performances. One of the jokes he tells involves his grandmother. He recounts, “My grandma described a car accident by saying, ‘He banged me in the parking lot!’ What!? ‘He banged me from the back in the parking lot. I got his phone number, we’re going to bang again.’”*

*[Watch the original performance of the joke](#) (Note from Editors: Includes adult content.)



frankiemcomedy • Follow
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Image 1. Frankie Marcos’s Instagram feed.

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Podcast producer Margaret Magat, who spent her first years in Manila, Philippines, and her teenage years in Los Angeles, laughed in recognition when she first heard Marcos’s piece. It evoked the voices of elder women she has known and longed to hear again. The comedian’s performance of his grandmother’s accent brought the past and bridged the present for Magat, and hopefully the podcast audience, too.

The joke plays on the divide between generations, an older immigrant and a third-generation young person—and the more conventional meaning of the verb “to be banged [into]” versus an obscene slang meaning. Writing about bad English, whether it involves memes of Asian children wearing T-shirts full of profanities or the specific accents of Asian immigrants, Cathy Park Hong in her groundbreaking work *Minor Feelings* states that “bad English” inspires her poetry, because “unmastering of English” is to “make audible the imperial power sewn into the language, to slit open so its dark histories slide out” (2020, 97). Whether it is an accent or the use of

words that the mainstream considers inappropriate, such cultural examples bring up the everyday experiences of diasporic immigrants. Filipino immigrants, for example, must master the reality of living in an adopted country, complete with understanding the multiple contexts of the English language’s usage while remaining attuned to the homeland as well as carrying the cultural and historic burdens of colonialism.

Building a new life is a balancing act of holding on to the past and negotiating identity in the present. There is a cultural dissonance resulting from being an Asian American immigrant in the U.S., and people try to resolve this through the performance of folklore whether jokes, or beliefs or foodways—all topics that the podcasts explore.

For Magat, the agency Marcos took in representing his heritage and his use of accent in the delivery of his story was powerful. Furthermore, its circulation through social media, and the reactions it elicits, brings their Filipino background and upbringing to a greater audience. In a similar way to which the circulation of Marcos’s jokes through his social media platforms brings his Filipino heritage to a broader audience, Magat hopes the “Yellow and Brown Tales” podcast can do the same: Introduce people to the different voices and experiences of Asian American immigrants like Frankie’s grandmother.

Listen to the episode: [“Comedian Frankie Follows His Heart to Mexipino Humor”](#)

Mexicans and Filipinos—we both love fried food. I think it’s both cardiac cuisines that are great for the soul and feel so warm and homey, a lot of our dishes.

—Frankie Marcos

“Culinary
Nationalism”
Foodways

Foodways is a prominent means through which diasporic communities strengthen and represent their cultural identity. Episode 2 focuses on Margaret Magat’s book *Balut: Fertilized Eggs and the Making of Culinary Capital* (2019, Image 2). It explores the continued practice and value placed on an example of Filipino foodways that may be considered unfavorably by mainstream culture in the U.S. Specifically, it examines the consumption of balut, fertilized duck eggs, in Filipino American festivals and how this strengthens the participants’ sense of Filipino identity. Magat explains how this intentional performance of expressive culture constitutes an act of culinary nationalism. It reflects how in new contexts (as in the community festivals in the U.S.), people are assigning new meanings to otherwise familiar elements of culture—and demonstrates the necessity of addressing such performances with terms that can speak to the new contexts (25:42 to 26:40). Magat explains to Juwen Zhang, co-host of this podcast:

. . . . when you came up with this idea, “folkloric identity,” it was absolutely essential for me to discuss it and to use it in my work, because here, we’re a group of people using this food in [a] non-traditional context. And we need a new term to describe it, because you can’t just say this is the authentic way of eating it or whatever. But the fact of the matter is, they’re doing this, online, in the new setting, with no one traditional necessarily guiding them except what they’ve seen others doing it, right? And so folkloric identity allowed me to be able to understand it better, because no longer do you have to be based on ethnicity. But it’s the focus on the cultural practice that’s being created in that particular context, right?

