



## Think Tank for Inclusion & Equity

### WHO WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Those with an ethnic background or ancestry from Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor-Leste, and Vietnam. Southeast Asians (SEAs) comprise hundreds of ethnic groups, and include other diaspora (e.g., Chinese Malaysian, Indian Singaporean) who have resided in SEA for multiple generations, as well as the SEA diaspora around the world. This includes America's largest-ever resettled refugee community of 1.1+ million Southeast Asian Americans (SEAs) who were resettled via the U.S. Refugee Act\* after the U.S.-backed war in Vietnam, the Secret War in Laos, and the Cambodia bombings, followed by the Khmer Rouge-orchestrated genocide.

**NOTE:** Find factsheets for other Asian Pacific communities (East Asians, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders, and South Asians) at [WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](https://writeinclusion.org/factsheets).

### HERE'S WHY AUTHENTICITY MATTERS

Hollywood has historically treated Asia as a monolith. Southeast Asia, if represented at all, is often an "exotic" locale or war-torn jungle. Its painting of SEA and SEAA men as emasculated and women as oversexualized has led to ongoing fetishization, hate, and violence against them, and fuels the narrative that Western Imperialism must save SEA people. Depicting Asia as a monolith casts SEAs in the "model minority" myth that all Asian Americans thrive versus other communities of color and that they don't have socioeconomic issues or need government help. It also erases nuanced identities based on vastly diverse backgrounds and life experiences.

# SOUTHEAST ASIANS

## OVERREPRESENTED STORIES & HARMFUL STEREOTYPES

- **Seduce & Serve:** Women as conniving (e.g., trading sex for improved immigration status), mysterious seductresses, or sex workers. This erases complex lives and permits white men to attack Asian women, especially sex workers (and LGBTQIA+ and migrant women mistaken for sex workers), while also fueling white men's savior complex.
- **Always a Foreigner:** Heavy, clichéd accents or very limited English as jokes. This treats SEAs as punchlines and "other," never fully American or citizens of their current home countries.
- **Trauma Porn:** SEA countries as conflict zones, jungles, or inhospitable. SEA roles limited to those about being traumatized by war erases SEAs' wide range of human experiences, while Hollywood profits by rehashing stories about the Vietnam War, for example, via a Western lens.
- **Exotic Evil:** SEA cities with shoddy high-rises, sprawling traffic, and lawlessness. Negative backdrops (e.g., drug deals, sex/human trafficking, illicit organ harvesting) perpetuate the falsehood that these cities are evil.
- **Tourist Playground:** Southeast Asia and SEA citizens only as exotic backdrops for white heroes' soul-searching journeys and tropical getaways. This fuels a predatory tourism industry.
- **Only Singaporeans:** Singaporeans, particularly light-skinned ethnic Chinese characters, as representative of all SEAs. This erases huge swaths of SEA lives and perpetuates the Western lie that light-skinned/mixed-race Asians are more attractive and acceptable.
- **Mocking "Ladyboys":** Queer and trans SEAs shown solely as performers or sex workers, almost always played for shock comedy and with negative outcomes, thus erasing the nuanced experiences of and injustices against LGBTQIA+ people.

## THINGS WE'D LIKE TO SEE MORE OF

- **Reframed POV:** SEA characters navigating their own personal, cultural, and political lives; not passively sexualized, traumatized minor characters, or tools for white characters' culture clashes.
- **Part of U.S. Tapestry:** Storylines and characters as integral to society and in thriving SEAA communities throughout the U.S.
- **Varied Jobs:** Showing characters in a wide range of U.S. jobs beyond service sector (e.g., politicians, journalists, business managers, salespeople, artists, factory workers, farmers). Also, SEA characters leading in tech-industry roles.
- **Cultural/Religious Specificity:** Depicting myriad differences across SEA countries, regions, and communities (e.g., language, idioms, cultural customs, traditions). Explore the religious diversity beyond Buddhist temples (e.g., Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, indigenous religions).
- **Indigenous Lives:** Storylines about Southeast Asia's indigenous, which includes 200 million of the world's 300 million indigenous people.
- **Multiracial/Ethnic Characters:** Showing varied multiracial/ethnic backgrounds including Black, Latinx, and other intersectional Asians, not defaulting to only half-white depictions. Also, Black SEAs from indigenous communities not of African descent (e.g., Filipino Negritos and Aeta; Papuans).
- **Personal/Universal:** Stories exploring universal challenges of everyday life (e.g., falling in love, dealing with grief, sibling rivalries, peer pressure, stress-related mental health issues).
- **LGBTQIA+:** Depictions of more identities and orientations, especially non-binary and transgender characters.

