Asian American Youth

EDITED BY
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Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity

ASIAN

AMERICAN

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Acknowledgments

It is a distinct pleasure when a project merges both professional and personal interests, and this volume reflects such a combination. As scholars who conduct research in the areas of immigration, the new second generation, and race/ethnicity, we hold a keen interest in the Asian American population and in Asian American youth in particular.

The Asian-ancestry population in the United States has made an indelible mark on the nation's demographic scene, multiplying eightfold from 1.4 million in 1970 to 11.9 million in 2000, and is projected to increase to 20 million by 2020. Although Asian Americans constitute only 4 percent of the country's population, they are the fastest growing racial/ethnic group in the United States, outpacing every other group in the rate of population growth in recent years. Moreover, Asian Americans comprise a significant portion of today's new immigrants, accounting for one-third of all new arrivals since the 1970s. As the twenty-first century unfolds, the children of Asian immigrants—who are often referred to as the 1.5 generation (foreign born arriving in the United States prior to age 13) and the second generation (U.S. born of foreign-born parentage)—are coming of age in record numbers. Surprisingly, there has been relatively little research on Asian American youth, and virtually none on the topic of Asian American youth culture.

This void is all the more astonishing considering that Asian American youth are highly visible on college campuses on the East and West coasts, and in metropolitan areas in between. Their presence is discernible in elite private universities such as Harvard and Stanford, in small liberal arts colleges such as Pomona and Wellesley, and in large public and private campuses including

the University of California campuses, the "Big Ten" universities in the Midwest (Indiana University; University of Michigan; University of Iowa; Purdue University; University of Minnesota; University of Wisconsin–Madison; Michigan State University; Northwestern University; Pennsylvania State University; and Ohio State University), and in state and community colleges across the nation.

As professors at the University of California campuses in Irvine (UCI) and Los Angeles (UCLA), respectively, where the Asian American student body makes up significant proportions of the total undergraduate enrollment (nearly 60 percent at UCI and 40 percent at UCLA), we come into contact with Asian American youth every day. We teach Asian American students in our classes, meet with them during our office hours, and participate in many of the activities they organize. Being in such close relationships with them affords us the unique opportunity to understand what issues they find most pressing, most interesting, and most salient in their daily lives. Keeping in mind what they have told us, we have collected a number of original chapters that speak to a host of issues that are directly relevant for today's Asian American youth. We hope that the Asian American youth who read this book find that it accurately reflects their lived experiences, and moreover, that they find it as meaningful to read as it was for us to write.

On a more personal note, as a former Asian American youth who grew up in the United States, and as the immigrant mother of an Asian American youth, we cannot deny that the topics of Asian American youth culture, identity, and ethnicity hold personal significance for both of us. Hence, in gathering material for the book, we selected chapters that resonated not only with our students' experiences but also with some of our own. Although we have certainly raised more questions than we have answered, we hope that this book motivates a new generation of researchers to delve further in the area of Asian American youth culture, since there is yet much to uncover in this fertile and underexplored terrain.

Like all projects of this size, this one owes manifold debts. First and foremost, we would like to thank all of the contributors who saw merit in our project and agreed to contribute their original ideas to it. The chapters reflect the diversity of their interests and disciplines, including Asian American studies, sociology, history, anthropology, political science, criminology, law, and other professions. Together, the volume provides a foray into Asian American youth culture, identity, and ethnicity, and has turned out to be much greater than the sum of its parts.

We are also grateful to former editors at Routledge, Vikram Mukhija and Ilene Kalish, whose keen eyes saw promise in our book proposal and whose enthusiasm for the project reaffirmed our commitment to it; to Salwa C. Jabado who helped to steer along the project to completion; and to Amy

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Introduction:
The Making of Culture, Identity, and Ethnicity among Asian American Youth

Min Zhou and Jennifer Lee

This volume centers on Asian American youth, focusing specifically on the way in which they create and practice a culture that is distinctively their own. In turn, this distinctive Asian American youth culture has powerfully shaped Asian American youth's daily lives and ethnic identities. Until recently, social science research rarely treated Asian American youth as a distinct analytical category. In fact, when we discuss Asian American youth culture with academic and lay people, we are often met with puzzled looks, followed by questions such as: "Is there such a thing as *Asian American* youth culture?" "Do Asian American youth have a culture of their own?" "If so, what is it like?"

