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MERGING IDENTITY -- A special report.;New Sense of Race Arises Among Asian-Americans

By NORIMITSU ONISHI

It was on a late May afternoon in 1969, three months after he had left the Philippines for New York City, that Peter Bersamin says he began to realize he was Asian.

Driving up to Cape Cod, he stopped at a cottage with a sign promising vacancies. But when Mr. Bersamin asked about a room, the keeper looked at him, told him no and closed the door. "Before I got back to the car, I knew it," he said. "That was my first experience with racial discrimination and the beginning of my awareness as being somebody other than white."

Until then, Mr. Bersamin had identified himself only as Filipino. But after meeting other Asian immigrants in Queens over the years, the 50-year-old psychologist has come to feel less part of a national or ethnic group and more part of a racial one. He now felt kinship for the Chinese, whom he had regarded suspiciously in the Philippines, and for the Japanese, whom his father, a colonel during World War II, hated so much he refused to stop in Tokyo on a trans-Pacific flight.

Even as anti-immigrant sentiment attracts attention, including comments hostile to immigrants from Julia Harrison, the Councilwoman from Flushing, Asian-Americans are arriving at a crossroad. A generation after large numbers of Asian immigrants arrived here, many, like Mr. Bersamin, say they have undergone transformations in how they think of themselves.

Many Asians still feel a strong sense of their separate ethnic identities, and ethnic clubs still flourish in some cities and colleges. Yet the emerging racial consciousness is giving birth to many pan-Asian clubs, particularly in Queens, lower Manhattan, Los Angeles and San Francisco, where only in the last two decades have Asians of different origins begun to live together.

But if personal experiences and social and political pressures are instilling in Asian-Americans the American sense of race, the consequences are unclear. They include more interethnic and interracial marriages.

Will members of the nation's fastest-growing racial group identify themselves as Chinese-Americans or Filipino-Americans, the way Italian-Americans or Irish-Americans often designate themselves? With a nod to their ethnic roots but their feet planted in the mainstream? Or will they end up defining themselves as Asian-American, a term like black or African-American, with its suggestion of a separate race?

Talk of Asian-Americans as a distinct racial group grew out of the civil rights movement. At the University of California at Berkeley and at Los Angeles, students and faculty members sought to unify Japanese- and Chinese-Americans, who had remained divided since immigrating a century ago. But starting in 1965, with the repeal of laws that had sharply restricted immigration from Asia since the 1920's, the number of Americans of Asian descent rose to a critical mass, from one million in 1960 to nine million today.

"Now you really have an emergence of the second generation," said Yen Le Espiritu, a Vietnamese-born ethnic studies professor at the University of California at San Diego. "They're going to college. You see them not only identifying with each other. They're also protesting at places like Columbia and Princeton to create Asian-American studies departments. It's another indication of their becoming racialized and politicized in the United States context."

Heritages Differ

A Melting Pot For Old Conflicts

In Queens, the county on the East Coast with the highest number of Asian-Americans, the most recent Asian immigrants remain divided by Asia's historical conflicts, while the older immigrants and their children mix and identify racially with one another. It is perhaps surprising these conflicts have melted in those cases, because their reminders, especially those of Japanese imperialism, are etched throughout the borough, sometimes subtly and unexpectedly.

At the Flushing public library, they are hidden on one shelf lined with Japanese children's books that older Taiwanese immigrants, who grew up under Japanese rule, read to their grandchildren. They appear on Kissena Boulevard in Flushing on a Korean-owned store called Tokyo Bakery and in Japanese restaurants in Queens, almost all owned by Korean immigrants.

In downtown Flushing's western end are shops and restaurants belonging to Taiwanese immigrants. Their Korean counterparts are clustered along Union Street, a block east and a world away.

Ryota Waki, 19, whose parents immigrated to Elmhurst, Queens, from Japan, saw how fresh some wounds can be in a seventh-grade math class when a Korean-American girl sitting behind him learned of his Japanese ancestry. "She had this shocked look on her face," Mr. Waki said. "Like, you got to be kidding. And she told me, 'I don't want to be your friend anymore.' And we didn't talk after that."

