

ASIAN AMERICA

Sociological and
Interdisciplinary Perspectives

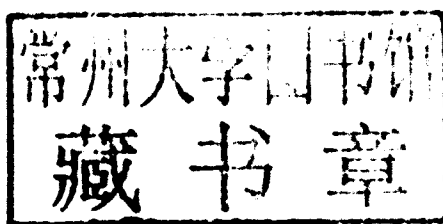
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Asian America

Sociological and Interdisciplinary
Perspectives

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ROBYN MAGALIT RODRIGUEZ



polity

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Foreword and Acknowledgments

This book is a labor of love. Labor in the sense that trying to represent social science perspectives on Asian American Studies is a daunting task, given the flourishing of quality scholarship over the past several years and the number of topics to represent. But it quickly became work in which we found great pleasure. Being able to take a bird's eye view of the field impressed upon us the important scholarship and debates within it.

Our goal has not been to summarize social science or even just sociological perspectives on Asian Americans. Instead, we put forth our view of how sociology and other social sciences connect to and rub against Asian American Studies and related work in critical race and ethnic studies. We do this along a number of theoretical and substantive topics. We seek to move forward the scholarship in this area by identifying what are the key debates and how to progress towards resolutions on them.

In some sense, this book has been a decade-long project for us. Each of us has been trained within sociology PhD programs and has been employed in sociology departments, even training future sociologists. Yet we also have studied within and been employed within American or Asian American Studies programs/departments in the West Coast, Midwest, and East Coast. This dual upbringing has made us acutely aware of the benefits but also gaps within any one particular school of thought. We see Asian Americans as not simply a fundamental population of the United States but as a necessary site, alongside other minority and immigrant groups, for elucidating social science questions on the nation, globalization, intersectional approaches to race and class, media, interpersonal solidarity and conflict, identity, and much more. As the neoliberal academy moves towards greater collaboration across departments/programs and demands more measurable "output" from scholars and teachers, we believe that recognizing the history and contributions of the study of Asian Americans across a variety of fields is all the more urgent.

This project came to be because of the foresight of Polity Press. We would like to thank Emma Longstaff for initiating this book and advancing this project. Special thanks also to Jonathan Skerrett for guiding us with a gentle but measured hand. Working with them both has been a pleasure. Co-authoring a book is a unique and special process. Pawan Dhingra was approached by Polity Press to propose a book and started drafting some of the chapters. Robyn Rodriguez joined to offer insights and draft other chapters. Together we have accomplished a piece neither of us could have done on our own.

This book is only possible because of a number of colleagues. With a book such as this, there are too many individual scholars to list for special acknowledgment, so we will not even try. In some respects, this entire book is an acknowledgment of the work they have done. We would like to give special recognition to our past and present

colleagues at Oberlin College, the Smithsonian Institution, Tufts University, Rutgers University, and the University of California, Davis. We would like to thank our families and close friends for putting up with yet another book project. Their support and enthusiasm around this project have made this all the more worthwhile.

Pawan Dhingra

Robyn Rodriguez

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1 Introduction

Asian Americans are overrepresented among college graduates, with 50 percent of Asian Americans age 25 and older having earned at least a bachelor's degree, compared to a quarter of the US population as a whole.¹ They are accomplished professionals in fields ranging from the sciences to the arts. They have a high rate of small-business ownership. They are seen as model workers. At the same time, a greater percentage of Asian Americans than non-Hispanic whites live in poverty, and Asian Americans are more likely than the US population overall to be uninsured.² A range of Asian Americans rely on public welfare programs, work in low-wage and segregated jobs (often owned by co-ethnics), encounter racial stereotypes as foreigners, suffer from untreated mental health diseases, and are victims of hate crimes.³

Yet, even with all of this variation and contradictions, it is not the multifaceted lives of Asian Americans alone that make them necessary subjects of study. The experiences of Asian Americans speak to more than just this group alone. Their lives provide insight into a host of broader topics that have been key topics of study. These topics include how race shapes people's lives; how immigrants gradually assimilate – or do not – to their surroundings; how transnationalism influences people's social and economic opportunities; how small groups come together or engage in conflict; how people self-identify; what leads to academic success and failure; and more. The goal of the book is to shed light on such general sociological questions through the experiences of Asian Americans.