To many Americans, Asian American youth do not fit into any of the popular images typically associated with youth culture or subcultures, such as hip-hop artists and rappers, hippies, skinheads, punks, graffiti writers, low riders, ravers, or suburban "mall rats," with the exception, perhaps, of gang members. For a long time, Asian American youth have been neglected or at best homogenized into a social group widely celebrated as the "model minority" while derogatively stereotyped as "nerds" or "geeks." As such, they are considered a uniform group and deviant from "normal" teenage Americans.

Through the chapters in this volume, we counteract this one-dimensional portrait, showing the diversity among Asian American youth and illustrating how they have created a culture of their own through "grass-roots cultural production" (Bielby, 2004). Moreover, in the process of creating a distinct culture, they have also redefined the Asian American

community. This collection comes from the original work of scholars from diverse disciplines such as Asian American studies, sociology, history, anthropology, political science, psychology, criminology, and law as well as by practitioners. It illustrates how Asian American youth create and define an identity and culture of their own against the backdrop of contemporary immigration, continued racialization, and the rise of the new second generation (the U.S.-born of foreign-born parentage). Before turning to the chapters that make up the volume, we first offer a brief literature review of the research on youth and youth cultures. Then, we establish an analytical framework for understanding Asian American youth and the way in which they have successfully carved out a cultural niche for themselves.

RESEARCH ON YOUTH AND YOUTH CULTURES

Youth and Culture

In preindustrial societies, one's life course was roughly marked by two discrete stages—childhood and adulthood. However, in postindustrial societies, the duration of childhood has been prolonged and also includes the distinct, yet overlapping stages of adolescence and youth. Today, youth generally refer to those between the ages of 16 and 24 (and sometimes even 30). These young people are at the stage in their life cycles where they strive to find their own spaces, make their own choices, and form their own identities, while at the same time deterred by certain norms, rules, regulations, and social forces from accepting the myriad responsibilities that accompany full adulthood.

The delayed entrance into adulthood stems from two sources: on the one hand, societal constraints prohibit youth from partaking in certain adult activities; and on the other, youth also prolong this stage in their lives. For instance, while American youth may legally enter the labor force, those under the age of 18 are considered minors and therefore banned from participating in electoral politics or purchasing a pack of cigarettes. In addition, it is a criminal offense for an adult to have sex with a minor, even when the sex is consensual. Furthermore, while accorded the full rights of citizenship at the age of 18, those under the age of 21 are prohibited from buying or consuming alcoholic beverages and entering nightclubs that serve alcohol. While societal constraints play an active part in delaying the entrance into adulthood, American youth themselves are increasingly active participants in prolonging this stage of their lives. For instance, it is becoming increasingly more common (and to some extent necessary in today's economy) for those under the age of 25 to continue with school full time after graduating from high school. Consequently, seeking higher education delays the transition to adulthood, which is typically characterized by a stable job, marriage, home life, and parenthood.

Today, to be young is to be hip, cool, fun loving, carefree, and able to follow one's heart's desires. As a significant social group, this age cohort is inherently ambiguous as it juxtaposes and strives to find balance between the dialectics of parental influence and individual freedom, dependence and independence, innocence and responsibility, and ultimately adolescence and adulthood. It is precisely the tension arising from this ambiguity that drives the public misrepresentation of youth as deviant, delinquent, deficient, and rebellious or resistant.

Culture, on the other hand, is defined as the ways, forms, and patterns of life in which socially identifiable groups interact with their environments and express their symbolic and material existences. Young people experience the conditions of their lives, define them, and respond to them, and in the process, they produce unique cultural forms and practices that become the expressions and products of their own experiences (Brake, 1985). Thus, youth culture is broadly referred to as a particular way of life, combined with particular patterns of beliefs, values, symbols, and activities that are shared, lived, or expressed by young people (Frith, 1984). As social scientists, our goal is not only to identify young people's shared activities but also to uncover the values that underlie their activities and behavior. As early as 1942, Talcott Parsons coined the phrase "youth culture" to describe a distinctive world of youth structured by age and sex roles with a value system in opposition to the adult world of productive work, responsibility, and routine (p. 606). While youth culture may oppose the adult values of conformity to adult culture and responsibilities, it also serves as an invaluable problem-solving resource—the development and use of day-to-day practices to help make sense of and cope with youth's shared problems (Frith, 1984).

