

Writing 120: Academic Writing

Subtle “Asian” Traits

Class Times: Tuesdays & Thursdays, 4:40-5:55pm | Location: Perkins LINK 085 (Seminar 2)

Instructor: Jaeyeon Yoo | Email: jaeyeon.yoo@duke.edu |

Office Hours: 5-6pm on Mondays in the Friedl Building Lobby (East Campus),
and after class (by appointment only - please email)



Course Description

Who or what do we define as “Asian,” both within and outside of America?

From coolie to model minority to robot, the Asian figure has been (over-)saturated with cultural stereotyping and fetishization. In recent decades, we've seen the rise of global Asian culture, heightened by the Internet and an ever-expanding Asian diasporic population; K-pop, boba tea, and the Facebook group "Subtle Asian Traits" are only a few examples of Asia's continued viral symbolism.

The course examines the circulation of “Asianness” in 20th- and 21st-century Anglophone literature and popular culture, as well as the efforts and problems of self-representation. Many authors and artists of Asian descent negotiate concepts of ethnicity—whether explicitly within their work or through the media’s portrayals of them. In other words, these creatives actively claim their Asian identity or have it attributed to them. Through literature and cultural studies, we will explore the mutating—and sometimes contradictory—ideas of Asianness throughout history, as well as their interactions with capitalism, racialization, nationalism, and imperialism. Materials include political cartoons and social media posts as well as novels, plays, and films. All course materials will be provided in English.

Throughout the course, we will engage in active writing alongside discussions on how to write/read. There will be in-class workshops held throughout the semester on various aspects of writing, such as how to annotate texts, edit, give feedback, and outline.

Student Learning Outcomes

All Writing 120 sections prioritize these goals, as elaborated on the TWP [website](#):

- Pursue inquiry and construct arguments
- Engage with rhetorical context

- Evaluate and integrate evidence
- Explore the ethics of academic writing
- Understand writing processes and writing transfer

By the end of this course, you will also be able to:

- Actively engage with issues like race, ethnicity, migration, gender, and class through both analytical and creative methods.
- Apply class materials to analyze contemporary events and everyday cultural objects.
- Develop critical reading, writing, and argumentative skills across genres (such as fiction, non-fiction, cultural theory, and popular media).

Required Texts

- Hwang, David Henry. *M Butterfly*. Plume, 1988.
- Kureishi, Hanif. *Buddha of Suburbia*. Penguin, 1991.
- Yáng, Shuang-Zi. *Taiwan Travelogue*, trans. Lin King. Graywolf Press, 2024.

Please purchase or borrow all three books as physical copies (not e-books or otherwise online versions). The books are available at the Duke Campus Bookstore, Duke Library, and Durham public libraries; there are also cheap used versions available on [AbeBooks](#).

Assignments

#1 – Cultural representation analysis – 15%

#2 - Close reading – 15%

#3 - Final project – 30%

Writing exercises – 15%

Final project proposal – 5%

Participation – 20%

- **Assignment #1 – cultural representation “think piece”:** Your first project will examine how Asians and/or Asian Americans have been portrayed in popular film, literature, television, art, or news media. In a 4-5 page essay, you will draw on our theoretical texts to explore a particular representation or set of representations (e.g., Orientalism, the model minority, Asian fetish, etc.). What is this trope? How does it misrepresent or oversimplify real issues? The goal of this assignment is to allow you to engage with the work of others, learning to make fair, generous, and assertive use of others’ arguments. The genre of “think piece” (such as an essay published in *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic*, *The Cut*, etc.) allows for liberties with tone and style; how can we make our ideas and writing engaging? Highlight why your topic is relevant for a general reader. The assignment should deeply engage with at least 2 class texts.¹ Grading rubric linked [here](#).
- **Assignment #2 – close reading:** Your second graded assignment asks you to practice close reading skills. In this 4-5 page exercise in close reading, you will choose a cultural

¹ Assignment description inspired by Dr. Susan Thanopavarn.

