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Asian American Women and Gender

Edited with introductions by

Franklin Ng

California State University – Fresno



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Asians in America

*The Peoples of East, Southeast, and South Asia
in American Life and Culture*

Series Editor

Franklin Ng

California State University – Fresno

A GARLAND SERIES

Contents of the Series

1. The History and Immigration of Asian Americans
2. Asian American Family Life and Community
3. Asian American Women and Gender
4. Adaptation, Acculturation, and Transnational Ties
Among Asian Americans
5. Asian American Interethnic Relations and Politics
6. Asian American Issues Relating to Labor, Economics,
and Socioeconomic Status

Series Introduction

As the fastest growing segment of the U.S. population since the mid-1960s, Asian Americans encompass Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Asian Indians, Pakistanis, Sri Lankans, Bangladeshis, Vietnamese, Lao, Hmong, Cambodians, Iu-Mien, and others. Their remarkably diverse ethnic, social, historical, and religious backgrounds and experiences enrich the cultural fabric of the United States. The study of Asian Americans offers many insights on such issues as immigration, refugee policy, transnationalism, return migration, cultural citizenship, ethnic communities, community building, identity and group formation, panethnicity, race relations, gender and class, entrepreneurship, employment, representation, politics, adaptation, and acculturation.

This collection of articles presents contemporary research that examines such issues as the growing political power of Asian Americans, the empowerment of emigrant women, the rise of youth gangs, relations between ethnic groups, the migration of highly educated Asians, and other important subjects. The writings are drawn from a wide variety of disciplines to provide a broad but informative array of insights on this fascinating and diverse population. The volumes give in-depth exposure to important issues linked to the different communities and impart a greater understanding of the Asian Americans in the United States.

This series consists of six volumes, and its coverage cuts across many disciplines. The first volume focuses on the history and immigration of Asian Americans. The second volume treats various themes relating to Asian American family life and community. The third volume is complementary and considers vital issues pertaining to Asian American women and gender. A fourth volume explores the processes of adaptation and acculturation, as well as the continuing significance of transnational ties for Asian Americans. The fifth volume addresses the complex subject of interethnic relations and Asian American politics. Finally, the last volume examines issues associated with labor, employment, entrepreneurship, enclave economies, and socioeconomic status.

In preparing this anthology, I have had help from many individuals. I would especially like to acknowledge assistance from Leo Balk, Paul Finkelman, and Carole Puccino. Their patience, encouragement, and guidance helped to ensure the success of this project.

Volume Introduction

Asian American women have shaped immigrant families, reared new generations, and pioneered significant changes in their communities. However, studies of women have in the past focused on white, middle-class women. Even when there have been studies about women of color, the major emphasis has been on African American or Hispanic American women. In previous studies about the Asian American experience, the tendency has been to spotlight men and to marginalize women. Only gradually has more attention been devoted to Asian American women in families, work, education, community, and society. Recent scholarship favors a women-centered perspective, showing how Asian American women operate within the intersections of race, gender, and class.

In the history of Asians in America, women have had to contend with the matrix of race, gender, and class. Discriminatory laws targeted them and denied them admission. For example, the Page Law of 1875 was passed to curb the entry of Chinese and Asian prostitutes, criminals, and contract laborers. The law was so zealously enforced that it barred even those Chinese women who had a right to enter the United States. Ultimately this had a harmful effect against the formation of Chinese American families. To cite another example, the subsequent Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had a class bias, for it denied entry to the wives of laborers. The wives and daughters of merchants, however, were eligible for admission. At the same time, Asian American women had to contend with patriarchal attitudes in both Asia and America. In Chinese society, for example, the birth of a boy was received with greater welcome than that of a girl. It meant that both the family and the family surname could be perpetuated into the future according to a patrilineal orientation. Sons might also be favored with more resources from within the family. Thus, funds were expended to educate them, while daughters would not receive comparable treatment. The same was true in inheriting property. After all, according to traditional attitudes, Chinese women would be "lost" as they married out of their natal families into that of their husbands. In other Asian American groups, the challenges of women dealing with race, gender, and class could also be cited, as they faced issues of subordination, inequality, discrimination, control over resources, and the use of power.