\*Denotes a term in the glossary

## QUICK FACTS

- ➔ As of 2010, there are 2.5+ million SEAs, totaling 14% of Asian Americans.
- ➔ The first Asians in America came from the Philippines in the 1500s.
- ➔ SEAs speak many languages such as English, Filipino, Hindi, Indonesian, Malay, Portuguese, Thai, and Vietnamese, and numerous local dialects within the languages.
- ➔ Southeast Asia is among the world's fastest-growing tech-hubs with \$100+ billion in internet economy.
- ➔ A large part of the SEA diaspora was created by the Indochina\* Wars.
- ➔ As of 2017, Filipinx people comprised 18% of Asian Americans, but only 11% of Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) series regulars; Vietnamese people comprised 9% of Asian Americans but less than 1% of AAPI series regulars.
- ➔ From March 2020–April 2021 in the U.S., there were 6,603 racist attacks against Asians (especially East Asian and Southeast Asian communities, who were scapegoated for COVID-19), mostly against women.

## ONLINE REFERENCES & RESOURCES:

- AAPI Data: [“Southeast Asian American Achievement Gaps Through Many Factors”](#)
- Asian Pacific Institute on Gender-Based Violence: [“Census Data & API Identities”](#)
- Colorlines: [“Why Are There No Filipino Nurses on Medical TV Shows?”](#)
- International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs: [“ASEAN’s Indigenous Peoples”](#)
- National Council of Asian Pacific Islander Physicians: [“The Impact of the Affordable Care Act on Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Pakistani, & Vietnamese Americans”](#)
- National LGBTQ Task Force: [“New analysis shows startling levels of discrimination against Asian American, South Asian, Southeast Asian and Pacific Islander transgender people”](#)
- [Project Yellow Dress](#)
- Southeast Asia Resource Action Center: [“Southeast Asian American Journeys”](#)
- [The Southeast Asian Diaspora Project](#)
- [Stop AAPI Hate](#)
- U.S. Census Bureau: [“Asian Alone by Selected Groups”](#)

## GLOSSARY

### **Buddhism:**

An Indian religion based on a series of original teachings attributed to Gautama Buddha. It originated in ancient India as a Sramana tradition between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, spreading through much of Asia. Buddhism practices in most of SEA tend to be distinct from their Chinese, Japanese, and Tibetan counterparts.

### **Indochina/Indochina Wars:**

Originally referred to as French Indochina, which included the current countries of Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia. The Indochina Wars refers to a series of wars in Southeast Asia from 1945–1991 between communist Indochinese forces and other ethnic minorities against mainly French, Vietnamese, U.S., Cambodian, Laotian, and Chinese forces. From 1964 to 1973, the U.S. Air Force, Navy, and Marine Corps aircraft dropped 7.6+ million tons of bombs and other ordnance, far exceeding tonnage in World War II and in the Korean War.

### **Model Minority:**

Refers to the idea that some underrepresented groups in the U.S., especially Asian Americans, are perceived to have certain “positive” traits (e.g., industrious, politically undistruptive, intelligent, inoffensive). This myth erases differences among individuals, while also driving a racial wedge between Asians and other underrepresented groups in the U.S.

### **U.S. Refugee Act of 1980:**

Amendment to previous U.S. immigration and refugee assistance acts that established a more uniform basis for assisting refugees. Due in part to this resettlement Act, U.S. SEA communities include large, diverse populations not only in coastal cities, as commonly assumed, but throughout the U.S. including in Chicago and Las Vegas, and in Florida, Louisiana, Minnesota, Missouri, Texas, and Washington.

Please visit our [Expanded Glossary](#) for in-depth definitions of the above terms and definitions of additional terms: **colorism, dharma, Hindu/Hinduism/Hindi, karma, and kathoey.**

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A list of the most up-to-date contact information for all of our partner organizations can be found on our website:  
[WriteInclusion.org/factsheets](http://WriteInclusion.org/factsheets)

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