BEYOND THE MODEL MINORITY

ASIAN AMERICAN COMMUNITIES AND
SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATION

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION V

PART I IDENTITY POLITICS 1

Reading 1 Beyond Boba Tea and Samosas: A Call for Asian American Race Consciousness 2
Sumun L. Pendakur and Vijay Pendakur
Reading 1 Questions 17

Reading 2 Maiden Voyage: Excursion into Sexuality and Identity Politics in Asian America 18
Dana Y. Takagi
Reading 2 Questions 33

Reading 3 Intermarriage, Ethnic Identity, and Perceived Social Standing Among Asian Women in the United States 34
Juan Chen and David T. Takeuchi
Reading 3 Questions 53

PART II IMMIGRANT LABOR 55

Reading 4 Immigrant Dreams and Nightmares: South Asian Domestic Workers in North America in a Time of Global Mobility 56
Anannya Bhattacharjee
Reading 4 Questions 72
Reading 5 Immigrant Business Owners: A Case Study of Vietnamese Entrepreneurs in America 73
   Hung M. Chu, Lei Zhu, and Anthony Chu
Reading 5 Questions 87

PART III  EDUCATIONAL ISSUES 89
Reading 6 A Critical Examination of Educational Disparities in Asian American and Pacific Islander Communities 90
   Dina C. Maramba and Xavier J. Hernandez
Reading 6 Questions 108
Reading 7 Towards The Model Minority: Asian Americanization of Burmese Immigrants as a Model Minority in a High School 109
   Gilbert C. Park
Reading 7 Questions 124
Reading 8 A Shortcut to the American Dream?: Vietnamese Youth Gangs in Little Saigon 125
   James Diego Vigil, Steve C. Yun, and Jesse Cheng
Reading 8 Questions 138

PART IV  HEALTH-CARE DISPARITIES 139
Reading 9 Asian American Health Inequities: An Exploration of Cultural and Language Incongruity and Discrimination in Accessing and Utilizing the Healthcare System 140
   Suzie S. Weng and Warren T. Wolfe
Reading 9 Questions 157
Reading 10 Addressing Health Disparities Among Older Asian Americans: Data and Diversity 158
   Grace J. Yoo, Elaine Musselman, Yeon-Shim Lee, and Darlene Yee-Melichar
Reading 10 Questions 167
PART V MEDIA (MIS)REPRESENTATION 169

Reading 11 How It Feels to be Viral Me: Affective Labor and Asian American YouTube Performance 170
Christine Bacareza Balance
Reading 11 Questions 182

Reading 12 Asian Americans, Disability, and the Model Minority Myth 183
Yoonmee Chang
Reading 12 Questions 194

Jeremy Hein
Reading 13 Questions 205

PART VI POLITICS AND LAW 207

Reading 14 Asian Americans and the Shifting Politics of Race: Asian Americans as Victim and Success Stories 208
Rowena Robles
Reading 14 Questions 223

Reading 15 Anti-Asian Violence and the Vincent Chin Case 224
Judy Yung, Gordon H. Change, and Him Mark Lai
Reading 15 Questions 234

Reading 16 Korean Americans vs. African Americans: Conflict and Construction 235
Sumi K. Cho
Reading 16 Questions 250

CONCLUSION 251
As a long-time scholar of Asian and Asian American studies, I have always been struggling with the “model minority” stereotype in my teaching and research. For five decades, Asian Americans have been labeled a “model minority,” as a monolithic racial group that is supposedly rich, stoic, and successful. The 2018 release of Crazy Rich Asians, for example, represents Hollywood’s latest contribution to this reigning myth. Often hailed as a media breakthrough of Asian representation in Hollywood, Crazy Rich Asians was noted for being the first modern story with an all-Asian cast and an Asian American lead in 25 years, ever since The Joy Luck Club (1993), and the most profitable romantic comedy in a decade. However, as a cultural critic, I have a huge problem with the film representation for all the opulence of wealth, endless luxury, and recycling of old-fashioned Asian stereotypes. Indeed, as Tony Wong of Toronto Star wrote, the movie “doesn’t blow away stereotypes. It reinforces them. There is little room for subtlety here—the title underlines the mission statement. Asians are rich, vulgar and clueless.” Indeed, the commercial success of media productions like Crazy Rich Asians does not help break down the stereotypes of all Asian communities as universally successful and problem-free.