Learning how Asian Americans experience these and other issues, moreover, tells us about the United States as a nation, for the nation is often understood based on how it treats its newcomers. According to the United States' self-proclaimed national creed as a nation of immigrants, all persons are welcome to make a new life here. But is there true equality in schools, the workplace, media, and elsewhere for all persons, regardless of country of origin, religion, gender, or other social categories? Can the nation become truly multicultural, or will the cultural definition of the United States remain Anglo-Saxon and Christian? How does the United States' pursuit of global capitalist ascendancy impact immigrants and minorities? Do immigration laws give immigrants control over their lives upon entering the United States, or do they privilege the interests of others? Does growing economic globalization create more transnational lives? How have racism and empire been key aspects of American history and contemporary life? In other words, the challenges and opportunities that Asian Americans face inform the true nature of the nation, and these are central issues that this book grapples with.

And of course, the study of Asian Americans matters for Asian Americans themselves and those who are interested in their well-being. A text that centers on the lives of Asian Americans affirms their experiences while also informing the human social condition more broadly.

Table 1.1 *Population size*

Group	Population, 2010
United States	311,591,919
Asian	15,020,419
Cambodian	253,830
Chinese	3,361,879
Filipino	2,538,325
Hmong	241,308
Indian	2,908,204
Japanese	756,898
Korean	1,449,876
Laotian	186,013
Vietnamese	1,669,447
Other Asian	1,079,820

Source: United States Census Bureau; American Community Survey, 2010 American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates, Table S0201⁴

Who are Asian Americans?

The number of Asian Americans has been increasing at a quick pace, due to both continued immigration and children born in the United States. According to the 2010 US Census, “The Asian alone population and the Asian alone-or-in-combination population both grew substantially between 2000 and 2010, increasing in size by 43 percent and 46 percent, respectively. These populations grew more than any other race group in 2010.”⁵ There were more than 15 million Asian Americans (not even including multiracial Asian Americans) as of 2010, comprising about 5 percent of the US population. As Table 1.1 indicates, Asian American groups range widely in their numbers, with five groups (Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Korean) comprising well over a million or even two million individuals each.

“Asian Americans” refers to individuals living in the United States who immigrated from (e.g. first-generation immigrants) or whose ancestors immigrated from (e.g. second-generation immigrants and beyond) Asian countries and Asian diasporas (i.e. settlements in other countries). Asian Americans consist of Bangladeshi, Burmese, Chinese, Cambodian, Filipino, Hmong, Indian, Indonesian, Japanese, Korean, Nepalese, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Taiwanese, Thai, and Vietnamese Americans, among others originating from Asia. As will be discussed in chapter 3, Asians have lived in the United States in large numbers since the 1800s. Historically, scholarship on Asian Americans focused on the largest groups to first immigrate, namely Chinese and Japanese Americans. Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino Americans drove the Asian-American Movement of the 1960s, which gave rise to Asian American Studies and increased research and writing about the Asian American experience. The Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 altered the demographics of the United States and precipitated a much larger immigration of Asians. Asian-American demographics have continued to change since then with continued voluntary immigration

and also due to war and imperialism. Southeast Asians have arrived mostly since the 1970s as refugees and as family members sponsored by those refugees.

