SECOND-GENERATION ASIAN AMERICAN PAN-ETHNIC IDENTITY: PLURALIZED MEANINGS OF A RACIAL LABEL

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ABSTRACT: *Recent research on the collective identity label described as Asian American, which was originally formulated as a political movement symbol, shows only some support among the various Asian ethnic groups that reside in the United States at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Based on a sample of second-generation Asian American student leaders in four public universities, this study provides empirical evidence that the definition of the term Asian American has multiplied as a result of major demographic and cultural factors that have affected the Asian population. These definitions reflect ethnic and religious diversification as well as the model minority stereotype and a cohort identity for the second-generation experience. At the same time, this diversification of definitions is also influenced by two concurrent and interlacing cultural discourses, one that emphasizes the racialized otherness of being "Asian American" and another that emphasizes the cultural diversity within this racial label. Implications for future research and theoretical development follow.*
Keywords: Asian Americans; racial and ethnic identity; children of immigrants; college students; multiculturalism

Increases in social diversity since the 1960s is well noted in popular and scholarly circles. Census reports and various national surveys of the adult population have documented most of these changes. Chief among the identifiers of diversity is race, typically using one of five familiar racial identifiers: white, African American, Latino or Hispanic American, Asian American, and Native American (Hollinger 2000).

In this article, I explore the meanings attributed to the pan-ethnic racial identifier *Asian American*[1] among a sample of college-age second-generation Asian Americans in four universities. Through interview responses with Asian Americans of various ethnicities, I provide empirical evidence that the term's original meaning as a racial political identity has diversified into a plurality of meanings.

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This plurality reflects the ways in which these second-generation young adults associate particular cultural and demographic trends (ethnic diversity, religious diversity, the model minority stereotype, and the second-generation experience) with the label. While these social changes have multiplied the meanings of the term *Asian American*, they are further constrained by two major cultural discourses that filter the ways in which these social changes affect the meanings associated with the term. One cultural discourse focuses on a racialization motif that emphasizes "Asian-ness" by deemphasizing interethnic cultural diversity. The second discourse focuses on a multicultural motif where *Asian American* recognizes and legitimates the variety of cultures encompassed by this term. These two discourses occur simultaneously and are interdependent on one another such that the various meanings often reveal the tensions between asserting the unique differences of Asian ethnicities while acknowledging a racialized similarity among them.

ASIAN AMERICAN IDENTITY IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND THE NEW AMERICAN DIVERSITY

The term *Asian American* was developed largely during the political awakenings of the Civil Rights era (Espiritu 1992; Kitano and Daniels 2000; Lee and Zhou 2004; Lien 2001; Lien, Conway, and Wong 2003; Lowe 1991; Wei 1993). It was a banner term under which mainly Chinese and Japanese American college-age individuals mobilized in order to raise awareness of racism and discrimination through protest of the Vietnam War, develop mutual support across ethnic groups, and provide services for the needy (Espiritu 1992; Lien 2001; Wei 1993). This groundswell developed further into campus movements for ethnic studies programs, which first appeared at San Francisco State College (Espiritu 1992; Lien 2001). Since that time, the pan-ethnic movement has diverged into several tracks, including the development of additional Asian American studies programs (Espiritu 1992; Kibria 1998; Wei 1993), provision of social services (Espiritu 1992; Wei 1993), protest against anti-Asian bias and violence, and various forms of pan-ethnic collective action (Espiritu 1992; Okamoto 2003; Wei 2004; Zia 2001).[2]

Recent and interlacing social trends, however, have altered the meaning of pan-ethnic identification for Asian Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century (Fong 2002). Textbooks regularly note that the post-1960s immigration waves have increased the diversity of the American ethnic and racial subpopulations. Pertinent to this discussion are several interrelated trends that have transformed the meaning of *Asian American* from its former understanding as a political-racial identifier: ethnic diversity, religious diversity, perceptions of the model minority image, and the second-generation experience. In the following section, I explore these factors and suggest how each of them might have an impact on Asian American pan-ethnic identity.

