

Are Asian Americans Becoming “White”?

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Context: Asian Americans have been labeled a “model minority” for their high rates of achievement, and widely seen as on their way to becoming “white.” These expectations are a burden and the predictions surely premature given that Americans still see Asians as foreign.

“I never asked to be white. I am not literally white. That is, I do not have white skin or white ancestors. I have yellow skin and yellow ancestors, hundreds of generations of them. But like so many other Asian Americans of the second generation, I find myself now the bearer of a strange new status: white, by acclamation. Thus it is that I have been described as an “honorary white,” by other whites, and as a ‘banana’ by other Asians... to the extent that I have moved away from the periphery and toward the center of American life, I have become white inside.”

—Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian* (p. 34)

Are Asian Americans becoming “white?” For many public officials the answer must be yes, because they classify Asian-origin Americans with European-origin Americans for equal opportunity programs, while other under-represented groups such as blacks, Latinos and Indians are not. But this classification is premature and based on false premises. Although Asian Americans as a group have attained the career and financial success equated with being white, and although many have moved next to or have even married whites, they still remain culturally distinct and suspect in a white society.

At issue is how to define Asian American and white. The term “Asian American” was coined by the late historian and activist Yuji Ichioka during the ethnic consciousness movements of the late 1960s. To adopt this identity is to reject the western-imposed label of “Oriental.” Today, “Asian American” is an umbrella category that includes both U.S. citizens and immigrants whose ancestors came from Asia east of Pakistan. Although widely used in public discussions, most Asian-origin Americans are ambivalent about this label, reflecting the difficulty of being American and still keeping some ethnic identity: Is one, for example, Asian American or Japanese American?

Similarly, “white” is an arbitrary label having more to do with privilege than biology. In the United States, groups initially considered non-white such as Irish and Jews have attained “white” membership by acquiring status and wealth. It is hardly surprising, then, that nonwhites would aspire to becoming “white” as a mark of and a tool for material success. However, becoming white can mean distancing oneself from “people of color” or disowning one’s ethnicity. Pan-ethnic identities—Asian American, African American, Hispanic American—are one way

the politically vocal in any group try to stem defections. But these group identities may restrain individual members' aspirations for personal mobility.

Varieties of Asian Americans

Privately, few Americans of Asian ancestry would spontaneously identify themselves as Asian, and fewer still as Asian American. They instead link their identities to specific countries of origin, such as China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, India or Vietnam. In a study of Vietnamese youth in San Diego, for example, 53 percent identified themselves as Vietnamese, 32 percent as Vietnamese American, and only 14 percent as Asian American; nearly 60 percent of these youth considered their chosen identity as very important to them. Some Americans of Asian ancestry have family histories in the United States longer than many Americans of Eastern or Southern European origin. However, they became numerous only after 1970, rising from 1.4 million to 11.9 million, or 4 percent of the total U.S. population, in 2000. Before 1970, the Asian-origin population was largely made up of Japanese, Chinese and Filipinos. Now, Americans of Chinese and Filipino ancestries are the largest subgroups (at 2.8 million and 2.4 million respectively), followed by Indians, Koreans, Vietnamese and Japanese (at more than one million). Some 20 other national-origin groups, such as Cambodians, Pakistanis, Lao, Thai, Indonesians and Bangladeshis were officially counted in government statistics only after 1980; together they amounted to more than two million residents in 2000.

The seven-fold growth of the Asian-origin population in the span of thirty-odd years is primarily due to the accelerated immigration subsequent to the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which ended the national origins quota system, and the historic resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War. Currently, about 60 percent of the Asian-origin population is foreign-born (the first generation), another 28 percent are U.S.-born of foreign-born parents (the second generation), and just 12 percent are born to U.S.-born parents (the third generation and beyond). The only exceptions to this pattern are Japanese Americans who have a fourth generation and many U.S.-born elderly.

Unlike earlier immigrants from Asia or Europe, who were mostly low-skilled laborers looking for work, today's immigrants from Asia have more varied backgrounds and come for many reasons, such as to join their families, to invest their money in the U.S. economy, to fulfill the demand for highly skilled labor, or to escape war, political or religious persecution and economic hardship. For example, Chinese, Taiwanese, Indian, and Filipino Americans tend to be over-represented among scientists, engineers, physicians and other skilled professionals, but less educated, low-skilled workers are more common among Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong Americans, most of whom entered the United States as refugees. While middle-class immigrants are able to start their American lives with high-paying professional careers and comfortable

suburban living, low-skilled immigrants and refugees often have to endure low-paying menial jobs and live in inner-city ghettos.

