Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype

Listening to Asian American Youth

SECOND EDITION

Stacey J. Lee

Foreword by Christine Sleeter

TEACHERS COLLEGE PRESS

Reflecting Again on the Model Minority

The Asian American students at Academic High School clearly demonstrate that there is no single Asian American experience, identity, or perspective. While some of the students embraced the achievement ideology and expressed pro-school attitudes and behaviors, others were ambivalent about the role of school in their lives. While some of the students achieved model minority success and were headed for elite universities, others struggled to pass their classes. Asian American students had varied understandings of race and racism, different types of relationships with non-Asians, and different responses to the model minority stereotype. The diversity among Asian American students at AHS represents but a small fraction of the diversity among Asian Americans in the larger society.

Despite the many differences among Asian American youth at Academic High, all of the Asian American students were affected by the stereotype that Asian Americans are high-achieving model minorities. Teachers and non-Asian students generally assumed that all Asian Americans were high-achieving model minorities, an assumption that negatively affected students who failed to live up to the standards of the stereotype. As a hegemonic construct, the model minority stereotype served as a wedge between Asian Americans and other groups of people of color, and shaped the way all Asian American students viewed themselves. The school district categorized all East and Southeast Asian students at Academic High as "Asian" regardless of whether or not students embraced a pan-ethnic identity. Similarly, at Academic High most teachers and students viewed all students of East and Southeast Asian descent as being "Asian," thereby erasing significant differences. In short, all of the Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Lao, and Cambodian students at AHS had to contend with both the pan-ethnic category of "Asian" and the model minority stereotype.

Asian American students from all four identity groups were aware that non-Asians lumped all Asian Americans into one category, and stereotyped Asian Americans as model minorities. Students were also aware that Asians are a racialized minority group—that is, compared to other groups,

The process of identity formation among all of the Asian American students was influenced by their perceptions regarding their positions and locations within society and their understanding of their interests. Asian American students in all four groups judged their situations by comparing their social positions to that of whites, nonwhite minorities, and other Asian Americans. Significantly, the four identity groups came to different conclusions about their positions in the larger society and different conclusions about how they should respond to dominant society. Some Asian American youth gladly accepted the model minority label, others struggled to live up to it, and still others were critical of it. While most embraced a pan-ethnic identity they applied varied and diverse meanings to being Asian. Asian American–identified students, for example, viewed pan-ethnic identification as an overtly political act, but Asian-identified students were more interested in the social support they gained from socializing with others who shared a similar culture and similar social positions.

In this revised conclusion to the book, I will revisit the four identity groups in light of the recent research on immigrant education, and the literature on Asian Americans in particular. Although the students in my study are unique individuals who attended a particular school at a specific moment in history, the students in the four identity groups represent general types of Asian American students who are present in our schools today. Although youth styles have changed, and the names of student categories may vary, a review of the literature on Asian Americans suggests that we can still find students who reflect these general categories today. Furthermore, I will argue that Asian American students continue to face many similar issues in the early 21st century. I will conclude the book by taking a final opportunity to reflect on the role of the model minority stereotype within the context of AHS and within the larger society.

ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITIES REVISITED

Korean-Identified Students

As I argued throughout the book, the vast majority of Korean American students at Academic High identified solely as Korean. That is, they rejected a pan-ethnic identity as Asian, and worked hard to distinguish themselves from other Asian Americans at the school. As noted in Chapter 2, Korean-identified students were exceptionally critical of new wave students because they saw the new wavers' underachievement and poverty as threats to the model minority image of Asians, which they attempted to achieve. Within the larger Asian American student community

Korean-identified students were seen as different and separate from other Asian Americans. As the group who bore the brunt of the Korean-identified students' criticism, new wave students were particularly quick to assert that Korean-identified students were elitist and ethnocentric. Similarly, in her study on low-income Southeast Asian youth Reyes (2007) found that many of her research participants "accused Korean Americans of having superiority complexes and of refusing to mingle with other Asian American ethnic groups" (p. 124).

The Korean identity expressed by most Korean American students at Academic High was one promoted by their parents and by the larger Korean immigrant community in the area. Other researchers have identified this strong ethnic solidarity that I observed among Korean American students as well (Kibria, 2002; Lew, 2006; Min, 1998). The literature on ethnic identity is roughly divided between those who argue that ethnic groups are "communities of culture" and those who argue that ethnic groups are "communities of interest" (Espiritu, 1992). Among Korean-identified students at AHS, ethnic identity appears to be both about culture/heritage and interest. Kibria (2002) found that within Korean immigrant families, parents emphasized primordial conceptions of Korean ethnicity that emphasized blood and common ancestry. Although I never heard a Korean-identified student speak about his or her ethnicity in these specific terms, many spoke of their Korean ethnicity as a given and as something that defined them in an essential kind of way. Indeed, the cultural and linguistic homogeneity among Korean immigrants supports in-group cohesion, and understandings of Korean ethnicity as essential (Min, 1991). Researchers have also suggested that the strong ethnic solidarity among Korean immigrants is a protective reaction to experiences with racism (Kibria, 2002). Korean-identified students at Academic High believed that if Koreans achieved model minority success they could overcome racism and gain greater acceptance in mainstream society. For these students, the coethnic networks were central to preserving the model minority image of Korean Americans. The peer networks worked to downplay and hide behaviors and experiences (e.g., low academic achievement) among Koreans that they feared might threaten the image of Korean Americans as model minorities. Finally, research has identified the central role of Korean protestant churches in the maintenance of a distinct Korean identity in the United States (Min, 1998; Park, 2004). As noted in Chapter 2, many of the Korean-identified students at AHS knew one another from the local Korean American community and some attended the same Korean church.

