

Beyond Black and White: The Model Minority Myth and the Invisibility of Asian American Students

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This study of diverse Asian American students at a racially integrated public high school illustrates that the achievement gap is a multi-racial problem that cannot be well understood solely in terms of the trajectories of Black and white students. Asian American students demonstrated a high academic profile on average, but faced difficulties and failure in ways rendered invisible by widespread acceptance of the "Model Minority Myth," which says that Asians comprise the racial minority group that has "made it" in America through hard work and education, and therefore serve as a model for other racial minorities to follow. Findings point to policy implications for teachers, counselors, school staff, social services and government.

KEY WORDS: Asian American; Racial achievement gap; Model Minority Myth; High school.

INTRODUCTION

Berkeley High is hard—Berkeley High is easy. Berkeley High is hard because students are not aware of Asians. They only see black and white. In *School Colors*¹ they only talked about black and white. The film showed all the negative stuff about Berkeley High, none of the good things. We have an Asian club. They never showed that.

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Berkeley High is also easy. It's easy because some students don't judge you by your ethnicity or race. They don't make assumptions. For Asians, the assumptions would be the stereotype—that we're smart, good in school, good at math, quiet—everyone's the same, long black hair, Chinese, speak with an accent. We are not all Chinese!

—Franklin Nguyen, 10th grade

Race is closely linked to academic achievement, with Asian Americans² disproportionately excelling and African American and Latino students disproportionately failing. Academic performance patterns lead to differential expectations, in a cycle of self-fulfilling prophesies. The image of Asian Americans as high achievers is tied to the "Model Minority Myth," which says that Asians comprise the racial minority group that has "made it" in America through hard work and education, and therefore serve as a model for other racial minorities to follow. This myth permeates our society and educational system, from pre-school through higher education. Though it sounds complimentary, it is a racial stereotype and carries negative implications.

This study focuses on Asian American students at Berkeley High School, a racially integrated school of some 3,000 students, who are approximately 35% white, 35% African American, 11% Latino, 10% Asian, and 9% multiracial and "other." It is part of a larger research project called the Diversity Project, conducted from 1996–2002, that examined the factors contributing to the racial achievement gap at a school that *The New York Times* called "the most integrated school in America" (Goodman, 1994). Because Asian students were underrepresented among students at the bottom of the achievement gap, the larger research project paid little attention to these students. I therefore designed a study to look more closely at the actual experiences and achievement of Asian students in relationship to the prevailing model minority myth.

Berkeley High School provides a suitable site for this study for several reasons. Asians are one of several minority groups at this school, providing a basis to compare their experiences not only to white students but to other students of color. The Asian student population is also diverse, allowing for comparison of experiences among students of different Asian ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. Most importantly, although Berkeley High School's Asian population is small, it has not escaped the stereotype. Reports on the D and F rates contain statistics on the differential achievement of white and Asian students on the one hand, and African American and Latino students on the other. All Asians are lumped together, with no distinctions regarding such basic differences as national origin and history, class background, immigration status, language(s) spoken, or parents'

educational levels and occupations, or what classes they are taking. Though the D and F reports never explicitly refer to Asian students as a “model minority,” the implications and assumptions are that Asian students have no serious academic problems, that they receive strong support for educational achievement from their parents, ethnic cultures and communities, and that they come from middle-class homes with college-educated parents.

Such inferences about Asian American student achievement, drawn from aggregated statistics of small sample populations, are not unique to Berkeley High, nor are they accurate. Some Asian students drop out before graduation, some are sent to the continuation high school, and some receive Ds and Fs in core academic classes. Some struggle to learn English while attempting to fulfill graduation and college eligibility requirements. Some live in poverty, and some will be the first in their families to complete high school. In many ways, it is more urgent to understand the factors influencing low-achieving Asian students, because they are the ones most in need of educational intervention and support. But if we were to believe the model minority myth, such students do not even exist.

Racial issues in U.S. schools and society are most often posed as “black and white,” or Latino and white in the Southwest (Ferguson, 2001; King & Funston, 2006; Terkel, 1992). However, like poor and working class Asians in society at-large, the educational needs of Asian students and often Latino and Native American students are overlooked (Kiang & Kaplan, 1994). Thus any study of racial issues at diverse Berkeley High School needs to go beyond black and white.

This paper aims at challenging the myth by examining the complexity and variation among Asian American students in terms of academic achievement. Berkeley High School serves as a case example to look into the question: What academic, social, or family problems, institutional barriers, and struggles do Asian American high school students face that may be masked by the model minority stereotype? But first, the persistence of the model minority myth, despite its inaccuracy, warrants a look at its historical origins.

HOW THE “MODEL MINORITY” IMAGE BECAME EMBEDDED IN U.S. CULTURE

Asian Americans have not always been viewed as a model minority. On the contrary, for more than 100 years, from roughly the 1850s to the post-World War II decade, Asians in the U.S. were dehumanized as an unsavory foreign contaminant—portrayed as uncivilized, sinister, heathen, filthy, yellow hordes that threatened to invade the U.S. and “mongrelize” the white “race” (Lee, 1999; Miller, 1969). Chinese in particular were viewed as the Yellow Peril. Frank Wu (2002) notes:

Novelist Jack London, whose dispatches from Asia for the Hearst newspapers helped popularize the term “yellow peril,” also wrote an essay [in 1904] of that title warning of the “menace” to the Western world from “millions of yellow men” {Chinese} under the management of “the little brown man” {Japanese}. (p. 13)

Samuel Gompers, the first president of the American Federation of Labor (1886–1924), forbade union locals from admitting Chinese or Japanese laborers. He wrote a famous essay at the turn of the twentieth century entitled, “Meat versus Rice: American Manhood Against Asiatic Coolieism—Which Shall Survive?” In it, Gompers argued in favor of excluding Asians from immigration to the U.S.

No matter for how many generations they have lived in this country, Asians have been, and still are, treated as foreigners (Takaki, 1989; Chan, 1991; Wu, 2002). During the California Gold Rush of the 1850s and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad, this racial stereotype was used to keep Chinese male workers in conditions of indentured servitude and to contain them in segregated communities where they were subjected to racial mob violence, such as the infamous Rock Springs massacre in Wyoming (Sorti, 1991).

From the early days of Asian immigration, discriminatory laws formalized the racial prejudice against Asian in America (Takaki, 1989; Chan, 1991; Ngai, 2005). Federal law proclaimed Asians legally ineligible for citizenship, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 became the first and only law prohibiting immigration based on national origin. The Immigration Act of 1917 banned immigration from most of Asia, and the Tydings—McDuffie Act of 1934 restricted Filipino immigrants to just 50 per year. At the state level, California passed the Alien Land Law of 1913, targeting immigrant Japanese farmers and denying them the right to purchase land.

In 1860, California banned Asians from public schools. In 1885, at the height of the “Chinese Must Go” furor, a Chinese student named Mamie Tape challenged the ban by attempting to enroll in San Francisco’s Spring Valley School. A state judge overturned the ban, and his decision was upheld by the state Supreme Court. However, the ruling fell short of challenging “separate but equal,” leaving the door open for San Francisco (in 1885) and Sacramento (in 1893) to establish segregated schools for “Mongolians” that became known as “Oriental” or “Chinese” schools. Wollenberg (1978) states that by the mid-1930s, San Francisco’s “...‘Chinese School’ no longer officially existed, though ‘Commodore Stockton School’ had more than 1,000 students, all of Chinese ancestry” (p.10), due to the segregation of the Chinatown community. In public education, Asian children in California were treated as undesirable and inferior.

