

Introduction

Arar Han and John Y. Hsu

No one will know who we are until we know who we are!
—Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*

The Origin of *Asian American X*

Before all of this—the thousands of emails, countless conversations, and the book contract that have led us here to the opening pages of *Asian American X*—we were simply old high school friends attending college in Boston, just trying to better understand ourselves. You might have called us constructively confused—groping in a cave of questions about identity and race—yet gravitating toward the light, whether through casual conversations or the books we shared.

Then, in March 2001, the *Harvard Crimson* ran Justin Fong’s “The Invasian.”¹

The article was a satire accusing Asian American students at Harvard of living up to, and even reinforcing, Asian American stereotypes. According to its author, who is himself Asian American, our generation of college-aged Asian Americans represented a “segregated community of stereotypes: self-lacking males that don’t have the courage to talk to anyone unless they appear just as flaccid as that image in the mirror, and a smattering of females that exist to satisfy someone’s fetish.”

A frenzied intercollegiate discussion immediately erupted, and we both watched in fascination. Given the provocative language of the article, most responders to “The Invasian” were furious and defensive, vigorously rebutting Fong’s blanket negative portrayal of Asian American college students. More specifically, they rejected his assertion that Asian American identity is

defined by sexual stereotypes and self-segregation (see Lee, *Unraveling the "Model Minority" Stereotype*). One woman opposed Fong on the grounds that such a portrayal of Asian American collective identity would fan the proliferation of hate crimes against Asian Americans.² Another reader suggested that Fong ought to soften his "aggressive tone," since phenomena like self-segregation could equally apply to other groups, including Caucasians.³ Still others understood the printing of "The Invasian" as the *Crimson's* lack of cultural sensitivity toward Asian Americans, and some fifty Harvard students staged a protest against the editorial board for printing "words which act only to undermine the efforts of other Asians who wish to defeat stereotypes constructively."⁴ The *Crimson* published two apologies days later.

While we, too, found Fong's article to be excessively brash, we also identified with his emphasis on individual identity. We recognized that a grounding point of "The Invasian" was its assertion that, like all other individuals, each Asian American of our generation has the right and even the responsibility to work toward an authentic life—a life that is faithful to one's uniquely individual way of being.⁵ In an attempt to reinforce this point and steer public debate away from name-calling, Arar wrote a letter to the *Crimson* that appeared four days later:

Granted, Fong makes some egregious faux pas in his open letter, but these missteps do not justify many Asian American students' simplistic accusations that Fong has set Harvard Asian American students back ten years. Such attacks stem from a complete failure to appreciate his point that we must strive to live by the truth of our substance rather than blundering down the path of superficiality and falsehood by ignoring basic human responsibility to be true to oneself.⁶

Through the smoke of the firestorm ignited by "The Invasian," we came to recognize a central question of this challenging debate about Asian American identity: As individuals and as a collective body, who are we, and what are our definitive individual and collective features?

Understanding through Self-Evaluation

In examining ourselves, we started to explore why we identified so strongly with the individual conception of the self. What caused us to part company

with many of our Asian American peers and conceptualize Fong as a liberator of sorts—taunting his fellow students out of a trap of stereotypical Asian-ness and daring them to step out of their racial confines to construct an original identity? Why did we believe that we had to transcend our collective identities—such as race, gender, religion, sexuality, and class—in order to realize an authentic personal identity?⁷

To answer these questions, we began to reflect on our education and upbringing. One of the very first things we realized was that neither of us had experienced much racial persecution growing up in Cupertino, California, one of the many suburban Asian American enclaves found throughout the United States today. The racial breakdown of our high school of just under two thousand students—approximately half Asian and half white, with very few Latino or black students—placed us within a critical mass of Asian students, sheltering us from the blatant racism often encountered by nonwhite students at predominantly white high schools.

