



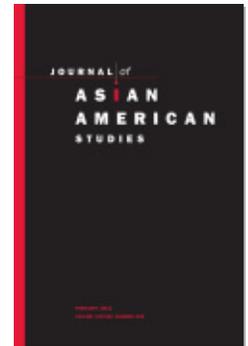
PROJECT MUSE®

A Success Worse Than Failure

Minh-Ha T. Pham

Journal of Asian American Studies, Volume 15, Number 3, October 2012, pp. 330-334 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press
DOI: [10.1353/jaas.2012.0028](https://doi.org/10.1353/jaas.2012.0028)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/jaas/summary/v015/15.3.pham.html>

A Success Worse Than Failure

Minh-Ha T. Pham

I already had failure on my mind when Timothy Yu's blog post "Has Asian American Studies Failed?" appeared on my Facebook news feed. That was around the same time I bought and began reading J. Jack Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure* after listening to a podcast of Halberstam on *The Critical Lede*. To paraphrase Halberstam, failure is a counterintuitive mode of knowing and doing that refuses the normalizing models of success that often have the effect of disciplining us into heterosexist capitalist structures of knowledge, feelings, and ideas about the world and ourselves. Understood in this way, failure potentially offers a unique set of rewards including "escape [from] the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development," the preservation of "some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood," and an "opportunity to . . . poke holes in the toxic positivity of contemporary life" in which promises of happiness and success function paradoxically as implicit threats of personal misery and failure.³

Reading beyond Yu's blog post title, I soon realized that I had misread failure. Yes, I had failed at "failure." Yu's "failure" is a diagnosis of the state of Asian American studies rather than a narrative of Asian Americanist practices. Still, I think my initial misreading of Yu's title may not be all bad. It might be one of those times in which, in Trinh T. Minh-ha's words, "the accidental becomes essential."⁴ This unintentional misreading, I suggest, begins a long overdue discussion about failure that reaches beyond evaluation toward a more speculative and suggestive inquiry about Asian Americans' historically fraught relationship to "failure" and "success."

As readers of this journal are no doubt aware, Asians in the United States have long been perceived as failures. In the imperializing logic of nineteenth-century Orientalism, it was the "failure" of Asian cultural and political structures to survive or thrive in the modern age that served as a rationale for the legacy of informal and institutionalized discrimination and exclusion brought to bear on all Asian groups in complex and uneven ways. Such Oriental failures gave rise to an array of other failures: Asians' failure to assimilate, their failure to learn English, and their failure to achieve the trappings of white American middle-class life including a nuclear family.

By the mid-twentieth century, of course, the general perception of Asian Americans had dramatically shifted. Splashy media stories hailed Asian Americans not as failures but as quintessential American success stories. Well-known articles published in 1966 trumpeted Japanese Americans as "better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites" (*New York Times Magazine*)⁵ and Chinese Americans as "a model of self-respect and achievement" (*US News & World*

Report).⁶ Asian Americans' putative family values, work ethic, and thriftiness were cited as explanations for their success. By the 1980s, the Asian American model minority stereotype, or what *Fortune* magazine called "America's Super Minority,"⁷ was well established in the popular discourse about U.S. race relations. It served as a liberal alibi for the unequal distribution of resources, opportunities, and political power among whites and nonwhites and, in the process, pitted Asian Americans against other racialized minorities. Thus, even "Asian American success" is a kind of failure—what Frank Wu aptly describes as "a race relations failure."⁸