object to analyze what it has to say about an aspect of Asian representation. *How* is something written or narrated, and what artistic choices is the author making? How does the form of a particular piece do the work of telling a particular story? How does it interact (or not) with the types of Asian representation we've been discussing? Critical thinking in any discipline relies on being able to analyze texts, and the goal of this assignment is to build awareness of conventions and expectations within humanistic disciplines.²

You are welcome to analyze a cultural object that is not on the syllabus, but please consult with me beforehand if you choose to do so. Your close reading should form the basis for your final project, and you will be revising/incorporating this assignment for the final project. The assignment should deeply engage with at least 1 primary source (your cultural object) and 1 secondary source.

Grading rubric is linked [here](#).

- **Assignment #3 - final project:** You can decide the medium and genre for this final project, but it should build off the research and writing you have done for your previous two graded writing assignments. The final should show incorporation of feedback and revision of ideas. The goal of this assignment is to encourage you to find what excites you about critical thinking and narrative analysis, which can take place in many forms. Grading rubric is linked [here](#).

Options for this project include:

- **Research paper:** an analytic 6 to 8-page paper that presents a nuanced, critical analysis of an "Asian" cultural object (which you wrote your close reading on). The paper should draw upon at least 2 academic sources we've engaged with in class and 2 external academic sources. It should have a clear thesis, along with close reading examples that support your thesis. Some questions you can ask in this paper are: what does this cultural object demonstrate or contribute to our ideas of "Asianness"? How do theoretical and critical frameworks help us better understand the object?
 - **Creative multi-modal project:** a creative project that explicitly addresses course materials and an "Asian" cultural object. It should make an argument about themes from the course, and be accompanied by a 5-page artist's statement. The project should reference or draw upon at least 2 academic sources we've engaged with in class and 2 external academic sources. This project can range from a painting to a short story to a podcast to a short film—whatever medium you feel would best channel your ideas!
- **Writing exercises:** In addition to the three course projects, you will be responsible for weekly writing that you will post on the class Canvas site. These small exercises will vary in length (depending on the week), but all will hopefully contribute to your assignments above and your growth as a writer. Unlike your other work, these assignments will not receive a letter grade but will be graded on completion. If you

² Assignment description inspired by Dr. Susan Thanopavarn.

complete each assignment thoroughly and on time, you will receive credit for having submitted the work, resulting in an A for 15% of the course grade. These exercises are meant to allow you a space to practice writing and experiment with new ways of expressing ideas, while still giving you credit for effort.

- **Final project proposal:** You will submit a proposal (at least 500 words, not including bibliography) for your final project. The proposal is to help you start thinking about your final project in advance. It should include a bibliography of at least 3 secondary sources that you plan to use for your final, including one source external from class readings. Depending on the type of project, the proposal should state your vision for the overall project, methodology, research question, and/or outline of examples. You should also include information about how you plan to incorporate and revise material from your previous assignments. The paper proposal will be graded as ✓, ✓+, and ✓-.
- **Participation:** Because this is a discussion-heavy course, participation is crucial to everyone's learning! Please come prepared to attend every class on time, having done the reading and ready to engage. You can miss up to 2 classes without any penalty; after that, unexcused absences will be deducted from your participation grade. If you are late for 2 or more class sessions, the tardiness (every 2 times you are late) will count as 1 absence. Please let me know if you have a situation that will make you miss multiple classes; see the policies below about medical exceptions and emergencies.

I understand that a college classroom may be an intimidating space to speak up. I count participation in other forms than speaking up in class, and invite you to consider how you can help create an inclusive and engaged classroom atmosphere. If you are someone who speaks up more easily, consider other ways of participating—such as stepping back and leaving space for others. If you are someone who struggles to speak in class, think about ways to still participate, such as utilizing office hours, going to the Writing Studio, emailing me your thoughts beforehand, signing up to be the collaborative notetaker, and participating in small group discussions.

