



# FREE CHOL SOO LEE

**DISCUSSION GUIDE**

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## LETTER FROM THE FILMMAKERS



Although we did not know it at the time, the seeds of this film were planted in December 2014, at the funeral of Chol Soo Lee. Many of the mourners gathered at the Buddhist temple were the people who had rallied to free Chol Soo Lee 40 years earlier, and they were expressing more than just grief upon his unexpected passing at age 62.

One activist read a letter to Chol Soo, saying she would forever regret not doing enough to save him. Another, who was inspired by the case to become a public defender, said Chol Soo did more for him and the other activists than they did for him. The depth of humanity, compassion, and responsibility mourners expressed for this man was moving. They had, after all, given so fully of themselves to a stranger, in a six-year-long social movement that would boldly stand up to the American criminal legal system, overturn two murder convictions, and get him freed from death row. There was a palpable heaviness in the space. When they chanted, “Free, free Chol Soo Lee,” the one-time defiant, passionate cry for justice now felt like an elegiac lament.



At one point, journalist K.W. Lee, whose series of stories in the 1970s helped launch the landmark Asian American movement, stood and cried out, “Why is this story underground after all these years?” He lamented that this story—not just an essential chapter in Asian American history, but an essential chapter in American history—was still not known. It was at risk of staying buried in history.

As Asian Americans who share a passion for telling stories about our community with nuance and depth, we could not allow that to happen. We knew we had to dig in and excavate this singular story, in all its complexity and messiness. The injustice, the heroism, the idealism, the pain, the regret, the heaviness—all needed to be investigated and explored. Chol Soo Lee may be gone, but his story still has much to teach us and beckons to be told. We hope our film allows him to have agency, to tell his own story, to speak his truth—and, finally, to be free.

—Julie Ha and Eugene Yi, Directors, *Free Chol Soo Lee*



## ABOUT THE FILM

### Film Synopsis

Sentenced to life for a 1973 San Francisco murder, Korean immigrant Chol Soo Lee was set free after a pan-Asian solidarity movement, which included Korean, Japanese, and Chinese Americans, helped to overturn his conviction. After 10 years of fighting for his life inside California state prisons, Lee found himself in a new fight to rise to the expectations of the people who believed in him.

### How to Watch the Film

**INDIE LENS POP-UP  
SCREENINGS:**

**March 25–May 22, 2023**

**INDEPENDENT LENS  
PREMIERE**

**([CHECK LOCAL LISTINGS](#)  
AND [STREAM ONLINE](#)):**

**April 24, 2023**

# Screening Objectives

At the heart of the story is Chol Soo Lee, a child who was sent from South Korea by his aunt and uncle to live with his mother in San Francisco when he was 12 years old. He was physically abused by his mother and bullied in school, which contributed to a traumatic adolescence. Then the 1973 murder occurred, and Chol Soo Lee was wrongly convicted and sentenced to life in prison. After a violent prison confrontation, he was later incarcerated at San Quentin's Death Row. He had become another Asian American caught in the cogs of a racist criminal legal system.

Racial discrimination and the failure of the U.S. legal system contributed to the wrongful conviction of Korean American Chol Soo Lee for the 1973 murder. The report *Race and Wrongful Convictions in the United States 2022* discusses cases listed in the National Registry of Exonerations, which is an ongoing online archive of all known exonerations in the United States starting from 1989. The registry's archives show that race has played a role in wrongful convictions at least as far back as then.<sup>1</sup> This report analyzes data from 1989 through most of 2022, but the history of how racism contributes to wrongful convictions—including “misconduct in obtaining and presenting evidence, [which] contributes substantially to the racial disparity in murder exonerations”—goes back much further.<sup>2 3</sup>

Journalist K.W. Lee's enduring pursuit to reveal the truth and his consistent reporting generated a pan-Asian campaign to gain justice for Chol Soo Lee—one that would ultimately lead to his release from prison. And even though he gained his freedom, the dehumanization and trauma he experienced in prison plagued him for the rest of his life. This was a historic Asian American social movement and activists continued their legacy of fighting for justice in other campaigns.

**Free Chol Soo Lee** documents this little-known story and challenges the dominant view of Asian Americans as a model minority. The goals of this film are to:

- create a space for dialogue about racism, the criminal legal system, and the traumatizing impact of incarceration.
- foster intergenerational conversations where participants can share their personal experiences, stories, and learnings to support a just society.
- promote awareness of Asian American history and the unsung Asian American movement to free Chol Soo Lee.
- inspire the public to get involved in causes that work toward social justice.

