

Interview transcript: University of Arizona Asian Pacific American Studies Faculty



The Library's [Biblio Lotus](#) team is delighted to present this interview series, hoping to elevate AAPI (Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders) communities' voices and celebrate their culture. The interviewees are in different fields and from various backgrounds, but their dedication to AAPI histories and cultures helps form our diverse and dynamic community in Pima County.

The University of Arizona [recently announced](#) the creation of the **Asian Pacific American Studies minor**. The new minor is under the [Department of East Asian Studies](#) in the [College of Humanities](#). The Biblio Lotus Team interviewed several faculty members teaching courses for the new minor: Jonathan Jae-an Crisman, Dian Li, and Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan. The creation of the Asian Pacific American Studies Program is the successful result of a decades-long process championed by University of Arizona faculty and students. All three professors expressed admiration for [Dr. Brett Esaki](#), who played an integral role in helping form the program.

Professor Jonathan Jae-an Crisman is an artist and urban scholar. His current research focuses on how art and culture act as forms of political engagement in the gentrification of cities and culture, and the politics surrounding the deaths of migrants in the borderlands. He holds a PhD in Urban Planning and Development from the University of Southern California, Master of Architecture and Master in City Planning degrees from MIT, and a BA in Architectural Studies, Geography, and Urban and Regional Planning from UCLA.

Professor Dian Li received his Ph.D. in Asian Languages and Cultures at the University of Michigan. He is the author of two books and many essays and articles on modern Chinese poetry, fiction, and films. Professor Li's research interests include classical and modern Chinese critical theories, diaspora and translational studies, translation theory and practice, contemporary Chinese poetry and film.

Professor Ragini Tharoor Srinivasan is Assistant Professor of English and Vice Chair of the graduate interdisciplinary program in Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory at the University of Arizona. She is Co-Chair of the Academic Council of the South Asian American Digital Archive, and is an award-winning journalist and former magazine editor with bylines in over three dozen scholarly and public venues. Dr. Srinivasan taught at the University of Nevada, Reno, and the University of California, Berkeley, where she earned a PhD in 2016.

When and how did you come to Tucson/Pima County?

Dr. Crisman

I moved to Tucson in 2019 to work at the University of Arizona. A lot of my research is focused on communities in Los Angeles, so I had mainly applied to jobs there, but the one job that I applied to outside of LA was at the U of A – and, lo and behold, that is the one that I ended up taking! I've been working on a border-related project for the past six years or so which brought me to Southern Arizona every year and so I knew how special Tucson is as a place. After interviewing, I was so enthralled with the warmth and generosity of folks in town, and I was really excited to start in the newly established Department of Public & Applied Humanities – the only program of its kind in the nation! The department is a transdisciplinary humanities space for work that is collaborative and applied, rather than siloed by language or medium. The University of Arizona is a really forward-looking place to have allowed a department like this to be established, and it's definitely a big reason why I came to Tucson.

Dr. Li

I came to Tucson for the job at the University of Arizona in 1999 and I fell in love with the city immediately. I had never been to Tucson before. My on-campus interview happened in January. Coming from the snow-covered country in Iowa—I was teaching at Iowa State at the time—and stepping into the sunny weather in Tucson, I could not believe my luck. Since then, I have raised a family with my wife here and feel I belong to this beautiful place more than ever.

Dr. Srinivasan

I moved to Tucson in summer 2017 to start a job as an Assistant Professor of English and Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory at the University of Arizona. I came with my husband, who is an Assistant Professor of Mathematics, also at UA. Today, we have two children, ages 3 and 8, how are both big readers.

How was the Asian Pacific American Studies program formed?

Dr. Li

My disciplinary training was Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Michigan. I took Asian American Literature as one of my minor fields. I put this minor to use by offering a couple of courses on Asian American Literature at the University of Arizona when I saw there was nothing there in Asian American Studies, which was rising across college campuses in the country.