Note: Please submit all written work in the form of a Word document by 5pm on Canvas. Assignments should use MLA formatting; you can refer to this [Purdue OWL website](#) for citation questions. I will circulate detailed guidelines and grading rubrics for the assignments closer to their deadlines. In the meantime, [here](#) are some of my general guidelines.

Policies

Here is a compilation of codes of conduct & classroom expectations:

- **Academic integrity:** Please follow [Duke's standards of conduct](#). To engage in academic work is to be in conversation with and properly credit others' work, alongside presenting your own ideas. Plagiarism harms your own growth as a thinker; I expect you to cite accordingly. While we will all learn from one another through discussions, there is no collaboration allowed for writing assignments. You can talk about your project ideas with

classmates, but all writing should be your original work. If you're not sure about what academic integrity entails and/or what might be plagiarism, come talk to me!

- Accommodations: If you need accommodations, there is institutional support available through the [Duke Academic Resource Center](#) and the [Student Disability Access Office](#) (SDAO). If there are accommodations you wish to talk to me about, please feel free to email me—learning styles and needs are different for everyone, and I want to make sure that you feel supported.
- AI usage: In our unit on notetaking and reading habits, we will also go over what generative AI tools like Chat GPT might be helpful for. From what I've seen, generative AI's critical analysis is unreliable, formulaic, and easy to spot. AI-generated writing will be treated as plagiarism and reported to the Office of Student Conduct; I expect all assignments to be your own original work. Each and every instance of AI use should be cited, including for tasks like proofreading; Duke Library offers a guide to citing AI [here](#).
- Classroom behavior: Please look over Duke's [DEI commitment](#). Any sort of discriminatory misconduct, such as racist language and sexual harassment, is unacceptable.
- Content warnings: Many of the texts address difficult subjects like hate crimes, sexual violence, and historical trauma. I include these topics because they are crucial to understanding the history of Asian migration and U.S. society today. I will try my best to mark readings with graphic material (with "CW"). If you skip those readings, let me know so we can make sure you are still able to fully participate in class activities.
- Generosity: I urge you all to approach one another (including the instructor) with generosity. In a discussion-heavy class on political topics, it can be easy to disagree. As we begin the semester, let's collectively think about how we might establish a space that feels encouraging and exploratory, rather than condemning.
- Lateness & extensions: if you know that you will benefit from an extension, please contact me **at least 5 days before the deadline** to ask for an extension. Extensions will be granted on a case-by-case basis. Late submissions without prior approval will be marked down half a grade by every day that it is late (ex.: A to A-, A- to B+, etc.).
- Missing class & COVID-19: If you are experiencing symptoms of COVID-19, please get tested and do not come to class. Please mask in class if you have been exposed (but are not experiencing symptoms and have tested negative). If you need to miss more than two classes, absences will only be excused with a doctor's note, a Dean's Excuse, or personal communication with the instructor.
- Recording: Please do not record class sessions or office hour discussions without my permission.
- Revisions: You will be allowed to re-submit Assignments #1 and 2, after instructor feedback. If the piece has improved, it will receive a higher grade—although submitting a revision does not guarantee a higher grade. The revision grade, if higher, will be the one factored into the final grade. You must submit all revised assignments **by Monday, April 27, 5pm, via email**.
- Links to other institutional resources

[Thompson Writing Studio](#)

[Duke Libraries](#) – our course librarian is [Matthew Hayes](#)

[Sexual misconduct/Title IX grievances](#)

[Counseling and Psychological Services](#)

[List of mental/emotional support networks](#)

[COVID testing](#)

[Student wellness](#)

[Classroom emergency: what to do](#)

Schedule

Note: this may be subject to change.

Class presentations are linked [here](#).

