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Chapter Twenty

The "Model Minority" Deconstructed

Lucie Cheng and Philip Q. Yang

Introduction

"I thought I would never say this. But these new immigrants are ruining things for us." Jim Yamada, a third-generation Japanese American, said in disgust. "Asian Americans fought for decades against discrimination and racial prejudice. We want to be treated just like everybody else, like Americans. You see, I get real angry when people come up to me and tell me how good my English is. They say: 'Oh, you have no accent. Where did you learn English?' Where did I learn English? Right here in America. I was born here like they were. We really hated it when people assume that just because Asian Americans look different we were foreigners. It took us a long time to get people to see this point, to be sensitized to it. Now the new immigrants are setting us back. People see me now and they automatically treat me as an immigrant. I really hate that. The worst thing is that these immigrants don't understand why I am angry."

"Am I an Asian American? No, I am Vietnamese," Le Tran asserted. "Actually, I am Vietnamese-Chinese. I came from Vietnam, but my ancestors were Chinese. Well, now maybe you can call me an Asian American. However, I don't usually identify myself that way." Her ethnic identity proves elusive. Some people tell her only those Asians born in the United States are Asian Americans; others say only Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Filipinos are Asian Americans because their ancestors came here long ago and shared a history of discrimination; still others say one has to have citizenship or at least a green card to be Asian American. "It's all so confusing! Does it matter?" she asked.

"My husband is a *kongzhong feiren* (spaceman or trapeze flier)," sighed Mrs. Li, the wife of a Chinese immigrant engineer turned entrepreneur: "There is no normal family life. But I am glad that he isn't like so many other 'trapeze fliers' who keep a 'wife' in every city." Dr. Li flies from Los Angeles to Taipei, Shenzhen, and Hong Kong every other month, managing a thriving garment manufacturing business. He anticipates tough competition from Taiwan entrepreneurs who are moving their plants to Indonesia to take advantage of cheap labor without the uncertain politics of the People's Republic of China.

These vignettes paint an initial portrait of Los Angeles's changing Asian American

communities. For Americans of Asian descent, ethnicity seems to have undergone periodic reconstruction. From the early immigration of the nineteenth century to the end of World War II, Asians in America identified themselves as distinct ethnic groups: Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos. Each group was brought to the United States to meet the specific labor needs of the time and suffered the somewhat similar fate of discrimination, restriction, and exclusion. These similar experiences gave rise to a new identity constructed during the civil rights era. In order to gain political access, Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos became "Asian Americans" (Espiritu 1992). But no sooner was this new identity established than a new, post-1965 wave of immigrants from Asia coming from a wider range of countries called the concept of Asian American into question. Speaking different languages and engaging in distinct cultural practices, the new immigrants reversed, if only temporarily, the trajectory of pan-Asian integration. Their separate ethnic identities as Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian, and so forth strengthen—are strengthened by—international ties that bind the global political economy.

Between 1970 and 1990, two parallel migration streams from diverse Asian countries converged in Los Angeles (Liu and Cheng 1994). The first was made up of highly educated Asian immigrants who joined the local professional-managerial class, usually on the lower rungs of the ladder, and slowly worked their way up. As new members of this class, which is becoming increasingly international, these immigrants are supported by a large group of other Asian immigrants who fill the semiskilled and unskilled jobs in manufacturing and services. While Asian immigrant professionals serve as a link to the most advanced sectors of the world economy, the less-developed sectors are maintained by less-skilled immigrant labor.

Entrepreneurship is a common characteristic of Asian immigrants. Although traditional Mom-and-Pop stores are still significant in the ethnic economy, Asian businesses are increasingly diverse in size and scope. They not only fill niches in the local Los Angeles economy but create international business networks, as well. For example, Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees have played a unique role in the development of bilateral trade between the United States and their countries of origin, contributing to the privatization of the economy in China and Vietnam as well as to the transformation of businesses in Los Angeles. The restructuring of the world political economy has created not only multinational corporations but also an emerging group of transnational residents whose activities and presence weave an international network of professional and business people. Asian participation in this network is gaining significance (Ong et al. 1992). Once limited to jobs as professionals, entrepreneurs, and low-skilled laborers, Asian immigrants now include a growing number of capitalists looking for investment opportunities in the United States. Not only do their occupations reinforce capitalism as an economic system, but at the same time their influx into the United States and their comparatively greater social mobility help strengthen the capitalist ideology of meritocracy and its ethno-racial variant, the "model minority" (Ong et al. 1992)

On the other hand, the conditions that Asian immigrants encounter may not long support the optimistism with which so many arrive. The visibility and the high profile of their residential enclaves and their occupational niches in particular have

tapped into undercurrents of racism and nativism deep in the American psyche. Many Asian Americans maintain that a "glass ceiling" keeps them from getting ahead, and these charges of discrimination have increased over the last decade. Anti-Asian violence has erupted in several major American cities. Alarmed by the resurgence of anti-Asianism, federal and state agencies have begun to monitor racial crime. An upsurge in hostility and discrimination, coupled with the changing Asian demographics, has made pan-Asian solidarity an issue of necessity and urgency for all groups of Asian descent. Nevertheless, historical rifts and current relations among Asian groups also pose challenges to Asian American identity.

Asian immigrants are victims of racism in two ways. They suffer from discrimination from non-Asians, and, yet, at the same time, many Asians discriminate against other racial groups. Coming from very different national backgrounds, often also from more culturally homogeneous societies, some Asian immigrants seem less tolerant of diversity. Cultural conflict aggravates already strained economic relations between Asians and other disadvantaged minorities. As victims of racism in the first sense, Asians are a progressive force for change. But Asian racism itself threatens to push the community toward conservatism.

This chapter focuses on the diversity of Asian Americans. What significant changes have occurred in the Asian American population in the past three decades? How well do Asians fare, and how do they adapt to the changing social environment? Do Asian experiences challenge or reinforce common stereotypes and concepts, such as "model minority" and "glass ceiling," which are thought to be especially applicable to Asian Americans? Finally, what do the changing intergroup relations mean for Asian Americans, for the formation of a pan-Asian ethnicity or coalition, and for the needs and aspirations of the reconstituted Asian ethnic groups? These are the main questions addressed in the following sections.

Immigration and Changes in Ethnic Composition

The rapid restructuring of the Pacific Rim political economy, ushered in by a long-term crisis in advanced capitalism, the advent of the global economy, and the challenge of ascending East Asian states, has influenced profoundly the pattern of immigration to the United States in the last two and half decades (Ong et al. 1994). In 1965, less than 7 percent of all immigrants to the United States were from Asia. In 1970, the figure rose to 25 percent, and in 1980 to 44 percent. Although Asian immigration continues to rise in the 1990s, official statistics from the Immigration and Naturalization Service show that the Asian share of total immigration during the 1980s dropped to 22 percent. This decline is more illusory than real, however, largely reflecting the results of the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act (IRCA). This act legalized a largely Mexican and Latin American origin population, many of whom had arrived in the United States prior to 1982.[1]

Four general features distinguish the new wave of Asian immigration from the old: a larger size, a higher percentage of women, greater ethnic and socioeconomic diversity, and more extensive—as well as intensive—global linkages. These same