As the children of white-collar professionals in Silicon Valley, we grew up with the privileges of an upper-middle-class American lifestyle. Our community placed a premium on formal education, and academic excellence was the crowning virtue; Bs were “bad,” and we aimed for SAT scores above the 1500 mark, hoping to maximize our chances of getting admitted into elite colleges. Extracurricular activities included public service clubs and volunteer jobs, speech and debate camps, as well as music and sports lessons. As high school students, we were presented with many opportunities to realize our individual goals, and we were fortunate to have the support and tools with which to pursue them.

At the same time, we realized that our love of individualism was a value that was itself profoundly reinforced by our collective identities—our specific class and racial affiliations. It became clear to us that growing up in an affluent community and attending a high school in which our racial minority was a near majority not only sheltered us from economic struggle and racial strife but also required us to be individuals—to set ourselves apart from those around us. In our community, our class and race served as collective identities that kept us innocent about the experiences of the vast majority of Asian Americans, today and throughout our collective history. These particular collective identities also encouraged individualism to take root, cultivating our abilities to live as we desired and saw fit.

So we emerged from our shared reflections with not only a clearer sense of

the collective identities that had advanced our individualistic tendencies but also an appreciation for how our individualism itself was deeply rooted in collective aspects of our identities. We had set out to better understand and strengthen our individual-leaning concept of identity, but ironically, our greatest insight was learning that we were who we were because of the dynamically intertwined influence of both individual *and* collective identities.

When we applied this newfound understanding to our interpretation of “The Invasian,” our original question about individual and collective features of identity became firmly embedded in the context of the self: How do we—that is, Asian Americans of our generation—understand our individual and collective identities? For each of us, in what ways and situations do our individual and collective identities manifest in everyday life?

Long accustomed to borrowing answers to life’s difficult questions from others, we again headed toward the library in search of answers to these new questions. Specifically, we had in mind definitive, intelligent, autoethnographic writings in the vein of Eric Liu’s *The Accidental Asian*, which we had found to be especially insightful in its expression of one Asian American and his place in American society.⁸ We hoped to find coherent articulations of identity for the entire terrain of college-aged Asian Americans—a set of books and essays like Liu’s that we could piece together into a unified landscape. Hunting through libraries, questioning professors of Asian American studies, and scouring the Internet turned up many academic works about our generation of Asian Americans; however, we found neither an established *self*-analysis of our generation’s Asian American identities nor a substantial set of autoethnographic books or essays from which we could extrapolate a broad understanding of our race and generation.

A New Generation of Asian Americans

Min Zhou and James Gatewood’s “Mapping the Terrain: Asian American Diversity and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century” gave us some demographic clues as to why we were unable to find the broad self-portrayal of Asian American college students that we sought.⁹ Due in large part to the national origins quota system, Asian immigration had been restricted to a weak trickle prior to 1968, when the Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 was enacted.¹⁰ The rising tide of Asian immigrants riding the post-Hart-

Cellar wave of migration meant that our predecessors over the last few decades were largely first-generational and thus likely to identify themselves as Asian, rather than American. As offspring of those who rode the post-Hart-Cellar wave of immigration all the way through the 1990s, our generation of collegiate Asian Americans is quantitatively larger than, and qualitatively distinct from, those of the previous three decades; sheer numbers aside, we are set apart from these mostly first-generation immigrants, for most of us are 1.5- or second-generation and thus more likely to identify ourselves as Asian *Americans*.¹¹ Consequently, the identity issues we face and concerns we have as ethnic Asians who have been educated and socialized in the United States are different from those of our first-generational predecessors.

Striking dissimilarities in sociopolitical environment also distinguish our generation from our counterparts over the past century. Asian Americans who lived during the first half of the twentieth century were truly second-class citizens who suffered from unconcealed racism exemplified by Yellow Peril, the immigration acts of 1924, and World War II internment camps. Their voices, unearthed by a growing tide of cultural historians, have since shaped our collective Asian American historical consciousness. Asian Americans who came of age in the 1960s and early 1970s as the children of World War II refugees, Paper Sons, and others—and were, like us, mostly 1.5- and second-generation Asian American—entered a society characterized by a spirit of revolutionary change fueled by the civil rights movement, Vietnam War draft protests, free love, and galvanizing events such as the San Francisco International Hotel struggle for affordable housing and the San Francisco State University fight for ethnic studies.¹² Their voices, influenced by their own collective experiences, alerted others to consider how racism is subtly embedded in the construction of society itself.