But Mr. Waki said it was an isolated incident. He has fallen among second-generation Asian-Americans. Two years ago, he left a Japanese-American church in Manhattan, with few congregants his age, for the Reform Church of Newton in Elmhurst, where second-generation Taiwanese-Americans attend English services. Recently, he joined a Korean Christian Fellowship club at New York University.

For Asian-Americans raised in neighborhoods with many Asians, racial awareness begins early.

After immigrating to Flushing from Taipei when he was 7, John Lee went to a public school most of whose students were black and Hispanic. He was teased and made few friends. But a year later, things changed when he transferred to Public School 32, with many Asian-American students. He made friends easily, even though his closest friends turned out not to be Taiwanese or even Chinese, but Koreans and a Thai.

"It just seemed that they looked like me," said Mr. Lee, 22, a senior at Baruch College, explaining why he gravitated toward them. "There was a comfort zone. Everybody was in the same boat, struggling to learn English. We didn't say, 'Oh, you're Chinese,' or 'You're Korean.' It was one big group."

On college campuses, away from the Asian immigrant neighborhoods of Queens, ethnic distinctions seem to matter less and less. Jennifer Bersamin, 19, the daughter of Peter Bersamin, is a sophomore at the State University at Binghamton, whose large population of Asian-Americans, she said, is from the New York area. Because her last name lacks a telltale ethnic root, some of her Asian-American friends are not aware of her Filipino ancestry.

"They don't ask," she said. "If they do, it's only out of curiosity."

School Ties When Campus Radicalizes

In a survey of 237 second-generation Korean-American high school students in New York, Pyong Gap Min, a Korean-born sociologist at Queens College, found that nearly three-quarters identified themselves as Korean-American, compared with three-quarters of first-generation immigrants who thought of themselves simply as Korean. Only a few of the high school students chose the term Asian-American.

But Professor Min said that will change when they go to college, especially on campuses with Asian-American studies programs. To some extent, there is evidence that this is happening. At the University of California and at Ivy League schools, for example, Asian-American clubs are organized increasingly around race rather than ethnicity. At U.C.L.A., about half of the 65 Asian-American student organizations are pan-Asian, said Don T. Nakanishi, director of U.C.L.A.'s Asian American Studies Center.

Dr. Min said this is partly owing to the influence of Asian-American studies programs, which are concentrated in California and spreading to the East Coast.

"Many of the people who teach Asian-American courses are activists," he said, adding that Queens College lacks Asian-American studies. "They indoctrinate students by emphasizing a common destiny. They make them demonstrate for Asian-American studies."

"If you have an institutional basis, you can do that. It's very important to shaping students' identities. When they come to college, they may not think of themselves as Asian-American. They may think of themselves ethnically as Korean, Chinese or Japanese. But their identities are changed."

Colleges hold a special power in shaping Asian-Americans' identities. Only 3 percent of the country's population, they represented 5.4 percent of the students in colleges and at universities nationwide in 1994, according to the United States Department of Education. It is the only racial group whose percentage of students was above their proportion of the national population.

Even at New York University, which does not offer Asian-American studies but which recently held an Asian-American heritage month and Asian athletic games for the university's Asian-American clubs, social forces can have a powerful effect.

Chi Truong, whose family left Vietnam in 1975 and settled in Elmhurst, Queens, said she consciously tried to make non-Asian friends in her freshman year. "I would see a big group of Asians and think, 'Oh brother, I hope I don't end up like that,'" she said. "I thought it would cut away your uniqueness, stifle your growth."

Now a junior, Ms. Truong, 19, said all her close friends are Asian-American, and her boyfriend is Mr. Waki. She felt she was missing something by not having friends of other races. But her choice was inevitable, she thought. As a freshman, she had started going to the

university's Korean Christian Fellowship club, which despite its name had become pan-Asian in the last year. She is now vice president of the club where she has made all her close friends.

On a recent Wednesday evening, about a third of the 40 students who crammed into a small room at the student center to worship and sing included students of Filipino, Taiwanese, Japanese and Vietnamese ancestry. (Last year, the Chinese Christian Fellowship club changed its name to the Asian-American Christian Fellowship because so many non-Chinese Americans had joined.)