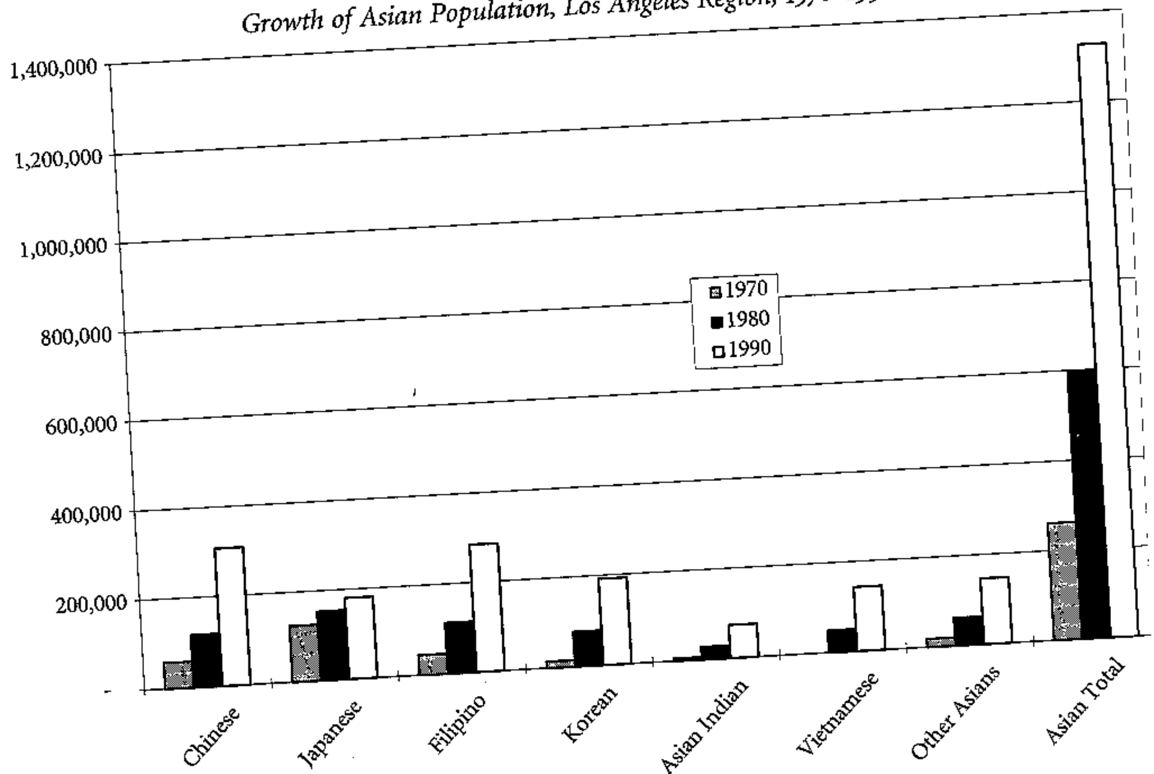
features characterize Asian immigrants to Los Angeles. The Los Angeles region, a significant gateway of the Pacific Rim and an emerging "global city," is a favorite destination of post-1965 Asian immigration. In this multiethnic region, Asians have been the fastest-growing segment of the population over the past two and half decades, largely because of immigration. In 1970, 240,000 Asians lived in Los Angeles, about 2 percent of the total population. By 1990, with over 1.3 million Asians making up 9 percent of the total population, the Los Angeles region was home to the single largest Asian population in the nation, far surpassing other major Asian centers such as San Francisco-Oakland, Honolulu, and New York. Between 1970 and 1990, the region's Asian population increased by 451 percent, ten times the regional average population growth rate (46 percent) and significantly more than the runner-up, the Latino population, which shot up by 236 percent. In contrast, the black population barely increased (0.4 percent), and the white population declined.

While all Asian groups experienced large increases in absolute size and relative population share, rates varied considerably between 1970 and 1990. The Korean and Indian populations, each beginning with a small base, increased dramatically, by more than 1,000 percent, while the already established Chinese and Filipino groups showed impressive growth, 626 percent and 563 percent, respectively. The Vietnamese, who began to settle in southern California after North Vietnam's conquest of South Vietnam in 1975, increased from 48,320 to 142,890 between 1980 and 1990, a 196 percent growth rate in one decade (see Figure 20.1).

Vietnamese are the largest of several groups whose presence became visible after

FIGURE 20.1

Growth of Asian Population, Los Angeles Region, 1970–1990



1970. Cambodians and Laotians were also absent from the region before the American involvement in the Vietnam War and internal strife on the Indochinese peninsula led to their arrival. Korean immigration began in the early twentieth century in small numbers and increased after the Korean War, as war brides and orphans adopted by Americans arrived. It was not until 1965, the year in which the discriminatory national origins quota system was abolished, that Koreans began moving to the United States in larger numbers. The change in immigration law also affected established groups such as Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos, whose foreign-born populations consist mostly of post-1965 immigrants. Most of the foreign-born Asians came after the enactment of the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act. In particular, almost all foreign-born Vietnamese, Koreans, and Asian Indians arrived after 1965.

The new immigration also ended the demographic predominance of the Japanese in transforming Asian American Los Angeles into a multiethnic community. In 1970, the Japanese, accounting for 51 percent of the region's Asian population, were the largest and dominant group. But, with fewer immigrants and a low fertility rate, the Japanese lost their top-ranking position; no single dominant group replaced them in the new mix of Asian groups that emerged over the next two decades. By 1990, the Japanese stood fourth (with 14 percent of the region's Asian population), following the Chinese, with 23 percent, the Filipinos, with 22 percent, and the Koreans, with about 15 percent. Vietnamese and other Asians each accounted for somewhat more than 10 percent of the total Asian population in 1990.

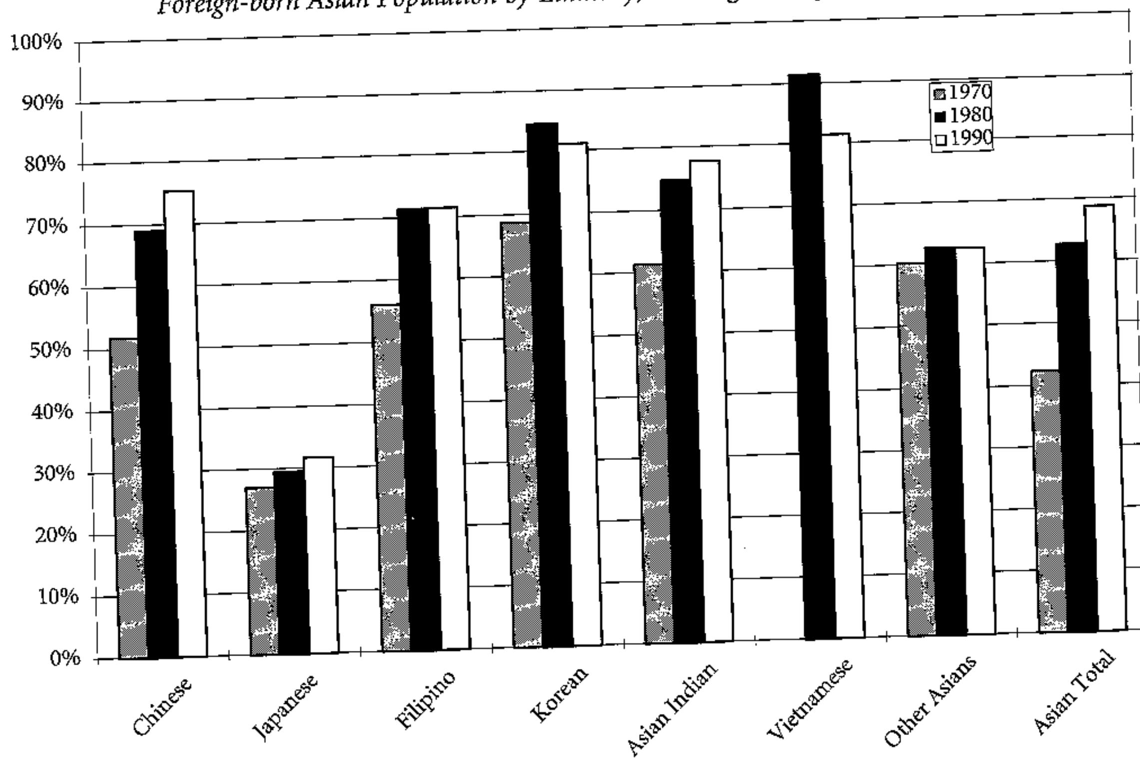
The influx of new immigrants also reversed the earlier demographic dominance of the U.S. born, as Figure 20.2 shows. In 1970, 57 percent of the Asian population in Los Angeles was made up of Americans by birth; twenty years later, they accounted for only 31 percent. From 1980 on, the foreign-born made up the majority of every Asian group except for the Japanese. For almost all groups, the proportion of the foreign-born significantly increased from 1970 to 1980, but the increase slowed in the next decade, and for the Vietnamese and Koreans the proportion declined. A relatively youthful female immigrant population and lower immigration rates may both have contributed to this change.