The widespread emergence of the “success literature” in the 1960s was therefore a sudden and radical departure from the old stereotype. During World War II, Japanese Americans were incarcerated in concentration camps and branded as “enemy aliens,” but by the mid-1960s they were widely portrayed in both the popular media and academic publications as the newest American success story. A January 1966 headline in *The New York Times* proclaimed, “Success Story, Japanese-American Style,” in an article by sociologist William Peterson, whose academic profession leant credibility to his characterization:

By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. ...Even in a country whose patron saint is the Horatio Alger hero, there is no parallel to this success story. (As quoted in Suzuki, 1977, p. 24)

In that same year, a parallel article focusing on Chinese Americans, entitled “Success story of one minority group in the U.S.,” appeared in *U.S. News and World Report*. The academic “success literature” of the same time period tended to use interpretations of empirical research or aggregated statistical data to justify genetic or cultural explanations for Asian American school achievement (Peterson, 1971).

It was no accident that the model minority image emerged in the 1960s. Suzuki (1977) points out that “The change toward a more positive image [of Asian Americans] became particularly noticeable in the mid-1960s in the wake of the Watts riot and amid growing discontent among blacks and other minorities” (p. 23). Ki-Taek Chun (1980) concurs,

It was in the 1960s—when the plight of Black Americans was occupying the nation’s attention as it tried to cope with their assertive demands for racial equality—that two of the nation’s most influential print media³ presented to the American public a portrait of Asian Americans as a successful model minority. (p. 1)

Negative Implications

Ironically, the myth became fashionable at the same time that the sweeping 1965 reform of U.S. immigration policy opened the doors to large waves of new Asian immigrants. They were predominantly Chinese who spoke little or no English, lived in tenements within crowded, impoverished Chinatown ghettos, worked in restaurants and garment sweatshops, and sent their children to public schools that were prepared to teach only the English-speaking.

The model minority myth ignored this reality and continued to gain acceptance. Barton and Coley comment,

We know that this stereotype is pervasive when it gets embedded in the nation's humor. Not long ago, a cartoon appeared in which a student, being confronted about poor grades, says: "What do you think I am, Asian or something?" (Kim, 1997, p. 2)

Dana Takagi (1992) updates the picture, stating that in the 1990s, the model minority stereotype took a new twist: "At many colleges and universities, white students came to view themselves as 'victims,' squeezed between Asian American achievement and preferential policies for blacks" (p. 110). Here, the Model Minority and Yellow Peril images converge into one, as "hordes" of Asian American "over-achievers" are depicted as overrunning the nation's top universities and taking the place of whites as well as of other people of color.

Whether in the 1960s at the height of the Black Power Movement, or in the 1990s in the backlash against affirmative action, Asian Americans—via the model minority myth—have been used as a wedge between whites and other people of color. This is a primary reason why this stereotype is dangerous. In some cases, the myth has served as a tool to castigate other people of color and to discredit their struggles for equality and social justice. In other cases, Asians have become targets for white anger at affirmative action or "foreign" competition, and simultaneously have become targets of anger from other people of color who see Asians as benefiting from aligning with whites.

Alongside the widespread acceptance of the model minority stereotype, many people simultaneously hold negative views of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners, sneaky, and untrustworthy.⁴ Although the model minority myth, like the Yellow Peril before it, is a social construction serving a political purpose, it nonetheless carries serious implications and material consequences for all Asian Americans, as witnessed by the rise in hate crimes against Asians.⁵

INTRODUCING THE ASIAN STUDENTS OF BERKELEY HIGH SCHOOL

The Asian student population at Berkeley High School—like that at many California high schools—belies the stereotypes that Asians are all alike in appearance, culture, and school performance. Berkeley High School's Asian American students are of diverse national origins. They are Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Indonesian, Thai, Mien, Sri Lankan, Korean, Indian, Iranian, Pakistani, Filipino, and

so on. An undetermined number are mixed-Asian (e.g., Chinese-Vietnamese) or Asian mixed-race students (e.g., Filipino-African American, Japanese-white).

Asian American students also come from a wide range of cultures, class backgrounds, immigration status/histories, family formations, and education levels. During their senior year, some 74 Asian students (out of a total of 91) responded to an annual survey of the Class of 2000 conducted by the Berkeley High School Diversity Project. Of these 74 students, 64% reported being born in the U.S., 28% were born elsewhere, and 8% were born in the U.S. but had lived one or more years outside the U.S. In terms of parent educational levels, a 52% majority reported that their mothers had completed college or graduate/professional school, while 38% reported that the highest level of education their mothers had completed was high school or less, with three students reporting that their mothers never went to school.

Berkeley High has both high- and low-achieving Asian students, and many in-between. They are in Honors track, Advanced Placement (AP) and regular classes, and in a variety of programs including Special Education and all five levels of English as a Second Language. A few are considered to be “at-risk” of not graduating, while others, despite good grades, have had trouble passing the writing proficiency test required for graduation. However, given their small numbers (about 300 Asian students in grades 9–12), the dispersed nature of Berkeley’s Asian communities, the lack of staff who speak any Asian language, and the widespread assumption that they have few academic or behavioral problems, Asians are perhaps the most “invisible” group at Berkeley High.

USING STUDENT DATA TO UNPACK THE MYTHS

This study uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative data to unpack the components of the model minority myth and challenge the underlying assumptions. Data on grades, course-taking patterns, college eligibility, and demographic backgrounds for the entire Berkeley High School graduating class of 2000 are supplemented by a separate, qualitative study of the Asian student experience at Berkeley High School focusing on six case study students.

These six students—representing various Asian ethnicities and immigration histories—were selected from a larger sample of 30 students who received letters inviting them to participate in the study. Those six students who returned signed parental and student consent forms were then interviewed in private sessions. Interview questions aimed at providing details, experiences, and perspectives that could not be understood from statistical and survey data alone, and touched on family history, language issues, academic

achievement and difficulties, parents' attitudes toward education, and the model minority myth. The pseudonyms for the case study students are:

- Franklin Nguyen, Vietnamese male, born in the U.S., 10th grade
- Soonthone Pramualphol, Laotian female, born in Laos, 12th grade
- Billy Hayashida, Japanese-white male, born in the U.S., 9th grade
- Merilee Leung, Chinese female, born in the U.S., 9th grade
- Ken Chun, Chinese male, born in China, Level 2 ESL, 10th grade
- Pane Phommachit, Laotian female, born in Thailand, 12th grade

FINDINGS REGARDING ASIAN AMERICAN STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Some interesting patterns emerged with relevance to Asians and the racial achievement gap. These findings also provide alternative explanations for the relatively high average academic achievement of Asian American students at Berkeley High, in contrast to the most common assumptions associated with the model minority myth, such as:

- All Asian students are high academic achievers. As a group, they outperform white students.
- Asians naturally excel at math.
- All Asian families highly value education.
- All Asians are alike in culture, language, appearance, and academic achievement.
- Asians do not suffer racial discrimination like other people of color.

Myth: All Asian Students Are High Achievers Who Outperform White Students

The average overall GPAs (grade point averages) for Asian American students at Berkeley High is high, as shown in Table 1.

The GPA data give a sense that Asian students are generally doing well academically. Thus Berkeley High Asian students fit a pattern found in many high schools across the country.

However, a closer look at individual GPAs tells another side of the story. At each grade level, there is a full range of GPAs, from very high to very low. For ninth graders, the range is from 0.83 to 4.0. For tenth graders, the range is from 1.0 to 4.0. For eleventh graders, the range is from 1.57 to 4.0. For twelfth graders, the range is from 2.06 to 3.98 (note that there were no Asian seniors with a 4.0 GPA). Although the distribution of GPAs is high,

TABLE 1.
Mean GPAs for Asian students, by grade level

	Mean GPA
Grade 9 (N = 79)	3.38
Grade 10 (N = 87)	3.41
Grade 11 (N = 65)	3.21
Grade 12 (N = 73)	3.25

the data show that there is a small minority of low-achieving Asian students at every grade level, and that not all Asian students have high GPAs.