Korean-identified students overwhelmingly expressed pro-school attitudes, a finding consistent with the larger literature on Korean immigrants that points to the value that Korean immigrant parents place on education

(Kibria, 2002; Lew, 2006; Min, 1998). While academic achievement varied among Korean-identified students, none questioned the idea that education would help them achieve the American dream. That is, they held folk theories of success that linked education to social mobility (Ogbu, 1987, 1991, 1994).

As discussed in Chapter 3, the Korean-identified students' ethnic solidarity was evidenced in peer networks in which they shared information about school and helped one another with homework. More recent research has highlighted the fact that the social capital conferred by these peer networks is crucial to the school success of Korean immigrant youth (Lew, 2006; Park, 2007). For example, Lew (2006) discovered that high-achieving, middle-class Korean American students relied on one another for help and support with academics.

Like the archetypal immigrant described by Ogbu (1987, 1990, 1991, 1994), the Korean-identified students were generally optimistic about their lives in the United States. The Korean-identified students at AHS were the children of post-1965 immigrants, including many with parents who were middle-class professionals in Korea and came to the United States in search of greater economic opportunities and in search of educational opportunities for their children. According to Park (1997) the economic, political, and cultural influence of the United States in Korea has fostered an "American fever" among many Korean immigrants. Korean-identified students assume that through education they would achieve social mobility, which in turn would elevate their social and political status in the United States. Although hopeful about their prospects for success in the United States, Korean-identified students seemed to understand that Koreans would not be able to usurp the position of whites, and thus they chose to adapt the strategy of accommodation without assimilation in relation to the dominant culture (Gibson, 1988). They were aware of racism, but believed it could be overcome through hard work and accommodations to the dominant culture. Thus, their decision to acculturate to white middle-class norms was strategic.

Significantly, the identity formation of Korean-identified students suggests that social class is salient to ethnic and racial identity. Indeed, ethnic solidarity among Korean students at AHS was supported by the social class homogeneity of the students. Recent research on the Korean American community highlights the growing class bifurcation within the Korean immigrant population (Lew, 2006; Park, 2007). Lew, for example, found that the working-class Korean immigrants were not privy to the social capital enjoyed by their middle-class coethnics. Korean-identified students at AHS understood that social class was a significant variable in American society, and they sought to use their merchant status to distance themselves

from working-class and poor Southeast Asians. The Korean-identified students marked their middle-class status by wearing clothes associated with upper-middle-class white students. Here, it is crucial to take note of the fact that they were intentionally adopting white youth styles, and not styles associated with urban youth of color (Perry, 2002). My point here is not to suggest that the Korean-identified students held prejudicial attitudes toward people of color, but to highlight the fact that they recognized that whites sit at the top of the racial hierarchy. Anthropologist Keyoung Park (1996) argues that Korean immigrant attitudes regarding race, particularly their respect for whites, have been influenced by Western economic, political, and military power and the "pervasive American cultural presence in South Korea, especially since the Korean War" (p. 494).

In other words, the Korean-identified students' rejection of pan-ethnicity was motivated by a fear that association with Southeast Asians might hurt their status. They did not want to be associated with Southeast Asians because they perceived them to be "drain[s] on the economy" and they likely understood that many whites were critical of people on public assistance. In other words, the Korean-identified students' upwardly mobile aspirations shaped their responses to the low-income Southeast Asian students. In short, Korean-identified students believed that their higher social-class status could attenuate the impact of racism. Indeed, economic self-sufficiency is a central characteristic of the model minority.

Despite the patterns that I observed among Korean American students, it is important to note that not all Korean American students at AHS were ethnic separatists. In fact, one of the central members of the Asian American–identified group was a Korean American student named Young (Chapter 5). As with other Asian American–identified students, Young embraced a pan-ethnic identity for political reasons. Like other students who adopted a pan-ethnic identity, Young remained connected to her specific ethnic identity as well. Young's case reminds us that all identity is fluid and responsive to social conditions. In general, the Korean-identified students' identity suggests that immigrant student identity is influenced by a group's beliefs about culture and identity, its historical experiences with outsiders, and its present social circumstances and interpretations of its position. Finally, recent research on Korean Americans calls attention to the significance of social class in ethnic networks and student achievement.

Asian-Identified Students

The students categorized as Asian-identified represented the largest group of Asian American students at Academic High. This group was diverse in terms of ethnicity and country of origin. In general, these students

used both the pan-ethnic label of Asian and ethnic specific terms to describe themselves. As discussed in Chapter 2, a pan-ethnic identification provided these students with a social network from which they gained social, emotional, and practical support. These students did not see their Asian identities as overtly political, and did not engage in pan-Asian political activities. Rather, they spoke of their Asianness in terms of sharing similar struggles at the school and in the United States, and about sharing similar cultures. Asian-identified students believed that the Asian Students' Association should focus on cultural and educational events.

With respect to common "Asian" experiences, Asian-identified students asserted that Asian parents were stricter than non-Asian parents. Here, there was often joking about the high expectations Asian parents had regarding academic achievement, and about the strict rules Asian parents had for behavior. Asian-identified students also spoke about the challenges that Asian immigrants experienced in becoming fluent in English. Specifically, many Asian-identified students remarked that they were self-conscious about their Asian accents, and feared non-Asians would either not understand them and/or make fun of their accents if they spoke in class. Even very high-achieving Asian-identified students like Thai Le saw Asian-accented English as a barrier to future achievements. As noted in Chapter 5, Asian-identified students internalized the racist standards that marked Asian accents as inferior. Despite their concerns regarding their Asian accents, Asian-identified students usually spoke to one another in English because they came from diverse language backgrounds and English was their common language.