Asian Americans tend to settle in large metropolitan areas and concentrate in the West. California is home to 35 percent of all Asian Americans. But recently, other states such as Texas, Minnesota and Wisconsin, which historically received few Asian immigrants, have become destinations for Asian American settlement. Traditional ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Manilatown, Koreatown, Little Phnom Penh, and Thaitown, persist or have emerged in gateway cities, helping new arrivals to cope with cultural and linguistic difficulties in their initial stage of resettlement. However, affluent and highly skilled immigrants tend to bypass inner-city enclaves and settle in suburbs upon arrival, belying the stereotype of the “unacculturated” immigrant. Today, more than half of the Asian-origin population is spreading out in suburbs surrounding traditional gateway cities, as well as in new urban centers of Asian settlement across the country.

Differences in national origins, timing of immigration, affluence and settlement patterns profoundly affect the formation of a pan-ethnic identity. Recent arrivals are less likely than those born or raised in the United States to identify as Asian American. They are also so busy settling in that they have little time to think about being Asian or Asian American, or, for that matter, white. Their diverse origins evoke drastic differences in languages and dialects, religions, cuisines and customs. Many nationalities also brought to America their histories of conflict (such as the Japanese colonization of Korea and Taiwan, Japanese attacks on China, and territory disputes between China-Vietnam).

Immigrants who are predominantly middle-class professionals such as the Taiwanese and Indians, or predominantly small business owners such as the Koreans, share few of the same concerns and priorities as those who are predominantly uneducated, low-skilled refugees, such as Cambodians and Hmong. Finally, Asian-origin people living in San Francisco or Los Angeles among many other Asians and self-conscious Asian Americans develop stronger ethnic identity than those living in Latin-dominant Miami or white-dominant Minneapolis. A politician might get away with calling Asians “Oriental” in Miami but get into big trouble in San Francisco. All of these differences can create obstacles to fostering a cohesive pan-Asian solidarity. As Yen Le Espiritu shows, pan-Asianism is primarily a political ideology of U.S.-born, American-educated, and middle-class Asians rather than of Asian immigrants, who are conscious of their national origins and overburdened with their daily struggles for survival.

Underneath the Model Minority: “White” or “Other”

The celebrated “model minority” image of Asian Americans appeared in the mid-1960s, at the peak of the civil rights movement and the ethnic consciousness movements, but before the rising waves of immigration and refugee influx from

Asia. Two articles in 1966—“Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” by William Petersen in the *New York Times Magazine*, and “Success of One Minority Group in U.S.,” by the *US News and World Report* staff—marked a significant departure from how Asian immigrants and their descendants had been traditionally depicted in the media. Both articles extolled Japanese and Chinese Americans for their persistence in overcoming extreme hardships and discrimination to achieve success, unmatched even by U.S.-born whites, with “their own almost totally unaided effort” and “no help from anyone else.” The press attributed their winning wealth and respect in American society to hard-work, family solidarity, discipline, delayed gratification, non-confrontation and eschewing welfare.

This “model minority” image remains largely unchanged even in the face of new and diverse waves of immigration since 1966. The 2000 U.S. Census shows that Asian Americans continue to exhibit remarkable economic and educational achievements. Their median household income in 1999 was \$55,525—the highest of all racial groups, including whites—and their poverty rate was 10.7 percent, the lowest of all racial groups. Moreover, 44 percent of all Asian Americans over 25 years of age had at least a bachelor’s degree, 18 percentage points more than all other racial groups. Strikingly, young Asian Americans, including both the children of foreign-born physicians, scientists, and engineers and those of uneducated and penniless refugees, repeatedly appear as high school valedictorians and academic decathlon winners, and enroll in the freshman classes of prestigious universities in disproportionately large numbers. In 1998, Asian Americans, just 4 percent of the nation’s population, made up more than 20 percent of the undergraduates at places such as Berkeley, Stanford, MIT and Cal Tech. Although some ethnic groups, such as Cambodians, Lao, and Hmong, still trail behind other East and South Asians in most indicators of achievement, they too show significant signs of upward mobility. The media have dubbed Asian Americans the “new Jews.” Like the second-generation Jews of the past, today’s children of Asian immigrants are climbing up the ladder by way of extraordinary educational achievement.

