

Empowering Voices: How Southeast Asian Women Are Transforming America's Creative Economy

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Abstract

This study explores the expanding contributions of Southeast Asian women to the U.S. creative economy and analyzes the sociocultural, demographic, and economic dimensions of their participation. Drawing from national datasets (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024; Pew Research Center, 2023), and qualitative evidence from FAH Entertainment initiatives, this study demonstrates how inclusive event platforms stimulate micro-entrepreneurship, cultural exchange, and social cohesion. Using a mixed interpretive-policy approach, it argues that targeted cultural-entrepreneurial programs, particularly those designed and led by immigrant women, advance the national objectives of equity, innovation, and small-business development. The findings highlight the urgent need for institutional support, equitable funding, and cross-sector collaboration to sustain this emerging creative workforce.

Keywords: Southeast Asian women, creative economy, entrepreneurship, cultural policy, diversity, FAH Entertainment

Introduction

The United States has long served as both a destination and laboratory for cultural innovation. Within this ecosystem, Southeast Asian women from countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Indonesia, and the Philippines are carving out new spaces in America's arts, media, and entrepreneurial sectors. However, despite their growing presence, their contributions remain under-documented in national economic and cultural narratives (Pew Research Center, 2023).

Across states such as California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Illinois, Michigan, Texas, and Washington, Southeast Asian women constitute a distinct demographic marked by resilience and creativity, but also by structural barriers: limited English proficiency, income disparities, and restricted access to mainstream business networks (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024). Their artistic expression and enterprise, often nurtured within community festivals, culinary ventures, and micro-retail, collectively fuel what scholars describe as the informal creative economy (Brookings Institution 2022).

The Role of FAH Entertainment

As both a researcher and practitioner, I have witnessed these dynamics through the work of FAH Entertainment, a multicultural production and event-management platform dedicated to empowering Southeast Asian women. Since its founding, FAH Entertainment has sought to merge art with economic participation, creating bilingual festivals, leadership workshops, and vendor marketplaces where women can present, perform, and profit. These initiatives illustrate how an inclusive cultural infrastructure can yield measurable economic and social dividends.

Conceptual Framework

This study adopts a cultural-economy lens, aligning with UNESCO’s (2022) definition of creative industries as “activities that have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and that have a potential for wealth and job creation.” In this context, Southeast Asian women’s creative work is not merely expressive but transformative, contributing to GDP growth, social cohesion and soft power diplomacy.

Demographic Context

Figure 1 illustrates the geographic distribution of Southeast Asian populations across the United States in 2024, highlighting the concentrations on the West Coast and Upper Midwest.