Defining terms

The term “Asian American” is often extended to be “Asian American and Pacific Islanders” in order to indicate their connections to each other. However, it is important not to conflate these groups. In this book, we use the term “Asian American” and mean it in an expansive way. Pacific Islanders receive attention in this book, although not to the same degree as other Asian Americans. Arab Americans also receive attention, even though they are not traditionally considered to be Asian American. The definitions of racial groups change over time, with some groups included and other groups excluded, depending on social and political contexts. For instance, South Asian Americans were classified as nonwhite in the US Census over the decades until 1970 when they were classified as white, and then in 1980 they were newly classified as Asian American after political lobbying by the community.

When one says “Asian American,” it has little resonance for most people beyond some standard stereotypes: Asian Americans are considered hard-working, strong in math and sciences, exotic (for women), asexual (for men), possibly threatening (economically), and foreign. Yet, when one speaks of Chinese Americans, Filipino Americans, Vietnamese Americans, and so on, more nuanced images come to mind. In this text, we will attend to both pan-ethnic (i.e. referring to trends across Asian American ethnic groups) and ethnic-specific trends. While the differences between groups receive recognition, their similarities are emphasized because they too shape individuals’ lives and illustrate how Asian Americans experience key social phenomena (e.g. migration, culture, race, employment, media, etc.) in comparable (not necessarily identical) ways, which in turn illustrates how Asian Americans and other groups are impacted by and in turn influence the nation and global trends.

Sociological and interdisciplinary approaches

To attend to the range of issues that Asian Americans inspire, we need to take a heterogeneous research approach. The book privileges the social sciences, in particular sociology, but also draws from other fields. In particular, it is informed by the interdisciplinary field of Asian American Studies.

Sociology as a discipline refers to the study of the social causes of why and how humans think and behave. Why do we do what we do? Our biological instincts may guide us. Philosophical arguments about ethics perhaps suggest to us certain options over others as morally appropriate. Monetary constraints can often dictate our choices. But sociologists, more so than other social scientists and humanities scholars, focus primarily on social causes of our actions and attitudes. Social causes refer to how individuals, groups, and social institutions – such as one’s family, the labor market, groups, the media, the nation, etc. – impact individuals and are impacted by us. Sociologists place us, everyday individuals, within a social context in order to understand how we interact with our environments as well as how our environments came to be in the first place.

As we consider the social dimensions to people’s behavior, we build up what noted

sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959) called the “sociological imagination.” According to Mills, the “sociological imagination” challenges us to see ourselves not simply as unique individuals with particular life histories. Instead, we should recognize that we are part of social groups and spaces and embody certain roles. We experience our families, for instance, through our roles as daughters, siblings, fathers, and so on, rather than as individuals. Once we recognize this, we better appreciate the social environment that is outside of us but which influences our lives, and which we act back on.

A sociological imagination is one that recognizes that individuals’ lives are crucially shaped by social institutions (defined below) like media, the government, the family, and the economy. These institutions place individuals in positions of relative privilege and/or disadvantage based on social class, race and ethnicity, and gender. Even though we have distinctive biographies and unique identities, institutions shape our lives and we participate in their transformation. Asian American Studies analyzes how Asian Americans experience institutions and even how the formation of institutions has been shaped by Asian Americans.

Inequalities, institutions, and identities

As we develop our sociological imagination, sociologists concern themselves with three key, interconnected dimensions of social life central to this book: inequalities, institutions, and identities. Social inequality occurs when resources are not distributed equally but instead tend to favor one group over another due in part to historical and/or contemporary unfair treatment or opportunities. Sociologists attend to national, racial, gender, class, sexual, age, (dis)ability, and other bases of inequalities. Asian Americans, like African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans, can experience inequalities relative to whites. This can take place in the labor market, such as when Asian Americans encounter limited opportunities for upper management despite ample experience and education (i.e. they face the “glass ceiling”). This can take place in the media, such as with limited and often stereotypical portrayals. This can take place in politics, such as when Asian Americans must defend themselves from being attacked as being un-American by virtue of having Asian roots. And so on. Sociologists and scholars of Asian American Studies are committed to advancing social justice, which requires unearthing the causes and consequences of social inequality.