In addition, data on Berkeley High School graduating classes from 1992–1996 show that in 1996, 56% of the 463 graduating seniors completed the academic requirements for admission to the University of California (UC) and/or the less selective California State University (CSU)⁶. But how do Asian American graduates compare to students of other racial/ethnic groups?

As indicated in Table 2, Asian females in the Class of 1996 lagged behind white females by 18 percentage points in completion of the UC and/or CSU admission requirements, and Asian males trailed white males by 9 points. It is therefore inaccurate to say that Asian American students academically outperform white students, if one important outcome of academic achievement is admissibility to the UC and/or CSU systems upon graduation from high school. These data also indicate that a significant number of Asian students who may be receiving high grades are actually taking different courses than their white counterparts, and that some of their courses do not fulfill the state university admissions requirements. This reality is masked by comparing only GPAs, without determining the equivalency of the courses in which the grades are earned.

Many Asian students at Berkeley High are academically successful, as measured by their grades and their disproportionate representation in some of the highest track classes, particularly in math and computer programming. But there are also those who are struggling and those who are failing,

TABLE 2.
Rate of completion of UC and/or CSU eligibility requirements for Berkeley High School graduates, by racial/ethnic group and gender^a

	Asian American	African American	Chicano/ Latino	White
Male	64%	14%	18%	73%
Female	70%	32%	48%	88%

^aData from California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) <http://www.cde.ca.gov/demographics/>

and even some who never finish high school. For instance, Soonthone Pramuaphol's older brother dropped out of Berkeley High when he was a freshman, and her sister became pregnant and never finished high school.

It should also be noted that GPAs for all Asians are combined in the school records database, making it difficult to determine patterns by Asian ethnicity, such as might be found by comparing South Asian or Chinese students to Laotian, Cambodian, or Vietnamese students. In Heather Kim's 1997 national study of Asian American high school seniors using data from the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS 88), she found that South Asians (e.g., Indian or Pakistani) outperformed Southeast Asians (e.g., Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian) in various academic and attitudinal measures related to academic success and aspirations regarding college graduation (Kim, 1997).

This is where the interviews become important. While too small a sample to be representative of specific Asian ethnicities or of the Asian student population as a whole, the case study students' views and experiences nevertheless help to bring individual voices, experiences, and feelings to the statistical data and anecdotal understandings or misunderstandings about Asian American students at Berkeley High.

Unseen Academic Difficulties for High- and Low-Achieving Asian Students

Whether they have high GPAs and high overall educational achievement or not, all of the students I interviewed experience some form of academic difficulty that teachers reportedly failed to notice, in part because of the stereotype. In many cases, the nature of the difficulty may not be apparent unless the student tells you.

For example, some high-GPA Asian students like Merilee Leung—from a middle-class, highly educated, bilingual family background—routinely work long hours, late into the night in order to keep pace with their schoolwork or to earn high grades. Occasionally, she stays up all night studying. Merilee also reports severe test-anxiety, most acutely felt in honors math. She is having the most difficulty in Geometry because she does poorly on tests, which count for 70% of her grade: "It's nerves. I tense up and I forget everything. I look at the page and I see, like, all these numbers and I just, like-blank." Claude Steele (1999) has studied and documented "stereotype threat" as a form of subconscious test anxiety resulting in lower test scores among African American students in situations where high stakes are attached to the test. In such situations, black students feel "the threat of being viewed through the lens of a negative stereotype, or the fear of doing something that would inadvertently confirm the stereotype" (p. 45). No one has yet studied stereotype threat among Asian Americans, who may feel test

anxiety over the opposite burden of measuring up to a high achievement stereotype, especially in math and science. In fact, none of the high-achieving Asian students I interviewed said that high grades—especially in math—were easy to attain, or that these grades came without serious but unseen sacrifice, and some were earning their lowest grades in math.

As for the students from this study who were struggling academically, three were male and one was female. Two of the boys—one Vietnamese and one Chinese—were soft-spoken, and according to self-reports, they were also quiet in class, had no disciplinary records or attendance problems, and were not considered to be at risk of not graduating. Despite their academic problems, they called little attention to themselves. Both were first- or second-generation immigrants whose parents were worked and never went to college. Following are a few examples of academic difficulties from the interviews of high- and low-achieving Asian students.

Soonthone, a Laotian refugee, has a high GPA and has already been accepted to UC Davis, but she has been unable to pass the writing proficiency test required for graduation. She came to the U.S. in third grade, but she had missed school for a few years already because she and her sister always skipped school during their years in the Thai refugee camps. She never learned to read or write Laotian, so she considers English to be her “first language in the sense of reading and writing.” Soonthone’s lack of literacy in her first language made acquisition of English literacy far more difficult—a finding also supported by language acquisition research (August & Hakuta, 1997; Cuevas, 1997; Cummins, 1981; Roberts, 1994). Thus, even after six years in U.S. schools, she was placed in the ESL program in high school and did not transition to mainstream classes until her junior year. She speaks English fluently and is able to communicate her ideas well in her classes, but the writing proficiency test posed an educational roadblock.

Franklin, a U.S.-born Vietnamese student, talked about the academic disadvantage faced by Vietnamese immigrant students—especially those who came to the U.S. as teenagers without English language skills, as did his older brothers. To graduate from high school, they must learn English while trying to complete the high school curriculum. Vietnamese parents have developed survival strategies for their older children, including this one, as described by Franklin:

A lot of Vietnamese immigrant families change the age of their children when they register for school, so they can learn more. So if a student came here when they were 12, they should be in sixth grade [middle school]. But the parents might say he is 10 so he can spend more time in the lower grades, learn more English, and not start off so far behind. You won’t know it, but some kids are a lot older than the rest of their classmates⁷.

As for his own schoolwork, math and Spanish gave him the most trouble, even though he declared math to be his favorite class.

Some of Ken's academic problems are obvious. A working class student whose father is an auto mechanic, Ken arrived in the U.S. and immediately entered ninth grade, and he speaks such limited English that he avoids talking to what he calls⁸ "American" students for fear that they will not like him. Less obvious is the problem he had in his PE class last semester. Ken failed his PE final exam the previous semester because his family received a last-minute call to come to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service at 8:00 a.m. on the morning of the final. The PE teacher did not accept this as a valid reason for a retake of the final, and he received an F.

Pane, a Laotian student born in a Thai refugee camp and was raised mostly on welfare by her single mother, is in the honors track in science and math. This year is the hardest academic year for her, as she is taking AP Calculus and AP Physics. Pane also takes care of her three-year-old niece after school every day until about 10:00 p.m. while her sister works a 12-hour shift at a restaurant. Pane is frequently awake past midnight to finish her homework.

Each case study student faced a different kind of academic challenge that goes unrecognized and unsupported, at least in part because it is masked by a general perception that Asians are the model students, they do not experience failure, and their success comes easy to them.

MYTH: Asian Students Naturally Excel at Math

The view that Asian students naturally excel at math is pervasive. Soonthone describes an episode in her Calculus class in which she tried to argue against the stereotype:

Yeah! They always say Asians get—They look at me and say, "You must get an A." And I say, "No, I got an F on this test." You know, they all think I get straight As, but I don't. They look at you and they say, "Oh, you got an A, huh, on the math test." I say, "No, I just got a D." They say, "That's impossible," you know, like, "You're supposed to be smart." I say, "No, not all of them [Asians students], there's only some." It's like white [students], it's half-half, every culture, every thing, it's not perfect. It's out there, yeah.

In her own way, Soonthone tried to explain to her classmates that some students from every racial group may do well or poorly in math, and that Asians are not naturally good at math.

Asian students are acutely aware of the spoken and unspoken expectations of other students and of teachers, based on the stereotype linking

Asians with superior math abilities, and linking ability in math with being “smart.” This awareness accounts for Soonthone’s rapid-fire response to students who judged her according to the stereotype. Soonthone, Franklin, and Merilee all expressed anger at being judged by racial assumptions rather than as a person, an individual.