As the nation’s fastest-growing and increasingly diverse community, Asian Americans, in the words of Asian Americans Advancing Justice (AAAJ), are a community of contrasts distinguished by their unique histories and challenges. Over recent years, there has been more research and better reporting on the socioeconomic status of Asian Americans as a whole. In three consecutive years, 2013, 2014, and 2015, for example, AAAJ conducted extensive surveys and published three separate reports on the Asian American communities in Los Angeles, Orange, and San Diego counties. The objectives of these reports are made crystal clear: with important disaggregated data on 30 Asian American ethnic groups, they work to highlight the cultural, social, and economic diversity as the communities’ hallmark; dispel “model minority” myths by highlighting the tremendous social, cultural, and economic diversity of Asian American communities; and advocate for the needs of the most vulnerable populations and their access to social service programs, such as culturally and linguistically sensitive K–12 education, unemployment benefits, job training, and health care.
Indeed, as the AAAJ reports document, five decades after the civil rights movement, significant progress has been made in overcoming segregation and the most egregious forms of racism and discrimination against Asian Americans and other people of color. Yet race and ethnicity, in the words of Cornel West, still matter as a social construct and contribute significantly to the disparities between the mainstream and minority communities in education, health care, social-economic status, and media representation. Those data-driven and evidence-based findings by AAAJ are powerful antitheses to the “model minority” stereotype. For example, in Los Angeles County, home to more Asian Americans than any other county in the United States, 23 percent of Asian American youth in 2011 considered suicide, more than any other racial group. Again in Los Angeles County, over one in three Korean Americans are uninsured, a rate highest among the county’s racial or ethnic groups. In addition, Southeast Asians have the lowest per capita incomes of any racial or ethnic group in Los Angeles countywide. Similarly, in Orange County, where Asian Americans number 600,000, 20 percent of the county’s total population, they face many challenges. For instance, 1 in 10 Asian Americans live in poverty and nearly a quarter are low-income, rates significantly higher than those for whites. Per capita, Asian Americans earn $29,598, less than African Americans ($30,108) and whites ($48,220). For another example, among Asian American renters in Orange County, Thai (62 percent), Vietnamese (60 percent), and Korean Americans (57 percent) are the most housing-cost burdened, spending 30 percent or more of their income on housing. In addition, there has not been a bilingual teacher in Orange County providing instruction in an Asian language since 2000–2001, when there were three Vietnamese language teachers. In reviewing the report for San Diego County, it is clear that Asian Americans are struggling with a number of social justice–related issues as well. During the 2013–2014 school year, for example, nearly 11,000 English language learners (ELL) in San Diego County spoke an Asian or Pacific Island language, making up 10 percent of all ELL students. However, in the most recent data, there were only two bilingual teachers in San Diego County schools, providing primary language instruction in an Asian or Pacific Islander language. In addition, countywide, about 38 percent of Asian American students in grade 7 were harassed or bullied because of race, ethnicity or national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, or physical or mental disability back in 2012. Per capita, Asian Americans ($27,606) earn less than the county average ($30,715) and significantly less than whites ($41,197). All the social justice issues documented earlier illustrate the fact that discrimination, racism, and structural inequalities still exist in our society and continue to affect the life experiences of Asian Americans. Social justice education is the only way to address those issues effectively.

Organized around the central theme of social justice education, this anthology will try to tackle those serious inequities described earlier in the context of Asian American history, culture, and communities. The book will examine the role of race and ethnicity in our public policy and social justice, specifically focusing on the themes of identity politics, immigrant labor, educational issues, health-care disparities, media (mis)representation, politics, and law. Such a theme-based organization will not only highlight the distinctive experiences of the various Asian American
communities but also inform us of the broader interlocking categories of social identities, such as race, gender, religion, and economic class.

