TODAY'S NEWS

"Unless education promotes character making ... it is not worth the trouble taken to furnish it."
WILLIAM HOWARD TAFT '78 27TH U.S. PRESIDENT

Min Jin Lee's Yale experience was shaped by classroom racial reckoning

BY HAILEY YOUNG AND ANAYAH ACCILIEN
STAFF REPORTERS

When acclaimed author Min Jin Lee '90 returns to Yale as this year's Class Day speaker, she will do so as a former student activist who once found herself at the center of a contentious debate over the place of race in the classroom.

In 1986, Lee recalled, she stepped onto a campus that was ideologically "fairly middle-to-left" and politically active, with shantytowns erected on Beinecke Plaza in opposition to South African apartheid. At the time, she said, there were "very, very few Asian Americans" and even fewer Korean Americans on campus. Yale was the only Ivy League at the time that did not offer instruction in the Korean language, and its department for East Asian studies lacked courses on Korean history.

"We didn't have anything about Korea, which I kind of thought was a little nuts," Lee said in a phone interview with the News. "And I thought, well, how do you study American history without understanding the Korean War, for example, or how do you understand communism or the Cold War without understanding Koreans?"

In a March 1989 News article, then-chairman of the East Asian languages and literatures department Edwin McClellan said that Yale had only been emphasizing studies of China and Japan — "two of the three major powers in East Asia" — in its course studies because those were the subjects that could be taught "well and in depth." Lee said she noticed this disparity more after taking a Davenport College seminar on Korea, which "wasn't a department course."

"That's what sort of emboldened me to say, I really think there's a lack here," Lee said. "Why don't we have a history class or one literature class or a language class? It wasn't like I was asking for like 50 courses or a major."

Dissatisfied with the absence of Korean academic programming for Yale undergraduates, especially given that the Korean language was taught at every other Ivy League school, Lee was inspired to found the Korean Studies Task Force in her sophomore year. The task force represented Yale's roughly 150 Korean American students and put pressure on the University to make a financial commitment to future Korean language courses.

Lee said she worked on coordinating a mass mailing campaign to unite student and parent voices, building and distributing packets containing stamps, envelopes and explanatory letters in English and Korean. Students mailed these packets home to their parents, who were urged to write to then-University President Benno Schmidt '63 LAW '66 and Yale College Dean Sidney Altman.

Lee said she revisited the Archives at Yale, where all of these letters are documented, and remembers being stunned by the scale of engagement the campaign received.

"I don't think I knew how many parents actually wrote," Lee shared. "It was definitely thousands."

Her efforts ultimately succeeded, with one family donating $100,000 after hearing about the task force's efforts — enough to fund three years of language instruction. A couple years later, Lee said, the Korea Foundation contributed half a million dollars to support the program, which launched in fall 1990, just after Lee graduated.

The 1989 effort to establish Korean language studies at Yale coincided with Lee's experience of classroom treatment she characterized as discriminatory. She enrolled in "Korea: A History," which she said was one of the only Korean history courses offered at the time, and left the class "heartbroken" and "devastated" by her professor's conduct toward Korean students in the classroom.

After giving her a failing grade on a midterm exam, Lee said the course's professor returned her work with a comment reading, "Ah me, what's to say?"

"It was so insulting," Lee said. "I don't know if he knew that I had created the Korean Studies Task Force, and that I had done all these meetings with different professors and gone to all the committees and tried to raise money. I don't know if he realized how much skin I had in the game."

Noticing that other friends in the course were also upset with feedback they had received, Lee said she questioned the grading distribution of the course, and requested a racial breakdown of grades from her professor. She said the data showed that most of the students who failed were Asian American, specifically, Korean American.



COURTESY OF MIN JIN LEE
Min Jin Lee '90, this year's Class Day speaker, in her Trumbull dorm room.

Lee said that her professor attributed these failing grades to an assumption that Asian American students were "Group IV" students, referring to the distributional category for math and science majors, which Lee felt was not only dismissive, but deeply racist.