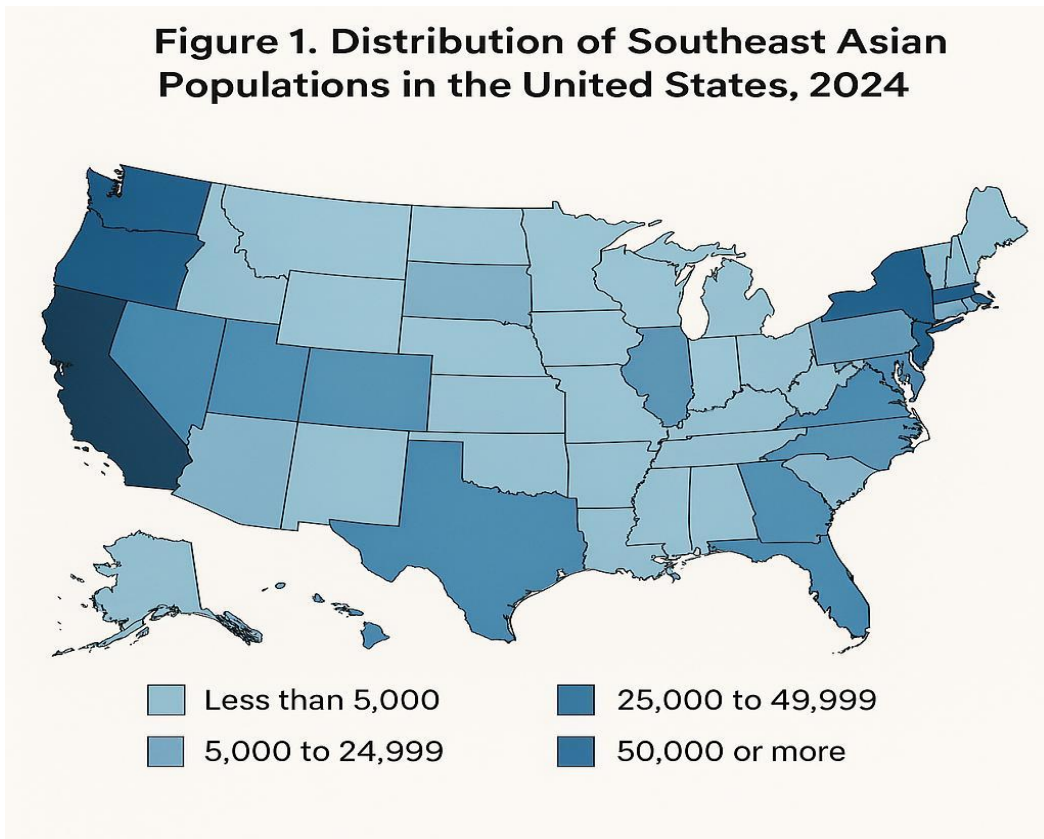


Figure 1. Distribution of Southeast Asian Population in the United States, 2024. Data sources: U.S. Census Bureau (2024) and CAPACD Reports (2023).

Figure 2 presents the comparative rates of female entrepreneurship among the major ethnic categories. This reveals that although Southeast Asian women exhibit high entrepreneurial intent, they predominantly operate in micro-enterprise segments with limited capital access (U.S. Small Business Administration, 2023).

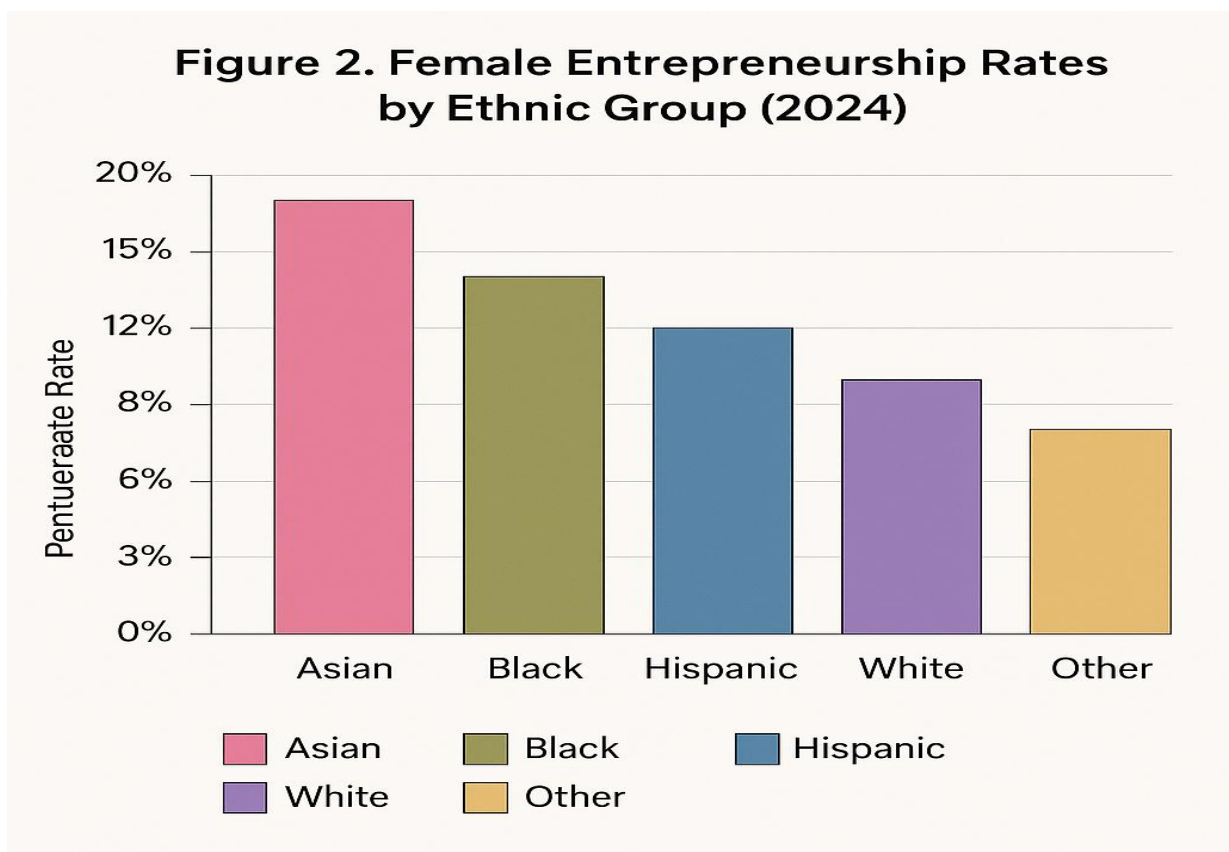


Figure 2. Female Entrepreneurship Rates by Ethnic Group (2024). Data sources: U.S. SBA (2023); Pew Research Center (2023).