The racial rationale for the belief that Asians naturally excel at math is essentially a genetic explanation. It is akin to racial profiling⁹. It should be no more acceptable than to say that the early Chinese immigrants were “naturally” suited to the hand laundry business, or that African Americans are “natural” athletes, or to say that certain races are more intelligent. Yet this explanation, combined with the cultural explanation in the following section, is widely accepted, to the exclusion of other social and materialist explanations.

MYTH: All Asian Families and Cultures Highly Value Education

A common explanation for Asian American student achievement is that Asian families and cultures stress the importance of education, and that Asian parents push their children especially hard to be high achievers in school, to go to college, and become doctors, engineers, and other kinds of highly paid professionals. An accompanying assumption is that many Asian families are middle-class or affluent, and that they have “made it” in this country, both economically and socially.

This explanation attributes Asian American academic achievement primarily to some common element of culture that originates in Asia. However, the six Asian American students whom I interviewed tell a far more varied story of parental attitudes toward education, of parents’ educational levels and socio-economic class backgrounds, and of cultural norms.

Franklin is American-born, but his parents and older siblings are immigrants from Vietnam. His mother is a seamstress, and his father is not working. He feels that his parents cannot really help with school work or get involved in his education because of their limited English. His older sister signs his notes from school.

Ken’s father is an auto mechanic, and came to the U.S. nine years before Ken to work in an auto shop, leaving his family behind in China. Ken commented, “My mother say I have to go to college, yeah. ... If I learn well, study well, I will go to college.” However, his father has expressed no strong feelings about college.

Billy’s Japanese American father runs his own printing shop, and Billy says his father never comes to visit his school. His white mother is more strict, and when Billy started coming home with Cs, his mother imposed a daily routine. After lacrosse practice, he comes home, jumps in the shower,

eats, then does his homework. His grades improved somewhat, but are usually Bs and Cs.

Soonthone's mother has a serious heart condition and the family revolves around her health needs, so her disabled mother is uninvolved in her education. Her family is on welfare. Soonthone explains that her father wants her to become a doctor, but does not understand the school system or what it takes to become a doctor. She says,

I do what I feel. My dad always trusts me. ...They don't know anything about what is it. I said I'm taking Chemistry, so he said, "Why are you taking Chemistry? I want you to be like doctors." That's what I think Asian parent want you to be. Doctor. Make a lot of money. ...All they want me to do—You have to go to college. They don't know the definition of going to college, but they said you have to go. They always put pressure on me because I will be the only first one in the family going to college. They proud of me, that's all.

Merilee's father is an engineer and her mother has a Ph.D., yet even these highly educated Chinese American parents do not insist on a 4.0 GPA. Merilee says,

They expect the best of me, but they don't expect me to get straight As because they know that's really hard. And if I had to do that, then I myself wouldn't be enjoying life, and they want me to enjoy life.

Pane was born in a Thai refugee camp. Her mother never went to school, and in the camp, she sold noodles to make a living. Her mother is a single parent, and has never come to any of Pane's school promotion ceremonies. However, she shows her concern for Pane's education in other ways. For example, she moved to Berkeley to keep her children away from the poorest, toughest Laotian neighborhoods and to get them into good public schools and keep them away from gangs.

Student Aspirations Defy Social Constraints on Career Paths for Asians

The model minority stereotype paints Asians with the same brush, and envisions them as single-minded students who aspire to become engineers, laboratory or computer scientists, pharmacists, or perhaps businesspersons—mostly fields that involve little public contact or social skills¹⁰. However, the Asian students in this study expressed a range of career aspirations, including some that involve communications media and creative arts, extensive public contact and social involvement, and one that requires no post-secondary education.

Franklin wants to be an architect. Ken wants to be an auto mechanic and learn from his father through apprenticeship. Soonthone wants to be a businesswoman, though her father hopes she will become a doctor. Merilee wants to be a doctor or a lawyer, but her friends feel she would make a good politician. Billy wants to go into film making or television production, while Pane is simply looking forward to college. The only two who might go into a science-related field are Merilee, if she goes into medicine, and Pane, who is simply undecided.

Complex Influences of Gender, Culture, and Family

The girls provided revealing insights into the impact of gender, culture, and family on their educational paths and identities, and they also brought out other dimensions of familial attitudes toward education. Both Laotian girls, Soonthone and Pane, talked about the practice of arranged marriages, or of Laotian girls marrying before completing high school—practices that conflict with girls seeking a college education or professional career. The Chinese American girl, Merilee, spoke confidently about being able to do anything a boy could do, and about having the freedom to choose a professional career pathway without pressure from her parents.

Pressure to put marriage before education

Soonthone explained the Laotian custom of arranged marriages. She said, “In our culture, girls get married young. They said that woman don’t need to have higher education because the man will work and all you do is stay home.” Pane concurred, stating, that in the Laotian community,

It’s not really expected, especially as a girl, to go off to college or to be really smart. You know, a lot of the Asian girls that I see are getting married at 18, 19, not necessarily because they want to but because parents are forcing them to.

Pane links this cultural norm to the harsh reality for Laotian families who immigrate from underdeveloped, war-torn countries with little economic or cultural capital (such as education, English fluency, or professional skills). For their children’s futures, the parents may envision not college, but work. She states,

A lot of Laotian parents don’t really push students to work really hard academically, but to rather work hard at a job or something, ...so that time is being taken away from a lot of homework and stuff. ...I think a lot of Laotian

parents have become dependent upon the welfare system, and as their kids get bigger, they don't really think of anything better for their kids a lot of the time. You know, if you don't get a job, then go get married and have kids and then you won't have to do anything.

However, Pane's mother supports her decision to go to college, perhaps because her mother is unusually independent, both socially and economically. Pane's mother was uneducated in Laos, and "was more of a concubine than an actual wife as in the United States." After spending nine years on welfare, she now supports herself and her daughter by working at a county daycare center. Pane says both she and her mother are viewed as "different" from most women in their community—her mother for leaving welfare and going to work, and Pane for going to college and for following in her mother's footsteps in seeking economic self-sufficiency, rather than marriage based on dependency.

Soonthone's family reconciles American economic reality with the Laotian tradition of early, arranged marriage for the daughters in a different way. She explains,

But in America is totally different from our country, right? Everyone have to work, should be able to survive. My dad said, "Well, if you want to live in here, you have to have high education." There's a family who come...they ask me to be engaged. But I said, I have to ask my dad, and my dad said, "No! My daughter need to be educated. If you can wait four or five years, then you have to wait for her," you know. Then he [the man who wanted to marry her] just like go out [of the house], and I guess he married now, I don't know.

Soonthone plans to marry a man of her parents' choosing, after she graduates from college.

Freedom to choose her own career

Merilee tells a very different story. Like Pane and Soonthone, Merilee's parents are immigrants. However, Merilee's parents arrived in the U.S. with far greater economic, social, and cultural capital. Her grandfather was a bank accountant in Hong Kong, and both of her parents went to British colonial boarding schools in Hong Kong before coming to the U.S. for college. Her father is an engineer; her mother has a Ph.D. and chooses to teach English to immigrant students in community college as a way of giving something back to the Chinese community. Merilee articulates an acute awareness of being an Asian female,¹¹ and is critical of the high rate of intermarriage of Asian American women with white men, whom she calls

“rice chasers.”¹² From her family’s class background and experience in the U.S., it is possible to trace the roots of some of Merilee’s attitude of self-confidence, Asian identity and pride, and spirit of independence. Although in feudal China, bound feet and arranged marriages were commonplace for wealthier peasant and landowning families, Merilee’s urban, professional family appears to have broken completely from Chinese feudal tradition. Moreover, her parents’ high levels of education set a clear expectation that Merilee would go to college. Merilee had the freedom to choose her career, but not going to college was never an option.