Sometime in 2003, David Ng, a political science major at UA who had taken my courses, came to me with the idea to start a student petition for an Asian American Studies program at UA. He was inspired by what he learned at a summer program at the UC Berkeley. The petition gathered hundreds of signatures from members of the university community, to which the then-Provost Davis responded favorably. I was asked to write a proposal for an AAS Minor Program, which was then to be approved by many levels of faculty committees. Unfortunately, the proposal did not pass the Undergraduate Council for technical reasons based on apathy and ignorance. It was a disappointment, especially for David, who put in lots of time and effort.

The conversation about establishing such a program has never stopped among interested faculty, staff, and students, though. Students' demand has always been the driving force in the establishment of APAS Programs almost anywhere. When the idea originated from students again a couple of years ago, it was greenlighted by stakeholders from all sides at the university. A committee of interested faculty was quickly formed. Professor Brett Esaki deserves lots of credit for providing feasibility studies and a draft program proposal, which helped move the approval process smoothly. The APAS Minor Program will be officially in place in fall 2021.

What specific needs are fulfilled by this program?

Dr. Crisman

There are several important needs that are fulfilled by the APAS program. First, Asian American studies is an important field that offers unique insights and documents, important histories that are not captured elsewhere – so there is an intellectual and scholarly need for a locus of such work. But there is also a very important student-centered need as well: our APIDA students were missing this critical resource where they could see their own histories reflected in curricula, and our non-APIDA students lacked a program where they could learn about intercultural competence for Asian American cultures. Asian Americans are one of the fastest growing groups in the United States, and everyone is well served when we can provide understanding and learning across difference and culture.

Dr. Li

The APAS program is foremost an enrichment of the educational experiences of all University of Arizona undergraduate students with regards to the Asian Pacific Americans--their history, their culture, and their triumph against racism. It will be an integral part of the Diversity and Inclusion component of the university's recently revised General Education curricula.

How does the Asian Pacific American Studies program at the University of Arizona differ from other programs or degrees? For example, how does it differ from a history degree?

Dr. Crisman

Well, first off, our new program is a minor – so that means that any student on campus, whether you are in the STEM fields, or you are in a studio-based major like art or architecture, or any other major, you can add it on top of your existing degree requirements. It's additive, and the minor is designed to provide critical thinking that complements a student's learning no matter where they are coming from. It's also designed to be applied and engaged: students will be undertaking project-oriented classes, and will be encouraged to earn units through things like independent studies or internships. There are definitely historical elements to the program, but it's a lot more than history as well.

Dr. Li

APAS is an interdisciplinary field. It is unified by its subject of study but its focus can vary by participating faculty. Currently, APAS is a minor program, but I hope it will become a degree program in the future.

Dr. Srinivasan

APAS is an interdisciplinary minor. This means that the faculty involved have been trained in a number of different disciplines, including History, Urban Studies, Religion, and Literature. It also means that we invite students from across the disciplines to take our classes and earn the minor.

APAS is what we would call an "identity field of study," given that it aims to teach the social and historical emergence as well as cultural production of people belonging to "Asian American" and "Asian Pacific" communities, broadly defined. By that same token, APAS is a field of study at the intersections of the humanities and social sciences. It draws on the critical traditions of both Ethnic Studies and Area Studies, and, to that end, it will fundamentally interrogate the very premise of "identity" as an organizing rubric for scholarly study.

Arizona House Bill 2281 was signed into AZ state law by Governor Jan Brewer in 2010, banning the Mexican American Studies program in the Tucson Unified School District. The Supreme Court ruled the ban to be unconstitutional in 2017. How do you think this ruling has affected or strengthened the formation of the Asian Pacific American Studies program at the university?

Dr. Crisman

I think that the young people who really wanted this program realized that they couldn't sit around and wait for the "adults" to figure things out. So often, the adults who have all the power are the ones who are the most clueless, and the young people have to organize and lead the way. They are the future, and they certainly played a hugely important role in advocating and pushing for this program for years.

Dr. Li

I think APAS has its own merit regardless of the prevailing national political environment. The speedy approval process and the wide support from the University of Arizona community speak to its necessity and merit.

Do you feel your life experiences give you a different perspective on life at the University and in Tucson/Pima County?

