



The Contemporary Asian American Experience

BEYOND THE MODEL MINORITY

TIMOTHY P. FONG

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THE CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Beyond the Model Minority

Timothy P. Fong

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PREFACE

This book is intended primarily for college-level courses, but is written in a clear and direct narrative form that can easily reach a broader audience. In *The Sociological Imagination* (1959) C. Wright Mills chides what he calls "socspeak," the complex writing style commonly used in social sciences. Mills complains that in academic circles, anyone who writes "in a widely intelligible way" is belittled for being "a mere journalist."¹ As a sociologist, I know many colleagues who criticize the journalistic writing style for being too simple. As a former journalist, I also know that journalists criticize sociological writing style for being too abstract. Despite these criticisms of each other, sociologists and journalists do share the same common goal: increasing understanding of the issues confronting today's society. Readers will find the journalistic sociology approach in this book refreshing because it combines the rigor of scholarship with the accessibility of journalism. Readers will also better appreciate the significance of the research work of scholars from a variety of academic disciplines.

This book has several major objectives. The first objective is to provide a sound academic background to better comprehend the contemporary history, culture, and social relationships that form the fundamental issues confronted by Asians in America. This book analyzes the interrelationship of race, class, and gender and explores how these factors have shaped the experiences of Asian Americans. The hope is that readers will arrive at a new level of understanding and awareness beyond the simplistic stereotype of the "model minority" through the exposure to important concerns of Asian American groups and communities.

Second, this book is intended to provide a balanced and comparative analysis of the different Asian ethnic groups, newer immigrants, and American-born Asians. While Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos were among the earliest immigrants from Asia, attention will also be given to new immigrants such as the Koreans, Asian Indians, and Southeast Asian refugees, who have come in large numbers to the United States since 1965. With this in mind, chapters in this book are organized by specific issues rather than by specific ethnic group. In addition, this book will be balanced in terms of strong representation of how the various issues pertain to and impact Asian American women.

Third, this book will analyze competing aspects of the Asian American experience. Most of the early research on Asian Americans has focused on the "positive" cultural aspects of a strong work ethic and filial piety, amazing success in education, and enviable economic upward mobility. Since the 1970s, however, an increasing number of Asian American scholars have challenged what they feel is an overemphasis on anecdotal evidence and superficial statistical data. They have focused on issues of prejudice and discrimination, underemployment, educational problems, family and intergenerational conflict, and a host of other social concerns intended to provide a comprehensive picture of the Asian American experience.

Fourth, this book will compare and contrast various theoretical perspectives throughout the text where appropriate. This approach is unique, but necessary given the diversity of issues being covered. For example, the book will discuss different theories on immigration, immigrant adaptation and assimilation, ethnic entrepreneurship, educational achievement, ethnic identity, interracial marriage, and political incorporation, among others. Within this, recent Asian immigrants greatly differ from earlier immigrants in socioeconomic background and adjustment to American society. Clearly there is a need to review traditional concepts and theories, which are primarily based on the previous historical experiences.

Lastly, this book features an up-to-date collection of immigration, demographic, socioeconomic, and educational data on Asian Americans. Liberal use of tables highlights this information and serves as an excellent resource for the general audience, students, and researchers. In addition, an extensive bibliography of books, articles, and reports on Asian American issues is included in the book. This will be extremely useful for student papers and research projects.

I believe this book could not have been written without the help of many others. I first and foremost want to thank all the academic researchers, the journalists, and the community activists who have focused their attention on Asian Americans and Asian American issues. This is evidence of the growth and maturity of Asian American Studies as an academic discipline, the increased attention on Asian Americans in the media, and the impor-

tance of the issues raised on the grass-roots level. Together, their works and activities over many years have converged, and have only recently reached a critical mass. Whether directly cited or not, their works and activities are very much the core of this book. It is their insights, their analysis, and their hard work that gives this book life. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Asian American Studies Department at California State University, Northridge, and the Social Sciences Division at Holy Names College where I have taught while writing this book. Their support and encouragement were invaluable. Special thanks go to Francis Hui and Lena Chang of the Cushing Library at Holy Names College, and to Wei-chi Poon of the Asian American Studies Library at UC Berkeley for their help locating reference materials. My highest praises go to Nancy Roberts, Sociology Editor at Prentice Hall, and Edie Riker, Editorial/Production Supervisor from East End Publishing Services, for their professional guidance on this book. Lastly, this book is dedicated to my wife, Elena Almanzo, the little one on the way, and our community of family and friends.