Common experiences with racism supported a pan-ethnic identity among Asian-identified students. In fact, all Asian-identified students reported being the victims of racial slurs, and some had been physically threatened; yet most were reluctant to challenge racism directly. For Asian-identified students the pan-ethnic identification provided a sense of safety that comes from being in a big group. Although Asian-identified students did not engage in political activism, their response to racism revealed a politics of accommodation that reflected their understanding that Asians are subordinate to whites. Like the Korean-identified students most Asian-identified students believed that Asians would gain greater acceptance and status by striving to be model minorities. For example, Thai Le believed that the status of Asians would rise if Asians "live[d] up to standards." It is important to point out that the strategy of embodying the model minority image is not unique to Asian- and Korean-identified students at AHS. In fact, there is ample evidence that various Asian groups have embraced the model minority image as a tactic for dealing with racism (Du, 2008; Wang, 2008).

The Asian-identified students' support of the model minority stereotype was one of the major differences between Asian-identified and Asian American–identified students. Students like Thai not only promoted the model minority image of Asians, but also suggested that the Asian American–identified students' criticisms of the model minority stereotype were wrong-headed and dangerous. Thai and other Asian-identified students criticized the Asian American–identified students for being too loud. They feared that the outspoken behavior of the Asian American-identified students would hurt the status of all Asian Americans. Here, the Asian-identified students' acceptance of the belief that "good Asians are quiet" represented a consent to hegemony.

The Asian-identified students' image of themselves as model minorities also informed their attitudes toward other groups of people of color. As noted in Chapter 5, high achieving Asian-identified students asserted that affirmative action policies unfairly favored African Americans and discriminated against Asians. The attitudes of these students highlight the fact that the position of Asian Americans as a model minority is contingent upon the stereotype of African Americans as the failing minority. Given the generally neoconservative positions advanced by these students, it is certainly reasonable to imagine that as college students some of these students may have been involved in the pan-Asian activism against affirmative action that emerged in the 1990s.

The Asian-identified students expressed pro-school attitudes and behaviors that were central to their model minority self-presentations. These students were respectful toward teachers and were generally described in positive terms by their teachers. Although Asian-identified students experienced varied levels of academic achievement they all asserted the importance of getting an education. In fact, Asian-identified students viewed education as being the best protection against racism, an idea they had learned from their parents. Similarly, in her research on Chinese immigrant college students, Louie (2004) found that immigrant parents emphasize the centrality of education in attenuating the impact of racial discrimination on their children. In the process of trying to live up to the model minority stereotype, Asian-identified students silenced behaviors and experiences that failed to measure up to the model minority standards. Like the Korean-identified students, Asian-identified students believed in the possibility of achieving the American dream through hard work and talent. Although this identity category included refugees who did not come to the United States voluntarily, all Asian-identified students held folk theories of success associated with immigrants regarding the role of education in social mobility (Ogbu, 1987, 1990, 1991).

Significantly, Asian-identified students noted that their parents did not express pan-ethnic identities and did not see Asians as having shared concerns. There is considerable evidence that when Asian immigrants first arrive in the United States they have a strong preference for ethnic-only identities like the ones expressed by Korean-identified students and Taiwanese American students. Asian immigrants have historically established ethnic-specific social and political organizations upon arrival in the United States. Post-1965 Chinese immigrants, for example, have established ethnic organizations in Chinatowns and new "ethnoburbs" that support adaptation to the United States and the maintenance of ethnic ties (Zhou & Kim, 2006). Length of time in the United States, particularly repeated experiences with racial subordination and racialization as Asians, promotes the formation of pan-ethnic identity among Asians (Okamoto, 2003). Common experiences at AHS and in their communities led Asian-identified students to form pan-ethnic identities.

Although Asian-identified students embraced pan-ethnic identities when around non-Asians, they often displayed their specific ethnic identities among themselves. Taiwanese American students, in particular, mentioned that they empathized with the Korean-identified students' desire to be seen as separate from other Asian Americans. Like the Korean-identified students, the few Taiwanese American students at Academic High were from merchant/middle-class backgrounds and inclined to believe that their social-class status meant that they were superior to working-class Asian Americans. While the Korean-identified students had a sizeable cohort of coethnics, there were only a few Taiwanese American students at AHS, and the small number of coethnics appeared to limit their ability to assert a separate Taiwanese identity. Given the situation at AHS, the Taiwanese students chose to identify as Taiwanese and as Asian. Like the other Asian-identified students, Taiwanese American students hoped that by working together with other Asian ethnic groups they could work to educate nonwhites about Asians. The Taiwanese American students' dilemma suggests that the population size of individual ethnic groups may influence the identity process.

In the nearly 20 years since my fieldwork at Academic High I have encountered many Asian American students who have reminded me of the Asian-identified students at Academic High. Although most of these students do not express pan-ethnic identities, they share similar aspirations, behaviors, and attitudes with the Asian-identified students. In my fieldwork in the Midwest and in large urban school districts in the Northeast I have met Asian American students who, like the Asian-identified students, are generally quiet, hardworking, and politically and socially conservative. For example, in my ethnographic research on Hmong American youth at

a high school in Wisconsin, I found that students who were identified as "traditional" paid attention to their studies, obeyed and respected their parents, and followed school rules (Lee, 2005). Although they experienced varied levels of academic achievement, most maintained an unquestioned belief that education was the best route to social mobility. In short, like the Asian-identified students at Academic High, the "traditional" Hmong students and other quiet Asian American students around the country appear to confirm much of the model minority image of Asian Americans. As the Asian-identified students' case demonstrates, however, behind this veneer are complexities that trouble the model minority stereotype.