This anthology is divided into six parts, each dealing with a particular issue or area of disparity. There are three chapters in Part I, examining Asian American identity formation and development from different perspectives. Chapter 1, “Beyond Boba Tea and Samosas,” written by two long-time student affairs scholar-practitioners, uses critical race theory (CRT) to examine the lack of race consciousness among Asian American college students. Unlike African Americans or Latino/a Americans, Asian American students would always identify themselves with their specific ethnicity rather than as a racial group. This ethnicity-over-race paradigm, they argue, is a result of the color-blind racism, the “nuanced, covert, institutional racism of the post-Civil Rights Era.” Specifically, Asian American college students were affected by the model minority narrative. Departing from the traditional programming of boba tea and samosas served at the culture shows, film screenings, heritage festivals, and events, the authors call for critical interventions by adopting CRT and a number of curricular and cocurricular programs focused on politics and race. In contrast to the call for a unitary Asian American racial identity, the second chapter by Takagi challenges the limits of what she calls “ethnic-based models of identity” by asking her readers to think critically about the inclusion of sexual practices, such as homosexuality, in the discourse on Asian American identity. She argues that although the two are not mutually exclusive, the dynamics works differently for sexual and racial identities. For example, as she demonstrates, “homosexuality is more clearly seen as constructed than racial identity.” Her analysis calls into question the concept of wholistic and coherent identities or the hierarchy of identities and highlights the need to rethink identity politics by recognizing non-ethnic-based differences, including homosexuality, in the construction of our identities. The third chapter in Part I, by Chen and Takeuchi, further complicates the question of identity for Asian American women by exploring the relationship between interracial or interethnic marriages and ethnic identification. As statistics and surveys show, Asian Americans marry outside their own racial or ethnic group at a higher rate than any other racial group in the United States. Drawing on data from the National Latino and Asian American Survey, the authors explore the consequences of interracial (mostly with whites) and interethnic (with other Asian groups) unions and their ethnic identification among Vietnamese, Filipina, and Chinese women. Based on social exchange theory, the authors conclude that Asian women who intermarry do not identify strongly with their ethnic groups but perceive themselves as more culturally compatible with whites.

Immigration and labor have always been inextricably tied in the history of the United States. The two chapters in Part II approach the subject by looking at two different kinds of immigrant labor: domestic service and entrepreneurship. Bhattacharjee’s piece examines the exploitation of immigrant domestic workers who are disproportionately women of color, immigrant women, and Third World women. In her case study of South Asian live-in female domestic workers, Bhattacharjee has documented a litany of abuses, including long workweeks, no days off, less than minimum wages, no benefits, verbal and physical harassment, regulated meals, health problems from overwork, inadequate sleep and rest, relentless tension, withholding of passports, and
threats of deportation. She also questions the bias and politics of US immigration policy, which plays a central role in strengthening the powers of highly educated and skilled men and their families in the exploitation of domestic workers. Chapter 5 is a case study of 279 Vietnamese immigrant business owners in San Jose and Orange County, California, Houston, Texas, and Philadelphia. After analyzing their motivations for business ownership, the authors look at the immigrants’ challenges as well as accomplishments. As they point out, despite their admirable successes, Vietnamese entrepreneurs “still encounter racial hostility and discrimination because of their Asian ethnicity and lower educational level.” In addition, unable to obtain adequate funding for initial capital investment, they were often forced them to locate their businesses in unsafe neighborhoods and become targets of many crimes. The authors end the chapter by calling for policy changes, particularly in the case of the Small Business Administration and local chambers of commerce.