1 Gross, Samuel R., Maurice J. Possley, Ken Otterbourg, Klara Stephens, Jessica Weinstock Paredes, & Barbara O'Brien (September 2022). *Race and wrongful convictions in the United States 2022*. [law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race%20Report%20Preview.pdf](https://law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Race%20Report%20Preview.pdf)

2 Rizer, Arthur L. (2003). “The race effect on wrongful convictions.” [open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1629&context=wmlr](https://open.mitchellhamline.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=&httpsredir=1&article=1629&context=wmlr)

3 Gross, Samuel R., Maurice J. Possley, Kaitlin Jackson Roll, & Klara Huber Stephens (September 1, 2020). *Government misconduct and convicting the innocent: The role of prosecutors, police, and other law enforcement*. [law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Government\\_Misconduct\\_and\\_Convicting\\_the\\_Innocent.pdf](https://law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Documents/Government_Misconduct_and_Convicting_the_Innocent.pdf)

# DISCUSSING THE FILM

**“We could be kinder and more empathetic if we truly took the time to learn about and listen to one another.”**

—Sebastian Yoon,  
Film Narrator, *Free Chol Soo Lee*

## Framing the Conversation

*Free Chol Soo Lee* covers a number of difficult and disturbing topics that may trigger the audience. It is critical to recognize this before launching into dialogues and to create safe spaces. Encourage participants to step away from the conversation if they feel triggered or traumatized by finding a quiet space or taking deep breaths. It could also be helpful to have a mental health specialist or a support person on hand in case individuals need extra assistance.

## Being Mindful of Language

It is essential to use non-othering, first person language that recognizes the humanity of incarcerated individuals such as Chol Soo Lee. People who have been convicted of crimes are often stigmatized and stereotyped as less than and unworthy of human rights. Also, structural racism is interwoven within who usually gets convicted and how the prison industrial complex operates.

Film narrator Sebastian Yoon, who is himself formerly incarcerated, publicly stated, “Try and listen to Chol Soo Lee before [forming] opinions, to imagine or at least consider the trauma he likely experienced throughout his childhood and incarceration. We could be kinder and more empathetic if we truly took the time to learn about and listen to one another.” This can be said about anyone convicted of a crime.

The table below lists othering language to avoid and people-first preferred language to use instead (for more, see [The Language Project | The Marshall Project](#)):

Othering language to avoid	Preferred language to use
criminal, inmate, convict, felon	person or individual affected by the legal system, people convicted of crimes
ex-con, ex-prisoner	formerly incarcerated
parolee	person or individual on parole
drug addict, substance abuser	person with a history of drug use



## TOPICS AND THEMES

The following topics and themes are provided to help you navigate the many provocative subjects brought up by **Free Chol Soo Lee** and organize them into thoughtful discussions and engagement activities:

### TOPICS AND THEMES:

- **Racial Injustice**
- **Impacts of Incarceration**
- **Movement Building**
- **Centering Asian American Stories**

Each topic/theme section includes the following:

- **Overview and background information:** Framing language and helpful insights to introduce the topic
- **Discussion questions:** Questions specific to the film and/or the topics that will help you get the conversation going and will support in-depth conversations as well as personal reflections
- **Resources:** Organizations to reach out to and/or links for research in preparation for your event
- **Potential partners and speakers:** Suggestions for outreach and community building and for building additional knowledge to moderate conversations
- **Engagement activities:** Ideas for promoting active participation in the film's topics

# Racial Injustice

## OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**Free Chol Soo Lee** is the story of a young Korean immigrant who arrives in the United States in 1964 at the age of 12 and who ended up at the age of 20 being wrongfully accused—and ultimately convicted—of the murder of suspected gang leader Yip Yee Tak in the middle of a crowded Chinatown street. The film covers Chol Soo Lee’s childhood in Korea and adolescence in San Francisco, including his early involvement in the U.S. legal system, and it tracks the grassroots movement that eventually led to the overturning of his conviction.

Chol Soo Lee’s story is couched within a larger context of racial injustice in the United States. Historian Ronald Takaki argues there has long been a “master narrative” that the United States has been settled primarily by European immigrants.<sup>4</sup> This is an inaccurate narrative, one that overlooks the Indigenous presence of Native Americans, the enslavement of Black people, and the migration of African, Latinx, Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander people to the United States.