Pane and Soonthone’s testimonies serve to illustrate that it would be simplistic to say that Laotian families value education less for daughters than for sons, or that they are merely transplanting unequal Laotian gender relationships in American soil through the practice of early, arranged marriages. The complexity of their families’ lives as refugees from halfway around the world, trying to survive economically and preserve a sense of family and culture, provides a more nuanced and practical explanation for some Laotian parents’ prioritizing of marriage over college. Both Pane and Soonthone, along with their respective parents, have negotiated and resolved the marriage-college contradiction in different ways that allow the girls to pursue a college education. Merilee’s story also serves to introduce elements of family history, culture, and changing views of women in Chinese and American society—and not simply class and educational background—as influences on Merilee’s sense of independence and of freedom to choose her future career.

Comparing Asian Students at Berkeley High with Asian Americans Nationally

Although Asians are commonly lumped together as one ethnic or racial group—similar in appearance, culture, and academic achievement—in reality Asians in America are very diverse. At Berkeley High, Asian students speak 15 or more different languages. Some are sixth generation Asian Americans whose families have been in this country longer than many white Americans. Some live in affluent neighborhoods in the Berkeley hills, while others live in crowded apartments with several generations living under one roof.

As Heather Kim (1997) found in her study of Asian American high school seniors,¹³ Asian American students at Berkeley High School represent a spectrum of educational attainment, as do their parents, who range from Ph.D.s to those with no formal schooling. Moreover, both immigrant and American-born Asian students hold strong feelings in opposition to the view that Asians are all the same, and that they all fit the model minority stereotype.

Asian American is an umbrella term that encompasses people with very diverse cultures, histories, experiences, and conditions of life. Taken as a group, Asian Americans show bimodal patterns of educational achievement, with high- and low-achieving students, as well as parents with high and low job status and incomes (Pang, 1994). In fact, Sue and Okazaki (1990) state that, "Asian Americans show not only high educational attainments, but relatively higher proportion of individuals with *no education whatsoever* compared with Whites and ethnic minority groups" (p. 133, emphasis added). Asian Americans are a heterogeneous grouping within a multicultural and heterogeneous society, yet the widely accepted stereotype says that Asians are all alike.

Even when aggregated as one minority group, Asian Americans are just 4.2% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2002). Researchers justify aggregating Asian American data to obtain a larger population, and to avoid extremely small sample size for individual Asian ethnic groups. But false conclusions can be drawn through research using samples that are too small to generalize the findings. In their foreword to Kim's (1997) report on Asian American high school seniors, Barton and Coley underscore the problems associated with aggregating Asian American data due to small sample size:

In the world of social science and educational research, Asian Americans are frequently represented as one group, and summarized with one number, like an arithmetic average. ...While most Americans know that an 'average' is simply a convenient statistical representation, it tends to convey an image, particularly when it is pointed out, over and over again, that the average achievement for one group is higher than that of another. (pp. 2-3)

Strong empirical evidence of diversity among the six case study students is also reflected in Stacey Lee's (1994) ethnographic study of Asian students at Academic High, where various groups of Asian students exhibited both socio-economic class and ethnic similarities and differences in their behaviors and attitudes toward school.

"We Are Not All Chinese!"—The Need to See Oneself in the Curriculum

All six case study students expressed support for the Asian American History course that began Fall 1997, taught by an Asian American female teacher. All signed or helped circulate petitions for the course because they wanted to see the diversity of Asian people included in the curriculum. Franklin's admonition, "We are not all Chinese!", struck a chord with many Asian students.

Regardless of their academic achievement levels, Asian American students at Berkeley High School seem to feel invisible, and their absence from the curriculum reinforces this feeling of being an unimportant outsider. Franklin said,

I almost started a riot in my World History class last year. I asked, “Why do we spend a semester and a half talking about European history? Are the European people really that important? Why do we spend just one week on Asia? The Great Wall, China, and that’s it! And the same thing with Africa. Why?”

The Asian American History class is designed to cover aspects of Asian history as it relates to Asian immigration to the U.S., but its main focus is on the Asian experience in America. Here, too, the issue of diversity among Asian Americans came up. This time, some of the students comments were directed not only toward people of other races, but toward Asian Americans who may know little about the homelands and histories of other Asian nationalities.

On a more personal note, Pane talked about the omission of Southeast Asian history and culture in the mainstream curriculum.

I don’t know much about my own culture and history, about Laos. I still don’t understand which—which war that my sister’s father was fighting in that drove my family out of the country. You know, I don’t understand—a lot of Asians are doing really well, but a lot are struggling.

Soonthone was happy about the new Asian American History class and she is critical of the existing Asian literature class. She angrily explained, “The other class [Asian Literature] is talking about Japanese and Chinese, but I said that is not called Asian, you know? So I don’t want to take it, make me sick! They don’t mention about other cultures.” English translations of literature from Southeast Asia are rare, so the lack of literature other than from Japan or China may in part be due to this constraint. However, Soonthone is responding to her sense that no effort has been made to include other Asian cultures in the curriculum, and to the tendency to view Japan and China as the main nations and cultures of Asia.

Although the students never elaborated on the reasons why they felt so strongly about seeing themselves in the curriculum, I interpreted this response to their various feelings of being overlooked in the high school and being lumped together under the umbrella of a stereotype that all Asians are the same.

MYTH: Asians Do Not Suffer Racial Discrimination Like Other People of Color

In part because American society treats all Asians as similar—as foreign, exotic, inscrutable, super—achievers—the racial stereotypes apply across all Asian ethnicities, despite the actual diversity among Asians. External factors cause Asians who did not identify with each other in Asia to identify with each other here in the U.S., including in the high school setting.¹⁴

However, like all people of color in the U.S., Asians continue to suffer many forms of racial discrimination, and they are also targets of escalating hate crimes, sometimes connected to the model minority myth. Asians are still perceived as foreigners, no matter how many generations their families have lived in this country.¹⁵

Asians at Berkeley High School are a small minority, and the students I interviewed express a sense of isolation within the large high school. Perhaps as a result of this, all six students expressed identification with other Asian students, and all had at least some Asian friends, though not necessarily of the same ethnicity as themselves. This complicates the picture of Asian American students at Berkeley High, since they express reasons for solidarity as Asians, as well as resentment over attributed homogeneity.

Three of the students recounted specific incidences of racism in their high school experience. In these cases, they saw the racism directed toward them as Asians, not as members of a particular ethnicity, such as Laotian. Often this racism took the form of statements by other students or teachers, such as, “You all look alike,” or “You are all the same,” carrying negative connotations. Some students expressed deep anger or described their own acts of individual resistance.

Franklin Nguyen gave the following example of his response to an encounter with a teacher. He said,

Some Vietnamese students don't speak up when teachers mispronounce their names. When my teacher called me “Noojun,” I corrected him. I said, “My name is pronounced ‘Nwin,’ not ‘Noojun.’” The teacher said, “Whatever.” Then I said, “No, my name is not ‘Whatever.’ It is Nguyen.”

Franklin characterizes this kind of treatment as commonplace for Asians of various nationalities, and says that teachers who make no effort to pronounce Asian names are disrespecting the students and their cultures. He added, “If the teacher's name was Nguyen, he would want me to say it correctly. Why can't we expect them to say our names correctly?”

Merilee spoke of open hostility from other students in her freshman English-History core classes, where she was the only Asian student. She felt

ostracized and without friends. With a note of anger in her voice, she described verbal assaults by her classmates, which she attributes to racial stereotyping.

I was dealt so much crap from just being Asian. They would just be like, “Oh, you’re going to get an A on that and you’re just going to screw up our entire group.” And they’d just be really mean to me when I did a presentation in class. They would just be like, “Well, she doesn’t even need to do that, she’s going to get an A without it.” But I transferred out of that class!