While we share demographic similarities with Asian Americans who came of age in the 1960s and early 1970s, our generation is growing up in a vastly different America. Our society is perhaps more racialistic than the America of the 1960s and 1970s but it is also characterized by its almost manic celebration of race and culture.¹³ Like those before us, our voices will leave a distinctive legacy by creating a new chapter of history and redefining what it means to be both Asian American and American. To echo the words of Abraham Lincoln, “As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”

Understanding “Asian American”

Before continuing, it is important to note that the term “Asian American” indiscriminately lumps together broadly distinct ethnicities and cultures on the basis of a vague geographical reference. Just as there is no singular Asian culture, value system, religion, or history, the internal diversity of Asian American culture is as varied as the many cultures of Asia and the stunning diversity of America. Moreover, the distinction “Asian American” often serves as a conveniently powerful mechanism to propagate stereotypes about these different people and cultures. As many of our friends have pointed out, our continued use of the category “Asian American” appears to be paradoxical—an implicit endorsement of a category we recognize as potentially harmful.

The simplest justification for our continued use of the term “Asian American” is that the category is an established part of our social vocabulary that powerfully affects everyday lives. The argument put forth by Asian American activists in the 1960s remains appropriate today: “A distinct Asian American identity [has] evolved over the years, based on the experiences of Asians in America.”¹⁴ This statement can be unpacked into three broad arguments:

- Virtually all Americans of Asian descent label themselves or are labeled by others as Asian Americans, primarily because they possess physical markers of Asian ancestries but also because of their ties to Asian culture.
- Asian Americans share a complex collective racial history riddled with targeted acts of discrimination, such as “Yellow Peril” at the turn of the twentieth century, laws restricting immigration that lasted until 1965, discriminatory educational laws, and even antimiscegenation laws.¹⁵
- Asian Americans are grouped together by current sociopolitical realities. In the United States, we are coclassified as a distinct people for numerous purposes, including the census, anthropological study, and admission into higher education and employment.

Our appearances, histories, and sociopolitical realities form both the reason for the legitimacy of the label “Asian American” and the basis for our collective Asian American identity. Although they represent a multitude of cul-

tures, languages, and ethnicities, Americans of Asian descent—for reasons out of their immediate control—also belong to the group titled “Asian American” and bear its baggage.

The Urgency for Asian American Identity Discourse

After “The Invasian,” we learned through self-reflection that individual identity is embedded within many collective identities. Now, we return again to the individual–collective question to reinforce the idea that we cannot fully claim to be individuals unless we know the ways in which we are not. In order to more fully exercise the freedom to be individuals, we must learn what our collective identities are and how we are tied to them; in doing so, we may also become a self-determining collective body of individuals. Most important, we must each be willing to be transformed through reflection, dialogue, and action within this collective body. As William Wei elegantly writes, it is in this “crucible of ‘Asian America’ that [our] individual and group identities are shaped and have integrity.”¹⁶

Now is an appropriate time for Asian Americans in our generation to begin a dialogue on our collective identity, for we find ourselves at a point at which our body is rapidly evolving. Census 2000 results show that Asian Americans are among the fastest-growing groups in the nation, surging from 6.9 to 11.9 million—a 72 percent increase—in the past decade, growing at more than three times the rate of the entire U.S. population.¹⁷ We are also disproportionately young and beginning to come of age in large numbers; the 1990 census revealed that over half of U.S.-born Asian Americans were under the age of fifteen.¹⁸ Asian American out-marriage is rising as well, further complicating the composition of the future Asian America and distancing the Asian America of today from the Asian America of the past. Approximately one-third of second-generation Asian Americans and over one-half of third-generation Asian Americans marry non-Asians, and if current projections hold, one in three Asian Americans will be multiracial by the year 2070.¹⁹ Furthermore, Asian Americans are becoming increasingly visible—and powerful—in the media, whether as influential political figures, celebrities, or mainstream sports players.²⁰ All of these changes point to one end, which is also our beginning: We have arrived at a moment in which the events and experiences of the past have collided with the sociopolitical reality of the present. The future of what it means to be Asian American, and even