One consequence of the model-minority stereotype is to buttress the myth that the United States is devoid of racism and accords equal opportunity to all, and that those who lag behind do so because of their own poor choices and inferior culture. Celebrating this model minority can help thwart other racial minorities’ demands for social justice by pitting minority groups against each other. It can also pit Asian Americans against whites. On the surface, Asian Americans seem to be on their way to becoming white, just like the offspring of earlier European immigrants. But the model-minority image implicitly casts Asian Americans as different from whites. By placing Asian Americans above whites, the model minority image also sets them apart from other Americans, white or nonwhite, in the public mind.

There are also less obvious effects. The model-minority stereotype holds Asian Americans to higher standards, distinguishing them from average Americans. “What’s wrong with being a model minority?” asked a black student in a class I taught on race. “I’d rather be in the model minority than in the downtrodden minority that nobody respects.” Whether people are in a model minority or a downtrodden minority, they are judged by standards different from average Americans. Also the model-minority stereotype places particular expectations on members of the group so labeled, channeling them to specific avenues of success, such as science and engineering, which in turn unintentionally reinforces barriers for Asian Americans in pursuing careers outside these designated fields. Falling into this trap, a Chinese immigrant father might be upset if his son told him that he had decided to change his major from engineering to English. Disregarding his son’s passion and talent for creative writing, the father would rationalize his concern, “You have a 90 percent chance of getting a decent job with an engineering degree, but what chance would you have of earning income as a writer?” This rationale reflects more than simple parental concern over career choices typical of middle-class families; it constitutes the self-fulfilling prophecy of a stereotype.

The celebration of Asian Americans as a model minority is based on the judgment that many Asian Americans perform at levels above the American average. The truth is that the unusually large number of middle- and upper-middle-class immigrants among some Asian-origin groups, such as the Chinese, Indians and Koreans, makes it easier for them and their children to succeed and regain their middle-class status in the new homeland. The financial resources that these immigrants bring also help establish ethnic businesses and institutions, such as private after-school programs, and strengthen ethnic communities. These, in turn, enable even the less fortunate members of the groups to move ahead more quickly than they would have otherwise.

Not So Much Being “White” as Being American

Most Asian Americans seem to accept that “white” is mainstream, average and normal, and look to whites as their frame of reference for attaining higher social position. Similarly, researchers often use non-Hispanic whites as the standard against which other groups are compared, even though there is great diversity among whites, too. Like most other immigrants to the United States, many Asian immigrants tend to believe in the American Dream and measure their achievements materially. As a Chinese immigrant said to me in an interview, “I hope to accomplish nothing but three things: to own a home, to be my own boss, and to send my children to the Ivy League.” Those with sufficient education, job skills, and money manage to move into white middle-class suburban neighborhoods immediately upon arrival, while others work intensively to accumulate enough savings to move their families up and out of inner-city ethnic enclaves. Consequently, many children of Asian ancestry have lived their entire childhood in white communities, made friends with mostly white peers, and

grown up speaking only English. In fact, Asian Americans are the most acculturated non-European group in the United States. By the second generation, most have lost fluency in their parents' native languages (see "English-Only Triumphs, But the Costs are High," *Contexts*, Spring 2002). David Lopez finds that in Los Angeles, more than three-quarters of second-generation Asian Americans (as opposed to about one-quarter of second-generation Mexicans) speak only English at home. Asian Americans also intermarry extensively with whites and with members of other minority groups. Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean find that more than one-quarter of married Asian Americans have a partner of a different racial background, and 87 percent of intermarried Asians marry whites; they also find that 12 percent of all Asian Americans claim a multiracial background, compared to 2 percent of whites and 4 percent of blacks.

Even though U.S.-born or U.S.-raised Asian Americans are relatively acculturated and often intermarry with whites, they may be more ambivalent about becoming white than their immigrant parents. Many only cynically agree that "white" is synonymous with "American." A Vietnamese high school student in New Orleans told me in an interview, "An American is white. You often hear people say, hey, so-and-so is dating an 'American.' You know she's dating a white boy. If he were black, then people would say he's black." But while they recognize whites as a frame of reference, some reject the idea of becoming white themselves—"It's not so much being white as being American," commented a Korean American student in my class on the new second generation. This aversion to becoming white is particularly common among the well-educated and privileged second-generation college students who have taken ethnic studies courses, and among Asian-American community activists. However, most of the second generation continues to strive for the privileged status associated with whiteness, just like their parents. For example, most U.S.-born or U.S.-raised Chinese American youth end up studying engineering, medicine, and law at college, believing that these areas of study guarantee a middle-class life and enhance social contact with whites.