Although early Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and Korean American communities were characterized as bachelor societies, the situation changed after 1965, when U.S. immigration policies were revised to favor of family reunification and large numbers of female immigrants from Asia came to Los Angeles. The large influx of Asian women immigrants generated balanced sex ratios for the major Asian communities, which now have slightly higher proportions of females than males. The future sizes and compositions of the Asian populations will surely reflect the current age compositions of women immigrants admitted during the past two decades.

The "Model Minority": Image and Reality

The phenomenal surge of Asian immigration and the resulting changes in ethnic composition have hardly tarnished the image of Asian Americans as a "model

FIGURE 20.2
Foreign-born Asian Population by Ethnicity, Los Angeles Region, 1970–1990



minority." This portrayal began in the mid-1960s at a time of massive racial upheaval; the term was first used by the press to depict Japanese Americans who struggled to enter the mainstream of American life and to laud Chinese Americans for their remarkable accomplishments.[2] These accounts conveyed the message that Japanese and Chinese Americans had achieved great success by overcoming discrimination with determination and hard work. Later extended to Asian Americans as a group,[3] the label filtered into college textbooks, where it further promoted the image of Asian Americans as minorities who "made it" in this "land of opportunity."

Ever since its inception, the model minority thesis has been a subject of considerable controversy, especially from critics who have argued that the image is racially stereotypic, empirically inaccurate, and no longer applicable to the changing Asian American population (Ong and Hee 1994; Takaki 1987). In their view, the model minority label is also objectionable for its political implications, which cast America as a fair, open society and a real land of opportunity, where minorities can make it as long as they work hard. The concept that some minorities could be a "model" thus counters the black militant claim that America is fundamentally a racist society, structured to keep minorities in a subordinate position. By extolling Asian Americans as a model minority, this critical literature asserts, the established world hopes to set a standard of behavior for other minorities.

Despite an unending barrage of attacks, the model minority image has persisted into the 1990s, quite alive if not entirely unscathed. The supporting literature often begins by citing the educational achievements of Asian Americans reported in data from the 1980 and earlier censuses (Hirschman and Wong 1986). Statistics for Los

Angeles confirm the pattern of high levels of education and disproportionate representation in universities and colleges but demonstrate significant variations across groups. Compared with U.S.-born non-Asian groups, U.S.-born Asians as a whole had higher levels of educational achievement in each census year. In 1990, for example, the average U.S.-born Asian adult reported 14.2 years of schooling, the highest among all broad ethnic groups. Not all groups of U.S.-born Asians were equally well educated, however. While Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, and Asian Indians ranked ahead of U.S.-born whites, Filipinos fell slightly behind and Vietnamese and other Asians fell substantially behind whites, with educational levels similar to or lower than those of U.S.-born blacks and Hispanics. As a whole, Asian immigrants were less well educated than their U.S.-born co-ethnics. Though relatively small at the beginning of 1970, the immigrant-native gap widened in successive years; by 1990, the average Asian immigrant was slightly less well schooled than the average native white, a reversal of the pattern from twenty years earlier. As average schooling levels for most Asian immigrant groups either improved or stayed the same between 1970 and 1990, the slight decline in average education for the entire Asian group seems largely due to two factors: the influx of poorly educated Vietnamese and other Indochinese in the 1980s and the arrival of female immigrants, whose educational levels were generally lower than those of their male counterparts (Filipinas excepted).

Data on the percentage distributions of educational level by ethnicity and nativity in 1990 (Table 20.1) further substantiate the phenomenal accomplishments of Asian Americans in higher education, but again with great variation. Among U.S.-born Asians every group outpaced native whites in completion of the college degree. Of particular note is the disparity between Chinese Americans, among whom 65 percent had finished college, and native whites, among whom 31 percent had finished college. Japanese Americans, the other large group of U.S.-born, also ranked well ahead of whites on this count, as did all the other smaller groups.

A similar pattern held up among immigrants, though with considerably greater variation. Once again, rates of college completion among all Asian groups Vietnamese excepted, substantially exceeded whites'; even among the Vietnamese, almost half reported some college or more. At the other end of the spectrum, the immigrants were also underrepresented among the ranks of the poorly schooled with a high school diploma or less, pointing to the continued selectivity of Asian immigration to Los Angeles; again, only the Vietnamese exceeded whites on this count.

While the schooling profile of adult Asian Americans shows some unevenness, a look at the educational performance of the younger generations erases any doubt. When it comes to school achievement and attainment, Asians leave all other groups far behind in the dust, and that generalization holds for all Asian ethnic groups, regardless of nativity and generational status, which we have broken down by adding a 1.5 generation to capture those immigrants who came as children under the age of ten. As Table 20.2 shows, Asian teenagers ages sixteen to nineteen drop out of high school at a rate that is either under or comparable to the rate for whites; only Vietnamese and Filipino immigrants, who lag behind whites on so many other indicators, do worse on this count, by exactly one percentage point. At a slightly older age, Asians of every group—Vietnamese immigrants excepted—are more

TABLE 20.1

Percentage Distribution of Educational Level by Ethnicity and Nativity, Persons Ages 25 and Over, Los Angeles Region, 1990

	Chinese		Japanese		Filipino		Korean	Indian	Vietnamese	White	Black	Hispanics	
Education	FB	USB	FB	USB	FB	USB	FB	USB	FB	USB	USB	USB	FB
No school/nursery	5.5	1.2	2.0	0.3	0.6	0.7	2.6	2.3	7.3	0.3	0.8	1.5	10.4
Elementary school	8.3	0.7	1.6	0.5	2.9	0.9	3.7	3.2	9.3	0.9	2.5	6.6	38.1
Some high school	9.5	2.0	6.1	3.1	3.8	7.3	6.8	8.1	19.4	8.1	16.6	23.2	20.8
High school graduate	14.1	7.5	26.7	17.1	10.6	19.3	23.8	12.2	15.4	22.0	24.8	27.9	13.5
Some college	2.4	23.2	28.5	35.1	28.2	39.4	25.0	19.0	30.3	37.9	39.6	30.7	12.4
College degree or more	40.2	65.4	35.1	43.9	53.9	32.4	38.1	55.2	18.4	30.8	15.8	10.0	4.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100	100.0

NOTES: Total may not add up to 100 percent due to rounding errors.
USB = U.S.-born; FB = Foreign-born.