American, lies in the successful reconciliation of past and present. Therein lies a crucial dialogue we have coined the “Asian American X.”

The Making of *Asian American X*

Asian American X intends to serve as a nexus for a dialogue of our past, present, and future as a collective body of Asian Americans. The thirty-five voices we selected to begin the dialogue were chosen from among 170 proposed essays received in response to an emailed call for papers circulated to undergraduate Asian American organizations at over sixty universities between April 2001 and July 2002. These essays are the result of four rounds of cuts: The first two rounds emphasized clarity and complexity of articulation, and the latter two were conducted with an eye for diverse representation of ethnicity, socioeconomic status, gender, generation, regional affiliation, and especially experiences and themes.

The essays in *Asian American X* are primarily written by first- to third-generation Americans who are in college and hail from middle-class backgrounds. It is likely that these writers are a self-selecting sample of our generation of Asian Americans, since all are attending, have attended, or plan to attend college. Indeed, there are significant groups of Asian Americans—for instance, those who have not the resources or opportunity to continue their education after high school—whose voices are not represented here directly and thus are in danger of becoming further marginalized. In the meantime, as we collectively work to increase their opportunities, those groups of Asian Americans who do not speak directly to us will find voice through the words of our authors, many of whom take careful note of the internal diversity of Asian America and of the need for a truly inclusive dialogue on Asian American identity.

The means by which our authors articulate their identities vary as much as their topics. Some choose to speak to their readers through lists and poetry, others through song and prose. Shiuan Butler’s “Reminisings” chooses the former, creating a top-ten list of life-changing moments interspersed with poems, illuminating a range of experiences from losing her virginity (“My first time having sex killed like hell”) to reuniting with her brother after fifteen years. Frederick Macapinlac’s “Doppelgänger” adopts an existential style to examine the impact of race, class, and popular culture on cultural identity in high school, explaining, in Macapinlac’s characteristically conver-

sational diction, that “if you don’t want to identify yourself with your culture, there is no way to change it.” Other authors choose to ground their essays in one decisive moment. Sunita Puri’s “1984” centers around her childhood memory of the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, while Jeremiah Torres’s “Label Us Angry” takes off from an instance of racism—“to them, we looked like lowlifes, chinks, gangsters, and punks”—and May Chang’s “Being Oil” delves into the clash between her Hmong heritage and American schooling through her experience of running away from home. A few authors choose to explore the intersection of racial identity with another collective identity: Priscilla Chan comments on how “being Asian in Chinatown meant climbing over more hurdles to even get to the same starting point” in “Drawing the Boundaries”; Francine Di, who writes about breaking stereotypes as an Asian American jazz musician, wishes that “people, in any country, of any race, [would] see [her] as a singer—not an Asian, not an American—just a singer,” in “The Jazzian Singer”; Uyen-Khanh Quang-Dang writes that “simply being a little bigger than all my best friends was . . . devastating to me” as she probes the connection between Asian American body-image expectations and eating disorders in “Thin Enough to Be Asian”; and Michael Kim notes that given the opportunity, he “would wish upon everyone in the world a coming-out experience” as he explores the intricacies of his gay, Christian, and Asian American identities in “Out and About: Coming of Age in a Straight White World.”

