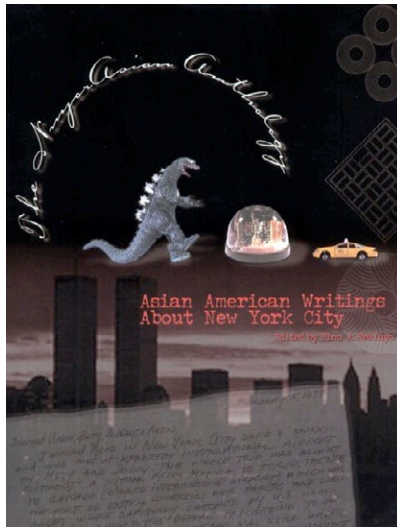


# THE NUYORASIAN ANTHOLOGY: ASIAN AMERICAN WRITINGS ABOUT NEW YORK CITY

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*Note: This Study Guide is meant for teachers of literature courses, wherein The NuyorAsian Anthology is required reading, either for high school seniors in an advanced class or college undergraduates.*

Compiled for the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the first three Chinese students in New York City in 1847, this anthology poses the question, “What does it mean to be Asian American in New York, to be a NuyorAsian?” The book attempts to answer this question by giving the reader a visceral, tangible feel for what the individual, whether fictional or historical, feels and thinks, who comes from an Asian background and finds him/herself in that great city by the Hudson River. Historically known as a point of entry into the United States of America for Europeans, here New York City is claimed by Asian America.

With sixty writers and eleven visual artists from five ethnicities, *The NuyorAsian Anthology* covers a broad array of genres, styles, and themes. Age-wise it ranges from sixteen-year-old Alison Park, the youngest contributor, to the oldest, the late José Garcia Villa, eighty-nine years old at the time of his death.

To get the most out of this anthology in the classroom, it is best to approach this wide-ranging book thematically and, further, to focus on three themes—“Chinatown:

Myth and Reality,” “New York City: Rites of Passage,” and “Biculturalism: Burden or Blessing?” These selected themes should enable the discussants to reference several contributors together rather than individually. Concentrating on selected themes does not mean excluding others, as these three, once explored, will inevitably lead to other related topics.

Since cities and diasporas grow out of specific historical conditions, it will help if the discussants were acquainted with such subjects as Orientalism; the history of Asian-America, including its wars; the evolution of New York City; and multiculturalism. References to popular culture, e.g., cinema, should aid in contextualizing the discussion. Towards this end, the teacher or discussion leader would be well advised to distribute relevant, supplementary material in advance of the session.

## I. Chinatown: Myth and Reality

With the following queries as the bases for discussions, please refer to individual pieces in the collection that you believe best demonstrate/illustrate the discussion. We suggest certain pieces, where warranted, but the discussants should feel free to come up with their own selections.

1. Whether in New York or any other American city, is Chinatown a site of the imagination as well as a real place? How does it signify or exemplify being Chinese and/or Asian in America?
2. What were the pressures that resulted in the establishment of Chinatown and its subsequent growth? If possible, discuss current configurations of the Chinatown nearest the school, such as population, location, businesses, etc.

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3. Chinatown has come to stand for an enclave of foreign-ness in a way radically different from, say, Little Italy in Manhattan, or the Irish neighborhoods in Queens. Do popular views of Chinatown dovetail with the Orientalist perspective? If so, how?
4. Compare the views of Chinatown in the anthology with its representations in Hollywood films, such as the series on Charlie Chan, *Flower Drum Song*, and *Year of the Dragon*.
5. To Americans of Asian descent, Chinatown often becomes a ghetto to escape from, while for the generation that preceded them, having been born abroad, Chinatown is a refuge from the assimilationist pressures of a largely Anglo society—a home, as imperfect as it may be, away from home. Discuss the ways in which Chinatown turns into a meeting ground not just of generations but of cultural contexts, sometimes smoothly, sometimes in conflict.
6. The Chinatown of each contributor is individualized, that is, the setting is familiar but, depending on the piece, adapted to the circumstances of the person or character involved. Among the writers who could be considered are: Louis Chu, Maxine Hong Kingston, Victoria Eng, Fay Chiang, Ed Lin, Henry Chang, and Andrea Louie.

## II. New York City: Rites of Passage

1. Right from its beginnings, New York City has been a site of multiple cultures. It serves as the country's bohemian and artistic capital, and on the East Coast, constitutes the most important gateway to the U.S. How is the city viewed by recent Asian immigrants and by Asian Americans? The focal point here, for instance, could be Wang Ping's poem, "Song of Calling Souls," on the ill-fated voyage of the Golden Venture to Queens,

and the luckless Chinese who drowned before reaching land.

2. Discuss the city's current configurations, particularly the size and significance of its Asian enclaves. Is New York City radically different from what it was, say, until 1965, when the comprehensive Immigration Reform Act was passed that did away with the national-origin quota system?
3. The city turns into a stage for rebellion, self-discovery, assimilation into or confrontation with America. Discuss the narratives of various characters in selected stories, and/or the development of consciousness in the poems where the city looms large.
4. How do these relate to other American literary works where New York plays a similar role? Compare and contrast, with, for example, Truman Capote's *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, or J.D. Salinger's *Catcher in the Rye*.
5. The contributors come from Chinese, Filipino, Korean, South Asian, and Japanese ethnicities. Gauging by the narratives, the poems, and the art, are there significant differences in the ways that each group perceives New York City? Similarities?
6. Discuss how, as often as not, the city becomes a stage where the relationships of various characters are lived out, with race and ethnicity backgrounded, rather than foregrounded, though still exerting some significance on these lives. What are foregrounded are matters common to all of us: sexuality, careers, family, the expansion of consciousness, etc. What does this shift in emphasis signify? Among writers who could be considered are Ameena Meer, Patricia Chao, Diane Mehta, Regie Cabico, Marianne Villanueva, and Laurence Chua.

### III. Biculturalism: Burden or Blessing?

1. Culture, history, and race intersect regularly in the lives depicted in the book's narratives and poems. Discuss how they do so in particular instances, and what the consequences are. Among the many contributors one might consider are Richard Oyama, Elda Rotor, Yukihide Maeshima Hartman, Ava Chin, Meena Alexander, Chang Rae Lee, Sunaina Maira, Bino Realuyo, and Bharati Mukherjee.
2. What common themes emerge in the writings of those who explore the complex world of bi- or multiculturalism?
3. The generational divide is complicated by issues of nativity and has long been a subject of Asian-American writing. Discuss how differences between foreign-born parents and their American-born offspring are manifested in everything from food to language to societal roles. One might consider, among others, pieces by Amitava Kumar, Leonard Chang, Jimin Han, Erna Hernandez, and Jean Fong Kwok.
4. Often enough, references to ethnicity are avoided, with the writer implicitly asserting that he or she need not feel bound by such considerations. What implications are there for how we think of Asian-American literature? Among writers who might be discussed are José Garcia Villa, Vijay Seshadri, visual artist Carol Sun, Patrick Rosal, Marli Higa, and Eileen Tabios.
5. In the works reproduced here of such artists as Chanika Svetvilas ("My English"), Tomie Arai (silkscreens), Ken Chu ("Boys Will Be Girls"), Nina Kuo (photo collages), and Mona Chen (photos), what themes and motifs are either directly referred to or are implied? For instance, how are ethnicity and sexual preference alluded to?