The ways that Asian Americans experience inequalities depend on their gender, sexuality, ethnicity, class, and other social statuses. Asian-American women encounter different stereotypes than men, for instance. To date, same-sex marriage is not recognized at the federal level, which impacts Asian-American gays and lesbians. Post-9/11, South Asian and Arab Americans have faced greater scrutiny than have other ethnic groups within Asian America. Economic status, such as differences in the labor market and school system, is fundamental to a group’s well-being. Asian Americans with different education levels and skill sets will have varying advantages and disadvantages.

The primary way that sociologists analyze inequalities is within social institutions, as noted above. Social institutions refer to a society’s publicly agreed-upon ways to take care of its members’ needs. One can think of social institutions this way: as an individual, all one needs to survive is food, clothing, and shelter. Yet, for a society

to survive and prosper, there must be a set of established means for individuals to pursue their interests and get along together. For example, there must be a means to raise children in the main norms and expectations of the society. This takes place within the institution of the family. There must be a means to train people for the occupations that the society will need. This takes place within the institutions of education. There must be a means to organize the contrasting needs of large numbers of individuals. This takes place within the institution of politics.

Sociologists analyze how social institutions are constructed, what functions they intend to serve, who wins, and who loses in how they are run, and how individuals engage in them and possibly change them. Because institutions are so central to how individuals relate to their environment, much of sociology is dedicated to understanding them. This book attends to the main institutions relevant to the study of Asian Americans. We attend to possible inequalities but, especially, to how Asian Americans experience institutions generally. We consider how Asian Americans experience family life, how they take part in politics, how they practice religion, how they fare at school, how they are framed by the media, and more. Asian Americans inform how these institutions work from the vantage point of an ethnic/racial minority position. For example, given how Asian Americans practice their religion and are treated as religious people, what do we learn about how culturally tolerant the nation is? From there, we can consider how well institutions are serving society's needs and what changes should be made to address possible problems.

Within institutions, we come to learn about ourselves and develop our self-identities. How one sees oneself as an Asian American is one's identity (or more accurately, one identity). Identity is a significant issue for all persons because everyone is a member of multiple sets of social groups (e.g. a family, school, workplace, political party, church, etc.) but has special relevance for racial minorities because of the ways US society has long categorized people. Asian Americans can identify with their ethnic group (i.e. Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Vietnamese), their pan-ethnic group (i.e. Asian American), their religious group, and more. We develop our identities based on influences from our families, the media, schools, and other social institutions. So, it is necessary to know how these institutions refer to Asian Americans. Other social categories, such as sexuality or gender, also shape our identities. Queer, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Asian Americans understand what it means to be Asian American differently than do straight Asian Americans. Our self-identities are central to our major lifestyle decisions, such as whom to befriend, where to live, how to raise our children, what rituals we perform, and so on.

Various complications arise in the identity development of racial minorities. How much choice do visible minorities have in their identity selections? For instance, can a Chinese American choose not to identify with his Chinese background if others keep referring to it? How do people of multiracial background choose to identify and form relations with others? Similarly, how do adopted Asian Americans make sense of their race if it differs from their adoptive parents? Can people (people who are non-Asian as well as those who are) bring together conflicting identities, such as "ethnic" and "American," or are these kept apart? Do Asian Americans identify with only their ethnicity or also pan-ethnically? Answers to these questions inform what motivates individuals and how racial dynamics are shifting. While one chapter in this book concentrates on identity, the issues surrounding identity permeate multiple chapters.