These essays are not intended to be a comprehensive standard of “the” Asian American experience. Neither is this book presented as a review of all Asian American experiences, for no single book could possibly encompass the whole of Asian America. We are not interested in trying to achieve a superficial representation of Asian America; rather, *Asian American X* provides an array of well-articulated identity essays whose collective intent is to contribute to the ongoing evolution of American culture by promoting discussion about who Asian Americans of our generation are and how we ought to understand ourselves within our current American context.

We have chosen not to divide this collection into sections that would place our authors into groups like country of origin, age, gender, socioeconomic status, or generation. An organizational scheme emphasizing such categories would undermine our attempt to explore the Asian American collective identity, since they would present the temptation for readers to focus their attention solely on the slivers that appeared to be personally relevant. In addition,

while reclaiming one's ethnic history can be empowering, *Asian American X* does not intend to spotlight or emphasize differences among Asian Americans, for that may serve to fragment the overall dialogue. Instead, it focuses on examining both our differences and our similarities to achieve an inclusive understanding of our Asian American identity. We also decided against creating other categories, such as sectioning the book into positive or negative takes on being Asian American, or according to stages of identity development. Groupings like the first quickly become difficult or fuzzy, and partitions like the second would place us in the presumptuous and uncomfortable position of rank-ordering the essays and endorsing the false notion that there is only one hierarchical path of self-knowing. Such groupings would also introduce a top-down conceptualization of identity that could preclude the possibility of a necessarily bottom-up dialogue.

Ultimately, we decided to order the essays to form a conversation among themselves. Each essay serves as a response to the experiences, themes, and ideas discussed in the previous pieces and also presents new topics that are considered in following essays. We have refrained from infusing our own interpretations and meanings into the essays by way of editorial comments. The most immediate reason for this is that we believe that these are excellent essays that speak strongly for themselves. Inspired by Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s careful rendering of *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, we have kept our editorial hand to a minimum, requesting only broad structural revisions from our contributors or taking the liberty of minor cosmetic editing.²¹ We have labored to present the reader with a set of powerfully written, compelling, original expressions of identity in their entirety. To that end, we have been scrupulous to avoid edits that could potentially narrow the scope of these essays. Our goal is to deliver to the reader a set of excellent data in the form of identity essays that are free of academic jargon and abstract theory and are enlightening and pleasurable to read. At the same time, each story, or "research text," is narrated from a critically introspective perspective, making for a collection that could easily be studied in the classroom.²²

All works of self-examination hint at the central issue of being that historian Stephen Schloesser calls the "inexorable dialectic" of humanity: to know oneself in a way that "builds on the past but does not become a captive of it."²³ It is this dialectic that so many writers before us have joined. It is this dialectic whose inexorability led us to recognize the need for a critical dialogue on Asian American identity, to embark on the self-reflective journey

that became this book, and finally to mark this intersection of voices with *Asian American X*.

We now offer to you the result of our work to strengthen our individual and collective identities within the constantly evolving, fluid nature of American identity. It is by reexamining the roots of our identities and the foundations of our country that we may emerge as unified individuals, mutually strengthened by compassion and sincere respect toward all those around us. Particularly during these precarious times of amplified hope and fear, we hope that others will join us in expanding and developing this dialogue to create a new American identity: “something more complex than either a melting pot or a confederation of separate but equal groups.”²⁴

Let’s begin here—the Asian American “X.”

Notes

1. Justin Fong, “The Invasian,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 15, 2001, available at <http://www.thecrimson.com/fmarchives/fm_03_15_2001/article6U.html>.

2. “Hate crimes . . . are fueled by discrimination and stereotypes. From where do people get hate, discrimination and stereotypes? From articles like Fong’s, articles that perpetuate that cycle of hate and misunderstanding.” Christine Ho, “Stereotypes Spur Hate,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 19, 2001, available at <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=103650>>.

3. “True, Asians do tend to stick together and share similar tastes in music, clothes, etc. But, what group doesn’t? Even so, who cares? Besides, when did this ‘sticking to your own’ concept become an exclusively Asian phenomenon?” J. Patrick Gatlula, “Style of ‘The Invasian’ Needlessly Offensive,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 19, 2001, available at <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=103650>>.

