The Emergence of Cultural Pan-Asian Identity

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Abstract

This paper focused on the emergence of cultural or ethnicized pan-Asian identity. While politically based pan-Asian identity during the Asian American movement in the 1960s has been well documented, a cultural pan-Asian identity has newly emerged in the recent years as it hinges on the shared common culture among numerous Asian Americans, especially among second and later generations. The shift of the character of pan-Asian identity suggests that the identity of a racially minority group is bound by racializing ascriptions that a group boundary along racial lines continues to be viable.

Keywords: Pan-Asianism, Pan-Asian identity, Asian American, Racial identity, Ethnicity, Assimilation

1. Introduction

Pan-Asian identity, namely "Asian American" or its consciousness, was first forged during the late 1960s as the Asian American movement emerged. Prompted by the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s, Asian American activists articulated various Asian groups and created the category "Asian American" for a common goal of achieving group interests. While this identity has been widely recognized as a political category since its emergence, over time it has yielded voluntary associations in which various Asian Americans interact and socialize among themselves at a personal level. Although this phenomenon is largely based on the East Asian American experience and its organizational principle largely remains rooted in similar phenotypes, they successfully articulate and move beyond their ethnic-specific identity and created a meaningful and valid group identity and institutions. This experience is sharply contrasted to the earlier dominance of the assimilationist paradigm of European immigrant children in the U.S. Assimilationists believe in the inevitability of eventual disappearance of distinctive ethnic values as a separate entity (Alba, 1990; Herberg, 1955; Waters, 1992).The immigrant children adopted unitary social system of the host culture and became absorbed into the network of social, political, and cultural values that are blinded to ethnicity. However, for the members of the racial minority like Asian Americans, such a theory becomes inapplicable to understand their experiences. Despite their acculturation and participation in various American institutions, they have created their own new cultural boundary. The purpose of this paper is to explore how Asian Americans negotiated and created a new ethnic boundary in the U.S. How would the acculturation of Asian Americans, who acquired the value and behavior of Anglo-Americans and yet learned to accept their standing as a racial minority, be projected in their identity formation? With this sociological question, I will delve into three voluntary based social arenas – college campuses, Asian inter-ethnic marriages, and religious institutions – in which the cultural/ethnic pan-Asian identity is salient.Because this paper addresses more of the private dimension of pan-Asian identity rather than the public aspect and deals with a contemporary phenomenon and context rather than a historical one, the support for my argument will rely mainly on ethnographic/sociological surveys and interviews from the research of other scholars. Based on the research, it is argued that pan-Asian identity has been more than a political label and has developed into a meaningful

identity to many Asian Americans based on a shared feeling of common culture, which is not based on a definitional or fixed characteristic of culture, rather on a constructive and fluid nature.

2. A Paradigm Shift of Pan-Asian Identity

Subsequent to the emergence of the pan-Asian movement in the 1960s, pan-Asian identity or "Asian American" has been largely employed as a political category, which was well documented by various scholars (Aguilar-San Juan,1994; Chang, 2001; Espiritu, 1992; Lien, 2001, Okamoto, 2006). By the 1970s, the term "Asian American" began to gain a common usage not only by government, but also by various professionals and academics, creating Asian American studies programs on university campuses, and publications. While the term is widely recognized by government officials and in professional fields, some scholars view with skepticism the long-term meaning and significance of pan-Asianism (Shinagawa and Pang, 1996). The primary reason for such a skepticism is due to the fact that a pan-Asian identity which emerged out of the movement is viewed as merely a product of the political process, which was only active when common material concerns or political interests were raised (Shinagawa and Pang, 1996). Such a view is also implied by other scholarly research which predominantly has dealt with a politicized pan-Asian identity (Espiritu,1992; Junn and Masuoka, 2008; Lott, 1998). In fact, some pan-ethnic theorists exclusively identify the nature of pan-ethnicity as a political construct for the purpose of establishing a representative category in response to government policies and external threats (Espiritu, 1992; Junn & Masuoka, 2008; Nakano, 2013; Okamoto, 2014). It is true that with American Indians, Hispanics, and Asian Americans, the concept of "pan-ethnicity" first emerged in the fight for group rights and racial pride; therefore, a political cause was always predominant (Anderson, 1991; Cornell, 1990; Nagel, 1995; Padilla, 1985). If pan-Asian identity is solely defined as a representative category for political or socioeconomic reasons as some suggest, it would be difficult to assess the long-term significance of pan-Asianism or pan-Asian identity at the present since only a situational and inconsistent political pan-Asian identity is periodically formed.