The success/failure apparatus of Asian difference operates differently for different Asian ethnic groups. The "success story" of South Asian Americans, for example, is articulated through the construction of the model minority as ideal worker. Vijay Prashad explains in *Karma of Brown Folk* that the desi model worker stereotype is a double-edged sword that is wielded against South Asian Americans who, as a racial "solution" to a labor problem, must accept that "we are only wanted here for our labor and not . . . our lives" and against African Americans who are blamed for their "inability to rise of their own volition."⁹ For Southeast Asian Americans, "success" is bound up with the trauma and disillusionment of the failures of the wars in Southeast Asia and their identity as war's "losers." Within this context, it's difficult to romanticize, much less intellectualize, failure. For many Vietnamese who stayed in Viet Nam after 1975, "failure" meant years of physically and emotionally grueling conditions in euphemistically named reeducation camps. For those who left or tried to leave in the 1970s and 1980s, "failure" resulted in fatal illness, terminal loneliness, and, in many cases, death. Success stories by and about Southeast Asian Americans thus function as counterstrategies to vindicate personal, familial, and/or national losses. As Karin Aguilar-San Juan finds in her study of Vietnamese Americans, "In Boston and in Orange Country, these narratives depict the refugee as honorable and deserving citizen, instead of a loser, a criminal, or a public expense."¹⁰

Yet it is precisely because of the varied and complicated ways in which Asian Americans have both voluntarily and involuntarily embodied "success" that there is an urgent need for Asian Americanists to critique the ideologically laden frameworks of success/failure as an apparatus of racial meaning and difference. Without doing so, we risk the intellectual hypocrisy of teaching against institutional frameworks of success (e.g., the model minority myth) while simultaneously reproducing them in our research and scholarly practice.

An Asian Americanist project of failure might open up extradisciplinary and antidisciplinary modes of individual and collaborative research and writing. It might also reimagine the intellectual project and priorities of Asian American

studies that disrupt institutional models of success. An Asian Americanist project of failure isn't necessarily about embracing failure, but rather *risking* it. Indeed, even proposing such a project constitutes at least a couple of risks. The first is the risk of being misunderstood for uncritically adapting "the queer art of failure" for the purposes of Asian American studies. The second risk is that of seeming naïve (a risk fraught with gendered meanings and consequences) for putting forth an intellectual project of failure at a time when so many Asian American studies and other ethnic studies departments, programs, and centers are already besieged targets of austerity measures. These have rendered them embattled sites that are underfunded, understaffed, and underequipped. In response to the first risk, let me be clear that while I believe that the best critical productions are also creative, I understand that modes of critical and creative production are conditioned by unique contexts. An Asian Americanist project of failure necessitates a different set of practices and assumptions from the queer arts of failure found in, say, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*. Still, I think the broader goal of risking failure in order to imagine alternative life worlds (including the worlds of knowledge economies and academic labor) remains the same.

As for the second risk, I want to suggest that an Asian Americanist project of failure is not naïve at all. In fact, risking innovative extra- and antidisciplinary thinking and doing is especially urgent in a time of austerity. As many of us are already all too aware, a battered economy and massive budget cuts have shrunk the already limited pool of full-time permanent faculty jobs and expanded the casualization of higher education's teaching labor, the effects of which impact not only part-time and adjunct teachers but also regular faculty whose institutional power is weakened as their numbers decrease. As this has happened, the growing numbers of unemployed and underemployed academics (most of whom are women and people of color) with little or no institutional support and resources have sought out new means of scholarly practice and community.¹¹

It was within just such a context in 2007 that I launched, with Mimi Nguyen, *Threadbared*, a research blog that discusses "the politics, aesthetics, histories, theories, cultures and subcultures that go by the names 'fashion' and 'beauty.'"¹² At the time, I had what amounted to a teaching postdoc at NYU (three courses per year) and was preparing to reenter a job market that, by all accounts, was tanking. Fresh out of graduate school and carrying a near full-time teaching load while also being on the job market left me very little time and energy to write journal articles much less figure out how, or whether, to revise my dissertation into a publishable book. *Threadbared* was an accidental but absolutely essential noninstitutional space in which I could test out new ideas and hone my writing

voice in one- to two-thousand-word mini-essays. Unlike some of the comments I've received on journal articles, most though not all of the comments to my blog posts were detailed, thoughtful, supportive, and almost immediate. These came not only from Mimi (an exemplary co-blogger, co-reader, and co-conspirator) but also *Threadbared* readers and the readers, editors, and bloggers of such feminist and antiracist websites as *Racialicious*, *Jezebel*, and *AlterNet*, where a number of my posts were syndicated. The intellectual and emotional engagements of this networked and motley community of readers and thinkers enabled me to find a way into my scholarship when the academy was closing so many doors.