Chol Soo’s arrival to the United States coincided with the large increase in Asian immigration to the United States following the passage of the 1965 Immigration Act. But he had difficulties adjusting to a new life in the United States and the public school system in San Francisco, which did not accommodate his Korean language or background. A fight with a classmate led to his incarceration at juvenile hall and later, placement in a psychiatric hospital after being misdiagnosed with schizophrenia.

Chol Soo Lee’s ostracization from school—and from the broader U.S. society—aligns with the present incarceration of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. His life, as historian and Asian American Studies professor Richard Kim writes, “[highlights] the poignant realities of race and class inequalities in the United States that

are still relevant today.”<sup>5</sup> A 2019–2021 survey by the Asian Prisoner Support Committee found that incarcerated individuals of Asian and Pacific Islander descent shared traumatic experiences that led to their immigration to the United States, primarily war, but also genocide, poverty, and religious persecution.<sup>6</sup> Survey participants also reported experiences of physical violence and emotional abuse, both in the country they fled and in the United States. These circumstances, per the survey, included difficulties in school, like language barriers, a lack of counseling, bullying, and more.

Chol Soo Lee’s experiences foretold a troubling, current trend: that of a “school-to-prison pipeline” which often leads to punitive actions taken by the juvenile legal system that ultimately result in many young people “progressing” from the juvenile system to the criminal legal system.<sup>7</sup> Culturally relevant curriculum, counseling, restorative justice approaches, and broad economic support are effective interventions to this pipeline.

Today, Asian Americans—an expansive category that consists of 35 to 45 different ethnic groups across the socioeconomic sphere—share a lesser-known history with Black, Latinx, and poor, working-class people. An examination of racial injustice requires an examination of a specific, socio-historical process—especially alongside people of color. Glenn E. Singleton, the author of *More Courageous Conversations about Race*, writes that the “slow racial progress in the United States is precisely due to white people’s inability and/or unwillingness to listen to and learn from people of color and indigenous people.”<sup>8</sup> These dialogues, however fraught, are a necessary educational component to repairing racial injustice. Having a conversation about Chol Soo Lee’s life, from his challenges as a new immigrant to his later incarceration, can be a fruitful start.

4 Takaki, Ronald. (2012). *A different mirror: A history of multicultural America* (revised edition). eBookIt.com

5 Lee, Chol Soo (2017). *Freedom without justice: The prison memoirs of Chol Soo Lee*. University of Hawaii Press, p. 4.

6 Asian Prisoner Support Committee. *Data report: On incarcerated and formerly incarcerated AAPIs, 2019–2021*. [asianprisonersupport.com/apsc-survey-data](https://asianprisonersupport.com/apsc-survey-data)

7 Mallett, Christopher A. (2015). *The school-to-prison pipeline: A comprehensive assessment*. Springer Publishing Company.

8 Singleton, Glenn E. (2012). *More courageous conversations about race*. Corwin Press.



## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How did Chol Soo Lee become involved in the legal system? Describe his journey from schooling to prison.
- What were the effects of immigration on Chol Soo Lee's childhood and adolescence?
- What were the psychological and social consequences of exclusion on his childhood and adolescence?
- What other kinds of support could have been provided to Chol Soo Lee? What did he need as a young person?
- What role did the community play in freeing Chol Soo Lee? How did people rally behind him?

## RESOURCES

- **API RISE:** Seeks to lift up the voices of the invisible and oppressed among Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander Americans in California's industrial prison complex. [api-rise.org](http://api-rise.org)
- **The Innocence Project:** Works to free the innocent, prevent wrongful convictions, and create fair, compassionate, and equitable systems of justice for everyone. [innocenceproject.org](http://innocenceproject.org)
- ***The Making of Asian America: A History***, by Erika Lee (Simon and Schuster, 2015): A comprehensive, readable overview of Asian immigrants and the deep impact of their American-born descendants on America.
- **National Museum of African American History and Culture:** *Talking about Race* exhibit. [nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race](http://nmaahc.si.edu/learn/talking-about-race)
- ***A Conversation on Race: A Series of Short Films about Identity in America***, presented by *The New York Times*. [nytimes.com/interactive/projects/your-stories/conversations-on-race](http://nytimes.com/interactive/projects/your-stories/conversations-on-race)
- ***Asian Americans*:** A five-hour film series on PBS about the ongoing role that Asian Americans have played in shaping the nation's story. [pbs.org/weta/asian-americans](http://pbs.org/weta/asian-americans)

## POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

- **Lawyers from the Northwestern Pritzker School of Law's Center on Wrongful Convictions:** [law.northwestern.edu/legalclinic/wrongfulconvictions](http://law.northwestern.edu/legalclinic/wrongfulconvictions)
- Former wrongly convicted persons
- Facilitators and educators who address systemic racism, such as those from Learning from Justice and Facing History.
  - [learningforjustice.org](http://learningforjustice.org)
  - [facinghistory.org](http://facinghistory.org)

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- **Have a dialogue across racial differences.** In *More Courageous Conversations about Race*, Singleton offers some advice for bringing people together across different racial groups. Start with talking about discomfort. Singleton suggests a prompt of talking about an experience you had or are aware of when race was a topic of conversation and participants became silent or less revelatory. Spend some time unpacking this. What were the participants' fears? What did they wish to say, but could not say? What conditions might have changed their response?

# Impacts of Incarceration

## OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

**Free Chol Soo Lee** uncovers the deep, long-standing inequities of the U.S. legal system. As a young person, Chol Soo Lee is put into juvenile detention for small infractions. He is later, as the film details, arrested for the murder of a gang leader in San Francisco's Chinatown on the basis of shaky witness testimonies. These testimonies are later disputed by other key witnesses. Despite the lack of evidence, Lee is convicted in 1974 of first-degree murder and is sentenced to life in prison.

The U.S. prison system is embedded in a long history of enforced labor and punishment. The United States imprisons people on a scale unlike any other country in the world. This system—which presently incarcerates more than 2 million individuals—includes state and federal prisons; local jails; juvenile correctional facilities; immigration detention facilities; Indian country jails; and more. All in all, the United States has 1,566 state prisons, 102 federal prisons, 2,850 local jails, 1,510 juvenile correctional facilities, 186 immigration detention facilities, and 82 Indian country jails, as well as military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in the U.S. territories.<sup>9</sup>

Carceral systems in the United States are defined by distinctive racial and class demographics. Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander Americans, as of a 2016 study, make up 0.9% of the populations represented in state prisons and are thus a minority in the larger carceral system, a reality that is observed by Chol Soo Lee in the film.<sup>10</sup> However, as the Asian Prisoner Support Committee notes, this statistic may not be accurate. Publicly available data often does not disaggregate data across Asian ethnicities. Asian and Pacific Islander American populations may be categorized as “Other” in statistics.<sup>11</sup>

In 1982, a San Francisco jury acquitted Chol Soo Lee for the 1973 murder of Yip Yee Tak. However, after serving hard time in state prison for ten years, Chol Soo Lee was left deeply traumatized. While Chol Soo became a symbol of an Asian American social justice movement, he struggled to hold onto steady employment, became addicted to drugs and got involved in criminal activities. He returned to prison in 1990 on a drug possession charge. Shortly thereafter, he was involved in an arson case in which he torched a house for a Chinatown gang, and he ended up suffering severe debilitating burns. After he agreed to testify against the gang, he entered a witness protection program.

Chol Soo Lee's return into the legal system was, unfortunately, all too common. Recidivism is a phenomenon in which formerly incarcerated people commit another crime or otherwise again come into conflict with the American legal system. According to a 2021 report from the Bureau of Justice Statistics, 62% of incarcerated people released across 34 states were arrested within three years, and 71% were arrested within five years.<sup>12</sup> Some of the contributing factors are, as they were true with Chol Soo Lee, the high unemployment rate among formerly incarcerated people and the number of requirements that people on probation must comply with per day or face re-arrest.<sup>13</sup>

Part of telling Chol Soo Lee's story is examining—and empathizing with—the long arc of his life and the factors that played into his involvement with the legal system. As he stated in a 2005 interview, “I was adjusting to be free, and I thought I was doing well, but I didn't realize the pitfalls and obstacles that I would face, that I could not live like I was living in prison or like living prior to going to prison.”<sup>14</sup>

9 Prison Policy Initiative. *Mass incarceration: The whole pie 2022*. [prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html](https://prisonpolicy.org/reports/pie2022.html)

10 Wang, Leah, Wendy Sawyer, Tiana Herring, & Emily Widra. “Beyond the count: A deep dive into state prison populations.” *Prison Policy Initiative*, April 2022.