In Part III, “Educational Issues,” the three chapters, as disparate as they are in topic and style, help highlight the disparities in our current educational system for Asian and Pacific Americans. The first chapter by Maramba and Hernandez offers a powerful critique of the long-time “model minority” stereotype, particularly in the field of education and how it negatively influences classroom interaction, pedagogy, and curricula for Asian American and Pacific Islander students. They illustrate how the model minority myth perpetuates a culture of stereotype threat that is detrimental to the academic achievement and overall well-being of Asian American and Pacific Islander students and contributes to the educational disparities among Asian and Pacific American students. As a result, they call for a critical disaggregation of Asian American data, which can reveal a more accurate picture of the needs and capacities of specific Asian and Pacific Islander student populations. Chapter 7, by Park, explores how the model minority stereotype was being reconstructed for Burmese students in a midwestern high school. Instead of emphasizing high achievements for those students, mostly of refugee background and lacking the resources and capacities of students from better established Asian American communities, the model minority narrative has been shifted from an achievement-based scheme to behavioral traits, such as “quiet,” “hardworking,” and “uncomplaining.” By internalizing this stereotype, those Burmese students developed a sense of disentitlement and underwent a process of segmented assimilation. The final piece in this section, Chapter 8 by Vigil, Yun, and Cheng, approaches the educational disparities for Asian Americans from an entirely different angle, the formation of gangs by Vietnamese American youth in Little Saigon. They argue that racism in schools and on the streets, often by law enforcement officers, work together to affect and inform gang formation. Unfortunately, schools have become sites of interethnic conflict, and streets serve as spaces for contentious interactions with the police. The chapter leaves an important question for readers to consider: What strategies and mechanisms are available to schoolteachers and students to defuse racial tension and avoid “race fights” for refugees of war?

Among all the social justice issues for Asian Americans, probably nothing is more impactful than health-care disparities. The two chapters in Part IV inform and educate readers on the
Chapter 9, by Weng and Wolfe, documents health inequalities among Asian Americans, including lack of access, underutilization, and poor quality of care. Among the causes of these disparities are racial discrimination and language and cultural incongruity. They have effectively illustrated the link between discrimination, illness, and poorer overall health among Asian Americans. As a result, the authors call for creative intervention strategies to address those health inequalities, focusing not only on the health-care system but also on health-care provider attitudes and biases. Chapter 10 specifically addresses health service disparities among older Asian Americans, both in physical and mental health. Using aggregated data, the authors provide detailed analysis of those disparities in the screening and treatment of several chronic health conditions, including cancer, heart disease, and diabetes owing to lack of English proficiency, low health literacy, cultural traditions, and racial discrimination in the medical care system. In addition, as the authors point out, mental illness is a serious public health concern for older Asian Americans “who are at greater risk for suicide compared to Hispanics and African Americans, in which groups rates decrease with age.” To reduce health disparities, the chapter calls for innovative and engaging intervention strategies from the community, financial, legal, and policy-making circles.

Together, the three chapters in Part V help us address Asian American representation by the media, including digital social media. Opening with Alexandra Wallace’s “Asians in the Library” video on YouTube and Jimmy Wong’s hugely popular parody, “Ching Chong? Asians in the Library Song,” Balance’s chapter offers a powerful exploration of the critical space offered by YouTube for Asian American artists and performers. She argues that social media platforms, such as YouTube, serve as a launching pad for Asian Americans to infiltrate mainstream culture, a group otherwise lacking representation in American pop culture. The author proclaims that the value of this new alternative media platform cannot be overemphasized for Asian Americans, the “most wired racial or ethnic group in America.” “Breaking out of the model minority myth’s discursive containment,” as Balance wrote eloquently, “these emerging online personalities restage and respond to the banal and ridiculously racist moments of Asian America’s everyday life, performing the affective labor of transforming alienation into humor, hate into love.” The following chapter, Chapter 12 by Chang, forcefully argues that the model minority stereotype makes Asian American disabilities invisible. Through his careful analysis of the construction of the model minority myth in various media, from newsmagazines to TV sitcoms, the author illustrates how the model minority myth endows Asian Americans with exceptional superability, which “quite purposefully obscures Asian American disability.” The final chapter in Part V focuses on media bias on the 2004 Wisconsin shooting case involving a Hmong American, Chai Vang. Comparing Vang’s case against the 2013 George Zimmerman shooting of unarmed 17-year-old African American Trayvon Martin through systematic analysis of 113 articles in the St. Paul Pioneer Press (SPPP), Minnesota’s oldest newspaper, the author argues that racial prejudice in media coverage of the event influenced public opinion and resulted in Vang’s conviction. Deliberately using inflammatory terms, including
“rampage,” “massacre,” and “slayings,” SPPP helped turn a “mistaken social interaction” owing to human errors and misinterpretations into a cold-blooded case of murder.

