

Top Young Historians

Henry Yu, 38

[Top Young Historians: Index](#)

Basic Facts

Teaching Position: Associate Professor, Department of History, and Department of Asian American Studies, UCLA; and Associate Professor of History, University of British Columbia

Area of Research: Migration in the U.S. and the Pacific region, the history of social science, Asian American history

Education: PhD. Princeton University, 1995

Major Publications: *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America* (Oxford, 2001).

Yu is finishing a book entitled *How Tiger Woods Lost His Stripes* and is currently working on a project rethinking how we understand migration in history.

Awards: Yu's book was a Choice Outstanding Academic Title for 2001 and received the Norris and Carol Hundley Prize for Most Distinguished Book of 2001.

He was the Co-Director for a Ford Foundation funded project on reimagining Asian American and Pacific Islander American history, and in addition to a current Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada Standard Research Grant for research on trans-

Pacific Chinese migration, has held residential fellowships at Wesleyan University's Center for the Humanities, the University of California's Humanities Research Institute, and the Woodrow Wilson Society of Fellows at Princeton University.

Additional Info: For the last three years, Yu has taught at both UCLA and UBC, travelling back and forth between Los Angeles and Vancouver while researching and teaching about the history of trans-Pacific migrations, including a joint summer class that mixed students from both schools for six weeks while studying the effects of migration and eating their way through each city's best Asian cuisine.



Personal Anecdote

I still can't quite believe that my "full time job" (in the words of my relatives), is to be a professional historian, since it involves spending inordinate amounts of time asking questions that pique my curiosity and then going out and finding answers to them. Most of my family (and many of my students I suspect), wonder why anyone should be paid to do something they so obviously enjoy, and the best parallel they can come up with is a professional hockey player or

some athlete paid for something they would have done for free. Perhaps some of the joy, as well as the seriousness of purpose, I feel doing my work is tied to the nagging feeling that I better enjoy it while I can because the plug will be pulled at any time. The feeling of being an "imposter" has been there right from the moment I entered graduate school (I kept waiting for them to realize that they had mixed up the application files and needed to rescind my fellowship?), and it still has never quite left me.

When I was first interviewing for a job at UCLA, my on-campus interview was during the week after the big Northridge earthquake. I was enthusiastically in the midst of explaining something or another when an aftershock hit. I'm sure it seemed pretty minor to most Angelenos, especially in the wake of the larger quake, but as I was going on and on, I noticed that the trees outside the window were swaying. It took me a moment to realize that in fact it was not the trees that were moving but our building, and that I had been so engrossed in talking that what seemed to me a minor nuisance of shifting trees might be more worrying to other people in the room. One of my future colleagues (who did not grow up in Los Angeles) had somewhat jokingly brought a construction hard hat to the office that day, and she alternated between looking at it, at me, and at the relative sanctuary under the table. I was in the middle of what must have seemed to me at the time a rather important point (although I have no recollection now as to what it was), and so I did not immediately register that the longing look in her eyes reflected an interior struggle between slipping under the table, putting on the hat, or continuing to listen to me prattle on. I'm sure that she was not the only one in the audience constrained against their better instincts by politeness, but such was the depth of my monomaniacal desire to finish my point that the earth stopped before I did. Later on, after I had been offered the job, I learned that I had been attributed with some preternatural ability to remain cool under pressure, and that my obstinate prolixity in the midst of an earthquake signalled a good fit for a teaching job in Los Angeles. I was quite ecstatic to be getting such a wonderful job, of course, but I'm not sure if there are any lessons to be learned by job candidates from my experience, other than perhaps the unwarranted moral that believing passionately in what we do sometimes has its rewards?

