

## Introduction

For more than three decades, I have been privileged to have front-row seats at what is one of the most—for me anyway—exciting games in town. The game is about politics and, more specifically, about the construction of a community's political identity. The ground rules are changeable; the players, the outline and location of the playing field, and the rewards of the game are in constant flux. It is a continually unpredictable process occurring within the Asian American community in Southern California, and since the late 1960s, the variability of alterations and modifications characterizes a community undergoing major transformation. I witnessed most of this dynamic struggle as a journalist of color in the Los Angeles area, working for the local news stations of two major U.S. television networks.

Being a journalist requires one to be a perpetual student and observer, something of which I always took advantage. There never was a time when I wasn't keen to insinuate myself into social processes in which people were actively fashioning membership in the Asian American community. My position as a news reporter and anchor gave me entrée (though not always welcome) and allowed me to penetrate community structures, become acquainted with acknowledged leadership, and understand contextually how and why issues translated into collective agendas and actions. I came to know countless individuals, most of them, like myself, American-born and politically progressive. We were products of the contested discourses that expanded racial and social paradigms during the 1960s.

For my part, I was not permitted, either by news management or by viewers, to forget my own role in the grand experiment of diversity undertaken by major news corporations. In the aftermath of the transformative 1960s, a few enlightened members of television news media looked around the newsroom and saw a staff of mostly white men. I was a “three-fer” and a first: young, female, and Asian American. I felt an overwhelming responsibility to ensure that newsworthy stories in the Asian American community were covered fairly and accurately. During the early 1970s, most of my bosses, co-workers, and the viewing public did not share this enthusiasm. Other than the occasional story about Chinese New Year or the Nisei Week Parade, most other coverage of Asian America was insignificant. In part, this reflected the numerically small and largely politically insignificant Asian American community in Southern California at the time. That, of course, was about to change.

In the space of just one decade, I became aware of a large, new cohort of different Asian actors whose rapid appearance after 1965 was facilitated by dramatic changes in U.S. immigration law. They quickly enlarged everyday notions of a more traditional Asian American political identity. These putative new leaders, and therefore newsmakers, in Southern California were speaking English with accents. They were Chinese from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even Mainland China. They were Asian Americans, but immigrant and naturalized. I did not know them, nor was I familiar with their leadership, methods of organizing, associations, important issues, or even where they lived. A television documentary I wrote and produced during the early 1980s was my attempt at making sense of the sweeping changes and increasing heterogeneity in the community.

Journalism gave me an elementary understanding, but it was not until my doctoral research in anthropology that I began to have a more thorough theoretical grasp of the relationship between a group’s politicized identity and the instantiation of structures of power in historical context. Within this matrix and grounded in the realities of continuing immigration from Asia, a major reordering in the meanings and construction of politicized group membership among new Chinese activists and within the larger Asian American community has occurred. As a social researcher, I could not ignore this change.

I was, in fact, quite literally forced to pay attention by some of the more active naturalized Chinese members of a political advocacy organization based in

Southern California called Chinese Americans United for Self Empowerment (CAUSE) who began to push for a larger pan-Asian American identity—a project of integration with other, more traditional, and largely native-born Asian Americans. This came after a decade of numerous ethnic-specific strategies in the organization and culminated in 2003 when the topic of changing the group's name came up at a board retreat. The new version replaced *Chinese American* with *Asian American*. Nobody was saying ethnic-specific strategies were inconsequential. Yet the realization was growing among the most active members that their new citizenship reflected not just their ethnic Chineseness but their racialization as Asians. Some felt that a wider, more instrumentally useful rubric had become necessary. Although only a spectator at the meeting, I was asked what I thought about the group's plan to pursue a pan-Asian American political outlook and identity. Not much.

In the years I had spent observing all manner of pan-Asian Pacific American politics locally and nationally, I was dismayed to realize that not much had come of it.<sup>1</sup> It was frustrating to see leadership and group strategies squandered on intragroup conflict that seemed as rife as ever given the community's increasing heterogeneity. It was equally angering that mainstream recognition of issues important to the Asian American community seesawed between ignorance and apathy or suspicion and panic but never seemed to diminish.

However Asian Americans were viewed politically, in the end not much seemed impressive about pan-Asian political participation and empowerment except the constituency's usefulness to mainstream political structures as a cash cow, and even that backfired in 1996 with the Democratic National Committee fund-raising scandal (see Chapter 5). On the whole, so many political issues still needed to be addressed, and I thought sadly that not much had changed since I wrote that documentary in the 1980s. Were you to watch it today with your eyes shut, you might think it had been produced last week. So I said, why not keep *Chinese* in the group's name, and why not continue to be ethnic specific? Why shouldn't Chinese Americans, who now compose the largest part of the Asian American community, independently seek their own agenda and be open about it?