Yu's evaluation of Asian American studies' failure doesn't take into account the changing economic conditions of academic labor that have pushed academics, for better and for worse, to think, write, speak, and earn a living outside of the university. It also doesn't consider the role of social media in this new climate. An increasing number of scholars, Asian Americanists among them, have embraced networked scholarship for an array of personal and professional reasons—though the conditions of risk and reward can vary greatly for junior and senior faculty. Yu's evaluation of “the perceived (and perhaps growing) divide between academic and popular writing” depends on a false dichotomy between the Ivory Tower and the everyday world that just doesn't match up with my experience. For me, these spaces are far more porous and their audiences far more heterogeneous than Yu supposes.

As of this writing, *Threadbared* has published 323 blog posts over the past five years on a wide range of topics that include nonnormative styles of embodiment; the fashion industry's racism, Islamophobia, and fatphobia; digital media's impact on shifting labor and consumer markets and practices; and the ways in which our Vietnamese refugee histories have shaped our relationship to fashion and consumption. Our blog posts receive as many as sixteen thousand hits per day (admittedly, our average is far more modest at forty thousand hits per month). As we are scholars trained in comparative ethnic studies who teach Asian American studies courses, which are cross-listed with visual studies, media studies, gender and sexuality studies, and other ethnic studies fields, our posts are informed by scholarly fields imbricated in and influenced by Asian American studies including postcolonial feminism, feminist media and cultural studies, queer studies, and comparative ethnic studies. *Threadbared* readers are a diverse bunch comprising scholars, students, nonfaculty academic professionals, journalists, museum professionals, artists, traditional fashion bloggers, and lay readers.

To be sure, I'm not the only one crossing and blurring the lines between the academy and the mainstream, and between old and new media publics. Other

Asian Americanists like Vijay Prashad, Jasbir Puar, Oliver Wang, Hua Hsu, Adeline Koh, Margaret Rhee, and erin Khuê Ninh come immediately to mind. Because they are regular or frequent contributors and columnists to established mainstream and/or alternative media sites like *Counterpunch*, the *Guardian* (UK), NPR, the *Atlantic*, HASTAC, and *Hyphen* magazine, among others, their readership far exceeds that of *Threadbare*. All of these sites are intellectual public spaces that are outside of the academy and may be perceived as outside of Asian American studies; nonetheless, they have contributed to and enabled the thinking and writing of much Asian Americanist scholarship—including my own.

All of this is to say that Yu's assessment of Asian American studies' failure to impact public discourse about Asian American history and cultural identity is suggestive for me of a larger failure to recognize Asian Americans' fraught relationship to the success/failure paradigm, and to recognize the multiplicity of publics that Asian Americanists inhabit and influence. Asian Americanists are engaged in very inventive and spirited scholarly discussions, collaborations, and practices every day—many of them happening in digital publics. To witness and/or participate in them depends on which publics we recognize as intellectual spaces, scholarly spaces, and Asian Americanist spaces. While many Asian Americanists have achieved many of the traditional benchmarks of the public intellectual Yu names (e.g., being cited or featured in the *New York Times* and other mainstream presses), the "success" of this kind of publicity should be considered in light of the crises that media giants are facing due to the changing practices of information consumption and production in the digital age, as well as the dubious quality of articles it does publish, like the one that prompted Yu to blog in the first place. Hitching our hopes for public intellectualism to these sites may mean a fate far worse than failure; it may be what web developers ruefully term "perceived success."

Bridging the Gap

Oliver Wang

As someone with one foot in academia and the other in journalism, I've held mixed feelings toward Timothy Yu's "Has Asian American Studies Failed?" missive since first reading it last December. Yu seems primarily focused on the perceived distance between academia and mainstream public/media discourse. To the extent that I straddle both worlds, I would certainly agree that gap exists. However, where I depart from Yu is over what this implies, as well as how to address it.

For example, Yu argues that a more "successful" Asian American studies could have stymied "Tiger Mother" Amy Chua's fifteen minutes of fame or prevented *New York Times* art critic Edward Rothstein from writing his bizarrely ahistorical