The study of youth culture has a history that dates back to the turn of the twentieth century with roots in the field of criminology. Below, we trace its history from the Chicago School to the Birmingham School, and to more recent research on American youth. What becomes glaringly apparent from this review is that Asian American youth have been virtually omitted from broader studies of youth, illustrating the vacant niche in the study of American youth culture.

The Chicago School and Classical Sociology of Youth

With its roots firmly implanted in the field of criminology at the turn of the twentieth century, research on youth and youth cultures flourished amidst sweeping social changes in the United States and Britain after World War II. Even before "youth" and "youth culture" were analytically defined, earlier research focused almost exclusively on delinquency and deviance

rather than on young people as a whole. Prewar youth were largely regarded as "gang" members, or groups of working-class young men hanging out in slums on the streets. Thus, many studies of youth prior to World War II implicitly and explicitly framed them (especially those who were working class) as undisciplined, unruly, lawless, and violent. The distinct styles of dress, leisure habits, and behavioral patterns that young people exhibited in public made them appear, both individually and collectively, as deviants from the norm.

The criminological inquiry about youth can be traced to the Chicago School, which was mainly concerned with the negative consequences of urbanization. Urban sociologists considered urban problems as inherently youth problems because, compared to rural communities, cities had more young people and more activities that both targeted and engaged them. However, much of the earlier work, including classical studies such as Frederick Thrasher's study of urban gangs (1927), Paul Cressey's taxi-dancers (1932), and William Foote Whyte's street corner society (1943), did not directly place youth at the center of analysis. Rather, these studies were concerned with how changes in human habitats induced by urbanization led to consequences associated with youth. More specifically, they focused on the ways in which urban life disrupted traditional ties to kin and community, and posited that the loss of a tightly knit system of family and community control led to the breakdown of moral values. The collapse of moral values, in turn, spawned a rise in juvenile delinquency, deviance, mental health problems, and organized crime.

Although most classical studies of youth adopted a macro urban perspective, another important strand of research emerged from the Chicago School—symbolic interactionism. Unlike the previous studies that focused on the roles of community and urbanization, studies born of the symbolic interactionism tradition focused on micro-level social processes, and in particular, on the way in which deviants and deviant behavior were defined by social groups and by society at large, and in turn, on how deviants coped with their labeling. Perhaps the most prominent study of this tradition is that of Erving Goffman (1963) who described how an individual whose physical traits and behavioral characteristics did not fit the "norm" was labeled as a deviant and stigmatized by an imposed identity, also referred to as the "spoiled" identity. Furthermore, Goffman illustrated how such an individual who was labeled as deviant "managed" his or her spoiled identity, either by retreating from social interactions or by passing for "normal." In contrast to Goffman's study, Howard Becker's (1963) classic study of "outsiders" focused more on the people who did the labeling than on those who were labeled. Becker demonstrated how groups who occupied positions of power and privilege successfully labeled marijuana and

alcohol use as deviant, and benefited from such labeling not merely on moral grounds but also on political and economic grounds, consequently enhancing their control over the working class.