New Wavers

Like the Asian-identified students, new wave students' pan-ethnicity was informed by their understanding that Asians from a range of ethnic groups share a common position relative to non-Asians. Although these students recognized some cultural and historical differences among Asians, they agreed that being "Asian" was different from being white, African American, Latino, or Native American. In particular, new wave students argued that Asians needed to stick together because they were less politically, economically, and socially powerful than whites, and less socially powerful than African Americans. Although they were more likely than their Asian-identified peers to express anger regarding racism and racial inequality, new wavers did not participate in organized pan-Asian politics. For new wavers, a pan-ethnic identity provided an important form of social support and practical protection from the real potential of racially charged altercations. Like Asian-identified students, the new wavers displayed pan-ethnic identities among non-Asians, and often referred to their specific ethnic identities among themselves.

In striking contrast to the Asian- and Korean-identified students, the new wavers rejected the model minority image. New wave students feared that the model minority stereotype contributed to the image that Asians are nerds. Here, it was clear that new wavers believed that the nerd image hurt the social position of Asian students among non-Asian peers, and placed Asians at risk for being ridiculed, attacked, and abused. Influenced by their desire to reject the nerd image, new wavers resisted all behavior associated with the stereotype, including open investment in schooling. As noted in Chapter 2, new wave students made efforts to appear mature and worldly and they viewed following school rules to be a sign of immaturity. Most significantly, new wave boys believed that the model minority stereotype and the associated nerd image contributed to the stereotype of Asian men as being effeminate. Asian American

scholars have highlighted the concerns regarding emasculation faced by Asian American men and boys, and the new wave boys appeared to be painfully aware that Asian boys were perceived by others to be small and weak (Eng, 2001; Kumashiro, 1999). Numerous scholars have pointed to the relationship between conceptualizations of gender and attitudes toward education, in particular the belief among some working-class and poor youth that education is femininizing and therefore threatens masculinity (Carter, 2005; Willis, 1977). Carter (2005), for example, found that the African American and Latino boys in her study were under a great deal of social pressure to be "hard" (i.e., tough), and that some boys had come to view aspects of schooling as "soft" (i.e., feminine). Although new wave boys did not explicitly state that they viewed education to be feminizing, they were intent on proving their masculinity by rejecting nerd-like behavior (i.e., studying and following rules) that might further challenge their masculinity. In other words, one reason the new wave boys rejected the model minority image was because they feared that it threatened their masculinity. I am not suggesting that the new wavers fully understood the racism behind the model minority stereotype, but I would argue that the new wavers held initial insights into how the stereotype influenced their experiences.

Like the other Asian American students at AHS, new wave students stated that their parents emphasized the importance of school in achieving success in the United States. Unlike the other Asian American students, however, new wavers did not accept the achievement ideology espoused by their parents. The new wavers' oppositional response to schooling challenges the assumption that newcomers to the United States remain optimistic about opportunities in the United States and believe in education as the best route to social mobility (Ogbu, 1987, 1991). It is important to remember that central to the cultural ecological theorists' explanation for immigrant students' achievement is their assumption that immigrant children hold the same values and attitudes toward education as their immigrant parents. For example, in writing about the influence that immigrant parents have over their children, Ogbu (1991) asserted:

> Parents and community members tend to insist that children follow school rules of behavior that enhance academic success. For their part, immigrant minority children seem to respond positively to their parents' advice and training and to parental and community pressure. (p. 22)

Despite their parents' entreaties regarding the importance of education, new wavers questioned the value of formal education in their lives. In particular, new wave students questioned whether anything learned

in school could protect them on the streets. Negative experiences with the police and security officers at the mall led them to distrust authority figures and attacked their confidence in the fairness of mainstream institutions, including schools. New wavers suggested that their parents held idealistic ideas about education, and didn't understand the issues that teens faced in school or in the larger American society. Ultimately, the new wavers' distrust of educational institutions contributed to their academic difficulties.

Significantly, new wavers' ambivalence toward school developed during their time at Academic High. They reported that prior to high school they had liked school and had been good students, but negative experiences in the hypercompetitive culture of AHS had led them to dislike and distrust school. Cultural ecological theorists and scholars who have advanced ideas regarding segmented assimilation have downplayed the role of schools in student responses to school (Ogbu, 1991; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Ogbu stated, "Although immigrant minorities may be attending segregated and/or inferior schools, their overall evaluation of their educational opportunity is not disillusioned" (p. 21). However, my research at Academic High suggests that the school played a central role in the formation of the new wavers' oppositional identity. In other words, school cultures, policies, and practices influence the way in which students respond to school. Recent research supports my argument that oppositional identities are formed in response to the actions of schools (Tyson, 2002; Valenzuela, 1999). Tyson (2002), for example, found that black children enter school with pro-school attitudes, but develop negative attitudes over time in response to experiences in school.

There is significant evidence that the oppositional identity expressed by the new wavers is growing among second-generation Asian American youth from working-class and poor backgrounds (Lee, 2005; McGinnis, 2007; Reyes, 2007; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). In their research on Vietnamese students, Zhou and Bankston (1998) found that while most Vietnamese students were successful, a growing number of second-generation Vietnamese youth were engaging in delinquent behavior. According to Zhou and Bankston (1998) these delinquent youth have lost their culture and have assimilated into the urban youth culture. While Zhou and Bankston's (1998) work presaged an important trend among low-income Asian American immigrant youth, they did not address the issue of why the youth are attracted to an oppositional urban youth culture.