Race, culture, and power

The three key elements of social life – inequalities, institutions, and identity – comprise the major parameters of the sociological study of Asian America. This book will examine how Asian Americans negotiate with and make sense of institutions (like the media, schools, global markets, the government, the family, etc.) while positioned as an immigrant minority group in American society. As the book explores these elements, two main dimensions of Asian America will receive priority: race and culture. Race and culture shape the context through which Asian Americans (and others) experience inequalities, institutions, and identities. Such an examination shows how race works beyond the black-white binary that currently defines race in the United States. That is, though racial power inequalities as typically discussed are only between blacks and whites, in reality race is more complex. This book aims to broaden our understanding to illustrate how race implicates people who are and who are not black or white. This is not to suggest that race more than other factors (e.g. class, gender, etc.) shapes the lives of individual Asian Americans. But across Asian America, common racial background leads to some degree of shared experiences. Elucidating those experiences informs the power of race as it intersects with other social categories.

Tied to race is colonialism and empire. The United States historically and currently has been a colonial or neocolonial state. This is seen in a series of historical acts, including the genocide of Native Americans, slavery of Africans, wars with Latin Americans, recruitment and mistreatment of Asian labor, internment of Japanese Americans, and wars and active colonization abroad (e.g. Philippines, Puerto Rico, Hawai'i). While US laws and institutions have become more equal and facilitated the great achievements of many minorities, including of course Asian Americans, this current state-driven inequality remains relevant.

Also, cultural differences matter greatly within the three topics of inequality, institutions, and identity. Asian immigrants make up the majority of contemporary Asian Americans. They and their descendants often have distinct cultural sensibilities and practices. Culture also matters because the nation is a cultural, not just legal, entity. As such not all groups find equal acceptance of their cultural backgrounds, especially as they stress transnational cultural ties (e.g. in terms of religion or rituals). Culture also informs the extent to which “Asian American” exists as a meaningful entity. While the term “Asian America” suggests a single entity, it is important to keep in mind the significant differences within the population. There are not only ethnic cultural differences but also differences of generation, income, citizenship status, and more. To what extent does “Asian America” really exist, or is it more appropriate to speak of a variety of groups with only a little in common? This book examines this question rather than takes for granted a cohesive population.

Perspectives on Asian America

In studying how Asian Americans and others experience these topics, scholars have devised certain theories to piece together observed trends. The theories explain how the three major topics of inequality, institutions, and identity relate to one another. Reviewing these theories elucidates what kinds of information scholars look for

and what assumptions they bring to the study of Asian Americans. This book draws extensively from these theoretical approaches in order to explain the causes and consequences of the experiences of Asian Americans.

Assimilation theory

Within sociology, the most prominent perspective on immigrants' adaptation to a new environment is assimilation theory. Assimilation occurs when an immigrant group's differences with the mainstream dissipate. This can happen as ethnic items become popular in the nation (e.g. "Chinese food"), so that consuming them does not appear foreign to most residents. More often, assimilation occurs as immigrant communities lose their distinctiveness and become more like the majority as they adopt dominant culture and social structure, akin to Anglo-conformity (Gordon 1964). They become socialized (or re-socialized as adults) within mainstream institutions, such as schools, popular media, civil society, and religion. As immigrant groups learn English, shop at popular clothing and grocery stores, befriend people outside their group, and so on, they gradually assimilate. Descendants of immigrants start to see mainstream culture as "normal" and may conceive of their ethnic background as strange or inferior. This assimilation need not be intentional. Instead, it occurs as immigrant groups seek better opportunities for themselves and their children, which are believed to be outside of one's ethnic group and within the mainstream (Alba and Nee 2003; Salins 1997).

According to assimilation theorists, this integration is possible because race matters less today than in the past, as evidenced by the numerous legal protections against discrimination and the general improvement in racial attitudes (Alba and Nee 2003). So according to assimilation theory, the labor market, schools, restaurants, and other spaces do not treat immigrants differently because of their ethnic origin, which enables Asian Americans to become a full part of the nation. Under these conditions, the main (not only) obstacle preventing assimilation, according to those who adopt the assimilation framework, is groups' own lack of effort to culturally and structurally assimilate.