4. Elliott Balch, “Students March on *Crimson* to Protest Article,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 20, 2001, available at <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=103665>>; Robin Tang, “Invasian Insensitive,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 19, 2001, available at <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=103650>>.

5. K. Anthony Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival,” in *Multiculturalism*, ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 152.

6. Arar Han, “Fong Is Right,” *Harvard Crimson*, March 19, 2001, available at <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article.aspx?ref=103650>>.

7. For a discussion on race, identity, and the authentic life, refer to Appiah, “Identity, Authenticity, Survival,” 149–63.

8. “Autoethnography” is defined as “an autobiographical genre of writing and

research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural,” in Carolyn Ellis and Arthur P. Bochner, “Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. Denzin and Y. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 2000), 733–68. See Eric Liu, *The Accidental Asian* (New York: Random House, 1998).

9. Min Zhou and James Gatewood, “Mapping the Terrain: Asian American Diversity and the Challenges of the Twenty-First Century,” *Asian American Policy Review* 9 (2000): 5–29.

10. The Hart-Cellar Act of 1965 enabled rapid acceleration of immigration from Asia by abolishing the national origins quota system, and between 1971 and 1996, a total of 5.8 million Asians were admitted as legal immigrants (not counting refugees). More than two-thirds were family-sponsored migrations and about one-fifth was employer-sponsored skilled labor. See Zhou and Gatewood, “Mapping the Terrain,” 7.

11. The term “1.5 generation” is defined as “immigrants and refugees born abroad but educated and socialized in the US”; see <http://www.imdiversity.com/article_detail.asp?Article_ID=807>.

12. For a description and history of Paper Son immigration, see <<http://angelisland.org/immigro2.html>>. Liz Del Sol, “Finding Our Common Interests: Personal Reflections about the Asian American Movement,” in *Asian Americans: The Movement and the Moment*, ed. S. Louie and G. Omatsu (Los Angeles: UCLA Asian American Studies Center Press, 2001), 139–45.

13. J. K. Bernhard, M. L. Lefebvre, K. M. Kilbride, G. Chud, and R. Lange, “Troubled Relationships in Early Childhood Education: Parent-Teacher Interactions in Ethnoculturally Diverse Child Care Settings,” *Early Education and Development* 19, no.1 (1998): 7–28.

14. William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 47.

15. For a description, see Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1998), 101–2, 330–31.

16. Wei, *The Asian American Movement*, 47.

17. See <<http://www.census.gov/Press-Release/www/2003/cb03-16.html>>.

18. Zhou and Gatewood, “Mapping the Terrain,” 12–13. The value goes to 75 percent if one looks solely at new immigrant groups and excludes Japanese Americans.

19. Gregory Rodriguez, “Mongrel America,” *Atlantic Monthly*, January/February 2003, 95–97.

20. Examples of political figures include Secretary of Labor Elaine Chao, New York City councilman John Liu, two-term governor of Washington Gary Locke, and Secretary of Transportation Norman Mineta. Celebrities include Dean Cain, Tia Carrere, Jackie Chan, Ann Curry, Ang Lee, Lisa Ling, Lucy Liu, The Rock, Ming-Na Wen, Russell Wong, John Woo, and Rick Yune. Mainstream sports players include Michael Chang, Amy Chow, Michelle Kwan, Jeanette Lee, Greg Louganis, Grace Park, Tiger Woods, and Kristi Yamaguchi.

21. Hannah Crafts, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, ed. Henry Louis Gates (New York: Warner Books, 2002).
22. L. Richardson, "Writing: A Method of Inquiry," in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage, 1994), 516–29.
23. Stephen Schloesser, personal conversation (March 2001); Kofi Annan, "Address to the Summit of the Organization of African Unity," 9 July 2001, available at <<http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/annan.html>> (12 July 2001).
24. Rodriguez, "Mongrel America," 97.

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