11 Asian Prisoner Support Committee. *Data report: On incarcerated and formerly incarcerated AAPIs, 2019–2021*. [asianprisonersupport.com/apsc-survey-data](https://asianprisonersupport.com/apsc-survey-data)

12 [bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/recidivism-prisoners-released-34-states-2012-5-year-follow-period-2012-2017](https://bjs.ojp.gov/library/publications/recidivism-prisoners-released-34-states-2012-5-year-follow-period-2012-2017)

13 [prisonpolicy.org/research/recidivism\\_and\\_reentry](https://prisonpolicy.org/research/recidivism_and_reentry)

14 Kim, Richard S. (2005). “A conversation with Chol Soo Lee and K.W. Lee.” *Amerasia Journal* 31(3), 75–108.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How does this story of an incarcerated Asian American differ from many mainstream media depictions of criminality?
- How was Chol Soo Lee impacted by his time in prison? What does Lee say about what prison does to an individual's humanity?
- How is a sense of freedom complicated by incarceration? What do you think are some of the effects—such as psychological, social, educational—that formerly incarcerated individuals experience when they are released from prison?
- What are some measures that can be implemented to prevent recidivism? What kinds of programs do you think are needed to support incarcerated people's well-being and to help them thrive (not just within, but beyond prison)?

## RESOURCES

- **Apert:** An *Independent Lens* documentary directed by Jennifer Redfearn. In a country leading the world in incarcerating women, meet three mothers fighting to rebuild their lives. [pbs.org/apart](https://www.pbs.org/apart)
- “Recidivism Imprisons American Progress,” by Liz Benecchi, *Harvard Politics Review*, August 8, 2021. [harvardpolitics.com/recidivism-american-progress/#:~:text=Within%20three%20years%20of%20their,system%20is%20known%20as%20recidivism](https://www.harvardpolitics.com/recidivism-american-progress/#:~:text=Within%20three%20years%20of%20their,system%20is%20known%20as%20recidivism)
- **College Behind Bars:** A four-part film series directed by Lynn Novick that documents the Bard Prison Initiative, an effective prison education program in the United States. *Free Chol Soo Lee* narrator Sebastian Yoon is featured in this documentary series. [pbs.org/show/college-behind-bars](https://www.pbs.org/show/college-behind-bars)
- **Prison Policy Initiative:** A nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that produces cutting-edge research to expose the broader harm of mass criminalization and then sparks advocacy campaigns to create a more just society. [prisonpolicy.org](https://www.prisonpolicy.org)

## POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

- **API RISE:** Empowers the Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander American communities and specifically those individuals who have been impacted by the criminal legal system. [api-rise.org](https://www.api-rise.org)
- **Asian Prisoner Support Committee:** Provides direct support to incarcerated Asian and Pacific Islanders (API) and raises awareness about the growing number of APIs being imprisoned, detained, and deported. [asianprisonersupport.com](https://www.asianprisonersupport.com)
- **New Breath Foundation:** Offers hope, healing, and new beginnings for new Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander immigrants and refugees, people impacted by incarceration and deportation, and survivors of violence. [new-breath.org](https://www.new-breath.org)
- **Anti-Recidivism Coalition:** Works to end mass incarceration in California and empowers formerly and currently incarcerated people to thrive by providing a support network, comprehensive reentry services, and opportunities to advocate for policy change. [antirecidivism.org](https://www.antirecidivism.org)

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- **Rethink our spaces.** How can institutions create more supportive spaces? Spend some time reflecting on spaces that you felt were helpful. What did these spaces look like? What did they feel like? Which purposes did they serve? Which people did they serve? What did people do that was supportive? What happened as a result of this environment?
- **Incorporate a short film into your screening or promotions.** The *Independent Lens* Bridge Builders Collective is a series of short films that explores the important work of five individuals and organizations who bridge critical gaps in their community as they relate to American criminal legal system reform. These films can help you focus the conversation on a specific sub-topic or community. Find relevant shorts available on YouTube for virtual and in-person screenings: [How We Heal Each Other](#); [Boundless](#); [Big Arms](#); [Beneath The Surface](#); and [The Power Of Us](#).



## Movement Building

### OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

People organize and build movements for social justice by promoting awareness of oppression and mobilizing communities. Building such movements takes a great deal of organization and comes in many forms. Through a campaign that can include petitioning, rallies, marches, sit-ins and, today, social media, activists communicate their grievances and fight for change.