Esther Ngan-ling Chow explains why a feminist consciousness among Asian American women has been slow to develop. Because of their ethnic diversity,

predominantly immigrant background, and concerns about discrimination, Asian American women have been more prone to join in common cause with Asian American men in activist movements. Oftentimes, they feel that on matters of class, gender, and race, they have more similarities with women of color than with middle-class feminists. Chalsa Loo observes that there is much to gain from the women's movement, but it is hard to mobilize the low income women in Chinatown. They must simultaneously cope with formidable barriers of race, class, gender, language, and culture. Susie Ling gives an account of the rise of the Asian American women's movement in Los Angeles and describes its range of involvement in different activities such as the antiwar movement and community organization. While the women were conscious of feminist issues, they seldom joined with white women's organizations.

That Asian American women play an important role in their communities, beyond the confines of their families, is a theme that is emphasized by Sylvia Junko Yanigisako and Nazli Kibria. Yanigisako points out that women-centered kin networks help to promote communication and interdependence in the Japanese American community. Kibria observes that immigrant women networks in the Vietnamese community help to facilitate the exchange of social and economic resources and to mediate disputes within families. At the same time, the women support a patriarchal social structure because they believe it preserves parental authority and promises greater economic security for the future.

Asian American women are often employed within both the family and the labor market. Kwang Chung Kim and Won Moo Hurh describe how Korean immigrant wives, many of whom are educated, are working full-time and also performing the domestic household tasks. For Korean women to be employed outside the home is a new role, and it may lead to changes among Korean-American families in the future. Evelyn Nakano Glenn also examines the changing roles of Asian American women within the family. Using an institutional framework, she traces how Chinese American women work and family patterns have responded over time to different political and economic conditions. Haya Stier provides a broad perspective by looking at the labor market participation and outcomes for Asian women from six different groups.

More recently, Southeast Asian refugees have arrived in the United States. Both women and men must adjust to new circumstances in a different kind of society with different assumptions about family and the individual. George M. Scott Jr. reveals how the traditional practice of bride theft among the Hmong from Laos has led to conflict with U.S. law. Sally Peterson demonstrates how Hmong women are recording the new experiences that they have encountered in their story cloths or *paj ntab*. Fashioned by needlework, the textile art depicts themes as varied as war and flight to courtship and marriage. Interesting comparisons and contrasts can be made between women and quilting, and Hmong women and their story cloths.

Asian American women have also blazed new paths and acted as catalysts for change. Lorraine Dong examines the background of second generation Chinese American women who violated convention by venturing into nightclub entertainment as singers and dancers. Although they might be talented, they always had to struggle with racist and sexist stereotypes. An article about Maya Lin, the designer of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, chronicles how a young woman gradually became aware of the

interplay of race, ethnicity, and gender in the harsh attacks that were directed against her. Despite the many questions impugning her ability and her character, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial today has won wide acclaim and has become the most popular monument in Washington, D.C.

Exploring issues about gender and sexuality for Asian American women can lead to topics such as identity politics, lesbianism, and homosexuality. Dana Y. Takagi considers the implications of gay, lesbian, and bisexual identities for Asian Americans and their communities. Asian American parents seldom discuss sexuality with their children. How then do they deal with the discovery that their offspring are gays or lesbians? Alice Y. Hom reports on the reactions of some parents when they are confronted with such disclosures. Finally, Martin F. Manalansan IV explores the divergent voices within the gay Filipino community in New York. He is inclined to believe that the Asian American gay community will not evolve in a unilinear fashion and mature into a kind of monolithic group. Rather, he expects that there will always be fluidity, leading to an array of different groupings and identities constantly in flux.

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Asian American Women
and Gender

THE DEVELOPMENT OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN

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This article examines the social circumstances, both current and past, that have affected the development and transformation of feminist consciousness among Asian American women. Gender, race, class, and culture all influenced the relative lack of participation of Asian American women in the mainstream feminist movement in the United States. It concludes that Asian American women have to come to terms with their multiple identities and define feminist issues from multiple dimensions. By incorporating race, class, and cultural issues along with gender concerns, a transcendent feminist consciousness that goes beyond these boundaries may develop.