Ethnic Diversity

Perhaps the most important trend to affect the definition of *Asian American* is the increasing diversification of ethnic groups that are labeled as Asian. The Asian

American population has always had some ethnic diversity, but Chinese and Japanese Americans consistently remained the predominant groups prior to the 1960s. By the 2000 Census, however, these groups constituted less than 32 percent of the whole. At the time of this Census, a notable 88 percent of Asian America was constituted by six ethnic groups—Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese—with not one of these taking up more than a 25 percent share of the Asian American subpopulation (Barnes and Bennett 2002; Zhou and Xiong 2005). The changing composition of ethnic groups within the label *Asian American* is but one example of the flexible nature of race as a social category (Omi and Winant 1994). The term itself has remained constant, but the ethnic constituency it encompasses has changed (Portes and Rumbaut 1996).

In this new ethnic diversity, how do various Asian ethnic groups identify with the term *Asian American*? Do the original predominant groups continue to identify with the term and the movement now that it includes many more groups besides themselves? Do other groups, such as South Asian Indians and Filipinos, also identify with the term and the movement given its historical emphasis on the Chinese and Japanese American experience? Recent survey research suggests that the answer is fairly consistent across ethnic groups: Most Asian Americans are ambivalent about the term as a self-identifier. Lien et al. (2003) found that about 57 percent in their sample of Asian Americans have identified with the label. Filipino respondents were the most likely to identify with the term (66 percent), while Chinese and Korean respondents were the least likely (50 percent each). These figures suggest that there is some leaning toward identification with the label but a sizeable minority (if not half) within each ethnic group do not identify with the term *Asian American* at all.

Given the consistency of ambivalence in identifying with this term across ethnic groups, what might explain the consistency of ambivalence in identifying with the term across ethnic groups?[3] Kibria (1997) suggests that the racial label carries explicit and implicit meanings. In her interviews with second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans, she notes that their explanations regarding suitable marriage partners had a racial quality (a preference for someone "Asian"); however, upon closer examination, she notes that "Asian" referred specifically to East Asian ethnic groups, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean (Kibria 1997). Ethnic diversity in the Asian population might connote, for some, East Asian ethnicity. Or it might refer to the increasingly diverse collection of Asian ethnic groups. Conceivably members of different ethnic groups might or might not identify with the term depending on the meaning they attach to it.

Religious Diversity

A second, and interrelated trend, which has had a significant impact on the Asian American pan-ethnic label, is the "religious factor" (Lenski 1961). The relationship between ethnicity and religion has long been a part of sociological research and typically scholars conclude that they are strongly interrelated (e.g., Gans 1994). But as Kibria (2002) points out, ethnicity and race are also deeply interconnected in American culture; thus we might expect that religion may also play a role in pan-ethnic or racial identity formation.

Scholars generally associate "Asian" with "religion" in two ways. In one, Asian American religion refers to the growth of traditional "Eastern" religions, which, while considered to be major world religions, are viewed as minority and relatively new[4] faith traditions in the United States. Practitioners of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam have gained some attention in part due to a growing interest among white Americans since the 1960s (Lippy 2000; Wuthnow and Cadge 2004). But for the most part, the majority of these faith practitioners remain largely Asian, and as the number of Asian immigrants to the United States increases, so too has the felt presence of these non-Christian religions. Thus the pan-ethnic label *Asian American* could refer to these "traditional Eastern" religious faiths.

Second, scholars connect "Asian American" with religion in reference to the growing racial diversity within American Christianity. Most widely studied is the Asian Protestant, particularly evangelical Protestant, case.[5] Conservative evangelical Protestantism is a religious movement characterized partly by its engagement at the individual level (through evangelism and conversion efforts) and at the cultural level (through political participation) (Smith et al. 1998). The success of Protestant evangelicalism in recruiting many Asian Americans has been observed both at the congregational level and on many American university campuses (Busto 1999; Kim 2004a, 2004b; Park 2004). On university campuses, the growth of the Asian presence in evangelical student groups is so dramatic that these organizations develop specific "niche markets" defined as "Asian American." The growth of these organizations also led to the emergence of pan-Asian Protestant congregations whose ranks are filled mostly by the second generation (Jeung 2005). There is no other religious group that employs such a tactic by attaching a pan-ethnic label to its religious clientele. If this is the case, some may associate the label *Asian American* to refer specifically to Asian American evangelicalism.

Persistence of the Model Minority Image

Popular impressions of the term *Asian American* at least since the 1980s have often dwelt on the so-called model minority image, the misrepresentation and overemphasis of socioeconomic prosperity among the members of one racial minority group.[6] Research over the past decade has shown that not only has this image left out working-class and impoverished Asian Americans, it has also placed problematic expectations for middle-class Asian Americans who face job discrimination in the workplace and in promotion (Ecklund 2005; Fong 2002; Wu 2002).