Listen to the episode: [“Conversation with Margaret Magat, Author of *Balut: Fertilized Eggs and the Making of Culinary Capital in the Filipino Diaspora*.”](#)

First and foremost, it’s a social food that’s eaten with others.

—Margaret Magat

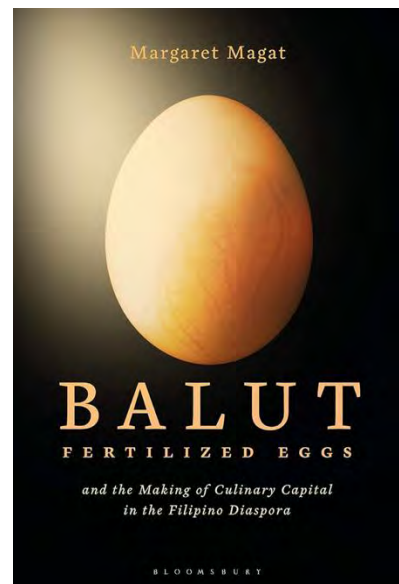
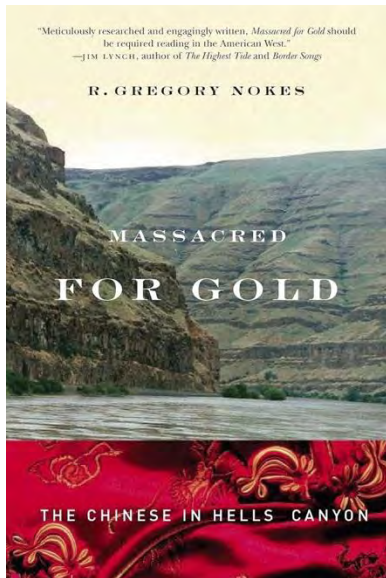


Image 2. The cover of *Balut: Fertilized Eggs and the Making of Culinary Capital in the Filipino Diaspora* (Magat 2019).

Hearing the
Place of Asian
Americans

All the podcast episodes fundamentally represent the many *places* of Asian Americans historically, metaphorically, physically, and culturally in U.S. history and culture. A series of episodes produced by Juwen Zhang explore this through celebration, memorialization, and music making.

For example, Episode 9 recounts the earliest public celebration of Lunar New Year in the U.S. in the 1870s: [“The Beginning of the Public Celebration of Chinese New Year in the US.”](#)



for Gold: The Chinese in Hells Canyon (Nokes 2009).

Episode 14 reveals the story behind the public recognition of the 1887 Hells Canyon massacre of the Chinese miners (see Image 3): [“Massacred for Gold: A Conversation with Greg Nokes.”](#)

Episode 17 is a portrait of George Lai Sun, a popular businessman recognized as the unofficial “mayor” in Salem, Oregon, at the turn of the 20th century, for whom a downtown alley was named in 2023 (see Image 4): [“From Underground Chinaman to Downtown Alley Name: The Story of George Lai Sun.”](#)

Episode 19 shares the stories of how a group of individuals rallied together to have U.S. President Biden issue a statement in 2023 in observance of the 80th anniversary of the repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act (which began in 1882 and was repealed in 1943): [“The 80th Anniversary of the Repeal of the Chinese Exclusion Act.”](#)

Episode 20 features a contemporary college student reflecting on the powerful 1889 essay by Yan Phou Lee, “Chinese Must Stay,” which was written in the aftermath of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act: [“‘The Chinese Must Stay’: Yan Phou Lee’s Denunciation of the Chinese Exclusion Rhetoric.”](#)

Episode 21 features a retired doctor who traces his Chinese roots to Guangdong, China, and American roots to Salem, Oregon, and shares his four-generation-family stories with the public, particularly to children, through books and images: [“A Bright Spot in a Dark History of Chinese Exclusion: Dr. Russ Low Sharing Family Stories of Becoming American.”](#)

Episode 22 explores the role of music as an expression of heritage. It features an interview by Juwen Zhang with a member of the band The Slants, who addresses how they named themselves using a racial slur to reclaim and fashion their Asian American identity: [“Telling the Story of ‘The Slants’ through Music: A Conversation with Joe X. Jiang.”](#)



“American Democracy, my observation, is more like playing Go, every piece is equal but we’re together to focus on one whole....”