Assimilation into the host society originally was framed as not only inevitable but also prescriptive (Kivisto 2005). In other words, those who adopted an assimilation standpoint believed that immigrants *should* gradually abandon parochial interests, like their ethnicity, and embrace the modern, American lifestyle in which people supposedly are judged, based on their accomplished categories, such as education level, occupational status, marital status, and so on. Assimilation theory assumes a mostly meritocratic United States. Such an adaptation was seen as in the best interests of the immigrant group in the nation. Today, assimilation theorists have dropped the moralistic tone. Still, there is an implied belief in the benefits of assimilation for immigrants.

Diverse modes of incorporation

Other scholars, however, disagree with both the likelihood and benefits of straight cultural and structural assimilation for ethnic minorities. Instead, immigrants can follow different trajectories based on their "mode of incorporation" into the country

(Portes and Rumbaut 2006). According to this approach, immigrant groups encounter a *segmented* assimilation, that is, they can assimilate into different segments of society beyond simply into the white middle class assumed within assimilation theory (Portes and Zhou 1993). For instance, they may live in inner cities with poorer African Americans or Latinos as neighbors than middle-class whites. Assimilation can look different in this context than normally imagined. According to these theorists, it may be to an immigrant group's advantage not to assimilate if the local group they would assimilate into does not often advance within school or in the labor market. Instead, groups often benefit from maintaining their ethnicity. Ethnic groups can achieve mobility by relying on members' assistance, values, and employment opportunities. Strong ethnic ties also can facilitate children's success within institutions like education, the labor market, and more (Gibson 1988; Waters 1999; Zhou and Bankston 1998). Maintaining transnational ties to one's homeland can help groups adjust to their local surroundings (Smith 2006). Otherwise, groups could be at risk of a "downward" trajectory (Gans 1992).

Despite its differences from standard assimilation theory, this emphasis on groups' diverse outcomes is similar to it in that it expects ethnic groups' gradual "incorporation" into the host society. As Portes and his co-authors write about the second generation, "the central question is not whether the second generation will assimilate to American society, but to what segment of that society it will assimilate" (Portes, Fernandez-Kelly, and Haller 2005: 1000). There are few, if any, entrenched barriers, such as racism, that cannot be overcome with the right resources (e.g. community oversight, educational support).

In addition to downplaying race as a pervasive constraint on minorities, these various assimilation paradigms stress the significance of culture in determining economic and social outcomes. Over time, immigrants who culturally assimilate akin to previous European immigrants are expected to become economically stable. They may hold onto certain cultural elements, such as traditional foods on special occasions, but these become mostly "symbolic" and ceremonial, rather than influential on people's lives (Alba 1990; Waters 1990).

According to these first two theoretical perspectives, groups gradually become more like their host society along key dimensions, including educational attainment, residential location, language preference, self-identity, marital partner, and so on. If poor immigrants have access to supportive co-ethnics (i.e. people who share their ethnic background) and do not encounter too many obstacles (e.g. discrimination), they too can achieve mobility. The major difference between the theories is that segmented assimilation stresses that the road to economic stability often drives through strong ties to one's ethnic group, whereas standard assimilation stresses the benefits of letting go of these ties. And as stressed within segmented assimilation theory, without sufficient support from co-ethnics, the second generation may assimilate in a downward fashion, marked by limited mobility (Portes and Rumbaut 2001).

Racial formation theory

In contrast to these assimilationist perspectives, other sociologists and those in Ethnic Studies highlight the significance of race and inequality facing ethnic minorities. The racial formation perspective argues that race is fundamental to how society

is organized and so continues to matter for minorities, even if they are economically secure (Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Omi and Winant 1994). Whites gain materially and psychologically in all sorts of ways, such as when attaining a mortgage or paying for a car, at the expense of minorities (Lipsitz 1998). Racial formation theory draws attention to how minorities are racialized, that is, how they are socially defined and treated as racial groups rather than as individuals. This racialization changes with historical and contextual circumstances based on political and social circumstances. The way groups are framed suits the white dominant establishment (e.g. government, the military, corporations). For instance, Chinese Americans went from “good” minorities during World War II to “bad” minorities post-World War II as China became increasingly communist and seemed a threat to the government. Japanese Americans switched from “bad” to “good” during this same time period. Our everyday interactions also reflect the power of race. We may talk to someone or even shake the person’s hands differently, based on her/his race.