TABLE 20.2
Educational Attendance and Completion Levels, Los Angeles Region, 1990

	Japenese	Chinese	Vietnamese	Filipino	Korean	Asian Indian	Mexican	White
High school dropouts, ages 16–19								
Foreign-born	3%	6%	9%	9%	6%	6%	58%	6%
1.5 generation	NA	2%	5%	4%	4%	5%	23%	6%
U.S.-born	3%	0%	5%	3%	3%	0%	15%	8%
High school dropouts, ages 18–24								
Foreign-born	5%	7%	16%	9%	6%	7%	64%	8%
1.5 generation	1%	4%	6%	4%	3%	3%	38%	9%
U.S.-born	4%	2%	9%	8%	3%	2%	25%	11%
College attendance, ages 18–24								
Foreign-born	64%	64%	49%	40%	52%	51%	8%	42%
1.5 generation	54%	60%	60%	61%	71%	69%	21%	40%
Native-born	59%	79%	53%	55%	71%	71%	28%	38%

NOTE: White foreign-born and 1.5 generation are immigrants born in Europe or Canada.

likely to complete high school than whites. As for college attendance, the Asian advantage is truly outstanding; every Asian ethnic and nativity group, with the exception of Filipino immigrants, surpasses whites in this respect. Chinese Americans attend college at twice the white rate, and U.S.-born Asian Indians and Koreans are not that far behind. Numbers like these account for the growing Asian presence in higher education, so easily seen on the campuses of the elite universities of the Los Angeles region. In 1993, for instance, Asians accounted for 32 percent of the undergraduate students at UCLA, 20 percent at USC, and 23 percent at Caltech—rates that pointed to two- to threefold Asian overrepresentation among elite undergraduate ranks.

Several theories have been offered to explain the success of Asians in school. One earlier explanation attributed this success to the Confucian culture that prevails in many Asian societies. This view emphasizes a cultural reverence for learning and scholarly achievements and its role in shaping parental behavior. Parents urge their children to study longer hours, reward them for doing well in school, and emphasize the importance of education for social mobility; consequently, Asian students are motivated or compelled to learn and succeed. A second explanation accentuates the role of stable Asian American families, which provide a good learning environment for educational success. The selectivity of highly educated Asian immigrants is also a factor (Barringer et al. 1993; Hirschman and Wong 1986). Although these explanations have merit, they do not capture all the important determinants. We argue that the social environment in the receiving country is an essential consideration. In a society dominated by whites, where racial minorities often must find their own special channels of social mobility, education has been a primary route for many minority groups. In other words, the reception context in the United States forces Asian immigrants and their U.S.-born children to pursue higher levels of education as a means of upward mobility. It is the combination of culture, family, selectivity of immigration, and the receiving context that determines the remarkable educational achievements of Asian Americans.

The occupational mobility of Asian Americans is another piece of evidence often cited in support of the model minority thesis. Historically, Asians tended to be clustered at physically difficult, low-prestige, and low-paying occupations; Chinese often worked as laundrymen or small restaurateurs, Japanese as gardeners and farmers. But after World War II, the occupational status of Asians gradually improved. Previous studies have shown Asians climbing the occupational ladder with such success that the U.S.-born Chinese and Japanese reached or almost achieved parity with whites (Barringer et al. 1990). The Los Angeles data shown in Table 20.3 demonstrate the significant progress that Asians have made over the past two decades.

Employment in high-skill occupations (HSOs)—here defined as professional, managerial, and technical occupations—went up significantly among U.S.-born Angelenos of all ethnic stripes between 1970 and 1990, reflecting the area's transition to a high-tech, high-information economy. But, even within this comparative frame, the performance of U.S.-born Asians remains impressive. Although the then small population of U.S.-born Asians held a lead over all other groups in 1970, it pulled farther ahead over the next decades until, by 1990, almost half the region's Asian Americans had moved into HSOs. As with the other indicators that we examine, the high overall average conceals considerable intra-Asian diversity. The Chinese American lead over whites opened up dramatically after 1970; Japanese American progress,

TABLE 20.3
Percentage Distribution of Employed Persons Ages 25–64 in High-Skill and Low-Skill Occupations by Nativity, Los Angeles Region, 1970–1990

	High-skill occupations			Low-skill occupations		
	1970	1980	1990	1970	1980	1990
U.S.-born						
Asians	36%	39%	50%	28%	20%	14%
Chinese	39%	58%	69%	23%	11%	7%
Japanese	36%	38%	51%	29%	21%	12%
Korean	35%	28%	50%	23%	25%	14%
Filipino	31%	30%	39%	36%	21%	20%
Asian India	NA	58%	50%	NA	21%	17%
Vietnamese	NA	NA	41%	NA	33%	39%
Other Asian	33%	24%	29%	33%	31%	25%
White	34%	39%	44%	23%	18%	15%
Black	16%	24%	31%	49%	36%	28%
Hispanics	13%	19%	25%	49%	40%	31%
Foreign-born						
Asians	35%	38%	39%	40%	25%	22%
Chinese	45%	47%	43%	41%	27%	21%
Japanese	22%	36%	41%	56%	33%	24%
Korean	NA	29%	31%	NA	33%	20%
Filipino	26%	39%	41%	34%	21%	20%
Asian India	NA	58%	52%	NA	12%	13%
Vietnamese	NA	30%	32%	NA	36%	33%
Other Asian	NA	27%	32%	NA	31%	25%
Hispanics	8%	9%	10%	66%	62%	59%

NOTE: High-skill occupations include managerial, professional, technical, and related workers, while low-skill occupations include private household workers, service workers, operatives, transportation workers, laborers, and farm workers.

also dramatic, pales only in comparison with the Chinese American record. On the other hand, Filipinos were doing somewhat worse than native whites in 1970 and lagged further behind in 1990, which meant that the intra-Asian disparity in HSO employment had widened still further.

A look at the bottom of the occupational spectrum shows that the Asian migration to the Los Angeles region does indeed contain a proletarian component, but one that has diminished in relative terms over time. In 1970, Asian immigrants in the Los Angeles region were a good deal more likely than native whites to be employed in low-skill occupations (LSOs, here defined as all blue-collar occupations, craft excepted, as well as service and farm jobs). By 1990, the proportion of Asian immigrants in LSOs was still larger than that of whites, but, the massive immigration notwithstanding, the gap was a good deal smaller than it had been two decades earlier. In fact, in 1990, the immigrant concentration in LSOs was modest not just in comparison with the overwhelmingly blue-collar Latino immigrants but in comparison with native African Americans and Latinos, as well.

Still, not every group of Asian immigrants was equally successful in escaping from the region's humbler jobs. As expected, Asian Indians were the least likely to work in LSOs; just as predictably, Vietnamese reported the largest concentration of LSO employment. Nonetheless, Vietnamese had managed to reduce their dependence on LSOs during the 1980s, even though this same period saw a large influx of Vietnamese newcomers who were less well qualified than those who had come before. And the 1990 rate of Vietnamese employment in LSOs made them more or less comparable with U.S.-native Hispanics and African Americans; since Vietnamese were the most disadvantaged of the region's Asian immigrant groups, this fact alone tells us something about how well the others were doing.