—Xiaoyan Zhang

Image 4. Sign for the recently dedicated George Lai Sun Alley, Salem, Oregon.

Photograph by Juwen Zhang, 2023.

Listening Together
Communities of Practice

Listening Together—Communities of Practice

Episode 6 focuses on music from the vantage point of the listeners. It features Grace Kao from Yale University, who discusses the impact of BTS, the Korean boy band, on Asian American culture. This interview with podcast producer Nancy Yan was recorded in 2020, early in the Covid-19 pandemic, as many people were staying home and limiting in-person contact to avoid spreading the virus. Meanwhile, BTS created an abundance of online content, ripe for socially isolated home viewers who increasingly turned to online entertainment. With new songs and several staged video performances of songs that appeared on YouTube and late-night talk shows, BTS’s popularity grew. K-pop was making a mark in the U.S.

In this discussion, Kao remarks on the impact of positive images of Asian Americans in such unconventional roles as musicians, as boy band members, and as influencers who participate in and shape popular culture worldwide. BTS has contributed to mainstreaming Asian faces and culture into American popular culture in unprecedented ways. Kao explains:


I think for Asian Americans, for us, it’s just a complete absence. We haven’t seen people in the media, right? BTS was the first to perform not just on SNL, but all of these award ceremonies—Grammys, American Music Award, Billboard, and so forth. And so, I think just seeing people has been a new thing. (Episode 6, 21:02-21:24)

This new visibility (and audibility) of Korean culture is regarded with interest by Korean Americans, who are struck by the seemingly sudden interest by thousands of non-Korean BTS fans in learning the Korean language and adopting other aspects of culture, including foodways.

Listen to the episode: [“K-Pop Scholar Dr. Grace Kao Talks BTS and Their Rise to Popularity.”](#)



Image 5. Instagram post of Grace Kao with JinJin of the K-pop group ASTRO.



Praxis
Deep Listening
and
Intersectional
Frameworks

Episode 3 explores the experiences of South Asian Americans, who have often been marginalized within the category “Asian American”—sometimes excluded, often not accounted for in curricula or in public programs. Produced by Fariha Khan, it focuses on the process of researching and interpreting personal experience narratives. It features an interview with a South Asian American college student, Simran Chand, whose senior thesis researched parent-child conversations on sexual health. Chand’s work deals with South Asian American families and their particular values around sex, sexual health, and sex education. Conducting fieldwork during the Covid-19 pandemic, the student worked thoughtfully and sensitively to record the conversations from her fieldwork while the world was forced into isolation in their homes. While this was a difficult moment to overcome and manage, the enthusiasm, the desire to share stories, and the need to be heard connected people. These are stories that people want to talk about but may not know how to share. In the hardship of the pandemic, there is still an excitement in being heard and seen that is palpable in this young researcher’s words.

The student describes her research framework as involving an interdisciplinary, transnational, intersectional gender studies lens informed by folklore studies. She explains, for example:

When we’re talking about these South Asian parents, we need to look at their immigration history, their experiences growing up in their home country, and then what their immigration experiences taught them, how they assimilated and settled in the U.S., and then how that influenced their parenting policies . . . and with folklore, it allowed me to center the parents’ narratives, so when I was asking students about their experiences, it wasn’t what actually happened, it was what was your perception of what happened. So that allowed me to look at what was the second-generation South Asian American immigrant experience and how did their parents’ experiences inform their choices to then inform their learning and their experiences to then inform their own actions in the future and their expressions. (Episode 3, 3:30)

As much as the podcast addresses challenging content, this episode is also notable for its focus on research praxis, including how Chand had to adapt her methodology to online forms of engagement during the pandemic. In terms of teaching and developing a course curriculum, this discussion between researchers demonstrates how fundamental folklore methodology is for engaging in deep listening and prioritizing attention on the voices of those that have purposely been erased or marginalized.

