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'Provocative' Speaker Helen Zia Promotes Social Change One Step at a Time

Writer, social activist and former Ms. Magazine executive editor Helen Zia spoke about human rights and social and political change in "Crossing Boundaries: Social Change in the New Millennium" as part of the university's Provocative Perspective lecture series April 13.

"I am for human rights; I am against the war in Iraq, against torture. I am for full treatment of all human beings; I am a feminist with a capital 'F.' I believe government secrecy is a form of tyranny and dissent is a form of democracy," said the second-generation Chinese American.

Zia is an award-winning journalist and scholar. Her articles, essays and reviews have appeared in numerous publications, books and anthologies. Her book "Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People" interweaves the remarkable history of Asian Americans with her own unique journey as an activist and writer.

Born and raised in New Jersey, the self-described "chronicler of contemporary history" grew up during the 1960s, a time when civil rights was a common front-page story in America. In her Provocative Perspectives lecture on campus, she compared today's discussion on immigration with the discrimination that has plagued the United States since the pilgrims executed 20 people for practicing witchcraft in Salem, Mass., more than 300 years ago. "Human migration is taking place across the globe, not just in the United States. Immigration is part of globalization," she said. "More than 50 percent of Californians are people of color," and the rest of the nation is following suit.

"When I was growing up, there were about 500,000 Asian Americans," she said. "There are 13 million Asian Americans today. Yet, I learned nothing in college about people of color. I call that M.I.H. (missing in history). When we know so little about our own history, we have a long way to go to learn about other cultures," she said.

"How many of you know that the Nazi death camp Dachau was liberated by Japanese American soldiers?" Zia asked the audience. How many remember that in the U.S. media "Asian Americans went from 'alien invaders' to the 'model minority'?" That thousands of Pilipino farm workers worked in the fields alongside Mexican laborers?" she asked.

The outspoken civil rights activist urges individuals to find the "interconnectdness" of people and cultures. "We absolutely must be comfortable in crossing boundaries and cultures," she said, urging people to "break through the cookie-cutter images" and ethnic stereotypes.

"From the Native Americans to the Japanese who were interned during World War II to the Muslims and those of Middle Eastern dissent deemed "evil" today, we have to reclaim the stories that bring our communities together," she said.

"America was founded by immigrants. Much of colonial America was built on trade with China, Africa, Latin America. Museums area crammed with treasures from other nations," Zia said. "But museums pay homage to things, not people. We must find stories to connect our history; to show our shared histories."

More about Helen Zia

Zia's work on the 1980s Asian American landmark civil rights case is documented in the Academy Award-nominated film "Who Killed Vincent Chin?" and she was profiled in Bill Moyers' PBS documentary "Becoming American: The Chinese Experience."

Zia is also coauthor, with Wen Ho Lee, of "My Country Versus Me," which reveals what happened to the Los Alamos scientist who was falsely accused of being a spy for China. To read more about her, visit <http://www.speakoutnow.org/People/HelenZia.html>.

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