In explaining the occupational patterns of Asian Americans, researchers have pointed to cultural factors, such as an ethic of hard work (Kitano 1988). The current literature is critical of cultural explanations, emphasizing instead structural factors or socioeconomic characteristics of immigrants. More recent research shows that the occupational status of Asian Americans is associated with their human capital (for example, education), physical capital (e.g., money brought to the United States by immigrants from abroad), and social capital (such as ethnic networks, occupational niches, and ethnic enclaves). The social origins of contemporary Asian immigrants, most notably their tendency to come from better-educated and more urban segments of their home societies, may also contribute to their current occupational status (Barringer et al. 1990; Ong et al. 1992).

The high average income levels of Asian Americans provide the most powerful evidence for the model minority thesis. The past three censuses show that, for the country as a whole, Asians have significantly higher levels of median household income than all other broad ethnic groups. But median household income may be a misleading indicator, since Asian families have more workers per household than white families and since Asians tend to be concentrated in a few large metropolitan areas, where incomes, as well as costs of living, are higher than the national average (Takaki 1987). In an effort to control for regional location, Ong and Hee compared the 1989 median incomes of non-Hispanic whites with those of Asian and Pacific

TABLE 20.4

Median Household Income, Los Angeles Region, 1979–1989

	Foreign-born										
	All Asians	Chinese	Japanese	Korean	Filipino	Asian Indian	Vietnamese	Other Asian	Hispanics		
1979	$33,302	$34,466	$27,574	$29,732	$41,366	$39,979	$21,553	$31,546	$23,277		
1989	$40,449	$38.427	$38,677	$34,382	$50,056	$48,539	$35,564	$33,371	$26,494		
	U.S.-born										
	All Asians	Chinese	Japanese	Korean	Filipino	Asian Indian	Vietnamese	Other Asian	Hispanics	Whites	Blacks
1979	$40,350	$40,315	$43,993	$35,451	$33,036	NA	NA	$31,546	$29,576	$35,000	$21,554
1989	$48,221	$49,146	$51,067	$37,871	$45,082	NA	NA	$40,197	$35,107	$43,220	$26,386

Islanders nationally and within the combined four metropolitan areas that have the largest Asian Pacific American populations (Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, and New York) (Ong and Hee 1994). Asian Pacific Americans did have a higher level of average median household income ($36,000) than whites ($31,000) for the county as a whole, but the order was reversed ($40,000 for whites and $37,200 for Asian Pacific Americans) for the four metropolitan areas (Takaki 1987).

The evidence from Los Angeles—which eliminates the influence of differences in the regional distribution of Asians and whites and therefore makes our contrast groups directly comparable—yields a picture that differs from Ong and Hee's. In 1989, median family income among the U.S.-native Asians ($48,221) put them significantly ahead of U.S.-native whites ($43,220) and even further ahead of other U.S.-born groups (see Table 20.4). Disaggregation by ethnicity shows that U.S.-native Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos, the numerically larger groups, fared much better than their white counterparts, while the much less numerous (and presumably younger) Koreans lagged behind. Asian immigrants as a whole fared much better than Hispanic immigrants and even U.S.-born Hispanics and blacks. Foreign-born Filipinos and Asian Indians especially outperformed other groups, since many of them were highly educated. Similar patterns obtained in 1979.

As we have noted, white/Asian differences in the number of adults working per family help explain why Asians tend to outrank whites in median family income. According to the 1990 census, U.S.-born Asian families contained an average of 1.5 adults who worked, as opposed to 1.2 persons for U.S.-born white families; similarly, foreign-born Asian families had an average of 1.6 working adults, compared with 1.1 working adults in foreign-born white families.

If the Asian lead in median family income is consistent with the model minority thesis, a look at personal earnings confounds it. Most groups of Asian men do worse than whites, a finding consistent with Ong and Hee's. But caution is needed before we decide that Asians have indeed fallen behind on the wage front, since the prevalence of newcomers, who undoubtedly need time to learn the ropes and to gain the specific skills needed by the region's employers, may well drag average earnings down. Untangling the question is complicated further by the diverse ethnic and nativity mix of the region's Asian groups, making it difficult to grasp the picture as a whole.

In effect, two competing hypotheses offer interpretations of the Asian wage lag. The discrimination hypothesis suggests that Asians, while often highly skilled, confront a structure of rewards different from that of their white counterparts, lagging behind comparable whites because employers treat the two groups differently. In contrast, the immigrant hypothesis suggests that for the foreign-born it is all a matter of adjustment; with time and the acquisition of better English skills and other proficiencies specific to the U.S. labor market, Asian immigrants eventually receive their just desserts.

We attempted to assess these hypotheses by adjusting for the labor market, family, and individual characteristics that affect earnings, giving Asians the average characteristics of native whites and then seeing how doing so affects the mean earnings of persons who made at least $1,000 in the year prior to the relevant census year. The

answer, as one might expect, differs by nativity, ethnicity, and gender. Among men, U.S.-native Asians do worse than U.S.-native whites; adjustment has virtually no effect on Asian earnings, since for the most part U.S.-born Asian men possess the characteristics associated with higher earnings. The earnings of U.S. native Asian women in 1969 and 1979 surpassed those of U.S.-born whites; adjustment brings Asian earnings down to about parity with whites, suggesting some slight advantages of Asians over whites. The Asian advantage diminished over time, however, so that in 1989 the adjusted earnings of Asian women fell largely below those of whites. Thus, the situation among the those born in the United States, men in particular, generally supports the discrimination hypothesis, indicating the handicapped market position of Asians.

The immigrant story, however, reads differently and needs to be looked at in a somewhat different manner. On the basis of the raw data for all Asian groups combined, time, measured as length of settlement in the United States, clearly matters. The newest cohorts did much worse than native whites, and the earlier cohorts did better. To be sure, not every individual group experienced the beneficial effect of time in quite the same way; Filipinos, for example, registered modest progress, with men in the cohort of the 1960s still doing worse than whites in 1989, whereas Koreans of the same cohort charged ahead, greatly outdistancing whites in 1989.

But, time is not the only attribute that counts; immigrants' labor market and familial characteristics should make them better earners than whites; by giving the older cohorts of immigrants the characteristics of whites pushed immigrant earnings down, indicating that comparable immigrants and whites are not rewarded equally. Hence, immigrants have a double burden to bear: the time needed to learn the ropes and discriminatory treatment that persists even after they gain the skills and experience that employers want.

A similar view emerges when we trace cohorts over time, though the small size of the populations in place as of the 1960s prevents extensive disaggregations. In 1969, men in the 1960s cohort were doing a good deal worse than native whites; the adjustment procedure did little to alter earnings. While earnings for men in the 1960s cohort improved over the next two decades, with the result that Asians had outdistanced whites by 1989, the adjustment yields a continued lag, suggesting that Asian immigrant men were not rewarded for education and experience at the same rate as native whites. By 1989, however, the women of this cohort had surpassed their white counterparts, both before and after any adjustment, evidence of gender differences in the opportunity structures.

Generalizing from older to newer cohorts can be hazardous, since the newer cohorts may not resemble their predecessors and in any case move into a labor market transformed by the increased immigrant presence. The data provide some suggestion of erosion; compared with subsequent cohorts at comparable periods of time, the 1960s cohort seems to have done somewhat better in the first decade of residence, though small numbers make any such conclusion tentative. Moreover, the 1980s cohort seems to be doing worse than the 1970s cohort at the end of the first

decade of residence—as one might have expected, given the tremendous expansion in immigrant numbers and the immigrant convergence on a limited number of occupations and industries.