In framing the answers to these questions and more, this ethnography combines an anthropological and an Asian Americanist approach by tacking back and forth between several major paradigms in both disciplines. Such theoretical synthesis brings together history and race, not only in time and

space but between differing imaginaries of community that both delineate and extend beyond borders. This is indicative of current anthropological frameworks that are attentive to constructions of identity that occur with the movement of capital and people in the context of global and transnational discourses (Brodin 2000; Smith 1994). Moreover, I give special consideration to the transformation of space and place that occurs “from below,” that is, social actions that privilege the agency of individuals and groups in altering and reifying larger structures of power (Guarnizo and Smith 1999). In this case, I focus on the narratives of post-1965 Chinese immigrants whose lives unfold as the newest additions to the collectivity known as Asian America. It has been a breathtaking change.

In little more than 150 years, beginning with a community of primarily segregated male laborers, Chinese immigrants from all over the world have been transformed into heterogeneous, multigenerational Americans. In this diversity, post-1965 politically involved Chinese activists in Southern California constitute new elites in the Chinese American and larger Asian American communities. This should be taken not as an assignment of valuation but only as recognition that the choice to take advantage of U.S. immigration and recruitment policies afforded them benefits that gave many an essential head start in their new *American* lives.

Their active participation is visible at every level of civic engagement, from the purely local to the national and beyond. From immigration to citizenship, they have embraced national discourses about the responsibility of participating in a democratic society. However, if current mainstream attitudes are any indication, the day when new Chinese American activists no longer have to pay attention to inequalities of opportunity is a long way off. A poll funded by the Committee of 100 shows not only a disheartening ambivalence toward but deep-seated suspicions about Asian Americans and in particular Chinese Americans.<sup>2</sup> White respondents seem to buy into the myth of the model minority, that is, that Asian Americans are hardworking, family oriented, and don't cause trouble. At the same time, these “positive attributes” also translate into a view of Asian Americans as ambitious, clanish, two-faced, and non-English speaking. Those polled could not distinguish between ethnic groups, and many did not want Asian Americans as bosses or neighbors. A media release from the Committee of 100 about the results expressed surprise: “We were startled. We thought that the findings would indicate some prejudice . . . but the findings reflect highly negative

attitudes and stereotypes among a significant group of Americans. These results should serve as a wake-up call to the community” (Committee of 100 2001). The paradox is that while racialization continues, “color-blind” American pedagogies service “the almost complete theoretical silence concerning the state” and the issue of race (Goldberg 2002, 2). What follows here is not color-blind research; it interrogates racial paradigms with an anthropological desire to rectify a silence engendered by the discipline’s failure in past years to more fully participate in the ongoing intellectual debates surrounding concepts of race and racism (Shanklin 1999).

The more recent return to discussions of race and racism is centered on the investigation of race as a social construction and is indicative of all that the term *social* implies. Theorizing naturalized Chinese activism falls squarely into this analysis, a liberal anthropology that instantiates racial epistemologies as necessary to the discussion of the persistence of race and racial categorization (Harrison 1995). Moreover, in order that anthropology become an indispensable discussant in racial discourses in this country, I argue for a rediscovered activist role in confronting the enormously complex and lightning-fast changes occurring in these social constructions of race. Anthropology should advocate again for a scholarly and politically committed stance concerning the power of unequal material relations. Firmly anchored in a bottom-up approach, this analysis adds to the conversation about how individuals struggle to create collective histories of shared experience and attempt to alter their life chances within the constraints of global capital projects. Contextualizing the everyday lives of naturalized Chinese activists and their American-born counterparts, assessing the political outcomes inherent in their life choices and social interactions, speaks to the agency and creativity in grassroots political projects and firmly repudiates difference as pathology.

Since the 1960s, Asian American pedagogies have been instrumental in expanding U.S. racial discourse beyond the dichotomous black/white equation. The rapid reconfiguration of Asian America after 1965 aided Asian American scholars, community leaders, and a small but vocal public intellectualism in the discipline. Post-1965 non-European immigration has forced new syntheses and new racial paradigms and has “required a broader conception of what it means to be an American” (Aoki and Nakanishi 2001). Implicit in the national construction of citizens is the integrative process of belonging and its manifestation in social practices such as civic engagement

or political participation. As will be shown, broader conceptions of citizenship also require rethinking traditional theories of assimilation.