ALTERNATIVES TO THE MYTH: EXPLAINING ASIAN ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

Scholars have proposed various theories and explanations to help explain the relatively high levels of Asian American academic performance, some of which explicitly and directly challenge the model minority myth. To combat the “scientific” evidence, it is necessary to uncover and address the explicit and implicit notions of genetic/racial superiority and inferiority embodied in the myth, as well as the stereotypes of Asian cultural or personality traits that allegedly account for their success in school.

Alternative explanations include considerations such as socio-economic class, historical and political circumstances, immigration status, English language skills, lack of opportunities for social and economic mobility outside of school, “voluntary” or “involuntary” minority status, and other interrelated structural, social, and cultural factors to explain the relatively high level of school achievement among some Asian Americans. Following are some of these alternative explanations and ways of approaching this perplexing question.

“Voluntary” vs. “Involuntary” Minority: Comparing Asians to Other Racial Minorities

John Ogbu (1987, 1990, 1991), an anthropologist, is one of the few scholars who even attempts to grapple with the issue of differential achievement among racial and ethnic minority groups. His theory regarding Asian American achievement patterns is integral to his theory of underachievement patterns among other students of color, namely African Americans, Latinos, and Native American Indians. While his work is widely read and seriously attempts to address this problem in a way that looks at historical context and rejects genetic superiority arguments, his theory nevertheless tends to reinforce the model minority stereotype of Asians.

Ogbu places Asian Americans among the “voluntary” minorities who have historically immigrated to the U.S. in search a better life. He argues that their “voluntary” status leads them to adopt a perspective of “accommodation without assimilation” within the school system and the dominant culture—a form of “When in Rome, do as the Romans” while in school, but without necessarily giving up one’s home language and culture. He further argues that their “voluntary” status allows these immigrants to believe in the possibility of upward mobility through hard work and perseverance. Ogbu contrasts this perspective to that of the “involuntary minorities,” defined as those who live in the U.S. involuntarily, as a result of slavery or conquest. African Americans, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native Hawaiians, Alaskan Indians and Eskimos, and American Indians are among these “involuntary minorities” who, according to Ogbu, consciously resist the dominant culture through their own oppositional culture. This oppositional culture rejects the dominant culture’s notion of meritocracy-of school achievement leading to the reward of good jobs and economic success.

Ogbu’s theory is unable to explain the existence of many low-achieving Asian students, or the fact that a student can be failing and yet appear outwardly indistinguishable from the straight-A student in dress and school behavior. Similarly, Ogbu cannot explain oppositional behavior among Asian youth, such as the “New Wavers” in Stacey Lee’s (1996) study who wore black clothing and spiked hair, or the Asian youth gangs in cities around Berkeley and across the U.S. Ogbu fails to address refugee status (Takaki, 1995) in his definitions of “voluntary” and “involuntary,” nor does he consider class differences or differences in school practices, structures, and cultures that contribute to or diminish student achievement. Finally, his theory cannot explain the bimodal patterns of educational achievement among the various “voluntary” Asian nationalities in the U.S., as demonstrated by Heather Kim’s (1997) study.

Collective Support for Achievement among Asian Students

In their responses to the Diversity Project’s Class of 2000 annual survey, self-identified Asian students of various ethnicities were more likely than any other racial/ethnic group to turn to friends for help with school work, and (along with Chicano/Latino students) were least likely to go to family members for help. Some 32% of Asian ninth grade respondents reported going to friends for help, compared to 12% of African American, 18% of white, and 11% of Chicano/Latino ninth grade respondents. Only 4% of Asian and Chicano/Latino respondents said they go to family members for help, compared to 14% of African Americans, and 30% of white students.

Collective support for academic achievement is a common practice among Asian American students—something socially constructed within the context of the high school. In this sense, it is a cultural characteristic of some Asian students, but it is not cultural in the sense of a practice embedded in certain cultures of Asia.

Other ethnographic studies have found similar practices among some Asian students, thereby demystifying their relative success in advanced mathematics and debunking genetic or cultural explanations. At Academic High, Stacey Lee (1996) found that Korean students' response to "differential achievement within the Korean student population was that the higher achievers would help the lower achievers" (p. 417). In another study by Kiang and Kaplan (1994), Vietnamese students at a Boston high school formed a Vietnamese Student Association "to provide academic tutoring, English as a Second Language (ESL) tutoring, advising about cultural expectations in American society, and ways to share Vietnamese language and culture" (p. 110). In his ground-breaking, 18-month study in the mid-1970s of 20 black and 20 Chinese students taking Calculus at UC Berkeley, math professor Uri Treisman found that Chinese students taking Calculus routinely formed what they called "study gangs" and "got used to kicking problems around. ...There was a friendly competition among them, but in the end, they shared information so that they could all excel" (Jackson, 1989, p. 24). Learning from the study habits and the seamless blend of social and academics found in the Chinese "study gangs," and believing that all students were capable of learning calculus, Treisman created a program that instilled "study gang" practices among multi-racial groups of students, with remarkable results. Thus, as Treisman demonstrated, group study practices of some Asian students that result in higher academic achievement are neither genetic in origin nor exclusive to certain Asian cultures, but are socially constructed and can be learned and taught.

Joe Chung Fong (2002), in his study of immigrant Chinese high school students in the San Gabriel Valley, California, discovered yet another understudied factor contributing to their relative academic success and strong college-going culture. He found that community-sponsored Chinese language schools and a high school Chinese language program provided venues for sharing "many of the related academic tools necessary to do well academically, such as discipline, morals, and encouraging a learning process" (pp. 316–317). Chinese parents viewed the community-based Chinese language schools as complementary, not supplementary or subordinate to, the formal education their children received in school. The students viewed these schools as a social space that also provided practice in academic arenas, such as in the organized Chinese language competitions among the schools, thus imparting skills that proved beneficial in their public school classrooms as

well. Fong — in refuting what he calls the “conventional cultural explanation about Asian students doing relatively well in school” (p. 326)—shows how Chinese students utilized both community- and school-based institutions and programs connected to Chinese language and culture to further their own positions within the U.S. public educational system.

Structural Factors and Restricted Social Mobility Influence Educational Paths

Structural factors such as immigration patterns have some impact on the bimodal educational attainment of many Asian Americans, and on their relative concentration in fields of mathematics and science. Since 1965, U.S. immigration law, through the preference system, has favored those with higher education and professional skills, thereby raising the educational level of many Asian immigrant groups well above the national average (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). With Hong Kong changing hands in 1997 from Britain to China, many businesspeople and other wealthy Chinese also began leaving the former British colony, with many heading to the U.S. and Canada¹⁶.

On the other end of the spectrum are the Cambodian immigrants. The Cambodian intellectuals and professionals were nearly eliminated by the Khmer Rouge, leaving Cambodian populations in the U.S. or their homeland marked by widespread poverty and low educational levels. Similarly, many Laotians immigrated from a war-torn Laos by way of Thai refugee camps, and entered the U.S. with little more than the clothes on their backs.

English fluency is also a differentiating factor among Asian immigrant communities in the U.S. Some Asian immigrants—such as many from India and some from Hong Kong and the Philippines—speak English fluently as a result of the historical legacy of British and U.S. colonialism in Asia. Generally speaking, those immigrant children who already speak and read English are at a great advantage in school over immigrant children who know little or no English (Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Kim, 1997).