It must be noted that reality is more complex than the simplifying metaphors that shape the public discourse about the Asian American experience. The model minority concept is not without its virtues; historically, it helped turn around the negative stereotypes of Asian Americans and enhanced the positive image of Asian Americans, and empirically it is consistent with Asian Americans, advantageous position, relative to other minorities if not always to native whites. On the other hand, discrimination still inhibits Asian American progress. Many Asian Americans could be doing even better were it not for the persistent effects of discrimination. Diversity further complicates the picture; newcomers abound among today's Asian Angelenos, and these new arrivals are paying a sizable penalty as they struggle to get ahead. But, perhaps the most fatal criticism is that the various ethnic groups do not seem to be progressing at comparable rates, no matter how hard they try. The variation suggests that there is no single model minority but rather an aggregate of groups undergoing very different fates.

Trajectories of Adaptation

Diversity is the hallmark of Asian American Los Angeles. In this section, we seek to account for that diversity and to identify its most important axes. As most Asian Angelenos are immigrants, their origins and the circumstances of their departure from their home countries are likely to explain a large part of the variation in their current status. Asians, especially Asian immigrants, fall into five main categories: professionals, entrepreneurs, capitalists, workers, and refugees. Each type has followed a distinct path of adaptation, and each ethnic group tends toward one or more of these categories. Some groups are relatively successful, while others are not. The varying experiences in initial immigration largely determine the paths and outcomes of adaptation and incorporation; we therefore focus on how Asians have adapted to the social environment under different patterns of initial entry.

Professionals

The large presence of professional workers does much to account for Asians' relative success. Not only do professionals raise the average socioeconomic status of their particular ethnic group, but they play an important role in the success of their children and communities as a whole. In 1990, 25 percent of Asians between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four in the Los Angeles region were professionals, compared with 24 percent of whites, 19 percent of blacks, and 8 percent of Hispanics. Note that the number of Asians with professional training is doubtless even greater, since those who cannot find professional employment in the United States are excluded from the professional category in the census. In particular, professionals were over-

represented among Asian Indians (33.7 percent), Japanese (27.9 percent), Chinese (27.4 percent), and Filipinos (27.5 percent). Although some Asian professionals were U.S.-born (mainly Japanese, and some Chinese and Filipinos), the majority (76.8 percent) immigrated from abroad, primarily from the Philippines, India, mainland China, Taiwan, and Korea.

Studies of the "brain drain" have demonstrated the causal connections between this phenomenon and the differences between sending and receiving countries in terms of living standards, research conditions, and professional employment opportunities. Recent studies further pinpoint the important role of international economic interdependency and articulation of higher education in determining the flows of immigrant professionals (Cheng and Yang 1998; Ong et al. 1992). In the context of the immigration of Asian professionals, several factors may be important. The economic involvement of the United States in Asian Pacific countries has created opportunities for Asian professional migration. Furthermore, American influence on the education systems and curricula of Asian countries, along with the exchange of students and scholars, has forged a pool of professionals who are employable in the United States. The so-called educational surplus—that is, the production of college graduates in excess of demand for them—also motivates the migration of higher-skilled persons. The Philippines, for example, produces far more college graduates than its labor market can absorb, and with skills not entirely relevant to the needs of an agricultural economy; the same phenomenon occurs in the Indian subcontinent. In both instances, the result is the exodus of professionals. Changes in U.S. immigration policy that favor the immigration of professional and technical workers and allow foreign students to adjust their resident status upon finding a permanent job in the United States have also facilitated the immigration of Asian professionals.

The factors affecting the flow of professionals may not always remain the same, however. Prior to the 1980s, low income and living standards prompted most foreign students from Asia to remain in the United States permanently after the completion of their education. In recent years, economic and political conditions in Taiwan and Korea have greatly improved, leading Taiwanese and Korean graduates of U.S. universities to return to their homelands in increasing numbers.

We detect at least two patterns of adaptation among Asian immigrant professionals in the Los Angeles region. In one pattern, immigrants begin in lower-level slots somehow connected to their original specialization and gradually move up the occupational ladder and back into the profession for which they trained earlier. This tortured road to success reflects immigrant selectivity, since immigrant professionals come from the upper, not the lower, ranks of their peers back home. They immigrate to the United States not to escape unemployment and poverty but to improve their careers and well-being. In the first few years after their arrival, many experience downward occupational mobility, because they lack U.S. labor market experience and English-language competence. Scientists or researchers are relegated to jobs as lab technicians or assistants, university faculty become high school or elementary school teachers, and doctors work as nurses or assistants. Their salaries are not commensurate with their human capital. After a sufficient period of time, some

Asian professionals gain recognition and get established, while others achieve higher status through additional schooling and extraordinarily hard work.

A second pattern of integration involves a temporary or permanent shift out of the professions. Some professionals move to a new occupation because it is more profitable or enjoyable, but others do so because they cannot find jobs in their field, in some cases finding themselves forced to do menial work. For example, a volleyball coach at the provincial level in China became a cleanup man at the UCLA hospital, a senior doctor was a babysitter, an engineer watched the gate at a swap meet, and a university teacher became a waiter. In time, such downwardly mobile professionals move up, but many never return to their original occupations or positions.

Whether they move right into professions on arrival in the United States or do so after a detour into more menial jobs, Asian professionals follow the typical immigrant path of moving into ethnic concentrations or clusters. Asian niches abound throughout the region's various professional and semiprofessional occupations, with Asians often constituting a very significant proportion of the entire workforce. In their range and type, the Asian professional clusters are no different in terms of immigrant density from the traditional immigrant pursuits, but they are distinctive in the types of work and remuneration they involve. Thus, Asians make up more than one-third of the region's pharmacists and chemists, more than one-quarter of the dentists, and more than one-fifth of the physicians, accountants, computer programmers, electrical engineers, and civil engineers, to cite a few notable examples. Of course, not every Asian group moves into professional niches such as these. Filipinos are much more likely to concentrate in the health care sector and its semiprofessions; 16 percent of the region's nurses are of Filipino origin, as are 18 percent of its lab technicians. Those groups with origins in refugee flows are less likely to move into high-level clusters. Still, Vietnamese immigrants are considerably overrepresented among the ranks of computer programmers and electrical engineers, perhaps a sign of better things to come.

Movement into the professions brings its rewards. In 1989, the average Asian immigrant physician made over $100,000, the average dentist $58,000, and the average electrical engineer $43,000. Some occupations, like dentistry or medicine, allow for self-employment, but most professionals find themselves working as cogs in vast bureaucratic organizations, where they soon encounter the glass ceiling that prevents them from moving to the top rung of the job ladder, especially into management positions. As time passes, these immigrant professionals discover that America seemed to want them for their skills and work ethic as employees but not for their assertiveness and ambition as bosses. The land of opportunity is far more limited than they had expected, and, contrary to what they have been taught, meritocracy is not color blind. Many seek to compensate for their race by outperforming their peers. Working longer hours and carrying out jobs beyond the call of duty, they ironically provide support for the "model minority" stereotype and harden the glass ceiling. In so doing, they alienate their native-born sisters and brothers and drive a wedge between Asians and other minorities.

The problem of the glass ceiling is commonly perceived by Asian professionals.