In the late 1960s, Americans of Asian descent coined the term Asian American and began organizing an Asian American movement that brought different Asian ethnic groups together in the struggle for transformative social change and justice. They protested along pan-Asian lines for their communities, against the American war in Vietnam, and for systemic changes in education and politics. The Free Chol Soo Lee movement, which began in the mid-1970s, was “one of its first major political campaigns” and “provides a rare and valuable glimpse into a pivotal moment in Asian American history.”<sup>15</sup> As momentum behind his case built up, Chol Soo’s unjust conviction was taken up across a diverse range of Asian ethnic groups and generations. These efforts coalesced into a grassroots social movement, fueled by individuals and groups who believed Chol Soo’s experiences reflected their own experiences with racial discrimination within America.

Investigative reporting also helped galvanize the community around Lee’s wrongful imprisonment. The persistent reporting of K.W. Lee, a Korean immigrant himself and one of the first to work for mainstream American newspapers, uncovered this miscarriage of justice and mobilized people of various backgrounds. He painted a picture of Chol Soo that made readers feel like he could be their son, their brother, their neighbor.

As a result, Asian Americans of many backgrounds formed a powerful pan-Asian coalition to free Chol Soo Lee from his wrongful imprisonment. They had a shared vision of social justice and cultivated strong community support from immigrant and American-born Asian Americans as well as transnational support from South Korea and Japan. Many of the student activists from this coalition formed the backbone of this movement and went on to become important future community leaders, activists, and advocates.

<sup>15</sup> Lee, Chol Soo. (2017). *Freedom without justice: The prison memoirs of Chol Soo Lee*. Edited by Richard S. Kim. University of Hawai’i Press.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How are social movements initiated today?
- Relationships were a critical part of the movement, such as between Chol Soo Lee, K.W. Lee, and Ranko Yamada. Chol Soo said, “K.W. Lee ... has given me life [and] a conscience and allowed me to have humanity to give to others when they are in pain.” Why are relationships like these a crucial part of movement building?
- How were diverse community groups able to unify around the Free Chol Soo Lee movement? What makes this coalition a unique movement? How can awareness of the Free Chol Soo Lee movement influence solidarities in social movements today?
- The Asian American leaders and activists from the Free Chol Soo Lee movement motivated a generation of Asian Americans to dedicate their careers and lives to social justice. Many became labor activists, nonprofit leaders, and lawyers for justice, such as public defenders. What might motivate people to become activists now? What legacies are today’s activists creating for the future?
- Chol Soo Lee felt a great deal of pressure in trying to be a symbol of a cause. How do these statements illustrate this and how might this have affected his life?
  - “I’m not a hero. I’m just a human being.”
  - “I want the people to feel good about what they did for me. I want the people who have helped me to be able to say, ‘At least he has put his life together.’ Hopefully I can make them feel like, ‘We did the right thing.’”

## RESOURCES

- **Amerasia Journal 31(3)** (UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2013): This issue commemorates the 13th anniversary of Chol Soo Lee’s release from prison. It includes essays by Free Chol Soo Lee activists and scholars such as Grant Din, Warren Furutani, Grace Kim, Richard Kim, K.W. Lee, Derrick Lim, Gail Whang, Jai Lee Wong, and Ranko Yamada, as well as Chol Soo Lee himself. [tandfonline.com/toc/ramj20/39/3?nav=toCList](http://tandfonline.com/toc/ramj20/39/3?nav=toCList)
- **“A Conversation with Chol Soo Lee and K.W. Lee,”** by Richard S. Kim (2005), *Amerasia Journal* 31(3): This article features an in-depth interview with Chol Soo Lee and K.W. Lee. [tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.17953/amer.31.3.q6p04504u5t5g8q4?src=recsys](http://tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.17953/amer.31.3.q6p04504u5t5g8q4?src=recsys)
- ***Serve the People: Making Asian America in the Long Sixties***, by Karen Ishizuka (2016). [versobooks.com/books/1899-serve-the-people](http://versobooks.com/books/1899-serve-the-people)

- ***Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment***, edited by Steven Louie and Glenn K. Omatsu (2001). [aasc.ucla.edu/aascpress/books/movement.aspx](http://aasc.ucla.edu/aascpress/books/movement.aspx)

## POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

- **The K.W. Lee Center for Leadership:** Based in Los Angeles, the center focuses on youth leadership training and is named after the journalist in the film. [kwleecenter.org](http://kwleecenter.org)
- **East Bay Asian Youth Center:** EBAYC envisions a future where all young people grow up to be lifelong builders of a just and compassionate multicultural society. The executive director of this organization is David Kakishiba, one of the activists in the film. [ebayc.org](http://ebayc.org)
- **API Legal Outreach:** The older version of this group assisted with the Free Chol Soo Lee movement. They provide culturally competent and linguistically appropriate legal representation, social services, and advocacy for the most marginalized segments of the community including low-income women, seniors, recent immigrants, and youth. [apilegaloutreach.org](http://apilegaloutreach.org)
- **UCLA Asian American Studies Center:** The center sponsored the Chol Soo Lee symposium in 2013 and published *Amerasia Journal* issues dedicated to his case. [aasc.ucla.edu](http://aasc.ucla.edu)
- **Asian American Journalists Association:** AAJA works towards the visibility and inclusion of AAPI journalists in newsroom leadership, and towards equitable and accurate coverage of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) and AAPI issues. [aaja.org](http://aaja.org)
- **Bay Rising:** This is an alliance of community-led organizations across the San Francisco Bay Area that knows we have the power to become co-creators of our future alongside our elected officials. [bayrising.org/about](http://bayrising.org/about)

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- Take action by contacting an organization that is fighting for a cause you care about and volunteer with them. Organizations fighting for change can be found in the Potential Partners section above.



## Centering Asian American Stories

### OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND INFORMATION

*Free Chol Soo Lee* is a groundbreaking film that illustrates lesser-known stories of the Asian American experience. This community is already largely underrepresented in society and rarely mentioned in school curriculum standards. Polls by [Leading Asian Americans to Unite for Change \(LAAUNCH\)](#) demonstrate that most Americans cannot name a prominent Asian American when asked. Further, Asian Americans are usually left out of narratives involving racial profiling, criminal justice, and carceral and reentry spaces. This is due in part to the “model minority” myth, which stereotypes Asian Americans as highly successful<sup>16</sup> and divides communities of color. Thus, Asian American stories like Chol Soo Lee’s that challenge the “model minority” narrative, are inevitably omitted. This is detrimental to providing a more complex and nuanced understanding of the Asian American experience.

Through documentaries like *Free Chol Soo Lee*, unknown histories of communities of color are revealed and brought to life in the larger society. Organizations and

groups also seek to promote awareness of these stories. For example, the Asian Prisoner Support Committee and the New Breath Foundation raise awareness specifically around Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs) within criminal justice, carceral, and reentry spaces.

Many incarcerated AAPIs are Southeast Asian refugees, some of whom have been deported or are in danger of being deported. Some refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam sought asylum from the ravages of the American war in Vietnam as very young children and have little connection to their countries of origin and language. The Asian Prisoner Support Committee conducts anti-deportation campaigns to bring awareness to such stories and prevent deportation. One of the more recent cases is Phoeun You, a Cambodian genocide survivor and refugee who served 25 years in a California prison. Even though he was recommended for early release by the Board of Parole Hearings for his service, mentorship, and rehabilitation, the California prison system had him deported.

16 Cheryan, S., & G.V. Bodenhausen. (2011). Model minority. In S. M. Caliendo & C. D. McIlwain (Eds), *Routledge Companion to Race & Ethnicity* (pp. 173–176). New York: Routledge. [\[pdf\]](#)

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What might we learn from Chol Soo Lee’s story that can help support Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders who are or have been incarcerated?
- Why is it important to learn diverse stories of a community or group of people?
- How can we tell and amplify stories of underrepresented communities?

## RESOURCES

- ***How We Heal Each Other***: An *Independent Lens* Bridge Builders Collective short film documentary directed by Adamu Chan, featuring Ny Nourn, co-director of the Asian Prisoner Support Committee, who is working to end the prison to deportation pipeline for AAPIs in California.
- ***Freedom without Justice: The Prison Memoirs of Chol Soo Lee***, by Chol Soo Lee, edited by Richard S. Kim: In this memoir, Chol Soo Lee tells his story “from false accusation through incarceration and eventual release from prison.”
- **SEARAC (Southeast Asian Resource Action Center)**: SEARAC is a national civil rights organization; its website contains a great deal of useful information for and about refugees from Southeast Asia, including how the forceful displacement of Southeast Asian refugees due to the American war in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos during the 1970s led to disproportionate criminalization and deportation of this community.
- **“ICE Deports Beloved Community Member Phoeun You”**: This article by the Asian Law Caucus covers the story of formerly incarcerated Cambodian American refugee Phoeun You, who was deported instead of paroled upon his release from prison.
- ***Sentenced Home***: An *Independent Lens* documentary directed by David Grabias and Nicole Newnham follows three young Cambodian Americans through the deportation process.
- **AAPI Data**: This organization is a nationally recognized publisher of demographic data and policy research on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders.
- ***Our America: Because I Am***: This video special produced by ABC-owned television stations features the diverse voices of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders and the positive impact they have had on our communities, politics, and culture.