Sue and Okazaki (1990) employ the theoretical framework of structural functionalism to explain why many Asian Americans place an emphasis on schooling as the only avenue available for mobility and success in the U.S. Their research asserts that,

...academic achievements of Asian Americans cannot be solely attributed to Asian cultural values. Rather, ...their behavioral patterns, including achievements, are a product of cultural values (i.e., ethnicity) and status in society (minority group standing). Using the notion of relative functionalism, we believe that the educational attainments of Asian Americans are highly influenced by the opportunities present for upward mobility, not only in educational

endeavors but also in noneducational areas. Noneducational areas include career activities such as leadership, entertainment, sports, politics, and so forth, in which education does not directly lead to the position. ... [E]ducation is increasingly functional as a means for mobility when other avenues are blocked. (p. 139)

Using this perspective, the large number of hours that some Asian students like Merilee spend studying, along with their willingness to form study groups and tutoring relationships among themselves, is not just an outgrowth of traditional cultures that venerate education and promote mutual assistance. These practices are socially necessitated because other avenues for upward mobility and social acceptance are closed to them. Examples of closed avenues include high profile sports and leadership positions, social activities, other activities valued by non-Asian peers and by college admissions officers, and so on. As for their parents, Suzuki's (1977) work explains that the reality of being Asian in America causes many of them to develop "an almost desperate faith in schooling" as the only hope for their children's futures (p. 44).

At Berkeley High, this notion of closed avenues for economic and social mobility is a reality. Sports provides a good example. Asian students tend to be small compared to some of their white or African American peers, and rarely play in the high profile sports such as basketball or football. Four of the six case study students participate in school athletics, and some play on other sports teams or athletics outside of school. Merilee plays basketball and lacrosse for Berkeley High, and practices three kinds of Asian martial arts outside of school. Billy plays varsity lacrosse. Ken and Soonthone play varsity badminton, where Ken is number one, and where speed and agility—not size and strength—are the winning ingredients. A handful of Asians, mostly girls, participate in swimming, water polo, crew, and women's soccer, basketball, and softball. Asians also participate in low-prestige intramural sports, such as the ESL faculty vs. student basketball tournament, or outside of school in martial arts and Asian basketball leagues. But unlike popular stars on high profile teams, Asians are involved in sports with no "popularity value" and are widely perceived as non-athletic.

Sue and Okazaki's notion of relative functionalism also helps to explain why so many Asian students are found in mathematics and in the sciences and engineering fields, and why they work so hard to stay competitive in these fields. Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (1997) reports: "Highly motivated [Asian] children may excel in math and science - subjects that require less sophisticated [English] language skills—while their lack of proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking skills is neglected" (p. 4). Moreover, Chun (1980) explains that Asian students' concentration in

technical and scientific fields “does not necessarily reflect aptitude, but rather an adaptive response to the world or reality as they have experienced it” (p. 8). Therefore, “Asian Americans may consider certain occupations and fields of specialization closed to them, and are resigned to a restricted range of occupational choices—pharmacy instead of medicine, business accounting rather than law, retail store ownership instead of corporate management, and so on” (p. 7).

Sue and Okazaki (1990) also introduce the role of historical timing—a “fortuitous match” between the skills of Asian immigrants and the labor needs and opportunity structures in the U.S.. In the post-World War II years, Asian workers were still barred from many labor unions and “blue collar” industries, and it was during this period that some Asian Americans moved into “white collar” office and lower managerial jobs (Suzuki, 1977). Currently, the high-tech era in the U.S. economy coincides “fortuitously” with a wave of educated Asian immigrants who already possess mathematical, computer, and scientific skills, or who—because of language and cultural barriers to other educational and occupational pursuits—gravitate toward engineering and technological fields in U.S. high schools, and when choosing their college majors and post-graduate fields of study (Sue & Okazaki, 1990).

Kao’s (1995) study concurs, citing pressure from Asian parents toward high school achievement and “safe” professional occupations. Lee too comments on the conscious choices that Asian students and their parents make regarding education and careers. Speaking of the Asian-identified students at Academic High, Lee (1996) says,

Although these students believed in the value of hard work, they also seemed to accept that discrimination would limit their potential. They did not challenge discrimination but instead altered their expectations to fit what they perceived to be their opportunities. ...One Asian-identified informant told me that, although he wanted to be a lawyer or politician, he planned to be an engineer because of his “accent.” (p. 418)

To this day, only a relatively small number of even U.S.-born Asian Americans who attend college will choose majors in the humanities and social sciences; most Asians are deterred by the need for English language skills in these fields of study, and by the occupational outcomes that tend to require extensive public contact. This is in part a process of self-selection, as well as a response to a history of discrimination in the job market.

CHALLENGING THE MYTH IN OUR PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Understanding the diversity of Asian Americans and the bimodal nature of their educational achievement and attainment is one important step in overcoming a legacy of “Yellow Peril” and “Model Minority” stereotypes, and of recognizing the educational needs of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans. It is particularly important to dispel myths and stereotypes, and our public schools are uniquely positioned to take on this task. This is an important educational charge, for several reasons:

Schools across the country are serving increasingly diverse immigrants from Asia

The number of Asian Pacific American students is growing rapidly,¹⁷ mostly through immigration, and more of the recent immigrant groups are poor and not well educated. Most schools are ill prepared to address the needs of the Asian students, in part because they fail to perceive the educational crisis facing this diverse and expanding population due to the prevalence of the Model Minority Myth. Schools and districts, once aware of the needs and challenges of Asian students, can take steps to address such issues as: English language acquisition, including proficiency and comfort in spoken English; services and programs for students who have experienced war and trauma or whose families have been separated for many years; early and intensive college counseling for students who will be the first in their families to graduate high school and/or go to college.

The Model Minority Myth pits Asians against other people of color

Asian Americans are commonly used by white mainstream society as a “wedge” against other people of color, with their “success story” pitted against African American and Latino demands for equality, including within our public schools. The model minority stereotype fosters discord among people of color rather than unity in struggle against racism and for greater equity for all people.

The myth places Asian Americans in a vulnerable position in society

Although their numbers are growing, the proportion of Asians to the overall U.S. population remains small, and they are mostly unrepresented politically.¹⁸ They are resented by white people for “taking away” jobs or seats at colleges and universities, and are targets of rising racial violence perpetrated mostly by white males.

The myth hides from view those most in need

Many Asian Americans are living in poverty and are going without needed social and educational services because the model minority lens renders them invisible. The same is true for those Asian students whose parents are under-educated or wholly without formal education, who may live in poverty, or who may be the first in their families to go to college. In San Francisco, more than one out of five youth who drop out of high school are Asian, yet they are treated as an aberration, because they do not fit the widespread assumption that Asians are “making it” in America.¹⁹ Educators, policymakers, journalists, and others can take action to render the problems visible and call for remedies.

Asians are overlooked in the black-white definition of race in America

Racial issues in U.S. schools and society are most often posed as “black and white,” or Latino and white in the Southwest. Including Asian American history and culture in the curriculum at the K-12 and college level, and in public discourse about race, is a step in the right direction.

Each of the Asian American students who participated in the interviews for this chapter, or who agreed to be shadowed, is dealing in his or her own ways with educational challenges, with cultural conflicts and cultural blending, and with parental concerns and family life. Their various identities, historical experiences, and their perceptions of opportunities influence their school performance and behaviors. Many of the obstacles and hardships they face are masked by the perception that Asian students are doing well and have no serious problems, or that they are culturally or genetically predisposed to do well in school. My hope is that some of what they said will come as a surprise to the reader, just as some things challenged my own biases and assumptions.²⁰ Asian students express feelings of invisibility and insignificance at Berkeley High, and by challenging assumptions and stereotypes, they may become visible and significant.

Perhaps more importantly, their stories hold policy implications for teachers, counselors, school staff, social services, and government. There is a need to recognize that many Asian students are in need of support services; that they are virtually absent in the curriculum; that they have much in common with other students of color; and that their voices ought to be fully included in any dialogue or plan of action at the high school and college level with regard to issues of diversity, race relations, school reform, and multicultural teaching and learning.