Asian Americans for Community Involvement (AACI) surveyed more than 300 white-collar Asian American professionals in Silicon Valley and found that 80 percent believed Asian Americans to be underrepresented in upper management and that concerns about the glass ceiling increased with age and experience. The respondents felt that Equal Employment Opportunity (EEO) programs had very little effect at this level; among those whose employers had EEO programs in place, about two-thirds stated that Asian Americans were underrepresented in middle and upper management. Many respondents felt that their employers perceived them as "modern-day, high-tech coolies"—hardworking, diligent employees but not potential managers. The AACI report concluded, "Regrettably, Asian Americans are still a long way off from adequate management representation in corporate boardrooms and executive suites, in educational institutions, and in government agencies" (Asian Pacific American Coalition U.S.A. 1993). The analysis of census data discussed in the previous section provides considerable support for this point of view. Asian Americans still have a long way to go before they reach full socioeconomic, legal, and political equality in this country.

Entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurship, usually measured by self-employment, has been described as a characteristic avenue of adaptation and social mobility of Asian Americans. In the Los Angeles region, Asian immigrants are much more likely to be entrepreneurs than are their native-born counterparts; for most Asian immigrant groups, the trend in self-employment lies on an upward curve. Not all Asian groups are equally interested in running their own businesses, however. Small business tends not to engage Filipinos, in particular. By contrast, the Koreans' propensity for entrepreneurship is now well known (Light and Bonacich 1988; Min 1996). Almost a quarter of Korean immigrants were working for themselves in 1980, and more than a third in 1990, testifying to the ability of Koreans to expand their economic base through self-employment.

The firms run by Korean immigrant entrepreneurs in Los Angeles tend to be small, to use family members or a fewer employees, and to be concentrated in retail trade, manufacturing, and services (Light and Bonacich 1988; Min 1996). Like professionals, the self-employed establish niches. The liquor trade is prototypical, a site of extraordinary Korean overrepresentation (by a factor of twenty-three) and for that reason a particularly poignant point in the Koreans' troubled relationship with the blacks. All the leading Korean industrial niches provide extraordinary opportunities for self-employment, from the low point in apparel, where 22 percent of Koreans work for themselves, to the high point in laundering, where 74 percent of Koreans work on their own account. As these business lines suggest, self-employment is not easy work, and Korean immigrant business owners work long hours indeed. But Koreans earn a significant self-employment bonus; those who work for themselves do much better than their compatriots employed in wage and salary jobs, even after controlling for differences in human capital and hours spent on the job.

The Chinese, especially immigrants, also had relatively higher rates of self-

employment than other groups in all three census years. Chinese-owned businesses are concentrated in Chinatown, Monterey Park, and the San Gabriel Valley, though Chinese restaurants are found throughout Los Angeles. Chinese firms vary in size, from husband-wife stores to businesses employing more than 100 workers. In addition to serving their local communities, Chinese immigrant entrepreneurs also play an active role in linking the United States, their home countries, and other Pacific Rim countries through import-export trade, remittances, and foreign investment. Although the Chinese persist in some of the traditional ethnic trades such as restaurants, there are new business specializations—for example, engineering, computers, and data processing—that stand out from the type of businesses that Koreans pursue. Overall, self-employment is a lucrative pursuit, giving Chinese entrepreneurs a substantial earnings advantage over their counterparts still working for others.

Capitalists

Capitalists are entrepreneurs with sizable capital. We single them out for analysis because of their growing significance. In the past, Asians seldom immigrated to the United States as investors or capitalists, but, as a result of the rapid economic growth in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong in the past three decades and more recently in mainland China, along with the passage of the 1990 Immigration Act, a new category of Asian immigrants—capitalists or investors—has emerged. Among this group are Japanese, Koreans, and Taiwanese who want to make a fortune in the United States and Hong Kong Chinese who are fearful of the colony's return to Chinese rule in 1997.

The Immigration Act of 1990 authorized the granting of permanent residency to foreign nationals who make a minimum $1 million investment in a business employing at least ten workers in the United States. In rural or high-unemployment areas, the investment can be as little as $500,000. The act took effect on October 1, 1991. As of September 30, 1992, seventy-three millionaire immigrants had been admitted, among whom fifty-eight, or 80 percent, were Asians, with thirty from Taiwan (the leading country), six from Pakistan, five from India, five from Macao, three from Hong Kong, one from South Korea, and the rest from other Asian countries. While the number of Asian millionaire immigrants is expected to grow in the foreseeable future, many other wealthy Asians, not quite in the millionaire category, have invested and settled in the Los Angeles region. For instance, Monterey Park, the first suburban Chinatown in the United States, has attracted a significant number of wealthy Chinese immigrants. According to Li-Pei Wu, chairman of General Bank, it is not unusual for families—mainly those from Taiwan—to bring $200,000 or more to southern California for investment. Indeed, the 1990 census showed that the Chinese have already established a concentration in security investments—perhaps the first instance of an immigrant niche in finance capitalism.

The adaptation pattern of this category of Asian immigrants is little known, although we may expect it to differ greatly from those of other immigrants. These immigrants are rich, resourceful, and self employed, but they may still lack knowledge of U.S. laws, market experience, and English ability and therefore may run the

risk of losing money, going bankrupt, or becoming involved in legal troubles. An incident reported by the Los *Angeles Times* serves as an example.[4]

Taung Ming-Lin abandoned a lucrative career in Taiwan as an importer of U.S.-made products and immigrated with his family to this country in 1990. In addition to investing over $1 million in the United States, he paid $310,000 for 723 acres of land outside Bakersfield, California, on which to grow bamboo. Unfortunately, Taung did not know that the land held little agricultural promise, requiring years of irrigation to turn scrubland to farmland; nor did he realize that he had bought property in an area set aside for kangaroo rats and two other animals protected under the Endangered Species Act. Recently, his bookbinding shop in South El Monte was raided by the INS for allegedly employing undocumented workers from Mexico.

Workers

Workers are defined as persons employed in manual and low-paying jobs, that is, those positions that we earlier classified as low-skill occupations (LSOs). In absolute numbers, the Asian working class is not inconsiderable, but, contrary to common perception, currently most Asian Americans in the Los Angeles region are not proletarians. In 1990, for example, 41 percent of employed Asians worked in managerial, professional, and technical jobs, and another 39 percent worked in clerical, sales, and craft positions; only 20 percent were engaged in lower-level jobs. Since immigrants predominate among Asians, the class structure of the immigrant population does not differ much from that of the general Asian population. As Table 20.3 shows, in 1990 only about 22 percent of Asian immigrants belonged to the worker category, and the percentage of native-born Asian workers was even smaller (14 percent).

Asian workers adapt to the receptive environment via at least two avenues. The majority of Asian workers strive for survival in the secondary labor market, which is characterized by low pay, poor working conditions, high turnover rate, and lack of opportunities for promotion. Most of them do operative and service jobs; for instance, new Asian immigrants, many of them women, have been an important source of the cheap labor that has supported and revived the Los Angeles garment industry. Significant proportions of Chinese and Korean workers, however, work in ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown and Koreatown, where some expect a better chance of upward mobility than in the secondary labor market, although others may suffer exploitation by their coethnic employers.

Refugees

Among Asian immigrants, the Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians are the least successful, because of their refugee experiences. The Vietnamese refugees began pouring into the Los Angeles area in 1975, when U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War ended abruptly. Since then, more than 600,000 have settled in the United States, with the heaviest concentration in the Los Angeles region, especially Orange County.