## POTENTIAL PARTNERS AND/OR SPEAKERS

- **API RISE**: Empowers the Asian, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander American communities and specifically those individuals who have been impacted by the criminal legal system. [api-rise.org](http://api-rise.org)
- **Asian Prisoner Support Committee**: Provides direct support to incarcerated Asian and Pacific Islanders and raises awareness about the growing number of APis being imprisoned, detained, and deported. [asianprisonersupport.com/](http://asianprisonersupport.com/)
- **New Breath Foundation**: Offers hope, healing, and new beginnings for new Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander immigrants and refugees, people impacted by incarceration and deportation, and survivors of violence. [new-breath.org](http://new-breath.org)

## ENGAGEMENT ACTIVITIES

- **Storytelling activity through StoryCorps**. Share a unique story by interviewing someone who is important in your life and whom you want to honor. Go to [StoryCorps Connect](http://StoryCorps Connect) for help and instructions on how to do this.

# Credits

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## INDIE LENS POP-UP

Indie Lens Pop-Up is a neighborhood series that brings people together—virtually and in-person—for film screenings and community-driven conversations. Featuring documentaries seen on PBS's *Independent Lens*, Indie Lens Pop-Up draws local residents, leaders, and organizations to discuss what matters most, from newsworthy topics and social issues to family and community relationships. Since its inception in 2005, more than 6,700 Indie Lens Pop-Up events have brought an estimated 400,000 participants together to discuss issues that impact local communities. For more information, visit [pbs.org/indielenspopup](http://pbs.org/indielenspopup).

## INDEPENDENT LENS

*Independent Lens* is an Emmy® Award-winning weekly series airing on PBS, Monday nights at 10 p.m. ET. The acclaimed series, with Lois Vossen as executive producer, features documentaries united by the creative freedom, artistic achievement, and unflinching visions of independent filmmakers. Presented by ITVS, the series is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, a private corporation funded by the American people, with additional funding from PBS, Acton Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Wyncote Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts. For more information, visit [pbs.org/independentlens](http://pbs.org/independentlens).

Join the conversation with [#CholSooLeePBS](https://twitter.com/CholSooLeePBS) on Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram at [@IndependentLens](https://twitter.com/IndependentLens).

## ITVS

ITVS is a San Francisco-based nonprofit organization that has, for more than 25 years, funded and partnered with a diverse range of documentary filmmakers to produce and distribute untold stories. ITVS incubates and co-produces these award-winning films and then airs them for free on PBS via our weekly series, *Independent Lens*, as well as on other PBS series and through our digital platform, OVEE. ITVS is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, the National Endowment for the Humanities: American Rescue Plan, Acton Family Giving, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and the Wyncote Foundation. For more information, visit [itvs.org](http://itvs.org).

## CENTER FOR ASIAN AMERICAN MEDIA

The Center for Asian American Media (CAAM) presents innovative, engaging Asian American works on public television through our dynamic documentary programs. CAAM's award-winning public TV programs are seen by millions of viewers a year across the United States, including 47 documentary shows in the last four years and more than 200 films since 1982. CAAM is a member of the National Multicultural Alliance (formerly the National Minority Consortia), designated by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting to provide diverse programming to PBS. For more information, visit [caamedia.org](http://caamedia.org).

## CORPORATION FOR PUBLIC BROADCASTING

The Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), a private, nonprofit corporation created by Congress in 1967, is the steward of the federal government's investment in public broadcasting. It helps support the operations of more than 1,500 locally owned and operated public television and radio stations nationwide. CPB is also the largest single source of funding for research, technology, and program development for public radio, public television, and related online services. For more information, visit [cpb.org](http://cpb.org), follow us on Twitter [@CPBmedia](https://twitter.com/CPBmedia), [Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/CPBmedia) and [LinkedIn](https://www.linkedin.com/company/cpb) and subscribe for other updates.