An Asian American emphasis on the processes of politicization fills in the blanks in mainstream literature, which has regarded Asian American political involvement as, at best, nascent or nonexistent (Massey 1981; Parrillo 1982; Sowell 1981). Although there is discussion of political situations in which Asian Americans have been *victimized*, far less attention is paid to the efforts of Asian American activists who successfully transformed power by creating their own counternarratives (Jo 1980; Turnbull 2003). Thus, Asian Americans continue to be the “done-tos” and not the “doers.” More to the point, despite impassioned and sustained critiques by Asian American academicians, dominant narratives of the model minority, assimilation, and a color-blind America are still in play (Kim 2001). The building of a more assertive, politicized community history was left to Asian American Studies, where it still resides as new growth (Chang 2001).

Indeed, there is a new and growing body of research by Asian American scholars on political participation. This is a valuable contribution to the literature, although much of it is statistical and policy driven. During the 1990s, community researchers in ethnic and cultural studies and other social sciences highlighted community transformation wrought by the presence of post-1965 immigrants. Consequences and fallout from transformations in suburban communities have been well documented (Horton 1995; Pardo 1998; Saito 1998). Generally, however, in the discussion of Asian American political participation, there is a relative lack of research directed specifically at *who* these new naturalized citizens are and *how* they construct new identities for themselves, including the specific processes, heavily implicated with power, by which they transform community politics both inside and outside of Asian America. As critical race theorists argue, although power structures that seek to maintain social domination and subordination may still be central, they must share space with the agency of others with less authority (Crenshaw and Gotanda 1995).

I am hopeful that this book will help provide new perspectives. My approach focuses more intimately on the genesis and subsequent maturational processes of politicized identities among naturalized Chinese activists and how these diachronic elements resulted in organizational and collective action. This is an on-the-ground, individual and group integrative process that offers a more nuanced look at how social motivations make history

and, individually and collectively, how history informs the production of identity—such as the ways in which *Asian* and *Asian American* have been and continue to be conflated. Naming the past through specific socio-historical schemes allows a look at the ways cultural constructions are negotiated and contested. Theoretically, these historical frames are political acts wherein Asian Americans contest others' representations of and opposition to their integration as participatory citizens. For example, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, dominant narratives portray an ascendant and competitive China. Within this framework, the lives of many new Chinese activists, which include both a grounded citizenship in the United States and transnational social practices here and in Asia, have been called into question and viewed with suspicion.

At the very least, I hope that learning more about the activities and motivations of these politically involved American citizens of Chinese ancestry will widen discussion beyond simply acknowledging their increased and visible presence. As for being asked my opinion about a possible name and agenda change for CAUSE, I'm thankful that nobody listened to me.

A word regarding nomenclature. The inability and unwillingness of mainstream society to distinguish nativity or ethnicity has been both a passive and a violent form of subjectification for Asian Americans (Hayano 1981). My aim here is to avoid reifying those discourses that deserve dismantling. Such categorizations minus meaningful explication continue to occupy an especially egregious place in Asian American history. In keeping context always in the foreground, I call activists born in the United States *native-born*. I refer to the post-1965 naturalized Chinese who are at the core of this ethnography *new activists*, *new Chinese activists*, or *naturalized activists*. The term *new activist* denotes individuals who arrived with the first, large Chinese immigrant cohort to become naturalized and mature in the local, post-1965 U.S. political arena—a watershed year in Asian American history. *New* does not ignore the political activism of a previous generation of Chinese immigrants, for that would abrogate much of the historical foundation of this book. Nevertheless, many post-1965 activists are substantially different from those who participated earlier. As part of the so-called transnational Asian knowledge class, new activists are uniquely positioned to utilize their resources within a restructured U.S. economy (Yang 2005). Individually and as a group, their social capital enables distinctive opportunities for political incursions. I will have more to say about this as well

as about whether transnational life and the uses of transnational social networks and capital among naturalized activists are new. Suffice it to say here that I don't believe transnationalism per se is a new social phenomenon so much as that scholarly focus on the subject is a new analytical tool that gives us a different perspective in challenging the assumptions about immigration and assimilation (Itzigsohn 2000b).

Regardless of nativity, however, *all* Americans of Asian ancestry participate in identity constructions that are notably fluid and situational in an *American* context. They are naturalized immigrants or they were born here, but they are *all* working out identity projects as citizens of the United States. In this, an Asian American political history has always been one of engagement, of work and participation, albeit oftentimes limited. This speaks to the role of agency and to the behaviors and activities that all of these participants have used in challenging asymmetries of power.