Date	In-Class Activities	Writing Due	Reading Due
<i>Fantasies of Asia</i>			
Week 1 Thursday, 01/08	Course introduction Association exercise, with Facebook posts compilation		Browse through the Facebook group, “Subtle Asian Traits,” and pick a post you were struck by. If you don’t have Facebook, there is a PDF on Canvas with a post compilation.
		<u>Writing exercise #1:</u> <u>using “I.”</u> Pick a Facebook post and reflect on what markers of “Asianness” it is associated with (at least 150 words). Try using the first-person voice. Due on Canvas by 01/12, 12:00pm.	
Week 2 Tuesday, 01/13	Discuss the Yellow Peril and its historical context		Tchen, John Kuo Wei and Dylan Yeats, eds. <i>Yellow Peril!: An Archive of Anti-Asian Fear</i> . Verso, 2014, pp. 1-32.

	Writing: notetaking/reading practices		Bring: browse political cartoons and illustrations, compiled on Canvas (“Yellow Peril_Image Compilation”)—pick out one image you were struck by.
Thursday, 01/15	Discuss “Madame Butterfly” and its adaptations; start <i>M. Butterfly</i> together in class Writing Studio consultant visit		Long, John Luther. “Madame Butterfly.” <i>Century Magazine</i> , 1898.
		<u>Writing exercise #2: annotations.</u> Upload your reading notes for “Madame Butterfly” (the short story by Luther Long) OR half of <i>M. Butterfly</i> (the play by David Henry Hwang, up to p.70), following the annotations worksheet from class. Due on Canvas by 01/19, 12:00pm.	
Week 3 Tuesday, 01/20	Discuss <i>M. Butterfly</i> Writing: outlining and brainstorming		Hwang, David Henry. <i>M. Butterfly</i> . Plume, 1988, pp. 10-70.
Thursday, 01/22	Discuss <i>M. Butterfly</i> Writing: paraphrases, citations, and direct quotes		<i>M. Butterfly</i> , pp. 70-112 (finish book, including playwright’s afterword).

			Optional: Rey Chow, "Dream of a Butterfly," pp. 1-7.
		<u>Writing exercise #3: thesis.</u> Come up with 2 sample thesis statements (at least 30 words each). Due on Canvas by 01/26, 12:00pm.	
<i>Orientalism</i>			
Week 4 Tuesday, 01/27	Discuss <i>Orientalism</i> Writing: thesis and argumentative writing		Said, Edward. <i>Orientalism</i> . Pantheon, 1979, pp. 1-9. (Available online through Duke Library.) Verghese, Namrata. " What is Orientalism? A Stereotyped, Colonialist Vision of Asian Cultures. " <i>Teen Vogue</i> , 2021.
Thursday, 01/29	Writing: librarian visit (resources, media literacy, navigating databases, and more!)		Mezzadri, Daniele. "The Paradox of AI-Assisted Research." <i>The Journal of Academic Ethics</i> , 2025.
		<u>Writing exercise #4: paragraph.</u> Write a paragraph (at least 250 words) that elaborates on a revised thesis from last week's exercise. Due on Canvas by 02/02, 12:00pm.	

Week 5 Tuesday, 02/03	Discuss Asian femininity and fetishization Writing: crafting a paragraph and topic sentences		Durba, Mitra, et al. <u>"It's Time to Reckon with the History of Asian Women in America."</u> <i>Harper's Bazaar</i> , 2021. (CW) Lim, Audrea. <u>"The Alt-Right's Asian Fetish."</u> <i>The New York Times</i> , 2018. Optional: Bow, Leslie. "Introduction" from <i>Racist Love</i> . Duke University Press, 2021, pp. 1-7.
Thursday, 02/05	Discuss <i>If They Come For Us</i> and Islamophobia Writing: drafting a project proposal		Asghar, Fatimah. Excerpts from <i>If They Come For Us</i> . One World, 2018. (CW) Mamdani, Zohran. <u>"FULL REMARKS: Mamdani delivers tearful speech on Muslim faith, slams Cuomo."</u> <i>ABC News</i> , 2025.
		<u>Writing exercise #5: proposal.</u> Draft a proposal (at least 250 words) for Assignment #1, building on the class worksheet. Due on Canvas by 02/09, 12:00pm.	
<i>Formations of Asia/America</i>			