The 1978 Indochinese Refugee Act permitted them to become permanent residents. There have been two major waves of Vietnamese immigration to Los Angeles. The first wave, from 1975 to 1980, was made up of South Vietnam's elites, who were evacuated with the U.S. troops and citizens immediately following the collapse of Saigon. Over 166,000 Vietnamese entered the United States as refugees in this period. A later wave consisted of the "boat people" and others who escaped from concentration camps or economic hardship in search of survival and advancement.

The varying backgrounds of the Vietnamese have determined the heterogeneity of the Vietnamese community and the diverse paths of Vietnamese adaptation in the Los Angeles region. In 1990, for instance, about 49 percent of the Vietnamese in the region had some college or higher education, while about 36 percent had not finished high school, including 7 percent with no formal schooling. Significant proportions were found both in well-paid professional occupations (25 percent) and managerial careers (7 percent) and in low-paid menial or service work (31 percent). Entrepreneurship is also an option for some Vietnamese. In 1990, 11 percent of the Vietnamese were self-employed. The chief Vietnamese occupational niches—as assemblers, hairdressers, electrical technicians, and machinists—reflect the group's overall economic status: not at the very bottom, perhaps, but still several removes from the middle class.

High rates of unemployment are a final distinguishing factor. In 1990, the unemployment rate of Vietnamese was about 7 percent, much higher than the rates for Japanese (1.7 percent), Koreans (2.4 percent), Chinese (3.3 percent), and Filipinos (3.6 percent), and even slightly higher than the rates for Hispanics (5.8 percent) and blacks (5.9 percent). Such high levels of joblessness appear to be linked to the welfare provision of the 1980 Refugee Act, which made it possible for certain unemployed Vietnamese refugees to survive for relatively long periods of time without work. Vietnamese refugees who have little schooling and work skills are most likely to stay unemployed. In short, the Vietnamese are a bifurcated community, and their adaptation patterns are even more diverse than those of other immigrant groups.

Conclusion

Asian Americans in Los Angeles are an increasingly diverse population, differing in ethnic composition, nativity, socioeconomic status, and patterns of adaptation and incorporation. Whether one focuses on demography, culture, or class, treating Asian Americans as a group is likely to conceal more than it reveals.

The term "Asian American" was coined by second- and third-generation Americans of Asian descent during the civil rights era for political reasons and was accepted by the larger population for convenience. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, Americans—Asians and others—deemphasized the separate identities of Asian groups and together, albeit with different motives, helped solidify an Asian American identity. Since the 1970s, however, the massive new immigration of Asians from diverse backgrounds has challenged the validity of this inclusive concept, and separate ethnic identities have gradually assumed more importance. Recognizing the growing

diversity of the population, Asian Americans simultaneously began a process of "deconstruction" and "reconstruction." On the one hand, differences between Asian groups were emphasized and their needs distinguished. The individual group identities under construction today are, however, quite different from those in the past. They are more transnational than national. The Chinese, the Vietnamese, and many other Asian groups tend to see themselves not just as Chinese or Vietnamese Americans but as Chinese or Vietnamese transnationals who are not rooted in any specific country. Many immigrant families assume multiple national identities to take full advantage of the global economy and culture. On the other hand, a new Asian American identity dubbed "pan-Asian ethnicity" came into being and recently has gained more momentum. This new inclusive national identity, like its old counterpart, is more politically than culturally significant.

Using census data for the two decades, we have tried to unravel the demographic and socioeconomic basis for this identity transformation as it unfolded in Los Angeles. In addition to examining the internal dynamics of the Asian American population, we challenged the commonly held model minority concept of the group and analyzed some key relations between Asian Americans and other populations in the area. In a restricted sense, the model minority image is not farfetched for Asian Americans, if we must lump them together; taken together, they fare much better than other minorities, such as blacks and Hispanics, in terms of the major socioeconomic indicators of education, occupation, and income. The model minority image has been exaggerated and inflated, however; contrary to media reports that Asian Americans have even outperformed whites, we found that in personal income, Asians still lag behind, generally receiving lower earnings returns on their human capital than U.S.-born whites. More important, there are considerable differences across Asian American groups in almost every aspect of life. As groups, Japanese and Chinese fare relatively well, but Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians arc struggling for survival. Although the majority of Asians in the Los Angeles region are not poverty stricken, neither have they fully succeeded. Furthermore, even within each Asian group individual diversity is substantial. Given these great diversities, it is dangerous to lump Asians together for statistical convenience and to treat them as a monolithic whole in terms of socioeconomic policies. Disregarding the differences among Asian communities will lead to serious neglect of the needs of various segments of the Asian American population.

Massive immigration after 1965 has been the leading force of Asian diversification in the Los Angeles region. The largely different origins and experiences of Asian immigrants have led to diverse paths and outcomes of adaptation and incorporation. For instance, immigrant professionals from India, the Philippines, China, and Taiwan, like their counterparts from other countries, achieve some measure of success after first experiencing downward mobility and then slowly climbing up the occupational ladder; the difference seems to be how far these Asian professionals can go before they reach the glass ceiling. Immigrant entrepreneurs, exemplified by the Koreans and Chinese, manage to survive and, with time, prosper by running usually small, family-oriented businesses that serve either outsiders or their co-ethnics while bridging the United States and their native countries in trade. Increasingly, Asian

immigrant capitalists come to settle in America, bringing significant investments. There is also the bifurcated refugee population from Vietnam, whose paths of adaptation are just as diverse as those of other immigrants.

Asian American groups, with their small numbers and their continuing disadvantageous position in American society, recognize the need for pan-Asian unity. Yet historical enmity, diverse group status and interests, and a lack of intergroup interaction make unity difficult. Should Asian immigration decline, the barriers to intra-Asian solidarity will gradually diminish. Whether immigrant numbers expand, decline, or remain stable, the ranks of the second generation will inevitably expand, and solidarity is likely to grow when this new generation of U.S.-born Asian Americans comes into its own. In the end, however, the emergence of a new pan-Asian ethnicity remains uncertain; its prospects hinge on the larger political and economic environment and, perhaps more important, on Asian Americans themselves and their conscious efforts at reconstruction.

NOTES

This chapter is an abridged version of "Asians: The 'Model Minority' Deconstructed," chapter 11 in Roger Waldinger and Mehdi Bozorgmehr (eds.), *Ethnic Los Angeles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1996).

1. Under IRCA, illegal immigrants who applied for amnesty were eligible for permanent resident status two years after the approval of their amnesty application. Since the INS fiscal year 1989, more than 3 million illegal immigrants (mainly from Mexico and other Latin American countries) have been granted permanent residency, leading to the relative decline of Asians' share of total immigration after 1989. However, the absolute number of Asian immigrants steadily increased from 236,097 in 1980 to 338,581 in 1990.

2. William Petersen, "Success Story, Japanese-American Style," *New York Times Magazine*, January 9, 1966, pp. 20–21, 33, 36, 38, 40–41, 43; William Petersen, "Success Story of One Minority in the U.S.," *U.S. News and World Report*, December 26, 1966, pp. 73–78.

3. See, for example, "Asian Americans: A Model Minority," *Newsweek*, December 6, 1982, pp. 39, 41–42, 51; David Bell, "The Triumph of Asian Americans," *New Republic*, July 1985, pp. 24–31.

4. Mark Arax, "INS Raids Firm of Farmer in Kangaroo Rat Case," *Los Angeles Times*, November 3, 1994.

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