On the one hand, a politically constructed pan-Asian identity seems short-lived and only emerges sporadically; on the other hand, pan-Asian identity, based on shared cultural bonds between various Asian American groups, has developed as a personally recognized identity since the 1990s. Recent studies reveal that an "ethnic" pan-Asian identity rather than a "political" pan-Asian identity is most commonly shared by American-born second and later generations of Asian Americans. In contrast to the pan-Asian identity which is generated by outward, social, or political causes, an ethnic pan-Asian identity is formed internally as a common feeling of a shared culture and of a common experience as part of a distinct group which is shared with acculturated Asian Americans (Chong, 2015).

This phenomenon challenges the traditional assimilation theories found in the U.S. The second and later generations of immigrant experience have traditionally been understood in the U.S. as a linear trajectory of assimilation into the dominant society as ethnic values and practices slowly recede. Assimilation theory assumes that American born generations eventually will put aside ethnic allegiances and ethnic institutional involvement as they desire integration into the host society. Contrary to this view, the second and later generations of Asian American experience reflect a much more complex picture of "assimilation" rather than the simplistic pattern once used to depict European immigrant descendents. Because of the lack of race factors in traditional assimilation theories, it is inadequate to describe the experience of people of color. For Asian Americans, like other people of color, race has been a key factor in understanding the context by which they negotiate affiliations and identity in the U.S. Although the majority of American born Asians are highly acculturated and educated, their status as a racially defined group continues to be viewed by the mainstream society as different and foreign (Tuan, 1998). Instead of following a linear and simplistic assimilation pattern, or maintaining an ethnic specific boundary, the second and later generations of Asian Americans have creatively negotiated and remade their ethnic boundary in a "third space," which reflects their unique experiences and struggles as a racialized minority in the U.S. This ethnic pan-Asian affiliation and identity is emerging within a third space, and a recognizable number of Asian Americans are drawn to other Asian Americans who share a similar experience and find comfort in this new ethnic niche (Kim, 2010)

3. The Third Space

3.1 Pan-Asian Friendship and Organizations on College Campuses

As the number of Asian American students in U.S. colleges has been overrepresented, college campuses have been important places for pan-Asian interactions. According to National Center for Education Statistics, from 2010 to 2021, the number of Asian Americans enrolled in colleges marked 64 to 60 percent, compared to 43 to 38 percent of White students. As the Asian American population in colleges continues to be dominant on campuses, more pan-Asian organizations have been offered in order to provide fellowship and resources. According to Don T. Nakanishi, director of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, sixty-five Asian American student organizations are pan-Asian (Onishi, 1996). Asian-American clubs on campuses are organized increasingly around race rather than specific ethnicity. Nazli Kibria (2002) interviewed sixty-four Korean and Chinese Americans who revealed that they had encountered and accepted a pan-Asian identity either by joining an on-campus pan-Asian organization or a pan-Asian social circle. As one-third of her interviewees had been actively involved in a pan-Asian organization during their college years, these organizations provided a crucial point through which they adopted an Asian American identity. While these organizations provided both political and social activities, the majority of her interviewees reported that they were more interested in the social aspect. In their socialization along racial lines, they experienced a greater sense of social ease and receptivity among Asian Americans, which become a comfortable social niche as they coped with a new college environment. Kibria describes this "comfortable social niche" with three factors: common family values, generational conflict between immigrants and the second generation, and a racialized or stereotyped image of the Asian.

Kibria's further research, which focused on Asian American college students who were not affiliated with pan-Asian organizations on campuses, also demonstrated the importance of the Asian American social circle in informal ways on campuses. Despite their disinterest in pan-Asian organization affiliation, and a tendency to avoid pan-Asian activities on campus, these students encountered the idea of "Asian American" one way or another so that eventually they were able to reflect the meaning and significance in terms of identity and community. For example, when these students were misidentified as other Asian descendant other than their own, or racially motivated crimes occurred such as in the Vincent Chin case, they inevitably encounter the concept of "Asian American" knowing that they cannot escape their racialized identity as a result of "racial lumping." Regardless of their pan-Asian organization affiliation, many Asian Americans realized the possibility that the concept of Asian American was not just an identity imposed from the outside but a self-claimed identity that can be embraced. In one way or another, Asian American college students encounter the pan-Asian circle and identity in their college years.