Implicated within this stereotype is the term *Asian American* as the catch phrase that collects all members of Asian descent into this one rubric complete with attributions of material success to "Asian cultural values," such as an "ethic of hard work" and Confucian-based discipline. This cultural definition remains part of the meaning associated with the term (Kibria 1998, 2002). Many second-generation Asian Americans grow up hearing this phrase and its association with the model minority stereotype, and studies suggest that this is a prevailing meaning applied to the term (Kibria 2002; Wong et al. 1998). Thus to be "Asian American"

is also to be a model minority, that is, having the cultural skills to achieve the American Dream, which override the structural advantages one might have.

The "Second-Generation" Experience

Finally, the Asian American population is experiencing growth among the children of immigrants, whether born or raised in the United States. These individuals make up what scholars are calling the "new second generation" (Portes and Zhou 1993), after the most recent immigration wave since the 1960s (Xie and Goyette 2004; Zhou and Xiong 2005). This group is particularly significant because in recent years a growing number of them have attained adulthood and complicated the popular notion that Asian Americans are foreigners. Their integration into the American mainstream raises important questions regarding assimilation patterns and racial socialization. Unlike their parents, the second generation has largely been raised in a context where the term *Asian* is normally applied to them. This shared experience of being collectively identified in everyday discourse and interaction might encourage adherence to the label among members of the second generation.

In sum, ethnic diversity has shifted the *Asian American* term to include not only Chinese and Japanese Americans but also a host of other Asian ethnic groups that have entered the United States since the 1960s. But given its earlier and limited reference to East Asian groups, the term can infer a select subset of Asian Americans as well. Ethnic diversity runs concurrently with religious diversity among Asian Americans and can refer either to the rise in pan-ethnic Asian evangelicalism or the prevalence of multiple world religions within and across Asian ethnic groups. The model minority stereotype has distorted the term to refer to that economically "successful" subgroup of Asian immigrants and their children; however, its interpretations within Asian America can vary along a continuum with active affirmation at one end and active resistance at the other end. Finally, the growth of the second generation has added on another layer of meaning where the pan-ethnic label can refer to the experience of being socialized in a racial culture that regularly groups certain ethnicities as "Asian." These changes have transformed the meaning of the term *Asian American* from a racial-political identifier to a variety of possible concepts and meanings. As Lopez and Espiritu (1990) have argued, "the greater degree of variation from subgroup to subgroup, the less potential for panethnicity," and indeed recent survey findings suggest that there is at least some ambivalence in identification across ethnic groups and across generations.

"ASIAN AMERICAN" IDENTITY AND CONTEMPORARY ETHNIC AND RACIAL CULTURAL DISCOURSE

While these demographic shifts should have a diversifying effect on the definition of the term *Asian American*, I argue that these definitions are also affected by the general cultural discourses concerning race. David Hollinger (2000) has argued that Americans have accepted what he describes as an "ethno-racial pentagon,"

referring to the five-category classification of ethnic groups noted earlier. The significance here is twofold. First, as Hollinger points out, this classification scheme creates some internal fluidity where individuals negotiate their ethnicity as more or less consistent with a traditional ethnic culture (sometimes described as degrees of "authenticity"). Along racial boundaries, however, one is not more or less "Asian," from the vantage point of the non-Asian outsider (Hollinger 2000: 28). From this perspective, the identity work focuses on legitimating and celebrating ethnic diversity; all ethnic groups are similar, none are any better than any other.

Second, the classification scheme legitimates racial similarity. These categories draw mainly from the experiences of discrimination faced by many Americans, where ethnic differences are typically ignored in favor of perceived visual commonalities among groups (Hollinger 2000). Racial groupings then take on a life of their own and consequently create cultural rationales that can reinforce the categories (Omi and Winant 1994). Kibria (2002) describes this as the "racialization of ethnicity." Ethnic groups that fall under the category "Hispanic/Latino" share certain cultural similarities, while ethnic groups within the racial category of "Asian" share their own characteristics as well. Yet as Hollinger notes, this approach is difficult to sustain in terms of clear boundaries between racial groups, since these unique "racial" characteristics in a cultural sense are not always exclusive to one category of ethnic groups, nor does it sufficiently acknowledge the cultural differences within each racial category. Nevertheless, this cultural perspective has ascended into a popular view that the ethnoracial pentagon represents real and culturally distinct racial sets of diverse ethnic groups.