Week 6 Tuesday, 02/10	Discuss historical context of the term "Asian America"		Bulosan, Carlos. <u>"Freedom from Want."</u> <i>The Saturday Evening Post</i> , 1943. <u>"The Longest Student Strike in History."</u> <i>PBS</i> , 2017. Optional: Lee, Erika. Chapter 13 from <i>The Making of Asian America: A History</i> , Simon & Schuster, 2015. (Available <u>online</u> through Duke Library.)
Thursday, 02/12	Discuss <i>The Best We Could Do</i> and <i>The Things They Carried</i> Writing: giving feedback		Buy, Thi. Excerpt from <i>The Best We Could Do</i> . Abrams ComicArts, 2017, pp. 22-60. (CW) O'Brien, Tim. "How to Tell a True War Story" from <i>The Things They Carried</i> . Houghton Mifflin, 1980. (CW)
		<u>Writing exercise #6: peer review.</u> Upload completed peer review worksheets for Assignment 1. Due on Canvas by end of day 02/17.	
Week 7 Tuesday, 02/17 (Lunar New Year!)	Discuss the Asian American literary movement Writing: workshop Assignment 1. Class cancelled; instead of meeting as a group,		Chin, Frank, et al. Preface to the First Edition from <i>Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers</i>, 3rd edition. University of Washington Press;

	please meet to exchange drafts with your peer review feedback partner. Post the completed worksheet on Canvas under “Writing Exercise #6.”		2019 (first published 1974), pp. xxv-xxxvii. Suggestion: start reading <i>Buddha of Suburbia</i> for next week’s classes.
Thursday, 02/19	Discuss model minority, post WWII/Cold War politics, Ornamentalism, and <i>Cut Piece</i>		Nguyễn, Viet Thanh. “Asian Americans Are Still Caught in the Trap of the ‘Model Minority’ Stereotype. And It Creates Inequality for All.” <i>TIME</i>, 2020. Cheng, Anne Anlin. “Ornamentalism: A Feminist Theory of the Yellow Woman.” <i>Critical Inquiry</i>, Spring 2018, pp. 415-446. Watch: Ono, Yoko. Cut Piece (1965). (CW)
		<u>Assignment #1 due on Canvas by 02/20, 5:00pm.</u>	
<i>The Ethnic Commercial/Essential</i>			
Week 8 Tuesday, 02/24	Discuss <i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> (CW) and <i>Cut Piece</i>		Kureishi, Hanif. <i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i>. Penguin Random House, 1991, pp. 1-77 (end of Ch. 5).
Thursday, 02/26	Discuss <i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i>		<i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i>, pp. 78-165 (end of Ch. 10).

	Writing: close reading		Optional: Zadie Smith on <i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> .
		<u>Writing exercise #7: close reading.</u> Pick a short passage from the <i>Buddha of Suburbia</i>, and analyze it with the close reading methods/questions from class. Your written analysis should be at least 300 words (passage not included). Due on Canvas by 03/02, 12:00pm.	
Week 9 Tuesday, 03/03	Discuss <i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> Writing: finding and using textual evidence		<i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> , pp. 166-242 (end of Ch. 16).
Thursday, 03/05	Discuss <i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> and ideas of “identity”		<i>The Buddha of Suburbia</i> , pp. 243-284 (finish book). Hall, Stuart. Excerpt from “Old and New Identities, Old and New Ethnicities,” pp. 73-82.
		Fill out mid-semester course survey before spring break.	
Week 10 Spring break!			
Week 11 Tuesday, 03/17 (St. Patrick’s Day!)	Discuss the advertising industry, ideas of		Shankar, Shalini. Excerpt from <i>Advertising</i>