In my research on Hmong American youth I found that students' experiences with poverty, racism, and unresponsive schools all contributed to oppositional attitudes (Lee, 2001, 2003, 2004). Interestingly, many second-generation Hmong American students adopted hip-hop styles of dress and

speech, which mainstream educators and the students themselves associated with African American urban youth. Indeed, these students adopted a hip-hop aesthetic because they viewed hip-hop as expressing a critique of racial and class inequality. Furthermore, these students identified more with the status of African American students than with middle-class white students at the school (Lee, 2005). Similarly, in her ethnographic study of an after-school program for Southeast Asian youth in Philadelphia, Reyes (2007) discovered that for Southeast Asian adolescents "African American identity was often associated with their present and future" (p. 62). The Southeast Asian youth in her study identified with African American experiences, and were drawn to and participated in the hip-hop culture associated with African American urban youth.

Finally, recent research suggests that some low-income Asian American boys may be adopting hop-hop styles in order to gain a more masculine or hypermasculine image (Lee, 2005; Lei, 2003). Lei (2003) discovered that Southeast Asian boys' decision to enact a more masculine identity through hip-hop styles had unintended consequences, including being cast as deviant by teachers.

> By choosing to adopt markers associated with black masculinity, which has been stereotyped as hypermasculine and a threat to white male prerogative (Ferguson, 2000), the Southeast Asian American male students gained a tougher image. However, this tougher image also materialized them as deviant academic and social beings. (p. 177)

Thus, the experiences of the new wave boys at Academic High and the experiences of Asian American boys in more recent studies (Lee, 2005; Lei, 2003) highlight the importance of gender in Asian American student identities.

While it might have been tempting to see new wave students as exceptions to the norm, recent research suggests otherwise. The fact that oppositional behaviors are increasingly being expressed by working-class Asian American youth underscores the fact that students' lived experiences in school and in communities shape identities.

Asian American–Identified Students

Although pan-ethnicity among Asian- and new wave–identified students was largely reactive and protective, for Asian American–identified students pan-ethnicity was not simply reactive, but also proactive. These students reclaimed the Asian American pan-ethnic label as a source of pride, solidarity, and strength. The Korean, Chinese, and Vietnamese students who identified as Asian American were concerned with various

forms of inequality, and argued that issues of race and class were connected. Asian American–identified students were outspoken in their critique of the model minority stereotype. While the new wavers' complaints regarding the stereotype were largely intuitive, the Asian American students' critique was very focused. They rejected the model minority stereotype as racist propaganda, charging that it was inaccurate and harmful to interracial relationships between Asian Americans and other racial minorities. They believed that, as racial minorities, they shared things in common with all people of color, and asserted that coalition building across racial groups would strengthen the fight for social justice. As noted in Chapter 5, Asian American–identified students worked with students in the Black Student Union to organize the workshop on black-Asian relations.

Asian American–identified girls argued that gender and race were equally significant in their lives, and they suggested that many Asian-identified boys held "traditional" attitudes regarding gender. Stephen Chau, a gay student who first identified as Asian and later as Asian American, shifted identities because of experiences with homophobia within the Asian-identified community. Within the Asian American–identified community Stephen found greater acceptance, and was able to come to peace with the various parts of his identity.

The identity expressed by Asian American–identified students is reminiscent of the identity expressed by those involved in the Asian American movement of the 1960s. In his analysis of the Asian American movement of the 1960s, Wei (2004) explains that pan-Asian activists were "inspired both by their African American and Latino peers and by Third World liberation movements and the Cultural Revolution in China" (p. 300). The goals of the early Asian American movement were to advocate for the rights of Asian Americans. One of the central achievements of the 1960s Asian American movement was the development of Asian American Studies as an academic field. Some of the most outspoken Asian American–identified students at AHS were active participants in an Asian American community group staffed by politically progressive Asian American adults, including some who expressed the political discourse of the 1960s Asian American movement. The community group engaged in a range of political activities (e.g., educational advocacy for low-income Asian American immigrant and refugee students, housing rights for low-income families, immigrant rights), and encouraged youth to become politically active in their communities.

In recent years, the pan-Asian movement has continued to evolve as the Asian American population has become more diverse with the influx of newer immigrants and refugees (Wei, 2004). While there are still some Asian American activists who express the politics associated with the

1960s, many of today's Asian American activists are more politically conservative. As noted in the section on Asian-identified students, some of the more outspoken Asian-identified students were beginning to voice the perspective of the more politically conservative Asian American activists. The split in the Asian American community regarding affirmative action best represents the political divide in the current pan-Asian movement (Robles, 2006; Wei, 2004).

Arguably the most interesting thing about the Asian American–identified students is that their identity represents a direct challenge to Ogbu's suggestion that the recognition of racism threatens students' commitment to education. Like the immigrant minorities described by Ogbu (1987, 1991), Gibson (1988, 1991), and Suárez-Orozco (1991), the Asian American–identified students were academically successful. In fact, they were all college-bound and were among the highest-achieving students at the school. Unlike the typical immigrant minority, however, they articulated a keen understanding of the racial dynamics at Academic High and in the United States. Ogbu (1991) did not deal with students who recognize racism and continue to strive to do well in school. In fact, he assumed that awareness of racism and distrust of schools puts students at risk for oppositional attitudes and underachievement. For example, Ogbu (1991) asserted, "The deep distrust that involuntary minorities have for members of the dominant group and the schools they control adds to the minorities' difficulties in school" (p. 28).

Asian American–identified students believed that racism was a reality that all people of color faced, and they recognized that even highly educated Asian Americans experienced racism. Furthermore, they believed that schools were implicated in the reproduction of inequality. Despite their skepticism regarding the ability of schools to provide full equality, Asian American–identified students planned to use their education to fight and resist both personal and institutional racism. The Asian American–identified students learned that education could be harnessed in the fight against inequality by observing the actions of their adult role models in the Asian American community group. Many of these adults held advanced degrees and used the knowledge they gained from formal education to fight racial and class inequality faced by Asian Americans.