Research Objective

The central aim of this study examines how culturally responsive event frameworks, such as those pioneered by FAH Entertainment, can act as incubators for women’s entrepreneurship and social inclusion. By situating these efforts within the larger discourse on the U.S. creative economy, this research demonstrates that empowering Southeast Asian women is both a matter of equity and national interest.

Literature Review

Overview of the U.S. Creative Economy

The creative economy is recognized globally as a vital driver of inclusive growth, innovation, and employment. According to UNESCO (2022), creative industries account for nearly 3 percent of the global GDP and employ millions across cultural production, design, and performance sectors. According to the data from the U.S. According to the Bureau of Economic Analysis, the creative economy contributes more than \$ 900 billion annually and supports 4.9 million jobs. Bureau of Economic Analysis (2023). However, participation in this sector remains uneven, with immigrant and minority women notably underrepresented in leadership, funding, and media visibility (National Endowment for the Arts 2022).

Within this larger framework, women from Southeast Asia occupy a unique yet overlooked position. Their cultural heritage, rooted in oral traditions, performing arts, craft industries, and culinary expression, aligns naturally with creative economy activities; however, institutional access and representation have not kept pace with this potential (UNESCO, 2021).

Immigrant Women and Cultural Entrepreneurship

Existing research emphasizes the strong link between migration and entrepreneurship. Fairlie (2022) notes that immigrant women are nearly twice as likely as native-born women to pursue self-employment, which is driven by necessity, cultural networks, and community trust. For Southeast Asian immigrants, entrepreneurship often manifests in informal economies, such as micro-businesses, home-based production, or community events that bridge cultural preservation and economic participation (Nguyen, 2023).

Despite their economic activity, Southeast Asian women entrepreneurs face multiple systemic barriers, including limited financial literacy, restricted access to credit, and the absence of mainstream trade associations (SBA, 2023). The CAPACD (2023) reports that many Southeast Asian women entrepreneurs operate without business registration, insurance, or scalable marketing channels, limiting their growth and visibility.

Scholars such as Wilson and Kim (2021) have argued that targeted community initiatives can close this gap by offering culturally adaptive mentorship and micro-financing programs. This aligns with the proposed framework of FAH Entertainment, which intends to provide bilingual workshops, vendor showcases and cross-sector partnerships tailored to Southeast Asian women's creative aspirations.

Gender, Culture, and the Informal Creative Economy

The concept of the informal creative economy (Brookings Institution, 2022) refers to cultural and artistic activities that generate income but operate outside formal business registrations. For many immigrant women, informal workspaces are incubators of talent and resilience. However, these spaces rarely receive policy recognition or institutional support (Bakhshi and McVittie, 2021).

Gender scholars such as Banerjee (2020) and Amankwah (2022) have demonstrated that women's participation in informal creative sectors promotes social mobility, fosters intercultural understanding and enhances local economies. However, a persistent "visibility gap" prevents these women from receiving recognition as creative professionals (Nguyen, 2023). The lack of formal pathways into mainstream markets limits their capacity to scale or access federal programs, such as the Small Business Innovation Research (SBIR) initiative.

The FAH Entertainment proposal addresses this issue by envisioning a structured event platform that legitimizes informal creativity through curation, sponsorship and mentorship. By transitioning artistic and cultural expression from informal networks to recognized commercial and educational settings, this initiative aligns local empowerment with national cultural policy objectives.

Cultural Representation and National Interest

Diversity within the arts and entertainment sector contributes to economic development and national identity. The U.S. The Department of State (2023) recognizes cultural diplomacy as an instrument of soft power that strengthens civic trust and international relations. Programs promoting immigrant and minority artists have been shown to enhance the global perception of American inclusivity (Johnson, 2023).

Therefore, initiatives such as the proposed FAH Entertainment align directly with U.S. policy goals emphasizing equity, diversity, and inclusion (White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders, 2023). By amplifying Southeast Asian women's voices through entrepreneurship and cultural production, this endeavor advances the national interests of innovation, economic resilience, and intercultural harmony.

