

Immigration, Assimilation, and the Model Minority Myth

By Christina Kaoh

Lyndon B. Johnson's signing of the Immigration Act of 1965 marked the shift in the demographics of America. According to Franklin Ng's *The Taiwanese Americans*, this act increased the quota of Chinese immigrants to twenty thousand a year and gave preferential access to persons with special technical skills and those "in needed occupations, such as cooks, restaurant chefs, and so on" (17). In short, the government changed its policy to allow for the immigration of highly skilled persons in order to increase human capital, as well as the unskilled and semi-skilled to maintain the cheap, labor pool that immigrants often comprise. This act created the wave of Taiwanese immigrants that included my parents. Shortly after their marriage, my parents immigrated to the United States in the late seventies and settled in Honolulu, Hawaii.

Throughout history, immigrants have experienced the stigma of being foreign and alien and thus were pressed to assimilate and cut ties with their mother countries. As one of the first non-white immigrants, Asians have been especially stigmatized, beginning with the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was the first policy to exclude immigrants on the basis of race. These acts and the attitudes of individuals fostered racism and stereotypes that persist even today. In order to avoid the implications of being "foreign," these new immigrants, like many immigrants, feel the need to assimilate and assimilate their children so they would be considered mainstream and thrive in American life. My parents were no exception to this concept, and therefore proceeded to shape my American. For them, assimilation was a process by which they ensured that they integrated

both themselves and their children into society. However, assimilation also results in the loss of an ethnic identity, or in the confusion of an ethnic and American identity.

Being raised in Hawaii, I experienced the identity of a “local.” I was exposed to an interethnic environment that felt influences from the Portuguese, Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, and Native Hawaiians. Hawaii’s unique environment helped to sustain my Chinese identity because the predominantly Asian cultural influences were the norm. We celebrated Chinese New Year and other holidays in grade school and had high school students teach us the basics of Mandarin, as well as other languages, as a fun activity. In that sense, I maintained much of my ethnic identity because what was normal was not necessarily considered white America. However, my parents inflicted other forces of assimilation upon me. Convinced that speaking English from an early age would build strong language and writing skills later, my mother switched from speaking Mandarin exclusively to English exclusively. Thus, I too transitioned from speaking Mandarin to English before I began school. Once fluent in Mandarin, I now have a severely limited verbal command of the language (though my auditory skills are still intact) because of this pressure to build the language skills and the accent of an American. Furthermore, I studied classical piano for twelve years, rather than the Chinese mandolin or other traditional instrument. I rigorously trained in ballet and tap, rather than experiencing Chinese art forms. My parents placed emphasis on training me into a member of white, upper-class society, rather than educating me on the history and traditions of the native lands and indigenous people.

Due to the economic downturn in the early nineties, my family moved to California to reduce our cost of living. We moved to a suburban, predominantly white area of Orange County where I

continued my junior high and high school education. Throughout junior high, I became acutely aware of my ethnicity and of my displacement from this suburban setting. Surrounded by few people of color and little ethnic understanding, I felt out of place and experienced another period of assimilation that drew me towards a white norm. This time, the pressures of assimilation did not stem from my parents; rather, I subconsciously chose to assimilate to satisfy my need for acceptance by my peers in this somewhat hostile and very different setting. Over this time, I was influenced by the mainland's white norms, in dress, interests, and activities. With little people of color of strong tradition and ethnic identity with whom I could identify, I came under the influence of the only strong presence, which was a white presence.

Now in my second year of college, I am only now beginning to create a new identity and understanding of myself as an Asian American. I have never taken any Asian American Studies courses and can only learn through my experiences with other Asian American students and their historical knowledge. Often times I question my identity as an Asian American student — I have little knowledge of the struggles of Asian Americans in their homelands or in the United States; I am heavily involved with *Conciencia Libre*, a student group of mainly Latino students that focuses on Latin American issues, and Student Worker Front, which until recently, was also predominantly Latino; my interest lies in indigenous peoples though I have no knowledge of indigenous people of Asia; and I perceive a lack of indigenous consciousness in Asian American students and activists.