Recent research has focused attention on the relationship between attitudes toward education and acknowledgment of racial and class barriers. In her research on low-income Latino and African American high school students, Carter (2005) found that the majority of cultural mainstreamers (i.e., students who comply with school norms), cultural straddlers (i.e., students who negotiate multiple cultures), and noncompliant students (i.e., those who do not comply with school norms) believed that job

discrimination exists, a fact that suggests that there is not a simple one-to-one relationship between perceptions of racism and attitudes toward education. O'Connor (1997), for example, identified a group of high-achieving African American students who expressed pro-school attitudes despite the fact that they recognized the racial and class constraints they faced. Like the Asian American–identified students, these "resilient" youth had adult role models who demonstrated how they could negotiate racial and class barriers.

"Other" Asians: South Asian American Students at Academic High

In reviewing my data nearly 20 years later I realized that there was one group of Asian American students whom I neglected to write about in the 1996 edition of this book—South Asians. During my research at Academic High there were a few South Asian students—Indian and Pakistani—in attendance. Early in my research I interviewed two South Asian students, but I didn't end up pursuing research with the South Asian students because they didn't appear to identify with the Asian category, and East Asian and Southeast Asian students did not perceive South Asians to be Asian. The Asian American–identified students were the only ones to recognize South Asians as part of the Asian American category, but they did not socialize with any South Asian students.

The two South Asian students I did interview used ethnic-specific terms to describe themselves, and suggested that they did not relate to the Asian American category. I didn't think to ask them whether they identified with the label "South Asian," a contested term among those it is meant to include (Bahri & Vasudeva, 1996; Maira, 2001; Rudrappa, 2004). Interestingly, these two students were aware of the model minority stereotype and explained that South Asians were also seen as model minorities. More recent research confirms that South Asian students must contend with the model minority stereotype (Asher, 2002). Both of the students I interviewed were born in the United States to middle-class immigrant parents, and socialized primarily with middle-class white students. When asked about their friendship patterns they explained that they were "Americanized," which I understood to mean that they were comfortable in white middle-class society.

The relationship between South Asians and other Asian Americans has been an issue of scholarly debate within Asian American studies. Some researchers have argued that South Asians have been excluded from the Asian American movement, and others have suggested that being subsumed by the Asian American identity may, in fact, be dangerous for South Asians (Bahri, 1998; Kibria, 2000). Kibria (2000) observes that

South Asians are ambiguous nonwhites who do not fit neatly into the racial categories recognized by the dominant racial discourse. Research on South Asian youth reveals that South Asians are often mistaken for other groups, including Latinos and mixed-raced blacks (Sandhu, 2004). Kibria (2000) argues that "perceived racial difference between South Asians and other Asian Americans" may play a significant role in the social distance between South Asians and other Asian Americans (p. 252). Unfortunately, I did not ask East Asians or Southeast Asians whether skin color played any role in their exclusion of South Asians from the Asian category. According to Academic High's current Web site there is currently an active "Indian Pakistani Cultural Club" at the school. Given the political tensions between India and Pakistan, the name of the club is particularly interesting, and an ethnographer conducting research on Asian American identities at Academic High today would be wise to include a discussion of this group and South Asian students in general. I must admit that I wish I had included the South Asian students in my research back in 1989.

FINAL THOUGHTS
ON IDENTITY AND RESPONSES TO EDUCATION

My fieldwork at Academic High School confirmed my initial assumption that the identity process is influenced by interracial contact. As I argued throughout this book, the model minority stereotype greatly influenced race relations between Asians and non-Asians. Identity formation among Asian American students was also influenced by how they interpreted their status relative to non-Asian and Asian groups, by their perceptions of future opportunities, by issues of social class, and by a myriad of other factors. Importantly, identity formation was also influenced by their intra-Asian relationships. All these factors played a role in whether students embraced pan-ethnic/racial identity as Asian or Asian American.

The fact that Asian American students at Academic High formed their ethnic and racial identities in response to their perceived conditions and social locations supports the idea that ethnic identity is motivated by self-interest and that ethnic groups are at least in part interest groups. Culture, however, was not a completely unimportant aspect of ethnic identity. Asian American students who identified as Korean, Asian, and new wave made references to the significance of cultural distinctions in marking them as different from non-Asians. Asian- and new wave-identified students watched me for signs of cultural competence (e.g., speaking Chinese, eating Chinese food, wearing jade) in order to determine my "Asianness." Despite references to culture, however, cultural

differences and similarities were less important to ethnic identity than issues of power.

The varied academic achievement among Asian American students at Academic High challenges simplistic characterizations of Asian Americans as model minorities. The students' varied responses to school revealed complexities that are masked by the cultural ecological theory. While my study included immigrants (i.e., voluntary minorities) and refugees (i.e., semivoluntary), the variation in achievement and attitudes toward school could not be explained by these differences in categories. That is, there were high- and low-achieving immigrant students and high- and low-achieving refugee students. Cultural ecological theorists assumed that immigrant parents and their children share similar ideas regarding life in the United States, thereby underestimating the significance of generational differences. New wave students and Asian American–identified students' interpretations of racism and their understandings of education differed from that of their families. Finally, my data demonstrated that the new wave students' oppositional attitudes and behaviors were informed by their experiences at Academic High. Thus, this research sits alongside more recent research that demonstrates the profound ways that school policies, practices, and cultures shape immigrant students' experiences and responses to school, and their understandings of where they fit in the broader society (Conchas, 2001; Lee, 2005; Lopez, 2003; Sarroub, 2005; Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001; Valenzuela, 1999).