Quotes

By Henry Yu

- "A truly democratic production of knowledge must recognize that racial practices have had a long history in the United States, and has produced profound legacies that cannot be wished away as mere cultural differences. The answer is not to ignore or forget race, but to confront its history and address the need to build a more equitable world that takes into account that history of racial exclusion and oppression. Every individual in the United States has been shaped by the practices of racial differentiation, whether through categorizations of black or Oriental or Hispanic-or the default category of white. The key is that we live together cognizant of these histories, yet believing that what makes life interesting are the myriad of other differences and similarities

that bind us all as human. Race divides and race makes similarity. Some of the most telling differences, however, are not the blatant and obvious ones that so often lead people to generalization, but those subtle variations between people who are seemingly alike. They promise us again and again that the wonder of humanity lies not in the discernment of patterns of either similarity or difference, but in the infinite varieties of human experience." -- *Henry Yu in From Thinking Orientals*

- "Although this book was written in Princeton, New Jersey, and Los Angeles, California, many of its ideas crystallized during the four solo driving trips I took across the United States during graduate school. While stopping for gas on the interstates or during meals in diners and restaurants, I hurriedly scribbled thoughts that had occurred during my driving. Through those long hours on America's roads, I realized that coming to know something is often a physical as well as an intellectual movement, that coming to knowledge is not something that occurs only in a study room or a research lab somewhere in a university; sometimes it is an act strewn across a landscape of ignorance. It is a leaving of some familiar place in order to trace a series of journeys into the unknown. The physical location of the unknown, a sense that it is elsewhere, is an aspect of the mystery of knowledge that is often forgotten when we have overcome our ignorance. We come to feel more at home with something, we are comfortable in knowing more about it, we no longer fear to tread its unknown streets. The excitement of being lost, of being confused, or even afraid, is replaced. Knowing is a secure place to be." *Henry Yu in From Thinking Orientals*

About Henry Yu

- "Elegantly written, keenly argued. Page after page, *Thinking Orientals* is aglitter with insights which will be important, not only for specialists in Asian American studies, but for anyone interested in the workings of 'race' on the American scene. Henry Yu brilliantly illuminates the mutual engagement of the social and the intellectual worlds—the power of ideas to disfigure the social landscape, and of existing social and institutional structures persistently to hem our thinking." -- *Matthew Frye Jacobson, Yale University*

- "A tour de force. Henry Yu takes us on a dazzling journey through twentieth-century social science and identity politics. There is something new and provocative on every page, from Yu's deep analysis of the construction of the "oriental" in Chicago School sociology to his finely-drawn biographical vignettes of famous intellectuals and little known immigrants. *Thinking Orientals* will find a place on a short shelf of absolutely indispensable books on the changing concept of race in American history." -- *Thomas J. Sugrue, University of Pennsylvania*

- "Stylish, rigorous, dramatic, and unpredictable, this book makes enormous contributions to American Studies, to Asian American Studies, to the sociology of race, and to cultural studies. More than almost any other recent work, it shows what is gained for intellectual history by taking a broadly cultural approach. Yu surely places social science within a broader and highly unequal world and situates the creativity of a fascinating group of intellectuals of color

within sharp constraints." -- *David Roediger, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign*

- "The best prof ever in UBC".... "I wish I can have this guy for every single class of mine cuz he's just that great."... "Wish I can have his class all throughout my unversity years"... "He's just plain amazing." -- *Anonymous Students*

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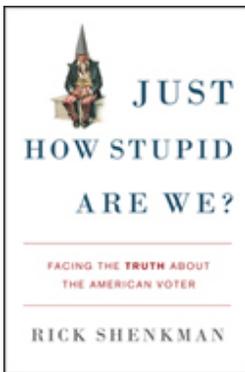
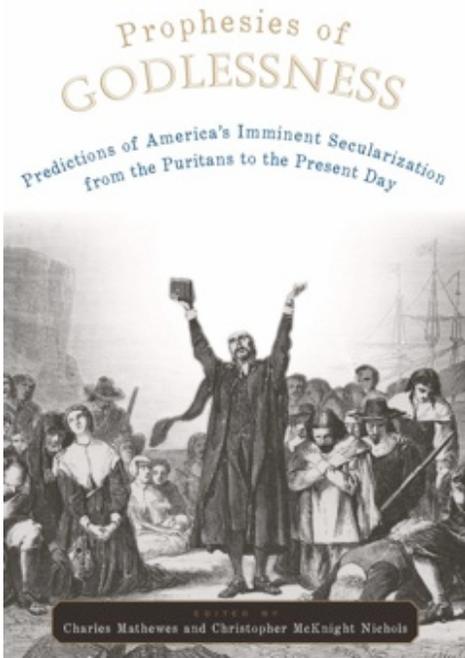
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