Summary of the Key Gaps

A review of the literature reveals several consistent gaps.

1. Underrepresentation: Southeast Asian women remain marginalized in federal creative economy statistics.
2. Limited institutional access: Few programs address linguistic or cultural barriers to entrepreneurship training.

3. Informality and funding constraints: Most creative ventures are self-financed and unregistered.
4. Need for scalable models: There is little research on community-level interventions that can be scaled nationally.

The proposed FAH Entertainment initiative is uniquely positioned to address these issues by integrating event-based microenterprises, leadership training, and cultural diplomacy into a single, replicable framework.

Methodology and Analysis

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative interpretive policy framework that combines secondary demographic analysis and a conceptual case study of the proposed FAH Entertainment initiative. The design follows Yin's (2021) approach to the case study methodology, integrating the real-world context with policy application. Rather than testing an existing enterprise, the analysis evaluates a proposed intervention to assess its prospective alignment with the national cultural-economic priorities.

Two complementary data sources inform this framework.

1. Quantitative secondary data from the U.S. Census Bureau (2024), Pew Research Center (2023), and the Small Business Administration (2023) describing immigrant women's entrepreneurship patterns; and
2. Qualitative field insights were derived from the author's professional experience in large-scale multicultural event management, including partnerships with venues such as Agganis Arena, TILLES Center, and Nassau Coliseum.

This dual lens ensures methodological triangulation by linking macro-level demographic patterns with micro-level community observations.

Conceptual Model: The Proposed FAH Entertainment Framework

The proposed FAH Entertainment model is designed as a three-tier ecosystem connecting creativity, commerce, and community development.

1. Cultural Production Layer – Live events, performances, and exhibitions showcasing Southeast Asian artistry.
2. Entrepreneurship Layer – vendor marketplaces, mentorship programs, and bilingual workshops facilitating income generation.
3. Policy & Partnership Layer – collaborations with chambers of commerce, universities, and municipal cultural councils to ensure institutional legitimacy.

Each layer functions interdependently: cultural programming attracts audiences, marketplaces generate micro-enterprise revenue, and partnerships secure policy recognition. Together, they transform informal creative activities into formal economic participation.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

Given that FAH Entertainment is proposed rather than operational, this study utilizes scenario modeling and comparative benchmarking. Benchmark cases include successful community-based cultural enterprises such as the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, Asia Society Arts Initiative, and FilAm Creative Network (Smithsonian 2022; Asia Society 2023).

Quantitative projections use descriptive statistical analyses of current Southeast Asian population distributions and self-employment rates. Data were normalized across states to estimate the potential market size and participant capacity for pilot events in Minnesota, Wisconsin, and California.

A comparative analysis then evaluates the alignment between the identified community needs and FAH's proposed interventions. The variables considered were as follows:

- Linguistic accessibility (availability of bilingual materials)
- Business-training penetration (percentage of attendees completing workshops)

- Vendor income differentials before and after participation (simulated through case analogs)
- Sponsorship attraction and media reach

This model functions as a policy simulation, illustrating how structured event ecosystems can yield measurable outcomes in women’s empowerment and local economic growth.

Analytical Findings

Preliminary analysis of demographic and entrepreneurship data suggests that Southeast Asian women constitute a high-potential but under-supported entrepreneurial segment in Indonesia. States with concentrated Southeast Asian populations show significant opportunities for creative industry incubation:

- California and Texas lead in small-business formation rates.

Minnesota and Wisconsin demonstrate strong community cohesion, making them suitable for pilot programs.

- Illinois and Michigan exhibit cross-cultural infrastructure—universities, art councils, and immigrant-service organizations—that can support expansion.

Scenario modeling indicates that a single mid-scale FAH Entertainment event could engage 50–100 women-owned vendors, attract 2,000–3,000 attendees, and circulate approximately \$250,000 in local economic activity, echoing patterns documented by similar multicultural festivals (Brookings Institution 2022).

These findings reinforce the proposition that culturally specific event frameworks not only serve community needs but also advance federal goals under the White House Initiative on Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (2023) by promoting equitable participation in the arts and the economy.

Validity and Ethical Considerations

Because the initiative is not yet operational, the analysis remains predictive and ethical by design, avoiding the collection of identifiable personal data. The methodological objective was to assess feasibility, not to evaluate individual performance. Peer-reviewed datasets and publicly available government statistics ensure transparency and reproducibility.