Racism is allowed to continue because racial ideologies make it socially permissible. For instance, even an ideology of “color-blindness,” which seems to downplay the relevance of race, limits minorities (Bonilla-Silva 2003; Omi and Winant 1994). It suggests that we should be “blind” to race, should ignore it, and that the real problem is those who keep talking about it, as well as programs like affirmative action. So, minorities who complain about racism become blamed for perpetuating racial differences. Indeed, some might suggest that, since the United States has elected the first African-American president, it has truly achieved a post-racial, color-blind society. However, sociologists and other scholarly critics point out that, even with his election, race continues to organize American life and cannot be ignored (Okamura 2011).

The racial formation perspective helps explain trends that assimilation theory either cannot or that it overlooks. For instance, even as more minorities appear on television, they remain in often stereotypical depictions (Davé, Nishime, and Oren 2005). People’s attitudes to race might have become more benevolent, therefore supporting assimilation theory assumptions about a merit-based United States, but that does not mean that minorities have ample opportunities. The US prison population has become overwhelmingly black and brown compared to the general population, for example, and not because those populations started committing more and more crime (Alexander 2010). Meanwhile, even as Asian Americans and Latinos have become more welcome within urban development, welfare laws discriminate against immigrants (Fujiwara 2008). Nor is this mistreatment relegated to poor immigrants. Wealthy Asian Americans experience barriers to full inclusion, due to racist and/or culturally prejudiced attitudes from the majority. According to this perspective, middle-class Asian Americans are “a part” of the mainstream but “apart” from it (Kibria 2002).

The “model minority” stereotype exemplifies this dynamic. It argues that Asian Americans succeed due to their Asian values of hard work and family support. In fact, Asian Americans’ success in schools and workplaces may be due in part to such racial stereotypes rather than a sign that stereotypes are fading (Dhingra 2007). But, within this stereotype Asian-American men and women are characterized as sexually deviant (i.e. Asian-American men are figured as effeminate; Asian-American women, as hyper-sexualized), overly passive, and apolitical. White elites within the capitalist structure benefit the most from this institutionalized discrimination. According to

the racial formation perspective, a lack of equality for immigrants is not their problem but that of the state and institutions, which promote inequality.

The broader theme within the racial formation perspective is a lack of trust in the nation-state and its institutions to promote full equality among racial groups. The United States, like other western, hyper-capitalist nations, is neither the “land of opportunity” nor even a benign force relative to ethnic minorities. Instead, according to critics, it is an imperial force that wages wars mostly in Third World nations and also engages in business practices that suit established interests more than minorities at home (Melamed 2006). Moreover, the racial formation perspective recognizes that, from its inception, the United States has been a country that was founded on white supremacist rationale. The fact that naturalization, for example, was restricted to only whites, or that slavery was actually permitted in the US Constitution is evidence that race has organized American society. Even when these laws have changed, it is because of struggles by minorities and/or in response to US foreign and economic interests. Legal reforms do not fully eradicate the racializing logics. Immigrant minorities may do well economically, but they must suffer through greater hurdles and indignities en route. For instance, Filipino-American men have attained a moderate middle-class status through working for the US navy. But, they can be relegated to subservient, emasculating positions in the process (Espiritu 2003).