	“representation,” and modern-day media (TikTok, Instagram, etc.) Writing: non-textual media analysis		<i>Diversity: Ad Agencies and the Creation of Asian American Consumers</i>. Duke University Press, 2015. (skim) Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty. “Questions of Multi-culturalism” from <i>The Post-Colonial Critic</i>. Routledge, 1990. Bring: an advertisement or digital content that features or is aimed at Asians/Asian Americans.
Thursday, 03/19	Discuss <i>Saving Face</i> Writing: film analysis Guest lecture: Madeleine Collier		Watch: <i>Saving Face</i> (2004, dir. Alice Wu).
		<u>Writing exercise #8: close reading, part 2.</u> Close read a cultural object of your choice (can be novel, film, music video, song, advertisement, etc.), following the techniques that we've discussed in class. This should be the cultural object that you will write your Assignment #2 on. Your written analysis	

		should be at least 300 words. Due on Canvas by 03/23, 12:00pm.	
<i>Marginal or Mainstream?</i>			
Week 12 Tuesday, 03/24	Discuss racial triangulation and inter-racial tensions Writing: work on assignment #2		Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." <i>Politics & Society</i> , 1990, pp. 105-130.
Thursday, 03/26	Discuss <i>Crazy Rich Asians</i> Guest lecture: Jing Hao Liong		Watch: <i>Crazy Rich Asians</i> (2018, dir. Jon Chu). Recommend: start reading <i>Taiwan Travelogue</i> .
		<u>Assignment #2 due on Canvas by Monday, 3/30, 5:00pm</u>	
Week 13 Tuesday, 03/31	Discuss K-pop, popular representations of Asia through music Combined class with Prof. Yun Emily Wang Class will be held on East Campus, Biddle Music Building 102		Watch: <i>KPop Demon Hunters</i> (2025, dir. Maggie Kang and Chris Appelhans). Listen: podcast on BTS's "Butter." Recommend: continue reading <i>Taiwan Travelogue</i> .
Thursday, 04/02	Discuss <i>Taiwan Travelogue</i> Writing: genres, tones, and styles		Yáng, Shuang-Zi. <i>Taiwan Travelogue</i> , trans. Lin King. Graywolf Press, 2024, pp. xi-67.

	Class will be held back in our usual LINK classroom		
		<u>Writing exercise #9: revisions.</u> Pick a paragraph from either assignment to substantially revise, given instructor feedback. Include a short paragraph about the changes you made and why. Due on Canvas by 04/08, 12:00pm.	
Week 14 Tuesday, 04/07	Discuss <i>Taiwan Travelogue</i> Writing: revisions and editing		<i>Taiwan Travelogue</i> , pp. 69-115.
Thursday, 04/09	Optional individual meeting with instructor in lieu of class - sign up here		<i>Taiwan Travelogue</i>, pp. 117-184.
		<u>Final project proposal:</u> Draft a proposal (at least 500 words) and include a bibliography of at least 3 secondary sources that you plan to use for your final. More information on slides here , as well as an example under “Course Worksheets” on Canvas. Due on Canvas by 04/15, 12:00pm.	
<i>Asianness Today?</i>			

Week 15 Tuesday, 04/14	Optional individual meeting with instructor in lieu of class - sign up here		<i>Taiwan Travelogue</i>, pp. 185-230. Please use this time to work on your final project proposal and draft!
Thursday, 04/16	Nasher exhibit guided visit with the curator, Julianne Miao, “Dis/orient: Contemporary Art of the Asian Diaspora” Meet at the Nasher Art Museum by the front desk.		<i>Taiwan Travelogue</i>, pp. 231-270.
		<u>Writing exercise #10:</u> Write a short reflection (250 words) on your key takeaways from the course. Due on Canvas by Monday, 04/20, 12:00pm. Please also email the instructor by the same time above with whatever draft you have of your final project. This will just be marked for submission and is counted towards your final grade (see rubric).	
Week 16 Tuesday, 04/21 (last day of class!)	Final project discussion		Prepare a short (1-2 minute) presentation of your final project. This can be informal;

	Course evals & wrap-up		you do not need slides. Roh, David, et al. <i>Techno-Orientalism: Imagining Asia in Speculative Fiction, History, and Media.</i> Rutgers University Press, 2015, pp. 1-19. Bring: a recent news article or contemporary news media that covers an Asia-related topic.
Week 17		Final project due on Canvas by 04/30, 12:00pm.	