

# Center for Asian-American Studies looks to its future at UT

*Editor's note: This is the final story in a five-part series examining the past, present and future of Asian-American Studies at the University.*

**By Jennie Kennedy**  
Daily Texan Staff

Now comes the challenge.

With schools on both coasts boasting successful Asian-American Studies programs, the question becomes how can Texas create a program that is unique, serves students and attracts scholars?

With the program currently in its formative stages, it is nearly impossible to predict what Asian-American Studies at the University will look like in 2003, much less 2020.

While only time will tell how much the community, students and the general

## Asian-American Studies

### Past • Present • Future

course of academia will affect the Center for Asian-American Studies, hiring decisions are one of the most certain ways to affect a program's future.

Arthur Sakamoto, former interim director of the program, said a continual emphasis on junior-level scholars is important because senior faculty tend to be very few in number and command high salaries.

Currently, the center has made two hires: John Park in American studies and Jim Lee in English. Park came to the University in the fall, and specializes in public policy, while Lee — who will join

the Department of English in 2002 — is currently on a post-doctorate fellowship at the University of California-San Diego.

Both Lee and Park decided to join the UT faculty due to the enormous potential they saw in the young program.

"Of the programs I was considering, this one appealed to me because it was so new," said Park, who was attracted to the University because of its academic reputation. "It's an exciting time to be in the field."

Lee and Park both believe that the UT Asian-American Studies program can become a major force in Texas.

"We have the possibility to make substantive statement on the changing face of this state and how Asian Americans are at the vanguard of that change," Lee said.

How the scholastic lens through which this change will be viewed depends on what types of scholars are selected to create the new center. While the University is currently looking for a South-Asian Americanist, there aren't restrictions on which department this person should come from.

"To be credible and attract talent, this program has to be unique to the University and the state of Texas," said David Moss, a member of the center's steering committee.

This, perhaps more than anything else, becomes the central factor when deciding how to fill the remaining four slots that the University has allocated to Asian-American Studies.

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# Focus

“Like I said about the organizing principle of Asian-American Studies from its inception in the late '60s, it's always about inspiring one's social imagination, about showing people what is possible, to imagine a politics of abundance rather than a politics of scarcity.”

- Jim Lee,

who will join Asian-American Studies in 2002

## *Looking to the future*

### AAS, from 1

So whether the program would gain a focus in the humanities or branch out into communications hinges on the dossiers that are now being sifted through as a new search committee for additional faculty members gets under way.

But creating a successful center requires more than just faculty hirings. Because students created the program, will be serviced by the program and will undoubtedly continue to have a vested interest in Asian-American Studies, their involvement is the top priority of many students who have fought on the front lines.

"My goal for the next 10 years is to always have students making decisions," said Zafar Shah, a member of the Asian American Relations Group, or AARGI.

Sakamoto said being inclusive is especially important. For him, this means being inclusive "to both faculty and students who are/may be interested."

"This means do not define Asian-American Studies narrowly and do not define 'Asian-American' people narrowly," he said.

For current students such as Moss and Murtaza Sutarwalla, a MIS senior who the first person to major in ethnic studies with a concentration in Asian-American Studies, the students who have come before them have made a crucial impact.

"The students in the UT 10 have added a sense of responsibility to the program," Moss said.

Irwin Tang, who was president of the Asian Relations Committee in 1995 and helped get the ball rolling for the UT Asian-American Studies, said this responsibility comes in the form of how students are viewed.

"Student involvement could be a good characteristic of this program," Tang said.

Tang said he feels the best thing that the University can do is to be concerned with Asian-American issues on a local level.





John Park, an assistant professor of American studies, and Emily Chung, a member of AARGI, laugh at the Asian-American Studies Committee meeting Oct. 27. At the meeting, members discussed the recruitment of new faculty, new course offerings and a mission statement for the program.

Kristen Austin/  
Daily Texan Staff

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Tang said he feels the best thing that the University can do is to be concerned with Asian-American issues on a local level.

"We need to have a geographical focus," Tang said. "Asian Americans are growing up in the Southwest. We grew up without many choices in terms of our identity or phenotype. By mere existence, this addresses those problems."

Quincy Tran, a UT alum and AARGI member, said he also hopes that Texas takes advantage of its uniqueness.

"There is a large number of post-1965 Asian immigrants, so we have the opportunity to see the emergence of relatively young immigrant communities," Tran said. "Texas is also the only state where the number of Vietnamese Americans is greater than that of Chinese Americans. I think there are a number of socioeconomic, historic and geographic factors that make Texas distinct, and an Asian-American Studies program here can operate from a different model than those established in the West and East Coasts."

Both scholars and community members agree that ethnic studies can benefit the public and, in turn, benefit from the public's attention, suggestions and financial support.

Lee said the University must maintain a three-legged stool approach, keeping in mind the concerns of students, faculty and administration, and the community.

"If the experience of other AAS programs around the country teaches us anything, it is that no program can thrive without these three constituencies feeling a stake in its development and working to make the program the best it can be," Lee said.

Vijay Mahajan, a professor of marketing who served as an informal adviser to both Mia Carter, the current interim director, and Sakamoto, the former interim director, said it is time for the Asian-American community to contribute to the campus.

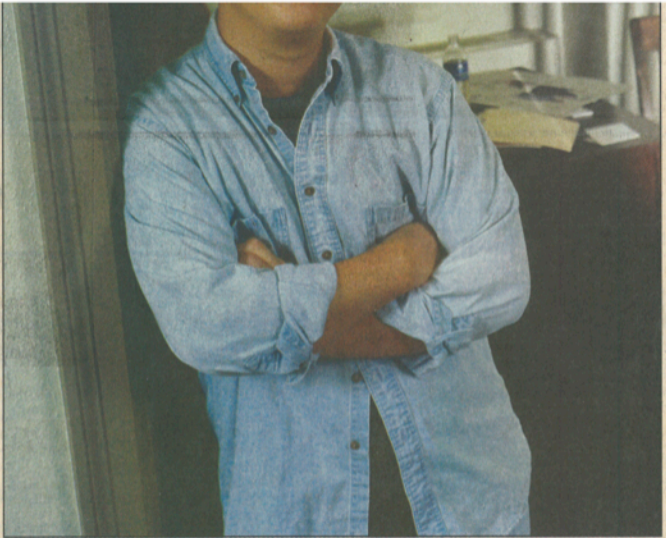
"Maybe someone could establish an endowment for a teaching award," Mahajan said. "If given an opportunity, I think Asian Americans would contribute in terms of expertise, financial help and scholarship."

And Amy Wong Mok, president of the Asian American Cultural Center, is up for the challenge.

"I am really committed to raise funds for resources," Mok said. "I really hope to create some form of endowment for the program. I'd like to see the program be well-connected and really committed."

For Lee, the idea of Asian-American Studies is simple. Asian-American Studies should serve as a conduit for the exchange of information that both challenges and inspires.

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Yeo-Yi Kim/Daily Texan Staff

John Park, who specializes in public policy, was one of two hires made by the Center for Asian-American Studies this year. Park said he chose to join the UT faculty because of the enormous potential he sees in the program.