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Holy Names College

ENDNOTE

1. C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), pp. 218–19.

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INTRODUCTION: CHANGING ASIAN AMERICA

VISIBILITY AND INVISIBILITY

The Los Angeles riot that erupted in 1992 following the acquittal of four police officers in the beating of motorist Rodney King prompted a national reexamination of race relations and poverty issues. This time, however, the debate needed to focus beyond just black and white issues. Suddenly, Asian Americans—in this case primarily Korean Americans—could not be ignored in the race relations equation. Throughout the violent uproar, Korean American businesses were the targets of looting and arson. After the smoke had cleared and the ashes cooled, it was discovered that over two thousand Korean-owned businesses were either damaged or destroyed during the riot. Together Korean and other Asian American businesses suffered over \$460 million in property losses, nearly half the total of all property losses in the city.¹

Despite this cataclysmic event, it is clear that precious little is known about Asian Americans in the United States. Just one year before the Los Angeles uprising, a national poll conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* and NBC News revealed some disturbing attitudes toward Asian Americans. A majority of Americans believed that Asian Americans are not discriminated against, and one out of five African Americans even believed that Asian Americans receive “too many special advantages.”² In August 1993, the *Los Angeles Times* reported results of a survey that found most Southern Californians admired Asian Americans for their work ethic and strong family ties. At the same time, however, the same survey found a large number of people—46 percent—also thought that new Asian immigrants are a burden to the local economy.³ In 1994, nearly two years after the urban disturbance in

Los Angeles, the National Conference of Christians and Jews released the results of another national survey on race relations that also produced troubling opinions of Asian Americans. On the positive side, all groups surveyed supported the notion of cultural diversity. On the other hand, Asian Americans felt the most in common with whites, even though both whites and blacks felt the least in common with Asian Americans.⁴ A severe lack of understanding creates conflicting images of visibility and invisibility for Asian Americans in the minds of many in the United States today. Asian Americans are visible only in such stereotypes as “perpetual foreigners,” “overachievers,” and the “model minority.” This often leads to irrational resentment. Recently, a Los Angeles radio talk show host complained about Asian American dominance in women’s figure skating. “You know, I’m tired of the Kristi Yamaguchis and the Michelle Kwans!” stormed Bill Handel of station KFI-AM. “They’re not American. . . . When I look at a box of Wheaties, I don’t want to see eyes that are slanted and Oriental and almond shaped. I want to see American eyes looking at me.”⁵ The fact that both Yamaguchi and Kwan are not recognized as U.S.-born citizens is evidence of the invisibility of Asian Americans due to widespread ignorance of their distinct histories and contemporary experiences.

The visibility (stereotypes) and invisibility (ignorance) witnessed in the above polls and radio host’s outburst speak to the urgency of the problem, and will be a recurring theme throughout this book. Despite this duality, Asian Americans can no longer be considered a marginal minority group. Since 1970 Asian Americans have been the fastest growing population group in the United States. In 1990 Asian and Pacific Islander Americans numbered over 7.2 million, and represented 2.9 percent of the United States population. The Asian American population nearly doubled between 1970 and 1980, and increased 95.2 percent between 1980 and 1990 (see Table I-1). From 1980 to 1990, the percentage of growth by the Asian American population far exceeded that of the Hispanic population, which grew by 51.5 percent. Asian Americans grew at a much higher rate than the African American population (13.2 percent), and grew at a rate over 20 times greater than the non-Hispanic white population (4.2 percent). Demographers project that the Asian American population could be as large as 20 million by the year 2020.⁶ The rapid growth in the Asian American population is due primarily to the passage of the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, which ended discriminatory immigration policies that purposely kept down the number of immigrants from Asia. In the 19-year time span between 1941 and 1960, relatively few Asians immigrated to the United States. In just the nine years between 1961 and 1970, over 427,000 immigrants came to the U.S. from Asia. This number increased to over 1.5 million between 1971 and 1980 and reached over 2.7 million between 1981 and 1990. From 1991 to 1994 there were over 1.3 million immigrants from Asia to the United States (see Table I-2).