Like many immigrants, Asian immigrants wanted their children to assimilate because society is kinder to those who uphold white norms. This fact only points to the existing discrimination and

negative attitudes to those who are new immigrants to the U.S. Immigrants are encouraged to lose their ethnic characteristics in dress, language, and way of life because it is considered strange. Assimilation requires one to adapt to mainstream, white characteristics; unfortunately, one cannot maintain a real ethnic identity in which one is educated about the struggles in their homeland. To be of the norm and an elite member of society, it seems that one must have white characteristics. Through the process of assimilation brought about by my parents and by myself, I have little ethnic identity and understanding of the Chinese before they were touched by western and modernizing influences. I struggle and often resent my lack of knowledge about Asian history as well as this “whiteness” that contradicts with my ethnic blood. My involvement with Latino organizations speaks to my need for an indigenous point of view and my rejection of the already westernized culture of Asian American student activists.

My research on the 1965 Immigration Act has unveiled why so there is such a contrast between extremely successful Asian Americans and those who are still of low socioeconomic status. Though stigmatized by the model minority myth, I have long also believed it, largely because I lived it. I have always been surrounded by successful Asian American students and like most believers of the myth, never saw Asian Americans as a struggling community. In reality, the myth conceals the struggles that Asians, like many communities of color, face in the U.S. I knew that there were struggling Asian immigrants, but given my parents’ background, believed that most Asian immigrants were like them. With the historical context of the Immigration Act of 1965, I now understand the existence of lower class Asian communities. American policy has always allowed for the influx of a cheap labor pool that creates these communities. Before, I

could never explain the existence of Asian Americans as the esteemed “model minority” and the immigrant laborers; therefore, I wrongly chose to ignore Asians as a marginalized community.

As an OBEE major, it has been especially difficult to find the balance between my classes, which are a far cry from social activism, and my involvement with conscious individuals that have organized for change on campus and in the surrounding community. Like many Asian American students, I feel the pressure that parents create to find a financially lucrative job that carries prestige. Uninspired by any field, I entered UCLA as an MCDB major. Luckily, I took a GE cluster called “Work, Labor, and Social Justice” that revolutionized the way I viewed the world and introduced me to student organizers, through the Student Worker Front, and union organizers, through AFSCME. Since then, I have been struggling with my science classes and my major, neither of which challenge me to examine the relationships between people, establishments, and systems and their implications on all communities. Through my engagement, I am forming the identity of a socially conscious individual that struggles to combine social aspects with a career in the sciences. For now, I am pursuing a focus in conservation or environmental biology because it examines human exploitation of natural resources.

Though I struggle with understanding the Asian American experience in an academic context, I have an understanding of what the implications are of being a person of color from experience. We all yearn to be a part of the norm, but still question the norm that is white America. By understanding immigration policies and their implications on the communities they affect, I hope first to learn more about immigrant Asian communities. Since I have been long focused on Latino communities, it is time that I turn an eye to working class Asians. From there, I want to

politicize the Asian community and help organize for action. Afro-Americans had their Black Panther movement; Latinos are organizing in the Chicano movement; but from my limited understanding and ignorance of Asian American history, there has been no visible Asian-American pride movement. There are already efforts to organize workers, but there does not seem to be a coordinated effort to create an Asian American student movement. Students have the academic resources available to them to empower and politicize them, as well as the time to create and organize for change. I hope to be a part of that movement and help create a niche for Asian Americans. It has long been said that Asians have a fluid identity — they are either like mainstream, white America, or gravitate toward another community of color. This fluid identity may be a result of the lack of a strong Asian American student identity. As I continue to gain more knowledge about the Asian American community and its students, I hope to build an identity for myself that will add to the existing movement and enhance it to make it a visible presence.