Listen to the episode: “[South Asian Americans and Sex Education: A Conversation with University of Pennsylvania Senior Simran Chand.](#)”

When I came to Penn and started studying gender, sexuality, and women’s studies, I started noticing there were cultural differences between how people experienced sexuality—not only sexuality, but their understanding of the world at large.

—Simran Chand

Confronting Anti-AAPI Hate

Confronting Anti-AAPI Hate

Launched during the Covid-19 lockdown and the resurgence of anti-AAPI hate, this podcast enabled us to share our stories and hear home through the many accents and diverse experiences of our narrators. These stories evoked the smell of food, the sound of music, and migration experiences, representing how Asian American identities continue to be reconstructed.

Some episodes specifically focused on pandemics and how to consider them historically with respect to Asian American experiences as well as to Asian folklore.

Episode 7 is a recording of a session presented on Zoom at the American Folklore Society meeting in 2021 on the urgency of Asian American folklore studies during the time of a pandemic in which Asians were often scapegoated as the source of the crises. Listen to the episode: “[Asians and the Global Pandemic: Race, Invisibility, and the Urgency of Asian American Folklore Studies.](#)”

Episode 18 focuses on Juwen Zhang’s recent book *Epidemics in Folk Memory: Tales and Poems from Chinese History* (2022), which reminds us that pandemics have been well recorded in Chinese tales and poems in oral and written forms, providing clues and traditional knowledge applicable to our present experiences (see Image 6). Among the stories that Zhang shares from his book is one recorded in the 14th century as “The Doctor from the Qin State,” which warns of how political leaders who fail to heed knowledge from the past might make major decisions that harm the health of the common people. In this excerpt from the original text, a prime minister and a king are cautioned about a mandate they make when an epidemic hits their state:

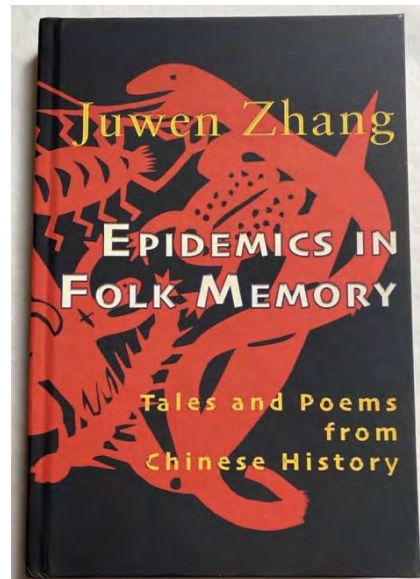


Image 6. The cover of *Epidemics in Folk Memory: Tales and Poems from Chinese History*. (Zhang 2022).

Nowadays the Qin doctors use prescriptions without learning from the ancients, but create their own prescription. They even say that the ancient masters were not good enough to learn from. As a result, what they use are nothing but those laxatives to clean the stomach, and those hard-to-swallow and dry-throat medicines, causing body-burn and head-dizzying pains. Those things enter the mouth like blades scraping the chest and intestines. Within a day, the liver and gallbladder would burst, and the body would die, and of course the sickness would be gone. This is even worse than a quick death. Now when you as the prime minister do not seek advice from the older wise people, but seek to benefit from what you like and trust. Is that the Way of the Heavenly Mandate? (Zhang, 2022, 64)

Listen to the episode: “[Conversation with Dr. Juwen Zhang, Author of *Epidemics in Folklore Memory: Memory, Tales, and Poems from Chinese History*](#)”

We see the rise in AAPI hate because people are not educated about this part of American history, and we return to this model of second-class citizenry for Asian Americans and we lose the lessons of Ethnic Studies. And it becomes watered down as plurality or diversity and not really thinking about the revolutionary purpose of education that the Third World Liberation Front wanted to put forth for us.