In constructing the histories of the newest political participants, new Chinese activists may begin civic life in the United States as ethnic political participants, but their experiences here have led them to perform as racialized Americans in tandem with other ethnic groups of Asian Americans. This conclusion challenges theories of racialized citizenship that pay attention to socially constructed "differences in the social, economic or political position of a group" but do not fully acknowledge the strength of historically unequal power relationships (Castles and Davidson 2000, 63). As Steven Gregory, whose work resonated deeply during my graduate years, has said: "It is essential that we historicize race and racism if we are to understand and struggle against their continuing significance in the present and the future. We need to understand how and why a ranked hierarchy of races has been put to such destructive uses, been affirmed 'scientifically,' been challenged repeatedly, and yet still dies so hard" (Gregory 1998, 1).

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The narrative structure of this book is primarily longitudinal so that the evolution of a post-1965 new-activist political identity, as well as its inclusion and transformation within existing Chinese American and Asian American political projects, can be more fully comprehended. However, its rough historical and chronological timeline is not absolutely linear but tacks back and forth, paying attention to the simultaneity of events and individuals' memories. Interviews and other ethnographic data are contextualized by



subject, not necessarily by time or date. So that the flow of content is maintained, date and place are frequently used as chapter subheadings or stated in the text. My aim is for the reader to visualize changing social and political times and experience the tempo of events as lived by individuals over the past 40 years in the United States and Asia.

Chapter 1 frames a picture of naturalized Chinese activists in Southern California—who they are, some of the activities in which they are involved—and the dialectics of potential alignment with an extant and primarily native-born Asian American political leadership.

Chapter 2 focuses on the construction of a pan-Asian American political identity by investigating the racial paradigms present in hegemonic colonial and imperial discourses even before the first Asian immigrants came to this country more than 150 years ago. This politicized history is a story of agency within a racially ascribed marginality whose roots were recovered by a new generation of Asian American student radicals during the 1960s. From those beginnings, Asian Americans—primarily native-born but joined by a small number of active immigrants who had come to the United States during the 1950s—began to mature and immerse themselves in local political structures. Political identities that coalesced around a progressive, pan-Asian American agenda are analyzed against the backdrop of a political campaign in Southern California. Half a world away, another group of similar age was shaping a different kind of political identity.

Chapter 3 marks the arrival in the United States of tens of thousands of Asian immigrants after 1965. Aided by global economic changes, a cohort of Western-educated students and professionals form the core of a new type of Asian immigrant. Their politicized life histories diverge deeply from the lives of American-born Asian activists. The political outlooks of new Asian immigrants are based on both nascent and marginal colonial or nation-state mentalities. At the same time, they have an overarching vision of what America can provide, not just economically, but in terms of the promise of citizenship and a stake in belonging.

Chapter 4 explores how these activist immigrants have made new lives for themselves and their families. But within these reconfigured communities of suburban Chinese Americans are places and spaces of racialized contestation where they confront radicalizing experiences with racism that do not match the ideals of democracy and citizenship that they envisioned before immigration. In this context, new Chinese American activists begin to be involved in

the political process as a way to contest their marginality and seek inclusion and recognition. Their first forays into organized, collective action manifest themselves in ethnic-specific mobilization utilizing transnational networking, a fundamentally different technique by which political identities might be worked that generally is not available to American-born Asians.

Chapter 5 examines the 1990s, and the new-activist political work of the decade, as a time of historic convergence in the Asian American collectivity. After pursuing ethnic-specific mobilization for a decade, some naturalized activists begin to embrace instead the instrumentality of a pan-Asian American identity. Both naturalized and native-born activists have undergone more than 30 years of maturation with common *American* experiences as racialized citizens. At this point in their life histories, they may disagree on some specific political issues, but not on the overall political goal of increased representation and a “seat at the table.” The prospects of forging alliances and seeking common ground despite heterogeneity between and *within* each group are explored.

Chapter 6 looks at future cooperative political participation and coalition and consensus building through an analysis of one American-born activist’s pursuit of political office and the naturalized citizens who help elect him despite differences in political outlook. Generational issues are briefly addressed. Are naturalized citizen activists one-generation anomalies? Their children are American-born, and although most have yet to reach maturity, the physical fact of immigration, although a vital chapter of family history, is not part of their lived American experience. Will they embrace pan-Asian American-ness or even see a need for political involvement?

Chapter 7 summarizes and offers a response to the questions asked in Chapter 1: Who are these new politically active Chinese Americans, and what do they want to accomplish?

This ethnography investigates the ways in which new Chinese American citizens become participants in democratic structures, and what it means to them and to other Asian Americans who are compelled by an activist agenda and a vision advocating social justice and participatory equality. In constructing everyday lives in neighborhoods all around Southern California, these newest participants on the block have graciously allowed me access and friendship and refreshed hope for constructing a politically empowered future—an Asian American future.