Dr. Crisman

Definitely – but all of our life experiences are unique and add to the distinct tapestry of culture at the University and Southern Arizona. I think that is a huge reason why APAS was needed – not that it is better or needed to replace anything that currently exists on campus, but simply that it didn't exist and could add to the richness of intellectual life on campus and in the community. I think one important thing that we want to do through our program is really focus on the broad spectrum of APIDA culture – often, Asian American studies tends to focus on East Asian ethnicities. I'm Korean American, for example, and Brett is Japanese American. But a large part of our student body is Filipino American, and there are really unique experiences and perspectives that the Filipino community has to offer to the broader field of Asian American studies, not to mention the numerous other heritages and cultures. There is more cultural and linguistic diversity within the "Asian" racial category, and this fact is often elided when we hear news outlets talking about "Asian Americans" – grouping together dramatically different ethnic groups. So we're really trying to break that open.

Dr. Li

Of course, one's view of life is always shaped by one's past, in ways of which one is not always aware. I grew up in Mao's China and came to the United States as a wide-eyed student. My appreciation of life in America is sometimes based on a comparative perspective of what life would have been like in China.

What surprised you about living in Pima County or Arizona?

Dr. Crisman

I will say that this is no surprise now, and it's a big reason why I moved here, but I was totally taken by surprise by the rich and unique activist culture in Tucson the first time I visited. The first time I visited Arizona was to work on the border project that I mentioned earlier, and this was right after SB 1070 was passed, so I was expecting the worst. Little did I know, Tucson was the birthplace of the sanctuary movement, and was a locus for so much really distinct faith-based activism. It's such a special place – and not to mention, it has one of the most incredible food scenes in the nation!

Dr. Li

Warm weather and nature in abundance, which offer me an active lifestyle that keeps me healthy and happy (most of the time).

What books are you currently reading?

Dr. Crisman

I teach a class on science fiction and urban studies, and so I just re-read the recent and truly incredible *The Ministry for the Future* by Kim Stanley Robinson. I recommend it to everyone: you won't find a more gripping, imaginative, and disturbingly likely depiction of our shared future as our planet transitions through the effects of climate change. It is also a dark reminder of the global distribution of risk and harm that will come out of climate change, which will likely impact folks in places like South Asia much worse than in North America to a horrifying degree. And yet the book is also surprisingly optimistic and hopeful – we can figure this out, if we work together! It's a great read.

Dr. Li

I will not bore you with my readings for research and scholarship. For leisure, I have started to read Bill Gates' How to Avoid a Climate Disaster. I appreciate his proposals to answer the environmental challenges facing the world today.

Dr. Srinivasan

This semester, I taught a graduate seminar in Asian American literature; the books for that course are freshly on my mind, and I recommend all of them! We read some "canonical" works in Asian American literature, like John Okada's No-No Boy, Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, and short stories by Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri. We also read Mohsin Hamid's The Reluctant Fundamentalist (which is a post-9/11, global Anglophone novel) and Ling Ma's Severance. Severance is a prophetic "pandemic novel" that sits formally at the intersections of the genres of zombie/apocalypse fiction, the office novel, and the immigrant coming-of-age story. We also read work by contemporary writers Cathy Park Hong, Chanel Miller, Aimee Nezhukumatathil, and Shruti Swamy.

Any favorite movies or shows you are watching?

Dr. Crisman

I just watched Nomadland by the Chinese American director Chloe Zhao, which just won the Oscar for Best Picture. I wasn't expecting to be so moved by it, or to be so impressed by its stunning visual imagery. And good old Quartzsite, Arizona, the place I stop through all the time on my drives between Tucson and Los Angeles, is featured! It has really stuck with me, and I strongly recommend it.

Dr. Li

No TV shows for me, but lots of movies, partly because film studies is a sub-field of my scholarship. I like films with lasting images and poignant social themes such as Chloé Zhao's Oscar-winning Nomadland and Oliver Stone's Salvador (1986).

Is there anything else you would like to share for the article?

Dr. Crisman

Just to say thank you for this opportunity, and for all you do at the library! I love our Pima County libraries, and the ability to borrow e-books was a total life saver during the pandemic! Also, I want to give a shout out to the incredible Seed Library – it's such a cool and unique program!