Second-generation Asian Americans are also more conscious of the disadvantages associated with being nonwhite than their parents are, who as immigrants tend to be optimistic about overcoming the disadvantages of this status. As a Chinese American woman points out from her own experience, "The truth is, no matter how American you think you are or try to be, if you have almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion, you are a foreigner by default... You can certainly be as good as or even better than whites, but you will never become accepted as white." This remark echoes a commonly-held frustration among second-generation Asian Americans who detest being treated as immigrants or foreigners. Their experience suggests that whitening has more to do with the beliefs of white America, than with the actual situation of Asian Americans. Speaking perfect English, effortlessly adopting mainstream cultural values, and even intermarrying members of the dominant group may help reduce this "otherness" at the individual level, but have little effect on the group

as a whole. New stereotypes can emerge and un-whiten Asian Americans anytime and anywhere, no matter how “successful” and “assimilated” they have become. For example, Congressman David Wu was once invited by the Asian-American employees of the U.S. Department of Energy to give a speech in celebration of the Asian-American Heritage Month. Yet he and his Asian-American staff were not allowed into the department building, even after presenting their congressional IDs, and were repeatedly asked about their citizenship and country of origin. They were told that this was standard procedure for the Department of Energy and that a Congressional ID was not a reliable document. A Congressman of Italian descent was allowed to enter the same building the next day with his Congressional ID, no questions asked.

The stereotype of the “honorary white” or model minority goes hand-in-hand with that of the “forever foreigner.” Today, globalization and U.S.-Asia relations, combined with continually high rates of immigration, affect how Asian Americans are perceived in American society. Most of the historical stereotypes, such as the “yellow peril” and “Fu Manchu” have found their way into contemporary American life, as revealed in such highly publicized incidents as the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American mistaken for Japanese and beaten to death by a disgruntled white auto worker in the 1980s; the trial of Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear scientist suspected of spying for the Chinese government in the mid-1990s; the 1996 presidential campaign finance scandal, which implicated Asian Americans in funneling foreign contributions to the Clinton campaign; and most recently, in 2001, the Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirts that depicted Asian cartoon characters in stereotypically negative ways—slanted eyes, thick glasses and heavy Asian accents. Ironically, the ambivalent, conditional nature of white acceptance of Asian Americans prompts them to organize pan-ethnically to fight back—which consequently heightens their racial distinctiveness. So becoming white or not is beside the point. The bottom line is: Americans of Asian ancestry still have to constantly prove that they are truly loyal Americans.

Recommended Readings

Horton, John. *The Politics of Diversity: Immigration, Resistance, and Change in Monterey Park, California*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995. This study of a new Chinese immigrant community in an affluent Los Angeles suburb explores how new immigrants confront resistance from more established Anglo, Asian-American, and Latino neighbors.

Kibria, Nazli. *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002. This study of second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans in Boston and Los Angeles explores the dynamics of race and identity formation and examines the various strategies used by members of this group to define themselves as both Asian and American.

Liu, Eric. *The Accidental Asian*. New York: Random House, 1998. This is a thoughtful memoir of a second-generation Chinese American.

Lopez, David and Yen Espiritu. "Panethnicity in the United States: A Theoretical Framework." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 13 (2), 1990: 198-224. This article examines how diverse national-origin groups organize as pan-ethnic movements.

Tuan, Mia. *Forever Foreign or Honorary White? The Asian Ethnic Experience Today*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999. This account of West Coast Asian Americans reveals the hidden and not-so-hidden injuries of race suffered by second- and third-generation Asian Americans.

Wu, Frank. *Yellow: Race in America beyond Black and White*. New York: Basic Books, 2002. This insightful exploration of race and identity explores, among other topics, the model minority myth and issues of racial diversity.

Yu, Henry. *Thinking Orientals: Migration, Contact, and Exoticism in Modern America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Yu details how social scientists at the University of Chicago addressed the "Oriental problem" during the first half of the 20th century.

Zhou, Min and James V. Gatewood, eds. *Contemporary Asian America: A Multidisciplinary Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 2000. This collection examines how contemporary immigration from Asia creates new issues of identity and assimilation for both native-born and foreign-born Asian Americans.