3.2 Asian Inter-ethnic Marriage

Traditionally, in the research of inter-group relations, ethnic and racial intermarriage has been an important area of sociological research. While racial and ethnic identities play an important role in maintaining group boundaries, intermarriage challenges the norms of difference and social distance (Bogardus, 1959; Gordon, 1964). In this sense, the pattern of Asian American intermarriage can provide an important clue about possible ethnic or racial consciousness shifts.

Sharon Lee and Marilyn Fernandez (1998) report trends in Asian American racial/ethnic intermarriage based on a comparison of U.S. census data from the 1980s and 1990s. According to Lee and Fernandez, the common assumption about Asian American intermarriage was that it was expected to be low due to "the effects of racial prejudice, social distance, immigration, settlement patterns, and population growth." Asian Americans were perceived as non-whites and a subordinate group in the U.S. racial hierarchy, and anti-miscegenation laws were enacted which forbade marriage between whites and people of color, including Asians. It was expected that Asian intermarriage would remain low. Even after immigration reform in 1965, the influx of new Asian immigrants was expected to cause a low intermarriage rate among Asian Americans since the first generation of immigrants were more closely tied to their

culture and ethnicity. However, contrary to expectations, the research on Asian American intermarriage has reported high levels of intermarriage, with ranges from 25 percent to over 50 percent depending on the ethnic group.

Lee and Fernandez compared census data from the 1980s with census data from the 1990s and noted three findings. First, the overall Asian American intermarriage rate dropped from 25 to 15 percent. Second, while the overall rate decreased, Asian inter-ethnic marriage, i.e., marriage between Asian ethnic groups, has increased from 11 to 21 percent. Third, native born Asian Americans are more likely to outmarry outside of their ethnic group compared with those who are foreign born. American born Asian men are more than four times likely to outmarry than foreign born Asian men, and American born Asian women a little less than two times likely compared to foreign born Asian women. Overall, American born Asians are substantially more likely to outmarry than the foreign born according to the census data from both the 1980s and 1990s.

Based on their research findings, Lee and Fernandez conclude the following important points: If marital distance is a measure of social distance, the large increase in Asian American inter-ethnic marriages suggests the breakdown of social distance among different Asian American groups. They speculate that demographic changes and other social processes, including a growing sense of pan-ethnic Asian identity, may have contributed to the rise in Asian inter-ethnic marriages.

Larry Shinagawa and Gin Yong Pang (1996) also conducted studies on Asian American intermarriage based on data from the 1980s and 1990s. Their research focused on two areas: U.S. and California Asian American marriage patterns from 1980 to 1990. Their findings are similar to those of Lee and Fernandez: on the national level, interethnic marriages rose 400 to 500 percent from 1980 to 1990. In contrast, interracial marriages with the white population substantially decreased. California data also shows a similar pattern that interethnic marriages of Asian American men residing in California increased from 21.1 percent to 64 percent, and for women from 10.8 percent to 45.5 percent. While their data shows findings that are similar to those of Lee and Fernandez (1998), Shinagawa and Pang attempt to interpret such results in historical and sociological contexts. Their sociological analysis leads to five speculations that may contribute to the growth of interethnic marriage among Asian Americans. First, the case of Vincent Chin, who was a victim of anti-Asian violence in 1982 and served as a catalyst who revived a sense of kinship; empathy toward other Asian groups increased interethnic interaction that resulted in the increase of pan-Asian interethnic marriages more than interracial marriages. Second, as the numbers in the Asian American population increased, Asian American social institutions and businesses also multiplied. With the increased social institutions and business tractions, interethnic interaction and social networking among Asian Americans became frequent. Third, socioeconomic attainment among Asian Americans caused them to move from ethnic enclaves into mixed Asian and white suburbs. Fourth, the acculturation of Asian Americans, including using a common English language and sharing American cultural experiences, promote affinity. Lastly, in a multiracial, multicultural society, a growing sense of comfort and familiarity with each other increased by sharing "symbols, foods, behavioral traits, and beliefs about family, community and common histories."

By providing an in-depth analysis of marriage patterns among Asian Americans from the sociological settings, Shinagawa and Pang demonstrate the recent trend of heightened pan-Asian consciousness among Asian Americans.

3.3 The Emergence of Pan-Asian Churches

The Los Angeles Times on March 8, 1999, reported on emerging pan-Asian churches:
Some Southland congregations break the mold, courting other ethnic groups rather than staying insular to preserve culture. Scholars see a blueprint for the region's future. Newsong and churches like it are becoming the first truly pan-Asian churches in the country, drawing a mix of second-, third- and even fourth-generation Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, and other Asians, whose Americanized upbringing and Christian faith bind ethnically diverse backgrounds.