In the final part on politics and law, the three chapters have presented three sharply different but interrelated cases about racial politics, civic activities, and legal representation. The first piece by Robles offers a nuanced discussion of the Brian Ho, Patrick Wong & Hilary Chen v. SFUSD lawsuit, the legal case launched by Chinese Americans against race-based school integration in the San Francisco Unified School District. The author argues that the Ho plaintiffs and their supporters employed a combination of the Asian American model minority stereotype, and neoconservative ideologies to further their cause, effectively making an assault on race-based policies such as affirmative action. As a result, the author warns, by asserting the divisive model minority myth, the Ho lawsuit will contribute to another emerging conflict, “black/brown versus yellow.” In view of all the current attention on Harvard University’s high-stakes affirmative action case, Robles’s chapter provides a much-needed perspective on the subject. The second chapter, Chapter 15 by Helen Y. Zia, documents probably the best-known case of anti-Asian violence in our recent history. Vincent Chin, a 27-year-old Chinese American engineer, was mistaken for being Japanese and brutally murdered with a baseball bat by two unemployed white autoworkers in Detroit. Instead of simply presenting a case of a hate crime against Asian Americans, Zia focuses on the failure of the criminal justice system, where a white judge sentenced the two white men to $3,000 in fines and three years’ probation for killing a Chinese American. In addition, the author, herself a community activist, makes the Chin case a rallying cry for Asian American activism. For example, a new Asian American civil rights organization, American Citizens for Justice, was born under Zia’s leadership. In many ways, Zia was very successful in helping her readers make connections between the Chin case and the latent racial and class conflicts in Detroit at the time. Chapter 16, the final chapter, by Sumi K. Cho, examines the controversial subject of interethnic conflict between subordinated groups in the US racial hierarchy. During the Rodney King civil unrest and violence in Los Angeles from April 29 to May 2, 1992, Korean American businesses were targeted and suffered about half of the $800 million in property damages. In analyzing the root causes for Korean Americans to become targets by African American youth, Cho argues that media sensationalism and the political manipulation of Korean Americans into a “model minority” contributed directly to making them a scapegoat during the Los Angeles riots. Looking at racial consciousness and politics in the twenty-first century, Cho challenges the traditional model of black/white binary opposition and calls for “incorporating the histories and the contemporary experiences of the people of color between the two poles of black and white on the racial spectrum.” Thus, according to her, a new theory for social change could be formulated with political leadership, individual accountability, and community education.

In closing, my intent in this introduction is to provide some general information about the thematic organization of the book. I also want to acknowledge Chunyan Cheng, my coeditor, for her help in putting the book together. I will reserve my final comments for the authors of the chapters collected in the anthology, who are an interdisciplinary group of established scholars,
community leaders, and practitioners. Because of its cross-disciplinary and comparative nature, this teaching anthology should make a unique contribution to the Asian American studies classroom and social justice education. On the surface, readers may find that the chapters vary widely in style and substance, ranging from journalistic essays, book chapters, to newsmagazine articles. But, together, they combine to dispel “model minority” myths and create a multifaceted portrait of a diverse Asian America that still struggles with prejudice, racism, and disparities in various areas. Informed by the scholarship in the book, I sincerely hope our students as well as school administrators, policy makers, and government agencies will work together to craft new policies that empower the Asian American communities in pursuit of a more equitable and just society for every American!