ISSUES OF RACE

As in the larger society, most non-Asians at Academic High School accepted the accuracy of the model minority stereotype, and assumed that Asian Americans inside and outside of AHS were academically and economically successful. Although white and African American students at AHS identified Asian Americans as high achievers, their attitudes toward Asian Americans and Asian American success depended on their relative position in the school, in their communities, and in the dominant society. In other words, a racial group's perceptions of their own social, economic, and political positions informed their attitudes toward Asians/Asian Americans and Asian American success.

At Academic High, white students were widely recognized among African American, Asian American, and white students as having the most social status at the school. White students were well represented in the academic elite, and in the high-status extracurricular activities. And finally, white students made up 45% of the student population, making

them the single largest racial group at the school. Thus, white students were secure in their position at the top of the racial hierarchy. As such, most whites were not threatened by Asian American success, and most held relatively positive attitudes toward Asian Americans. Indeed, the majority of white students at Academic High talked about Asian American success in positive terms. According to some white students and teachers, Asian American students were model minorities who proved that equal opportunity existed for students of all races.

Asian American writers, scholars, and activists have repeatedly warned us that the model minority stereotype is an expression of racist love, and therefore is dependent on the dominant group's perception of their own position relative to Asian Americans. Cho (1993) writes, "Because the embrace or love is not genuine, one cannot reasonably expect the architects truly to care about the health or well-being of the model minority" (p. 203). In other words, when whites are secure in their status, Asian American success is seen as positive, but when whites feel threatened Asian American success is unwanted competition. Several studies suggest that when whites feel that their status is threatened, they begin to view Asian American success and achievement as negative (Fong, 1994; Newman, 1993; Takagi, 1992). Under these circumstances, Asian Americans are no longer viewed as "model minorities" but are instead viewed as potential dominators. Katherine Newman's (1993) study of downward mobility among middle-class whites suggests that when whites feel that their status is threatened, they turn their anger on Asians. Thus, attitudes of whites toward Asians are directly influenced by perceptions of their own status. Fong's (1994) study of Monterey Park, California, also suggests that whites' attitudes toward Asian success can turn from positive to negative. Fong reports that the large immigrant Chinese population "changed the demographic, economic, social, cultural, and political landscape" of Monterey Park, and he asserts that one result of these changes has been an increase in anti-Asian sentiment.

More recently there have been reports of white flight in Silicon Valley in response to the growth in middle- and upper-middle-class Asian American population in local public schools (Hwang, 2005). Reporting on the trend in one community, one journalist observed, "Some white Cupertino parents are instead sending their children to private schools or moving them to other, whiter public schools. More commonly, young white families in Silicon Valley say they are avoiding Cupertino altogether" (Hwang, 2005, p. 1). According to this article, white parents in Silicon Valley have expressed concern that Asian American students are too competitive and that their own children end up being stereotyped as underachievers in contrast to the hyperachievement-oriented Asian

American students. In short, the white parents fear that their children can't compete against the Asian American students. Thus, within the white imagination, Asian Americans have been transformed from model minorities into Mongol hordes.

At Academic High, the white, working-class students from the south side of the city (i.e., the East Lawners) were outsiders within the white student group. East Lawners kept largely to themselves, and were criticized by high-achieving white students for being racist. As noted in Chapter 5, even the principal suggested that the East Lawners were racially intolerant. It is important to remember that both East Lawners and Asian American students were outsiders at the school, and that both groups were competing to gain respect within the school. Like others who felt threatened, East Lawners equated Asian success with Asian dominance. Their fear of Asian dominance translated into hostility toward all Asians. Other signs of anti-Asian sentiment among white students at Academic High were beginning to be expressed by a few high-achieving students, most of whom were middle class. These students asserted that Asians were "not normal" because all they did was study. Jennifer Smith, a high-achieving white student, pointed out that she and her friends, unlike the Asian American students, were good students but also "normal" people who did other things besides study. The image of Asian American students as "unfair competitors" is common among white college students who attend colleges where Asians represent a significant portion of the student population. Some of these white students report that they avoid classes where there are too many Asians because Asians ruin the curve (Takagi, 1992). The attitudes expressed by these high-achieving, middle-class white students demonstrate that working-class whites are not inherently more racist than middle-class whites, as some individuals at AHS suggested. Rather, this data suggests that racism is likely to be expressed by whites across class backgrounds when Asian competition becomes a threat.

In general, the relationships between Asian American students and African American students were tense. Most Asian American students viewed African Americans with suspicion. Korean-, new wave-, and Asian-identified students accepted the stereotype that many African Americans are lazy welfare recipients. High-achieving, Asian-identified students resented African Americans because they believed that African Americans received unfair advantages through affirmative action programs. The Korean-identified, new wave-identified, and Asian-identified students' negative attitudes toward African Americans were a product of their relative structural positions in society. For the most part, the Korean-identified and Asian-identified students were relative

newcomers to this country who believed that equal opportunity existed for all races. They justified the racism experienced by African Americans by blaming the victims. Their rationalization of the injustices experienced by African Americans preserved their belief in the fairness of the system. Furthermore, Korean-identified, new wave–identified, and Asian-identified students recognized that African Americans are beneath whites in the racial hierarchy, and they feared that association with African Americans might hurt their own status. Recent research confirms that immigrants may distance themselves from African Americans in their efforts to achieve upward mobility in mainstream society (Islam, 2000; Waters, 1999).