Newsong has been one of the prominent and successful cases of the pan-Asian church that has branched out to a number of sister churches throughout Southern California. Other representative cases of a pan-Asian church in Southern California include the Garden Christian Fellowship in West Los Angeles, and Evergreen Church in San Gabriel and Rosemead, both of which have been models for a pan-Asian church.

Russell Jeung researches pan-Asian churches in the San Francisco Bay Area, and also reports about burgeoning new congregations (2004). According to his research, pan-Asian churches in the Bay Area increased from one in 1989 to five in 1993. By 1998 an estimated two hundred churches in the area had congregations with a majority of Chinese or Japanese American members. Twenty-two of these were specifically identified as pan-Asian, accounting for 10 percent of the ethnic Asian churches in this region.

While California, where Asians are densely populated, has been the most viable area for pan-Asian congregations, this phenomenon concurrently rises in other parts of the U.S. On "Asian American Parachurch Ministries" website that introduces pan-Asian churches in the U.S., ninety-nine churches are listed under this rubric.

The emergence of pan-Asian churches and parachurch ministries implies a complex interplay between religion and racial identity in the U.S. It indicates that racial dynamics in the U.S. continue to play an important role in the lives of Asian Americans. Such an emergence problematizes Will Herberg's idea of the "triple melting pot" which proposes assimilation based on three religious traditions: Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish. Herberg theorizes that second generation European immigrants abandoned their ethnic ties and customs in order to assimilate into the mainstream society. Herberg asserts that by the third generation immigrants have fully adapted to "the American way of life," while religious divisions continue to exist. In this transitional period, ethnic identity is replaced by religious identity (1955). Contrary to his theory, following their immigrant parents, Asian Americans continue to use religion as an important venue through which they secure both ethnic and religious identities without subsuming one or conflicting with each other.

While the emergence of pan-Asian congregations challenges the theoretical conception of the relationship between religion and ethnic/racial identity, Jeung attempts to articulate three contextual factors that have attributed to the birth of pan-Asian congregations. First, it may be caused by demographic shifts within the Asian American community and their churches. Especially, the Japanese American churches have a shrinking ethnic base since the rate of Japanese immigration is low; the churches needed to widen their target beyond their own ethnic group. Second, generational conflicts within ethnic churches eventually encourage American born Asians to create their own churches. To be free from any cultural baggage, American born Asians tend to choose a pan-Asian church. Third, pan-Asian congregations had already adopted either an Asian American identity or a pan-Asian social connection prior to a church affiliation.

These three factors were summed up by conducting extensive interviews with forty-four Asian American ministers; Jeung believes that the pastors' philosophy in leading their churches, including determining their target group, should play an important role in the birth of pan-Asian churches, because "they are the leading agents of church organizational change, entrepreneurs for their institutions, and cultural narrators of ethnic and racial discourse" (2004). Jeung views the role of ministers, rather than that of congregations, as an explanation for the emergence of the pan-Asian church.

4. The "Common Culture" of Asian Americans

As seen above, campus social organizations, intra-Asian marriage, and religious affiliations such as Protestant pan-Asian churches, have been formed in part through the pan-ethnic consciousness of Asian Americans, which is clear evidence of ethnic pan-Asianism. A common theme that runs through these expressed aspects of society was the shared feelings of a "common culture" among different Asian groups. Scholars such as Kibria, Jeung, and Mia Tuan, who have done research on Americanized Asians, predominantly attribute such phenomena to increased feelings of a shared "common culture." While some use the term "common culture" very loosely, some attempt to articulate what this "common culture" is comprised of, and it is shared by different ethnic Asian Americans.

4.1 Shared Values: Education, Family, Work

By "common culture," many Asian Americans refer to similar values that they share with other Asians. Although these values are not exclusive to Asian Americans, three values are mainly expressed: education, family, and work ethic, by which they reflect their worldview. These values which are held by many Asian Americans are often

explained by a reference to the cultural traditions influenced by Confucianism. These common values are also reinforced and further emphasized by the conditions of Asian immigration. Immigrant parents constantly remind their children of the importance and value of education and of getting good grades as a means of bettering their situation in America. For immigrant parents, educational achievement is emphasized as a key element in the accommodation strategy for their children (Endo,1980). From an early age, immigrant children are reminded of their parents' sacrifice so that they may get a good education. Concurrently, this sense of "common culture" is also shared due to the perception of the white mainstream as the model minority (Park, 2008). The image of the "model minority," albeit an imposed identity, is often accepted by many Asian Americans because of the emphasis on education and work ethics.