A racial formation perspective also helps explain how immigrant minorities respond to racist interactions. Asian Americans, even those raised in the United States, accentuate their cultural and social commonalities with one another rather than their ties to the mainstream (Dhingra 2007; Purkayastha 2005; Tuan 1998). Even if ethnic minorities live in mostly white neighborhoods, they often seek out one another for solidarity. People identify with their ethnicity rather than as simply “American.” These trends contradict predictions based on an assimilation perspective.

Pan-ethnicity

The growing pan-ethnicity among Asian Americans serves as another challenge to assimilation theory. Pan-ethnicity refers to Asian Americans’ increasing collaboration and identification along racial, rather than only along ethnic, lines. As pan-ethnicity occurs, group boundaries start to change, with a new group (i.e. “Asian American”) forming. Pan-ethnicity can result from a shared racial formation among ethnic groups but also from a sense of cultural connections, and so is not reducible to racial formation. Asian Americans identify pan-ethnically due to a shared culture (e.g. Confucian heritage), shared categorization by others (e.g. stereotypes of “Asians” as all foreigners), shared institutions (e.g. pan-ethnic student organizations that promote this identification), and shared interests (e.g. to eradicate racism). Understanding why pan-ethnicity happens, when it takes place or does not, and how strong it is informs the process of group identity formation more broadly.

Global political economy

The increasing interdependency between countries also complicates immigrants’ adaptation. Globalization refers to the connections between nations economically, culturally, politically, and socially. For example, the fact that we learn about what is

happening on the other side of the planet instantaneously through the internet, or the fact that most of the products we buy are made in another country is evidence that our lives are being shaped by forces beyond our country. A global political economy perspective draws attention to the relations between nations that spurs migration (Baldoz 2011). Because developing countries do not have enough employment opportunities for their population, or the jobs pay too little or options for upward mobility are limited, individuals seek fortunes elsewhere. But individuals rarely just migrate anywhere. One's country's relationship with other nations influences where one migrates to. For instance, colonial histories between countries create lasting pathways of immigration. Also, to develop their economies, countries will train citizens for jobs in other countries. Migrants are then expected to send back money or expertise to their homeland (Rodriguez 2010). Would-be migrants hear of jobs in a particular country through state- or corporate-sponsored advertisements or through their personal networks. In other words, to understand immigration, one must understand the relationships between nations.

A global political economy perspective downplays the assimilationist model of immigration and adaptation. Assimilation theory frames migrants as independent actors who seek out a new country to make their living and settle their families. In contrast, a global political economy perspective highlights the sustained ties between migrants and their homeland. Immigration is not so much an act of pure volition as a consequence of global economic and political factors within which immigrants make calculated decisions. Within this perspective, it makes sense that immigrants maintain transnational ties to their homeland. Transnationalism originated as a topic of study as a critique of assimilation theory's assumption that one's adopted nation defined immigrants' subjective and material experiences. Instead, immigrants can live across borders. For instance, they may both receive and send money from and to a homeland, follow the political and cultural changes of the nation, visit home often, and more. Rather than consider immigrants' adaptation relative to the United States, as is the case within assimilation theory, it may be more relevant to consider it within a broader diaspora or widely dispersed community.

A global political economy perspective is often combined with other ones. For instance, global dynamics connect to racial formation processes. In such cases, analysts frame international relations within a context of global power inequality, with developed nations utilizing immigrants from developing nations to their advantage (Parreñas 2001). Yet more recently, scholars have come to analyze immigrants' transnational lives within an overall assimilation paradigm. Immigrants' commitments abroad need not detract from their general integration within the United States (Levitt and Waters 2002). Transnational individuals can follow both homeland and US politics, for instance. Experiences in the homeland can give individuals the cultural tools, such as pride in their background, to help them feel supported when in the United States (Smith 2006). So, while transnationalism and globalization are receiving increasing attention, what they mean for immigrant groups is not settled.

A case study of theoretical convergence

A single case illuminates how different theories lead to distinct conclusions. Asian-American women are closely associated with garment manufacturing in New York