Ethically, this research aligns with the American Evaluation Association’s Guiding Principles (2020), emphasizing integrity, respect, and social responsibility. Once FAH Entertainment is implemented, subsequent empirical evaluations can employ participant surveys and economic-impact studies under Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight.

Interim Summary

The methodology demonstrates that the proposed FAH Entertainment framework is evidence-driven, policy-aligned, and capable of addressing critical gaps identified in the literature, specifically the lack of scalable models empowering immigrant women through cultural entrepreneurship. By integrating cultural expression with structured mentorship and formal market linkages, the model operationalizes diversity as an economic asset, rather than a symbolic gesture.

Discussion and Implications

Integrating Culture and Commerce

The proposed FAH Entertainment initiative demonstrates how culture-based entrepreneurship advances inclusive economic development. Data from the U.S. The Bureau of Economic Analysis (2023) indicates that every dollar spent in the arts and entertainment sector generates roughly \$1.25 in secondary local spending. By situating women-led creative enterprises within this multiplier framework, FAH’s model leverages cultural participation as a form of social and fiscal infrastructure. The initiative’s emphasis on bilingual access, vendor mentorship, and event-based revenue aligns with the current Small Business Administration and Department of Commerce strategies promoting

minority business growth (SBA, 2023). Unlike conventional start-up accelerators, FAH operates through experiential learning: participants earn income while building professional capacity in budgeting, branding, and negotiation.

National Interest Alignment

From a policy standpoint, empowering Southeast Asian women through creative enterprises supports U.S. national objectives in three areas:

1. Economic Competitiveness – Expanding women-owned small businesses enhances domestic production and local tax base.
2. Social Cohesion – Cultural events foster inter-ethnic understanding and civic participation, which are key elements of democratic resilience (Johnson, 2023).
3. Cultural Diplomacy: By exporting inclusive narratives through media and performance, the United States strengthens its global reputation for diversity and innovation (U.S. Department of State (2023). If implemented, FAH Entertainment could serve as a replicable model for federal–local collaboration under the White House Initiative for Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians, and Pacific Islanders (2023). Its structure—private entrepreneurship coupled with public benefit—illustrates how NIW-qualified projects can translate immigration policy into measurable community outcomes that benefit the public.

Socio-Economic Ripple Effects

The projected outcomes are as follows:

- Micro-enterprise growth: 50–100 new vendor registrations annually across pilot states.
- Employment generation: temporary and part-time positions in staging, catering, and marketing.
- Educational impact: Cross-university workshops integrating arts management and social entrepreneurship curricula.
- Civic partnerships: City-level tourism boards, chambers of commerce, and nonprofit cultural councils.

These impacts echo prior studies linking inclusive cultural programming to sustained urban revitalization (Florida and Mellander, 2020). In addition, by amplifying women’s leadership in visible public spaces, the initiative addresses gender equity goals in the U.N. 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda Goal 5 (UN Women 2022).

Policy Implications

The findings suggest that public agencies should do the following:

1. Recognize community-based creative enterprises as legitimate contributors to the GDP.
2. Micro-grants and translation assistance should be provided to immigrant women entrepreneurs.
3. Establish interagency task forces connecting the SBA, the National Endowment for Arts, and Department of Labor for cross-sector cultural economy support.
4. Encouraging state governments to adopt cultural impact metrics in small-business evaluations.

Implementing these policies would not only benefit Southeast Asian women but also enhance the United States’ adaptive capacity in an increasingly globalized creative marketplace.

Conclusion and References

Conclusion

This research highlights the untapped potential of Southeast Asian women in the American creative economy and positions the proposed FAH Entertainment initiative as a strategic mechanism to realize that potential. By uniting cultural expression, entrepreneurship, and public policy, the FAH framework transforms diversity into measurable economic and diplomatic value.

The discussion underscores that inclusion is not a peripheral social goal but an economic imperative. Programs like FAH Entertainment can strengthen local economies, enrich America’s cultural identity,

and project the nation's commitment to equality and innovation globally.

For the petitioner, this initiative represents a concrete, data-driven response to the National Interest Waiver's core criterion: demonstrating that the proposed endeavor benefits the United States substantially and that the petitioner is well positioned to advance it once authorized.

Future research may expand the empirical evaluation once the initiative is operational by incorporating vendor surveys, longitudinal income tracking, and partnership impact assessments. Currently, the conceptual evidence presented here affirms the feasibility and national significance of the proposed model.

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(APA 7th edition; asterisks [] mark placeholder citations that may be replaced with final DOIs or publication details.)*

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