4.2 Common Socioeconomic Status

The emphasis on the value of education and a hard work ethic may have led to the growing similarity in the socioeconomic attainment of Asian Americans. Indeed, Asian American socioeconomic achievement has received increased attention in scholarly research. While scholars vary on the causes of the growing similarity in socioeconomic attainment among Asian Americans, education seems to be the primary factor that is highlighted in the research (Barringer, et al.,1980).

In Jeung's interview with pan-Asian church ministers, ministers report that "congregations are remarkably similar in their professional status, their upwardly mobile families, and spare-time activities" (2004). In their similar socioeconomic status, they tend to share common hobbies or leisure activities through which they increase their associations and affinities. Kibria's ethnographic study also reflects middle class upwardly mobile characteristics among her interviewees, and these features certainly play a role in creating a common bond. In connection to this notion, Vijay Prashad argues that the term "Asian American" carries connotations of bourgeois status, while working class Asians such as the Vietnamese, the Hmong "boat-people," Chinese American sweatshop workers, or the South Asian taxi driers and kiosk workers who do not use the term "Asian American" to refer to themselves (1998).

4.3 Racialized Experience in the U.S.

Even though many Asian Americans may have obtained middle class status, this status does not necessarily translate into social acceptance in the larger society. Asian Americans recognize the similarities which link their experiences. Importantly, these similarities are grounded in a common experience of being treated as a distinct racial group in the U.S. Kibria also believes that a shared culture and worldview are fundamentally about a racialized experience characterized by such things as subtle remarks, racial ignorance, and cultural stereotypes. She argues that "Second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans believe that a unique 'Asian American' culture and community emerged out of a central experience and identification with the United States, one that those who had not grown up elsewhere did not fundamentally share" (2002).

All of these sum up to two important points: First, Asian Americans have developed a strong racial consciousness that, for them, race becomes an underlying factor that affects a worldview which is expressed at both a conscious and subconscious level. Second, as a result of strong racial consciousness, the group boundary is shifting. Since race, more than ethnicity, shapes experience and worldview in American society, the group or social boundary is increasingly shaped panethnically. Therefore, pan-Asian or Asian American identity is bound by racializing ascriptions. However, this identity should not be solely understood as a racial category that is ascribed from the outside, but also as a self-defined category based on a common "Asian culture" and friendship.

5. Conclusion: Pan-Asian Identity- Racial or Ethnic Identity?

The pan-Asian identity as a cultural form in recent years has emerged in a complex dynamic between ethnic and racial consciousness. While ethnicity and race are separate entities, they are closely intertwined and mutually reinforce each other, especially among non-white races in the U.S. A consensus exists where pan-Asian identity or "Asian American" identity is largely referred to as a racial identity, while an ethnic-American category, such as Japanese-

American or Korean-American, highlights an ethnic identity. However, for racialized ethnics, the boundary between these two categories is often ambiguous.   These two identities crosscut and mutually reinforce or sustain each other, blurring the boundary of the two. For example, Tuan's interview with forty-eight Chinese and Japanese American born descendents reveals that their ethnic identity (e.g., Chinese-American, Japanese-American) was emphasized in a situation in which they were racially grouped together as "Asian" by outsiders, despite the fact that most of them only maintain a minimum affinity with their ethnic values and culture. In this case, it is racial consciousness that reinforces the sense of ethnic identity. However, Kibria's participants report that this specific ethnic identity merely signifies a generic Asian identity rather than a specific ethnonational one, since "in the face of homogenizing racial processes, distinctions of nationality and ethnicity become irrelevant" (2002). In contrast, white Americans, seen as colorless or racially neutral, have the privilege of ethnic options separately from their racial identity (Alba, 1990; Waters, 1992). Ethnic identity for white Americans is not something that affects their lives as a racialized ethnic group. In fact, Asian Americans, especially later generations of immigrants, exercise a great deal of personal choice in cultural values and practices just like their white counterparts. Most of them have chosen to retain very little. Although Asian Americans may retain ethnicity only symbolically in their lives, their racial identity forces them to adopt their ethnicity or ethnic identity.

The symbolic ethnicity of Asian Americans is characterized as Asian American culture in general since their distinct cultural patterns of their specific ethnicity has been watered down through the acculturation. Within this group consciousness, Asian Americans as a collective group have developed their own culture, institutions, and associations, creating a new social boundary as pan-Asian or a hybrid "ethnic" group.

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