NOTES

1. School Colors is the 1994 documentary film produced by the Center for Investigative Reporting. It is about race relations at Berkeley High School in Berkeley, California. Filming took place over one school year, and when the video aired on TV, many Berkeley High students shared similar criticisms about emphasizing the negative over the positive. (See Joyce Millman's article, "Berkeley High School shows divided 'School Colors,'" in the *San Francisco Examiner*, October 18, 1994, for more on student response.)
2. The term Asian American is used interchangeably with Asian. It refers to people of Asian descent (East Asia, South Asia, Southeast Asia, Central Asia, Persian Gulf) who are living in the U.S., regardless of citizenship status or place of birth.
3. The quote refers to *The New York Times and US News and World Report*.
4. In a 2001 survey of 1,216 Americans sponsored by the Committee of 100, a Chinese American leadership organization, "One in four Americans has 'strong negative attitudes' toward Chinese Americans, would feel uncomfortable voting for an Asian American for president of the United States, and would disapprove of a family member marrying someone of Asian descent." See "Asian Americans seen negatively," by Matthew Yi and Ryan Kim, *San Francisco Chronicle*, April 27, 2001, p. A1.
5. During the 1980s, two such hate crimes took place. In 1981, Vincent Chin, a young Chinese man, was beaten to death in Detroit by two white men who blamed Japan for the loss of U.S. auto jobs, and mistook Chin for a Japanese. The killers never spent a day in prison. On January 17, 1989, an unemployed white man, Patrick Purdy, opened fire on an elementary schoolyard in Stockton, California, killing five children—four Cambodian and one Vietnamese. Purdy had once attended this school, which had since become 70% Southeast Asian, and he reportedly harbored racist sentiments toward Asians. More recently, on April 11, 1997, six Asian students and their white companion were beaten in the parking lot of a Denny's restaurant after being denied service, while white patrons were seated immediately. Denny's security guards, who are also sheriffs with the Onondaga Sheriff's Department, stood by and watched the attack. See Helen Zia's (2001) *Asian American Dreams: The emergence of an American people*, and Morse (1989) for more accounts of racial violence against Asian Americans.
6. Data from California Basic Educational Data System (CBEDS) <http://www.cde.ca.gov/demographics/>
7. This is an example of a practice that is passed along to newcomers and is common knowledge within a community, but unknown to those outside the community, including school personnel. This information, shared through a parent network, can be viewed as a form of social and cultural capital contained within the Vietnamese community.
8. Laurie Olsen (1997), in her book *Made in America*, also found that recent immigrant students (newcomers) at Madison High School made a distinction between themselves and "American" students, based upon English language proficiency and other cultural attributes.
9. Frank Wu, in his book *Yellow* (2002), describes the "Chinese spy" accusations against nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee, a naturalized U.S. citizen, as a clear case of racial profiling, based upon widely accepted stereotypes of Asians in America as being perpetual foreigners who are disloyal to the U.S. (pp. 176–190).

10. See later section on “Structural Factors and Restricted Social Mobility” for an explanation of the historically limited opportunities for Asian Americans in fields of employment involving public contact, extensive verbal interactions, and social involvement.
11. The model minority myth applies in a different way to male and female students. The stereotype of the Asian male student is as a “nerd,” an emasculated, bespectacled student who studies all the time, wears a pocket protector, and has no social or athletic life. The corresponding stereotype of the Asian female student is also as a “nerd,” but she additionally bears the image of exotic Asian femininity (McKay & Wong, 1996).
12. What Merilee calls “rice chasers” (white men who chase Asian women) is a phenomenon that also emanates from the gendered stereotypes of Asians. David Mura (1996), in his commentary entitled, “How America unsexes the Asian male,” explains the flip-side of racism in the white male perception of Asian femininity. He states, “In fiction, when East meets West, it is almost always a Western man meeting an Asian woman. There is constant reinforcement for the image of the East as feminine and the stereotype of Asian women as exotic, submissive and sensual. From ‘Madama Butterfly’ to ‘The Karate Kid, Part II’ and ‘Miss Saigon,’ the white man who falls in love with an Asian woman has been used to profer the view that racial barriers cannot block the heart’s affections. ...And where does that leave Asian men?” Meanwhile, Mattel released a special collection Barbie called “Fantasy Goddess of Asia Barbie.” It is one of the pricey International Beauty Collection series, and is an Asian Barbie dressed in an ornate brocade caricature of a Dragon Lady dress. Shamita Dasgupta (1998) of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund (AALDEF) writes, “I call your attention to the exoticization that Asian women have historically suffered in the West. I call your attention to the racist violence that is integral to and a result of this grotesque fascination with Asian ‘femininity.’ I call your attention to the stereotypes that each of us carry as a consequence. ‘Fantasy Goddess of Asia Barbie’ is obviously designed to satisfy the White male gaze that has promoted trafficking of Asian women by legitimizing industries such as the ‘mail order brides’.”
13. Unlike the Berkeley High data, which aggregates all Asians except Filipinos into one group, Kim had access to a national dataset (the Second Follow-Up Survey of the 1988 National Educational Longitudinal Study—NELS) that was partially disaggregated by ethnicity or region of Asia. This enabled her to show a distinct pattern of South Asians on the high end of achievement and Southeast Asians on the low end, with other Asian ethnicities falling somewhere in between.
14. The term “Asian American” was first proposed in 1968 by Yuji Ichioka (1936–2002), a renowned scholar of Japanese American history, who sought an identity that could unite diverse Asians in the U.S. in a common movement for civil rights and social justice.
15. In a newspaper commentary entitled “A campaign against Asians” on racism in the controversy over political campaign funding and Asian American donors, Congressman Norman V. Mineta (1997) of California cites examples, including “(a) cover of the *National Review* magazine featuring a cartoon showing the vice president in Buddhist robes, the first lady in a coolie hat and the president and first lady with slanted eyes and buck teeth.” He adds, “People who would be called ‘permanent residents’ or ‘immigrants’ in any other kind of news study have been routinely referred to as ‘foreigners’ in the coverage of the fund-raising scandal and discussions surrounding it. ...The long-term worry is that the constant focus on race surrounding this issue is adding to a drumbeat of general suspicion about Asian Pacific American involvement in politics.” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, August 25, 1997, Open Forum)

16. By contrast, the early Asian immigrants were largely Chinese from rural, peasant backgrounds, Japanese farmers and laborers, and Filipino farm workers and laborers.
17. "The Asian Pacific American population doubled between 1980 and 1990, and the number of Asian Pacific American school-age children grew six-fold-from 212,900 to almost 1.3 million-between 1960 and 1990. By the year 2020, it is estimated that there will be 4.4 million Asian Pacific American children between the ages of 5 and 17. These children come from 34 ethnic groups who speak more than 300 languages and dialects." (Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy, 1997, p. 3)
18. Asian Americans are underrepresented at all levels of government, even in cities such as San Francisco, where they comprise nearly one-third of the population.
19. Nakao (1996) reported that more than one third of those living in poverty in San Francisco were Asians (a staggering 67% growth in Asian/Pacific Islander poverty since 1980). Asians comprised the largest group of low birth-weight babies (a problem associated with poverty, poor nutrition, and lack of access to good prenatal health care). But as Nakao points out, because Asians are perceived as "successful" with few economic or educational problems, they received far less funding and other resources to address these problems. According report by Asian Americans/Pacific Islanders in Philanthropy (1997), "Overall, 14% of Asian Pacific Americans live below the poverty line, compared with 13% of the U.S. population. Although aggregate statistics place Asian Pacific Americans at the top of the *family* income charts, data are misleading unless the number of wage earners per family, the average per capita earnings, and the poverty level within a community are taken into account."
20. My own incorrect assumptions included: that American-born Asians would be more strongly in favor of the Asian American History class than foreign-born Asian students; that American-born students might be unaware of the need to expand understanding of the newer Asian communities; that traditions such as arranged marriages are not commonly practiced in the U.S.; that Asian students, especially foreign-born students, are not very involved in school athletics and extracurricular activities; that Asian students with high grades are mostly American-born and from middle-class families.

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