"It just crushed me, because I couldn't believe that a professor could think that because I'm Asian, I was automatically a math and science major, or that he also believed that math and science majors didn't know how to write history papers. It really hurt me," she said.

Soon afterwards, Lee published an essay in the Yale Herald called "Student disillusioned by Korean history course," in which she alleged that she had faced academic abuse and intellectual discrimination on the basis of race.

"How many professors does it take, how many abuses? How many subtle and insidious comments does it take to quash a young dream? To what and to whom do we defer these dreams?" Lee wrote in the article.

Talk of the controversy spread quickly. Lee recalled that she "became kind of like a social pariah," and an April 1989 News editorial grouped her among the "politically correct terrorists" it condemned for setting the campus "ablaze."

"What was even more devastating was to have other Asian Americans defend him and say that I was just complaining about a grade because that was the last of my concerns," Lee said, referring to the professor.

In a piece titled "A Question of Intellectual Abuse" in the now-defunct Yale Observer, Lee published the grade breakdown provided by her professor. The data suggested that in a class made up of 55 percent Korean American students, nine out of 12 who received a D or below were Korean American.

Still, Lee said that she was able to forge strong relationships with campus affinity groups while at Yale.

"Even though it was bumpy, I still felt the support of so many people at the University," she said. "I found a lot of community with women of color at Yale, with other feminist groups and with the ethnic houses."

In addition to the Korean Studies Task Force, Lee was also a member of the Asian American Students Association, Korean American Students at Yale and Yale Women of Color. She said she wrote for a multitude of campus journals and graduated with top prizes awarded by the English Department for writing.

As an undergraduate, Lee attended a college tea at Trumbull College that would inspire her to write her seminal novel, Pachinko, which was a finalist for the 2017 National Book Award for Fiction. The tea's invitee was an American missionary who had engaged with the Korean diaspora in Japan, a group whose history is explored in Pachinko.

"Yale was my first-choice dream school," Lee said. "Although my four years were really difficult on a personal and academic level, Yale gave me a world-class education, which continues to nourish me today."

Lee will address the class of 2026 on May 17.

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Student performers to seek light and truth in the ordinary on Class Day

BY HANNAH LIU
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This year's student orator and eight Class Day performers — composed of five musicians and a comedy trio — will combine an array of cultures, mediums and thoughts to reflect on the class of 2026's time at Yale.

Class Day is Yale's annual student-led ceremony, held on Old Campus on the Sunday before Commencement. This year, the event will take place on May 17, and is set to feature keynote speaker Min Jin Lee '90 alongside student performances and a prize ceremony. Seniors in attendance traditionally don headgear of their choice along with their graduation gowns.

"Our whole focus has been, 'How do we celebrate this warmth and excitement about the world that our class has been showing?'" Maya Moseley '26, one of this year's four Class Day co-chairs, said in a phone interview with the News. "There's an aspect of joy in all the pieces that they'll be able to see and an enthusiasm for what's next. We're looking up and looking ahead, and I think that's a really cool aspect of it."

Auditions for this year's student performances consisted of an online application and a live performance, a process run by this year's four Class Day co-chairs.

According to Moseley, this year's Class Day performance order will allow for a larger, more cohesive block of student section performances rather than the previously more interspersed performances throughout the ceremony.

Here is a quick look into the three Class Day performances.

The Ivy Ode: "The Light We Take Forward"

Inspired by Yale's "Lux et Veritas" motto, this year's Class Day musicians have composed an intercultural musical experience exploring what it means to carry forward light and truth.

"Even though we're leaving all of the people and places at Yale behind, the light of friendship and love and familiarity and the way that Yale has taught us to think and grow as intellectuals are the things we will carry with us," Grace Halak '26, who will be playing guitar, said in a phone interview with the News.

The seniors' performance weaves together spoken word with music from various styles into one cohesive piece, inspired by the western pop tradition, Indian Classical music and Arabic melodies.