Like other women of color, Asian American women as a group have neither been included in the predominantly white middle-class feminist movement, nor have they begun collectively to identify with it (Chia 1983; Chow forthcoming; Dill 1983; Loo and Ong 1982; Yamada 1981). Although some Asian American women have participated in social movements within their communities or in the larger society, building ties with white feminists and other women of color is a recent phenomenon for Asian American women. Since Asian American women are a relatively small group in the United States, their invisibility and contribution to the feminist movement in the larger society may seem insignificant.¹ Furthermore, ethnic diversity among Asian American women serves as a barrier to organizing and makes it difficult for these women to identify themselves collectively

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as a group. Because approximately half of Asian American women are foreign-born, their lack of familiarity with the women's movement in the United States and their preoccupation with economic survival limit their feminist involvement. The use of demographic factors such as size, ethnic diversity, and nativity, without an examination of structural conditions, such as gender, race, class, and culture, will not permit an adequate understanding of the extent of feminist activism of Asian women in the United States.

What are the social conditions that have hindered Asian American women from developing a feminist consciousness, a prerequisite for political activism in the feminist movement? From a historical and structural perspective, this article argues that the feminist consciousness of Asian American women has been limited by their location in society and social experiences. A broader perspective is needed to understand the development of feminist consciousness among Asian American women who are subject to cross-group pressures.

The intent of this article is primarily conceptual, describing how gender, race, class, and culture intersect in the lives of Asian American women and how their experiences as women have affected the development of feminist consciousness. The ideas are a synthesis of legal documents, archival materials, and census statistics; participant observation in the civil rights movement, feminist movement, Asian American groups, and Asian American organizations since the mid-1960s; interviews and conversations with Asian American feminists and leaders; and letters, oral histories, ethnic newspapers, organizational newsletters, films, and other creative writings by and about Asian American women.

GENDER CONSCIOUSNESS: PRECURSOR OF FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

Gender consciousness is an awareness of one's self as having certain gender characteristics and an identification with others who occupy a similar position in the sex-gender structure. In the case of women, an awareness of femaleness and an identification with other women can lead to an understanding of gender power relations and the institutional pressures and socialization processes that create and maintain these power relations (Weitz 1982). Ultimately, gender consciousness can bring about the development of feminist conscious-

ness and the formation of group solidarity necessary for collective action in the struggle for gender equality (Christiansen-Ruffman 1982; Green 1979; Houston 1982).

Being female, awareness of gender roles, and identification with other women are the major ingredients in building gender consciousness. However, it is necessary to understand the social contexts in which the gender consciousness of Asian American women has developed. Domination by men is a commonly shared oppression for Asian American women. These women have been socialized to accept their devaluation, restricted roles for women, psychological reinforcement of gender stereotypes, and a subordinate position within Asian communities as well as in the society at large (Chow 1985). Within Asian communities, the Asian family (especially the immigrant one) is characterized by a hierarchy of authority based on sex, age, and generation, with young women at the lowest level, subordinate to father-husband-brother-son. The Asian family is also characterized by well-defined family roles, with father as a breadwinner and decision maker and mother as a compliant wife and homemaker. While they are well protected by the family because of their filial piety and obedience, women are socially alienated from their Asian sisters. Such alienation may limit the development of gender and feminist consciousness and render Asian women politically powerless in achieving effective communication and organization, and in building bonds with other women of color and white feminists.

In studying the majority of women activists who participated in various movements for oppressed groups, Blumberg (1982) found that participation in these movements affected the development of gender consciousness among women, which later, because of sexism in the movements, was transformed into a related but distinctive state of awareness—a feminist consciousness. For Asian American women, cross-group allegiances can hinder the development of feminist consciousness or expand it into a more universal view. Women who consider racism and classism to be so pervasive that they cannot embrace feminism at the same level may subordinate women's rights to other social concerns, thus limiting the development of feminist consciousness. Women who are aware of multiple oppressions and who advocate taking collective action to supersede racial, gender, and class differences may develop a feminist consciousness that transcends gender, racial, class, and cultural boundaries.