Edmund Chiang, 19, a freshman from Woodside, Queens, whose parents immigrated from Taiwan, led the Korean-American fellowship in song. At Stuyvesant High School, where half the students are of Asian descent, Mr. Chiang said his identity began shifting from "just being Taiwanese."

"Now," he said, "I first think of myself as a Christian, then Asian and then Taiwanese."

The Enemy Within Antagonism Or Assimilation?

Some Asian-Americans say the political climate on campuses is widening and multiplying the country's racial fissures by producing a generation with an antagonistic attitude toward white Americans. Just as the Irish, Italians and Jews encountered hostility at the turn of the century but eventually assimilated, Asian immigrants and their children can follow the same path if they try, they say.

Lance T. Izumi, a fellow at Pacific Research Institute in San Francisco who served as a speechwriter to Attorney General Edwin Meese 3d during the Reagan Administration, said the climate is delaying the integration of Asian-Americans. Although Chinese- and Japanese-Americans were excluded until after World War II, they have assimilated quickly in the last two or three decades, Mr. Izumi said.

He pointed to the high number of marriages between whites and third- and fourth-generation Japanese- and Chinese-Americans. For Japanese-Americans, about half of all marriages are now interracial.

"There are many in my generation, and I include myself, who see more of the commonalities and don't cling on to this idea of Asian-American," said Mr. Izumi, 37, a third-generation Japanese-American. "But how many of those third-generation Vietnamese- and Korean-Americans will feel the same as I do now if they had it beaten into their heads that the majority culture is the enemy?"

Critics like Mr. Izumi say Asian-American advocates, by emphasizing historical wrongs, promote the idea of victimhood, a label that they say rings false when Asian Indians are the most educated ethnic group in the nation, Japanese- and Chinese-Americans earn higher incomes than whites, and two-thirds of all Asian-Americans were born abroad.

And while advocates stress solidarity with black and Hispanic people, many Asian-Americans say they think policies like affirmative action hurt them, especially in college admissions, by favoring black and Hispanic applicants as well as whites. Asian-American high school seniors have the highest grades and test scores of any racial group, and usually do not qualify for affirmative action programs.

Politically, even in areas with concentrations of Asian immigrants, like Flushing or Los Angeles, Asian-American candidates so far have had little success in uniting the Asian vote behind them. Because a small percentage of Asian immigrants register to vote -- and when they do, Japanese-Americans lean toward Democrats and Chinese- and Korean-Americans favor Republicans -- Asian-American candidates now must discreetly appeal to their core constituency while being ethnically neutral enough to broaden their appeal.

Second-generation Asian-Americans are likely to become more politically involved, experts predict. But how their identities take shape over the years will determine whether they become involved in racial or mainstream politics.

"Which direction they take," said Michael Woo, a Chinese-American who ran unsuccessfully for mayor of Los Angeles in 1993 and has since taught at Harvard and U.C.L.A., "will depend on two factors: the level of continuing racism and discrimination, and whether there is a continuing flow of immigrants revitalizing the ethnic communities."

Asian-American advocates, who say racism is at the core of American society, say that Asian-Americans must form a voting bloc. They point to the comments by Mrs. Harrison, the Councilwoman, who described the arrival of Asian immigrants in Flushing as an invasion.

"I don't know if they're Korean or Chinese," she said. "I can't tell by the name." The remarks drew more than 2,000 protesters, mostly Chinese and Korean immigrants, also backed by other Asian groups, in front of City Hall.

"It's all interest politics," said Mr. Nakanishi of U.C.L.A., adding that Asian-Americans might become a swing vote in a generation in areas like California and New York. "It's been played out for decades. The competition 50 years ago, for example, between the ethnic whites and white Anglo-Saxon elites. It's very much part of the American tradition."

But others, like Dinesh D'Souza, the Indian-born writer, say Asian-Americans are already assimilating into the mainstream through education and entrepreneurialism. These efforts provide a quicker ladder to success than political activism based on promoting an Asian-American racial identity, Mr. D'Souza said.

"This is a uniquely American phenomenon," he said. "In other parts of the world, identity is not so fluid. You're born with it, so you

have no choice. But here it's constructed. And if you fail, you feel your life has been a waste."