



**TITLE**

# THE PHOTOGRAPHY OF CORKY LEE: ASIAN AMERICANS IN PHOTOS

GRADE LEVEL: MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

**DISCIPLINE:** -Civics, U.S. History, Art, Journalism

**TOPIC:** e.g Chinese Exclusion, Colonization of Hawai'i, Japanese American Incarceration, etc.

**STANDARDS:** The Roadmap - Educating for American Democracy: See Theme 1: Civic Participation; Theme 3: We the People; Theme 5: Institutional and Social Transformation United States History Content Standards: See Era 6, Standards 1, 2, 3.

**OBJECTIVES:**

**Students will:**

- Demonstrate the value in photography as a mode of advocacy and activism through the camera lens of Corky Lee and his documentation of the lives of Asian Americans.
- Explain how history is interpreted by examining Corky Lee's work and showing how different perspectives can bring deeper understanding to the past.
- Understand the role Corky Lee played in helping to establish an Asian American identity.

**ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS:**

- In what ways does photography enable an individual to create their own kind of history?
- How do Lee's photographs demonstrate the intertwining of Asian American history with American history?
- How did Lee express the themes of belonging, inclusion, and exclusion through his photography?
- In what ways can we utilize photography as a means to advocate for causes?

**KIT INCLUDES:**

- Primary Source Documents
- Readings
- Vocabulary
- Resources
- Activities With Formative Assessments

**MATERIALS NEEDED:**

• All materials are embedded within the lesson

**CLASSROOM HOURS NEEDED:**

2 to 3 class periods

**FINAL ASSESSMENT TYPE:**

• Corky Lee demonstrated the themes of Americanness throughout his life through his camera lens. Photography was the avenue that Lee opted to express himself, document history, and create art. Like Lee, choose a creative avenue of your own to express your own relationship with "Americanness," however you describe it.

CREDIT AUTHOR AND CONTACT: ANA LUOCAI

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**THIS LESSON PLAN FOCUSES ON:**

The significance of photographs in creating a view of history and the importance of interpreting History through a critical lens using multiple perspectives.

**INTRODUCTION:**

Corky Lee was a Chinese American photographer from New York City, dubbed by many as the “Undisputed Unofficial Asian American Photographer Laureate.” Not professionally trained in photography, Lee began taking photos of rallies and demonstrations in Chinatown, New York City in the 1970s after realizing there was a lack of historical documentation of Asian Americans. His photography, spanning decades, captured what otherwise would have been forgotten from American history.

From the mundane everyday lives of Asian Americans to lively protests amidst the larger Asian American Movement, Lee was there to document the role of Asian Americans as part of the fabric of American society. Lee passed away from COVID in 2021, but his legacy and impact remains, sustained by his photography.

**ACTIVITY:**

**Have students answer the following questions based on this npr Article and the two images below:**

- Why do you think Chinese rail workers were excluded in the 1869 photo and what are the implications of this exclusion?
- Why do you think Corky Lee chose to recreate this particular photo instead of other historical images documenting the development of the Transcontinental Railroad?
- What is the value in recreating historical images with a different subject?
- With the inclusion of descendants of Chinese rail workers, what message does the 2014 photo send to those in 1869?



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**Definition of protest:**

- Something said or done that shows disagreement with or disapproval of something
- An event at which people gather together to show strong disapproval about something

**Have students answer and discuss the following questions before analyzing the three images below:**

- In your own words, what does “protest” mean? What does the act of “protesting” mean?
  - Have you ever protested something? Been a part of a protest?
  - Why would someone want to protest? What does it signal?
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- In each of the photos, what do you see and what do you think the people were protesting about?
  - What do you think incited Corky Lee to capture these protests on camera?
  - As a photographer documenting the event, would Corky Lee count as being a part of the protest too?
  - Can you think of examples today of photography’s role in protesting and activism?

**ACTIVITY 2:**  
PROTEST AS A MEANS OF SURVIVAL



©CORKY LEE '91



**ACTIVITY 3:**  
THE “AMERICAN”  
IN ASIAN  
AMERICAN

The term “Asian American” has only been in mainstream use since the late 1960s, largely in due part by the efforts of civil rights activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee.

Prior to the usage of “Asian American,” “people of Asian descent in the U.S. would generally refer to themselves by their specific ethnic subgroup, such as Japanese American, Filipino American, and so on. When a broad term was used, it was often ‘oriental,’ which held racist and colonialist connotations. But ‘Asian American’ wasn’t just a handy umbrella term: by uniting those subgroups linguistically, it also helped unite activists in their fight for greater equality.”

[To provide further context to the historical exclusion of Asians in the US, students may read this brief overview on the 1924 Immigration Act, which barred immigration from Asia and instated immigration quotas from countries in the Eastern Hemisphere:  
<https://calendar.eji.org/racial-injustice/may/26/>]

**After reading, have students analyze the four photos below and answer the following questions:**

- What is the importance of the symbolism of “America” in the photos?
- What do you think it means to identify as American and claim “Americanness” after a history of American exclusion and ostracization?
- Do you think there are better terms than “Asian American” to describe Americans of Asian descent?
- Through his photography, what do you think it means to be American according to Corky Lee??



## RESOURCES:

[CONGRESS AND THE AMERICAN WEST: THE TRANSCONTINENTAL RAILROAD](#)

[DESCENDANTS OF CHINESE LABORERS RECLAIM RAILROAD'S HISTORY](#)

[PHOTOGRAPH OF GOLDEN SPIKE CEREMONY AT PROMONTORY, UTAH](#)

[MERRIAM-WEBSTER DICTIONARY, "PROTEST"](#)

[CHINESE PROTEST ALLEGED POLICE BEATING HERE](#)

[A UNION AND WAITERS FACE OFF IN CHINATOWN](#)

[CORKY LEE: MEMORIES OF A SEEKER](#)

[IMMIGRATION ACT OF 1924 PROHIBITS IMMIGRATION FROM ASIA](#)

[IN 1968, THESE ACTIVISTS COINED THE TERM 'ASIAN AMERICAN'—AND HELPED SHAPE DECADES OF ADVOCACY:](#)

[THE BATTLE OF 'MISS SAIGON': YELLOWFACE, ART AND OPPORTUNITY:](#)

[CORKY LEE, WHO PHOTOGRAPHED ASIAN-AMERICAN LIFE, DIES AT 73](#)



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