—Nancy Yan

What's Next?

“Yellow and Brown Tales” is a volunteer effort—with production taking place between the deadlines and commitments of our working lives and family responsibilities. We remain committed to continuing this podcast, and we value the gift of each speaker’s contribution knowing that their stories are culturally and historically meaningful.

We will continue to emphasize tales shared by individuals about their upbringing and Asian American consciousness; their personal insights into such themes as history, generational identity, gender, family, foodways, and public display; as well as their stories about the varied places that they call home. For instance, a future episode will

highlight the organization of the North American Chinese Volleyball Invitational Tournament (NACVIT), now in its 79th year, a major event connecting the U.S.’s historical, urban Chinatowns. Other forthcoming episodes will explore labor, gender, legacies of colonialism, and how individuals perform and express their senses of culture and identity.

In addition to being a gathering space for cultural producers and culture bearers, we hope that the podcast can also provide a resource for students and educators—by offering tangible examples of the complexity of identity, community, and how it is expressed.

We endeavor to create a sense of connection—when people listen to or talk with us—and we welcome anyone who is interested in collaborating. We hope that through the lives represented in the podcast, listeners will hear the resonance of how they may or may not feel at home in the spaces and interactions that make up their lives.

These tales were created to give hope to humans, make sense of what they do, and maintain their relations with other beings in the universe.

—Juwen Zhang

Fariha Khan is Co-Director of the Asian American Studies Program at the University of Pennsylvania. She received a Master's degree in Arabic and Islamic Studies from Yale University and a PhD in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. She teaches courses on South Asians in the U.S., Asian American communities, and American concepts of race. Her current research focuses on South Asian American Muslims, race and ethnicity, as well as Asian American folklore. Dr. Khan has published in the *Journal of American Folklore* and the *Oxford Handbook of American Folklore and Folklife Studies*.

Margaret Magat is an independent scholar and writer. She has a doctorate in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania and an MA in Folklore, University of California, Berkeley. She has published on foodways, historic preservation, women and transnational migration, and Asian American cultural practices. Her book, *Balut: Fertilized Eggs and the Making of Culinary Capital* (New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019), reveals how traditional foods are used in the performance of identity and ethnicity and looks at the impact globalization and migration are having on cultural practices and food consumption across the world.

Nancy Yan received her PhD in Folklore from The Ohio State University and taught First and Second-Year Writing, Comparative Studies, and Asian American Studies classes for several years before returning to organizing work. She served on the Cultural Diversity Committee of the *American Folklore Society* from 2017-2019 and is a member of the Board of Directors of *New Faculty Majority*, an advocacy organization for non-tenure-track faculty. She is also a host on *New Books in Folklore*, part of *New Books Network*. Currently, Dr. Yan works for the *American Federation of Teachers-Maryland* as an organizer.

Juwen Zhang is Professor of Chinese and Folklore, Global Cultural Studies, at Willamette University. He has a PhD in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania. His recent publications on Asian American folklore include "Folklore in the Making of Chinese American Identity" (In *Routledge Handbook of Asian Transnationalism*, 2022); "Where Were/Are Asian American Folklorists?" (*Journal of American Folklore*, 2023); "Making Sense of the Pandemic of Racism: From the Asian Exclusion Act in 1924 to the COVID-19 Hate Crimes Act in 2021" (*Cultural Analysis*, 2023); *Translating, Interpreting, and Decolonizing Chinese Fairy Tales: A Case Study and Ideological Approach* (Landham, MD: Lexington Books, 2024).

URLs

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Joke <https://youtube.com/shorts/37Uud1amLcg?si=ZSprBz4nZ5iAH1oy>

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