Table I-1 United States Population, 1980–1990

	1990	1980	Increase %
Total U.S.	248,709,873	226,545,805	9.8
Non-Hispanic White	188,128,296	180,602,838	4.2
African American	29,986,060	26,482,349	13.2
Native American			
Indian, Eskimo, Aleut	1,959,234	1,534,336	27.7
Asian/Pacific Islander	7,273,662	3,726,440	95.2*
Chinese	1,645,472	812,178	102.6
Filipino	1,406,770	781,894	79.9
Japanese	847,562	716,331	18.3
Asian Indian	815,447	387,223	110.6
Korean	798,849	357,393	123.5
Vietnamese	614,547	245,025	150.8
Laotian	149,014	47,683	212.5
Cambodian	147,411	16,044	818.8
Hmong	90,082	5,204	1,631.0
Other Asian & Pacific Islander	758,508	357,465	112.2
Hispanic**	21,113,528	13,935,827	51.5
Non-Hispanic & Other Race	249,093	264,015	-5.7

*The percentage of change between 1980 and 1990 in this table is lower than the 107.8 percent found some other published reports. Other reports were based on the count of all Asian Pacific Americans in 1990 but only nine specific Asian American groups in 1980. The 95.2 percent figure cited in this table is more accurate and comparable, and is the percentage change if you count only the nine specific Asian American groups between 1980 and 1990.

**Hispanic includes those "White" and other races.

Source: U.S. Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of the Population, General Population Characteristics, United States Summary*, CP-1-1, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1993), Table 3; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Asian Pacific Islander Population in the United States: 1980* PC80-1-1E, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1988), Table 1.

Table 1-2 Asian Immigrants to the United States, Fiscal Years 1941–1994

	<i>All Countries</i>	<i>Asia*</i>	<i>%</i>
1994	804,416	232,449	35.1
1993	904,292	345,425	38.2
1992	973,977	344,802	35.4
1991	1,827,167	342,157	18.7
1981–90	7,338,062	2,738,157	37.3
1971–80	4,493,314	1,588,176	35.3
1961–70	3,321,677	427,642	12.9
1951–60	2,515,479	153,249	6.1
1941–50	1,035,039	37,028	3.6

* Includes Iraq, Israel, Syria, Turkey, and other Southwest Asian countries.

Source: U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service, *Statistical Yearbook of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, 1994*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), Table 1, pp. 25–29.

Who Are Asian Americans?

Lack of understanding of Asian Americans is due in part to the fact that they are an extremely heterogeneous minority group. They are composed of people whose ancestry originates from dozens of countries, who have been in the United States for generations, and those who are only recent immigrants and refugees. They are composed of people who are highly educated, professionally skilled, and relatively affluent. The Asian American population also includes a significant number of people who are completely illiterate, possess little more than subsistence farming skills, and are extremely poor. In addition, who is considered to be Asian is not clearly defined. The United States Census Bureau uses the broad term “Asian and Pacific Islander Americans” in its population count, which includes native Hawaiians, Samoans, Guamanians, and so forth. The Immigration and Naturalization Service broadly counts Asian immigrants to include people from Southwest Asian countries such as Iran, Israel, and Turkey. As a result, this book must make important distinctions and limitations.

First of all, this book concentrates on the most prominent Asian American ethnic groups in the United States who represent the vast majority the U.S. census category, “Asian Pacific Islander.” They are Chinese American, Japanese American, Filipino American, Korean American, Asian Indians, and Southeast Asian refugees, consisting of Vietnamese, Cambodians, Laotian, and Hmong Americans. Second, this book will focus on the Asian American experience as a distinct minority in the continental United States. While I recognize the overall importance of Hawaii in the history of Asian Americans, I will not discuss the

Asian American experience in Hawaii in great detail. Asian Americans are the majority population in Hawaii, and their experience is quite different from other Asian Americans on the mainland. For example, Japanese Americans in Hawaii were not interned during World War II, while over 110,000 Japanese Americans on the mainland were forcibly incarcerated.