Sharply diverging from both macro and micro traditions of the Chicago School, Robert K. Merton (1949) took an entirely different approach to the study of deviance. In his classic essay, "Social Structure and Anomie," Merton argued that deviance is a response to anomie and resulted from an imbalance in the social system between socially approved goals and the availability of socially approved means of attaining those goals. According to Merton, individuals responded to the system's imbalance in five distinct ways in terms of acceptance or rejection of the socially approved goals and/or the means of achieving those goals: conformity (accepting both); innovation (accepting the goals but rejecting the means); ritualism (rejecting the goals but accepting the means); retreatism (rejecting both); and rebellion (rejecting both). "Innovation" was the most common form of deviance. Taking a middle-range approach, Merton located the source of deviance squarely on the social structure and the culture it produced rather than on macro structural forces or on the micro-level processes in which the deviants themselves came to interact with others and with societal institutions. Adopting Merton's middle-range approach to the study of deviance, Albert Cohen's study of urban gangs (1955) illustrated how gang membership provided lower-class boys (who could not achieve respectable social status through normative means) with the opportunities and means to attain respect and other forms of achievement.

The Birmingham School and Youth-Centered Approaches

While the Chicago School dominated studies of youth prior to World War II, during the postwar years, social scientists and cultural critics began to develop new models of understanding youth and youth culture. Spearheaded by the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham (known as the Birmingham School), scholars and critics adopted a more holistic approach. Rather than focusing solely on the causes of youth-related problems, they attempted to map the meaning of youth and document the rich experiences lived by youth (Hall and Jefferson, 1976). Influenced by the Marxist conception of cultural production, Birmingham School researchers redefined youth as cultural producers and consumers rather than as delinquents. Moreover, they regarded youth cultures as the distinct ways and patterns of life in which socially identifiable youth groups come to process the raw material of their life experiences and give expressive forms, or "maps of meaning," to their social and material

existence (Clarke et al., 1976: 10). By centering on youth, with a particular focus on the "look" of various youth cultures, the Birmingham School perspective located the subject matter in relation to three broader cultural structures: the working-class parent culture; the dominant culture; and the mass culture (Gelder, 1997).

First, youth cultures were considered a part of the working-class parent culture, similarly subjected to the structural constraints of the working class. During the postwar years, broad economic and urban shifts had an enormous impact on the lived experiences of youth, in particular, urban revitalization, economic restructuring, and formal schooling. These changes disrupted the dense cultural space for working-class life and polarized the working class into two distinct groups: the highly skilled suburbanites and the low skilled trapped in urban ghettos, which included the majority of working-class youth. Hence, youth culture was born of the structural constraints associated with working-class life, and moreover, the culture itself was viewed as a means of expressing and resolving the crisis of class.

With this conception of working-class youth culture, the Birmingham School regarded the youth's public display of nonconformist styles and deviant behaviors as more than simply a rebellion against their working-class parents. More fundamentally, the unconventional styles and behavior of youth were considered a means of expressing working-class youth's resistance to middle-class authority. For example, Birmingham School scholars regarded the skinhead phenomenon as a symbolic attempt to reaffirm the traditional working-class core values of "community" rather than simply an act of senseless rebellion (Clarke, 1976).

Second, the Birmingham School also situated youth cultures within a hegemonic relationship to the dominant culture. Developed by Antonio Gramsci (1971), the concept of "hegemony" refers to the power of a society's ruling class to exert total control—state power, economic resources, and ideas—over subordinate classes. Rather than excluding the subordinate classes, the dominant class incorporated them into key institutions such as the family, school, church, and other cultural institutions in order to prevent them from erecting alternate institutions. By incorporating them into such key spheres of life, the dominant class not only ensures that the subordinate class will adopt its ideologies and values, but in the process, it effectively reproduces class subordination.

Youth from the subordinate classes (the working class and racial minorities in particular) introduced a repertoire of strategies, responses, and ways of coping and resisting the dominant class authority that had clearly articulated collective structures. Working-class youth constructed distinct subcultures around their living environments, representing the appropriation of the "ghetto" as well as a class-conscious struggle to negotiate

identity and to carve out a "space" of their own. However, as a consequence of creating their own space, their class-based culture served as a mechanism in their alienation from society at large (Clarke et al., 1976: 60).