For their part, most African American students perceived Asian American "success as anything but positive. African American students accused Asian Americans of economic exploitation. According to the majority of African American students, all Asians were guilty of getting rich by buying up stores in African American neighborhoods. Thus, while the dominant group saw Asian entrepreneurship as evidence that Asian Americans are model minorities, African American students viewed Asian entrepreneurship as evidence of Asian domination. The economic tensions between African Americans and Asian Americans have been expressed in popular culture. Shortly after my fieldwork at Academic High, for example, rapper Ice Cube issued a warning to Korean merchants in African American neighborhoods. The tension between African Americans and Asian Americans has been the subject of much academic discourse (Kim, 2000).

At least one scholar, however, has argued that both the media and the social science research has overexaggerated the conflict between African Americans and Asian Americans (Lie, 2004). In challenging the conflict thesis that has dominated the literature on Korean American–African American relations, Lie (2004) argues that the two groups have not been in direct competition for employment, housing, or political power. Although Lie acknowledges the existence of individual prejudice on both sides, he points out that reports of conflict have focused exclusively on relations between Korean merchants and black customers and that very little evidence exists for general conflict between the groups. Recent research on Asian American youth, which highlights the affinity that many low-income Asian American youth are expressing toward African American youth culture, certainly suggests that relations between African Americans and Asian Americans are filled with complexities and contradictions (Lee, 2005; Reyes, 2007).

At Academic High, however, African American students and Asian American students were perceived to be competitors, a perception rooted

in the school's history. As noted in Chapter 4, during the late 1980s the African American student population at Academic High dropped and the Asian American student population grew. Given the special status of Academic High within the city, the shift in the racial makeup of the school was symbolically important. The growth in the Asian American population did reflect the significant growth in the Asian American population in the entire school district. Some observers, however, asserted that the drop in the African American population and the growth in the Asian American population reflected the admissions policies put in place by the principal. Inside the halls of Academic High policies regarding tracking and ranking further fueled competition between the groups. African Americans were locked out of the academic elite, and they interpreted Asian American students' success as confirmation of their fears that Asians are taking over everything. Their perceptions of Asian Americans as highly successful (i.e., model minorities and fierce competitors) were confirmed by the number of Asians in the top tracks, the number of Asians ranked in the top ten of each graduating class, and teachers' rhetoric about Asian students being smart. In this way, the stereotype of Asian Americans as high achievers and the stereotype that Asians are fierce competitors who are taking over became blurred.

Although issues outside of the school informed the tension between African American and Asian American students at Academic High, it is clear that the school added to the racial tensions through its culture of competition. For example, my data suggests that Academic High's policy of ranking students each year and its policy of posting the names of the top ten students in each grade was unnecessary and negatively influenced race relations. One high-achieving, Asian American–identified student who was sensitive to the interracial tension at Academic criticized the school's policy of posting the rankings: "They [non-Asians] see all the Asians up there—it's really striking. It causes resentment. People don't realize that not all Asians do that well." In the class of 1990, the top 10 students included six Asian American students. The posting of these rankings added credibility to the model minority stereotype. Like Mrs. Lewis, the African American teacher discussed in Chapter 4, I would argue that much of the tracking at Academic High is redundant and unnecessary. Tracking at Academic High led to the resegregation of students and negatively affected interracial relations. Thus, while I do not believe that the school was directly responsible for the interracial tension between students, I do believe that the school contributed to the interracial tensions through its policies. Furthermore, my data suggests that the school should have made changes to improve relations between African American and Asian American students.

Finally, recent reports of conflict between Asian and non-Asian students in schools across the country suggest that scholars should not ignore the way that race influences social interaction. In one widely publicized case of conflict between blacks and Asians at Lafayette High School in Bensonhurst, New York, Chinese and Pakistani immigrant youth were repeatedly the targets of anti-Asian violence (AALDEF, 2005). Given that Asian Americans are regularly compared to other groups, we need to pay attention to how schools influence relationships between Asian American and non-Asian students. What role do racial stereotypes, including the model minority stereotype, play in relationships between Asian American and non-Asian youth? How do policies such as tracking influence attitudes toward Asian American students?

FINAL REFLECTIONS
ON THE MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE

June 26, 1989—It is late in the year and the class of 1989 has just
graduated. The juniors are excited about becoming seniors, and
freshman seem simply elated that they will no longer be freshman
come the fall. I'm tired from months in the field, but a little sorry
that my daily visits to Academic High will soon come to an end.
I decide to make a final visit to the computer room where many
of the high-achieving, Asian-identified male students gather on a
regular basis. As I sit talking to Mr. Engen, the teacher in charge
of the computer room, the subject of Asian American student
achievement surfaces. Mr. Engen is bubbling over with praise for
his Asian American students. After listening for some minutes,
I decide to question his understanding of Asian Americans as
model minorities. Mr. Engen understands that I am critical of the
stereotype, but before I can complete my thought, he stops me and
says, "Please don't ruin my stereotype. It is such a nice one." Thus,
once again, I learn one of the secrets to the endurance of the model
minority stereotype.

I have been writing about the dangers of the model minority stereotype for nearly 20 years, and in that time I have encountered a great deal of resistance from both non-Asians and Asians who insist that the stereotype is both accurate and positive. What could be wrong with being characterized as industrious, smart, and successful? Indeed, some Asian Americans may enjoy certain privileges associated with being seen as model minorities, but the Academic High case demonstrates the problematic

nature of the stereotype. As in the larger society, the model minority stereotype was used at Academic High to silence claims of racial inequality. The stereotype set standards for how Asian American students and all other students of color should behave, and it hid the problems faced by some Asian American students. And finally, the stereotype influenced the way Asian American students viewed themselves, and when that happens, they may, as one student reminds us, "just lose your identity . . . lose being yourself." Thus, in response to the model minority stereotype, we must ask the following questions: Who benefits from the stereotype? What ideologies are supported? Who is hurt and/or hidden by the stereotype?