"Each segment of our story is a different musical form," Ayush Iyer '26, who will play piano for the set, said in a phone interview. "I grew up with one culture in the house and one culture outside the house. When I came to Yale, it was the first time I actually got to combine those things. It's beautiful to me because it's sort of a culmination of a lot of things I've done throughout my life in one."

Iyer and Anjal Jain '26 are members of the Indian Classical group Yale Dhvani and were inspired by the recent Muziko concert they played in collaboration with the Yale Undergraduate Jazz Collective and Yale Undergraduate Chamber Orchestra.

The two, along with Yara Chami '25+1, are also members of the Yale Glee Club and have performed in previous Class Days ceremonies in the choir. This year, Jain and Chami will perform as vocalists in their set.

"I'm really excited because throughout my time at Yale, whenever people ask me what I'm doing, I'll be at rehearsal through the different musical groups I've been able to engage in," Jain said in a phone interview. "So I think it means a lot for my friends and my classmates to see what types of things we've been doing at rehearsal and to see my musical side."

For Chami, who was originally part of the class of 2025 but took a gap year to perform with the Yale Whiffenpoofs, being a Class Day performer for this year's class is particularly meaningful.

"I truly do feel like a member of both the class of '25 and the class of '26," Chami said in a phone interview. "It's very much an honor to graduate with this group of people who I've come to get to know very well," she said, referring to the class of 2026.

Halak said that one of her original songs will be featured in the Class Day performance.

"I feel like it'll be a really special and symbolic way to end my time here, especially since music has been such a big part of my time here, and it's probably the biggest thing I do outside of the classroom."

Naomi-Jeanne Main '26 will also be performing on violin.

Comedic Reflection: "Yale is Magical"

Following the Ivy Ode, three students will take the stage to perform a comedic piece called "Yale is Magical," which centers around a hectic group project at Yale that goes awry.

"We'll be tripping over each other and making a bunch of jokes about Yale along the way, which is sort of what it feels like to put together a sketch comedy show sometimes," Josh Bock '25+1 said in a phone interview. "Yale is a space where you can run into challenges, disagree and work with people that you don't expect to, and make it through despite how tough it is."

Bock, Prentiss Patrick-Carter '26 and Amara Neal '26 make up the comedy trio that will perform on Sunday. The three are all members of Yale's Red Hot Poker sketch comedy group, and Bock said their time collaborating in the group allowed them to learn how to write and make jokes together.

According to Patrick-Carter, the group has been excited about the prospect of performing in a setting like Class Day since their first year at Yale. They came together this February to write a script for their audition to perform at Class Day and, after finding out they were selected, have been honing their exhibition ever since.

"Comedy is a valid means of connection with people," Neal said in a phone interview with the News. "You can laugh and also be sad at the same time."

The group hopes to connect with people through comedy and laughter, both at Class Day and post-graduation.

Class Oration: "Tuesday"

To close out the student portion of Sunday's ceremony, Shubh Gupta '26's oration will highlight the everyday moments that make Yale special.

Focused on the idea of "Tuesdays," which is intended to symbolize the smaller, mundane parts of the Yale experience, Gupta hopes his audience will realize that it is not always the grand milestones that shape a student's time at Yale.

"We all look forward to these big moments, these highlight reel grand moments like Harvard-Yale and Spring Fling and the senior thesis, and the senior society," Gupta said in a phone interview with the News. "But the moments that change us don't really feel important while they're happening, they feel super ordinary."

When Gupta found out that another student from his high school in Kentucky had given the graduation speech a few years ago, he was inspired to apply. His experience starting the speech and debate club at his high school helped him develop his love for speaking, he added.

"It's such an honor and so humbling to know that I'm going to have this opportunity," Gupta said. "There is definitely some weight I felt in, 'How do I do this class justice?' Class day and graduation feels so much bigger than one person. The real challenge is how to say something that feels true to everyone, and that everyone can relate to and carry something out of for the rest of their lives."

The Yale Glee Club was founded in 1861.

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