Third, youth cultures were viewed as a form of mass culture because youth were both consumers and simultaneously producers of mass culture. On the one hand, the postwar employment opportunities afforded working-class youth a substantial amount of disposable income, making them the first targeted consumer group (Benson, 1994). Their newly acquired affluence allowed them to consume mass culture in a new way, leading to the need to produce new cultural forms. Mark Abrams posited that young people should be defined not by their delinquent behavior, but rather in terms of their market choices (Abrams, 1959). In effect, Abrams argued that their consumption patterns and market choices reflected a new "teenage culture" defined in terms of leisure goods and activities. This, in turn, generated distinct youth cultures that transcended both class and racial boundaries. For example, while working-class youth (mostly people of color) appropriated the ghetto to create their own distinctive cultural forms and meanings, middle-class youth (mostly white) gravitated to the "ghetto" and imitated the cultural forms of their working-class counterparts as a way of expressing their own experience (Clarke et al., 1976: 60).

Although the development of youth cultures transcended the boundaries of race and class, the Birmingham School insisted that youth culture was not classless since youth continued to be manipulated by big businesses, advertisers, marketers, and distributors of the dominant class culture. In short, the Birmingham School perspective underscored the role of class and hegemony in shaping the experiences of youth and youth culture, even within the realm of a seemingly "classless" mass culture.

Recent Youth Research in the United States

Both the Chicago School and Birmingham School traditions have had a profound influence on youth culture research in the United States, especially between 1950 and 1970. While the studies from the Chicago School focused on the macro social forces that led to deviance among youth as well as the micro interactions among those labeled as deviant, and the Birmingham School focused on the role of class and hegemonic social structures, recent research on youth cultures has veered in a different direction altogether. Contemporary research on youth culture reveals a tendency to move youth out of class-based categories, and instead, emphasize the diversity of youth cultures as well as the multidimensional nature of resistance. The resurgent literature on youth culture, especially since the 1980s,

turns our attention to the distinctive characteristics of youth, with a particular emphasis on the impacts of class, race/ethnicity, gender, and geography on their cultural expressions, signs, symbols, and activities.[1]

Significant collections of youth culture include *Rave Off: Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture* edited by Steve Redhead (1993), *Generations of Youth* edited by Joe Austin and Michael Nevin Willard (1998a), *Youth Culture* edited by Jonathon Epstein (1998), *Digital Diversions* edited by Julian Sefton-Green (1998), and *Cool Places* edited by Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine (1998), to name just a few. Also noteworthy are numerous book-length case studies, thematic works, and comparative studies such as *The Gang as an American Enterprise* by Felix M. Padilla (1992), *It's Not about a Salary ... Rap, Race and Resistance in Los Angeles* by Brian Cross (1993), *Youth: Positions and Oppositions* by S. J. Blackman (1995), *Young and Homeless in Hollywood* by Susan M. Ruddick (1995), *New Ethnicities and Urban Culture* by Les Back (1996), *Gangsters* by Lewis Yablonsky (1997), *Popular Music and Youth Culture* by Andy Bennett (2000), *Renegade Kids, Suburban Outlaws* by Wayne Wooden and Randy Blazak (2001), and *The Hip Hop Generation* by Bakari Kitwana (2002), to name some prominent monographs.

We highlight several significant conceptual advancements in the recent literature on youth culture as they help provide some contextual background for our understanding of the Asian American youth culture. First, instead of placing youth within a class framework or portraying them as delinquents, new research on youth in the United States focuses on the interactive processes between various macro and micro social forces in the formation and practice of culture and identity. Going beyond analyses of class, contemporary work recognizes the diversity of youth cultures, examining differences across a wide range of social categories, including class, race/ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and geography, and sometimes even making further distinctions within these categories. For example, the experiences of white and nonwhite youth, boys and girls, and heterosexuals and homosexuals are now presumed to have distinct characteristics that interact with structural forces such as hegemony, racism, sexism, and homophobia. Their experiences shape their socialization, which in turn affect the ways in which members of each respective group express, represent, and identify themselves.

Second, informed by the Birmingham School tradition, new research highlights the role of agency on the part of youth, and focuses on the proactive approaches toward the cultural production and consumption among youth of different class, racial/ethnic, and gender backgrounds. For instance, Andy Bennett (2000) views youth as a culture in its own right, asserting that youth themselves are capable of generating norms and values. Youth use their bodies, ghetto walls, city streets, as well as the press, television programming, and online publications as sites for cultural expression and