AWAKENING FEMINIST CONSCIOUSNESS

In the wake of the civil rights movement in the early 1960s and the feminist movement in the mid-1960s, Asian American women, following the leads of black and Hispanic women, began to organize (Chow forthcoming; Ling and Mazumdar 1983; Lott and Pian 1979; G. Wong 1980). Initially, some better educated Asian American women formed women's groups to meet personal and family needs and to provide services to their respective organizations and ethnic communities. These groups, few in number and with little institutionalized leadership, were traditional and informal in nature, and usually supported philanthropic concerns (G. Wong 1980). While there had been a few sporadic efforts to organize Asian American women around specific issues and concerns that did not pertain to women (e.g., the unavailability or high cost of basic food, Angel Island, the World War II internment of Japanese Americans), these attempts generally lacked continuity and support, and the organization of Asian American women was limited as a political force. Nevertheless, these activities, as stepping stones for future political activism, allowed Asian American women to cultivate their gender consciousness, to acquire leadership skills, and to increase their political visibility.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, many Asian American women activists preferred to join forces with Asian American men in the struggle against racism and classism (Fong 1978; G. Wong 1980; Woo 1971). Like black and Hispanic women (Cade 1970; Dill 1983; Fallis 1974; Hepburn et al. 1977; Hooks 1984; Terrelonge 1984), some Asian American women felt that the feminist movement was not attacking racial and class problems of central concern to them. They wanted to work with groups that advocated improved conditions for people of their own racial and ethnic background or people of color, rather than groups oriented toward women's issues (Fong 1978; G. Wong 1980; Woo 1971), even though they may have been aware of their roles and interests and even oppression as women.

As Asian American women became active in their communities, they encountered sexism. Even though many Asian American women realized that they usually occupied subservient positions in the male-dominated organizations within Asian communities, their ethnic pride and loyalty frequently kept them from public revolt (Woo

1971). More recently, some Asian American women have recognized that these organizations have not been particularly responsive to their needs and concerns as women. They also protested that their intense involvement did not and will not result in equal participation as long as the traditional dominance by men and the gendered division of labor remain (G. Wong 1980). Their protests have sensitized some men and have resulted in changes of attitudes and treatment of women, but other Asians, both women and men, perceived them as moving toward separatism.

Asian American women are criticized for the possible consequences of their protests: weakening of the male ego, dilution of effort and resources in Asian American communities, destruction of working relationships between Asian men and women, setbacks for the Asian American cause, cooptation into the larger society, and eventual loss of ethnic identity for Asian Americans as a whole. In short, affiliation with the feminist movement is perceived as a threat to solidarity within their own community. All these forces have restricted the development of feminist consciousness among Asian American women and their active participation in the feminist movement. (For the similar experience of black women, see Hooks 1984.)

Other barriers to political activism are the sexist stereotypes and discriminatory treatment Asian American women encounter outside their own communities. The legacy of the Chinese prostitute and the slave girl from the late nineteenth century still lingers. American involvement in Asian wars continues to perpetuate the image of Asian women as cheap whores and exotic sexpots (e.g., images such as "Suzie Wong" for Chinese women, the "geisha girl" in the Japanese teahouse, the bar girls in Vietnam). The "picture bride" image of Asian women is still very much alive, as U.S. soldiers and business men brought back Asian wives from China, Japan, Korea, and Vietnam with the expectation that they would make perfect wives and homemakers. In the last few years, a systematic importation through advertisements in newspapers and magazines of Asian "mail-order brides" has continued their exploitation as commodities and has been intensively protested by many Asian American communities. Mistreatment, desertion, divorce, and physical abuse of Asian wives or war brides have been major concerns for Asian American women (Kim 1977). The National Committee Concerned with Asian Wives of U.S. Servicemen was specifically organized to deal with these problems.

The result of these cross-pressures is an internal dilemma of choice