Because I do not focus on Hawaii and the Pacific Islander population, I prefer to use the term "Asian American," rather than "Asian Pacific Americans" or "Asian Pacific Islander Americans" in this book. There will be, however, individuals quoted and sources cited throughout this book that do use the "Asian Pacific" terms. Since I focus on the Asian American experience after the 1965 Immigration Reform Act, I generally refer to all persons of Asian ancestry living in the United States as Asian Americans. I do this because the overwhelming majority of Asian immigrants and refugees who have come to the United States after 1965 did so fully intending to settle down and become United States citizens. Despite obvious ethnic and language differences within this broadly defined group, the term "Asian American" is significant and meaningful. The above nine groups have been shaped by similar historical experiences in the United States, and today confront a myriad of common issues. This book examines many of these common issues and is intended to show that Asian Americans continue to face prejudice, discrimination, and racially motivated violence that clearly hinder their full and open participation in American society. At the same time, this book is not intended to be only about social problems. The increasing number of highly educated, motivated, and talented Asian Americans is an asset to the United States in terms of economic growth and cultural enrichment. I will highlight these aspects of the Asian American experience as well. Lastly, this book also works to show both the similarities and differences between Asian Americans and other racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups to emphasize that the post-1965 contemporary Asian American experience challenges any easy definition or theoretical analysis.

ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

The organization of this book is based on the Asian American Contemporary Issues course I have been teaching for the past several years, and is intended generally to flow sequentially, with each chapter building on information from previous chapters. Chapter 1 starts with a history of the Asian American experience in the United States and discusses the tremendous changes for Asian Americans after 1965. A historical overview is highly instructive to show both the dramatic progress made by Asian Americans, as well as disturbing trends and animosities that continue to this day. Chapter 2 provides a demographic and socioeconomic profile of Asian Americans. This chapter will feature the latest data on settlement patterns, geographic dispersion, ethnic entrepreneurship, as well as a critical analysis of the popular "model minority" image of

Asian Americans today. Chapter 3 examines the highly touted success of Asian Americans in education and highlights several theories for this phenomenon. At the same time, Chapter 3 also looks beyond the generalized statistics and addresses several educational issues confronting Asian Americans in primary school (K–12) through college.

The book then shifts from the classroom to the workplace. Chapter 4 focuses the subtleties of discrimination in the workplace, which, upon close examination, are not so subtle at all. Chapter 5 confronts anti-Asian violence, probably the most important issue to confront Asian Americans today. Key to this chapter is a discussion of four factors that encourage and perpetuate anti-Asian hostility, along with a closer look at the volatile issue of Asian American and African American relations. Because much of the anti-Asian sentiment and violence stems from negative images of Asians in the media, Chapter 6 provides coverage and analysis of stereotypes of Asian Americans in film and other media. The chapter not only offers a historical perspective but also looks at very recent examples, and shows how Asian American media artists and activist groups are trying to raise awareness about these issues.

While certain images of Asian Americans are perpetuated in the media, the realities of Asian American life are constantly changing. Chapter 7 looks at Asian American families and identities, with particular emphasis on diversity and new transformations. Important cutting-edge issues such as identity formation, mental health concerns, interracial marriage, biracial Asian Americans, and gay and lesbian Asian Americans are included in this chapter. Lastly, Chapter 8 addresses the issue of Asian American political empowerment. The chapter begins with an overview of electoral and nonelectoral empowerment efforts by Asian Americans, and ends with an examination of the important role of Asian Americans in several recent national, state, and local elections.

PERSPECTIVE OF THE BOOK

This book focuses on some of the most important issues confronting Asian Americans since 1965. The issues raised here are significant because they are likely to continue to be seen in one form or another in the future. The strength of this book comes from highlighting each of the major issues within a broader historical context and from an interdisciplinary perspective. This book also draws attention to how various issues such as images in the media, anti-immigrant sentiment, and anti-Asian violence interrelate, and analyzes how the concepts of race, class, and gender intersect throughout the Asian American experience.

This book is deeply rooted in many of the ideals first articulated during the founding years of the Asian American Movement following the 1968 student strike at San Francisco State College (now San Francisco State University). One of the most important ideals that emerged from the student strike