We might expect that the interpretation of being "Asian American" is affected by these two approaches to viewing race. On the one hand, definitions of *Asian American* identity will focus on a collective experience of similarity; Asian Americans have some sense of "Asian-ness" in common, however well or ill-defined that may be. On the other hand, "Asian American" identity might emphasize the unique ethnic cultures collectively drawn together under the rubric of "Asian." These two cultural frames then may interact with the pluralized meanings developed in light of demographic changes affecting Asian America.

This study ties together the contemporary trends as well as the cultural discursive influences on the pan-ethnic label *Asian American* through an empirical analysis of the explanations given by an ethnically and religiously diverse sample of second-generation Asian Americans. Ethnic diversity, religious diversity, the persisting model minority image, and the growth of the second generation should multiply the number of definitions applied to the term, while the cultural discourses of race (one emphasizing racial similarity and one emphasizing cultural diversity) should alter these definitions as well. This work also specifically expands other studies on this topic by including a broader number of ethnic groups from "East Asian" ethnicities (i.e., Chinese, Japanese, and Korean) as well as other Asian ethnic groups (e.g., Filipino, Indian, and Vietnamese). Despite the apparent growth of South and Southeast Asian Americans, little research to date has included their voices in direct comparison with East Asian Americans.[7] As

ethnic diversity has grown, so has religious diversity, which has also not been incorporated into any study of pan-ethnic identity.

DATA AND METHODS

In the fall of 2000, I conducted a series of eighty-eight face-to-face interviews with second-generation[8] Asian American college student leaders in public university settings.[9] The aim of the larger project was to obtain information about ethnic, panethnic, and religious identities from a sample of Asian Americans of diverse cultural backgrounds in a secular setting. College student leaders were selected on the grounds that they would provide better articulation on issues of identity, especially if selected from organizations that specialize in ethnicity, panethnicity, religion, and so on. Public university sites were selected to maximize regional representation in the sample. Thus I selected one public university in each of the four major census regions: University of California–Irvine (*N* = 23), University of Illinois at Chicago (*N* = 26), University of Houston (*N* = 20), and State University of New York at Stony Brook (*N* = 19). In each of these schools, the Asian undergraduate population was listed as the highest proportionally of all public universities in that region and was no less than 20 percent of the student body. By selecting these universities, I could obtain a greater variety of Asian ethnic and religious respondents.[10]

Student leaders were contacted with the assistance of online student activity group listings and directors of student activities at the respective universities. From each list, all groups were divided into four categories: ethnic and pan-ethnic organizations (e.g., Asian American Students Association), religious organizations (e.g., Hindu Students Council), pan-ethnic-religious and ethnic-religious organizations (Asian American Intervarsity Christian Fellowship), and all other organizations (e.g., College Democrats).[11] Sampling was also stratified by ethnicity (Chinese [*N* = 16], Filipino [*N* = 10], Indian [*N* = 19], Japanese [*N* = 2], Korean [*N* = 17], Vietnamese [*N* = 9], and others [*N* = 15]) and religion (Buddhist [*N* = 6], Catholic [*N* = 20], Hindu [*N* = 15], Muslim [*N* = 3], Protestant [*N* = 25], religious others [*N* = 4], and nonreligious [*N* = 15]). The final sample consisted of 45 females and 43 males ranging in age from eighteen to twenty-six.

Upon contact with a student leader, I scheduled a face-to-face, tape-recorded, on-campus interview lasting anywhere between thirty to ninety minutes. Respondents were asked a variety of questions regarding ethnic, pan-ethnic, and religious identity. Included in the interview were two questions from which this analysis is drawn. I asked each respondent: "What do you think of when you hear the term *Asian American*?" Given that there is some question over how inclusive this term is, I also asked a follow-up question: "What groups come to mind when you hear the term *Asian American*?" In terms of analysis, I followed a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) in order to view themes in the responses as they arose from the interviewees without directing their answers from a prescribed theory. Thus I divided the sample by themes found in the responses. In subsequent analyses I further divided the answers according to ethnic group and by organizational affiliation, and in none of these analyses did I find any distinct pattern in the

answers according to the above categories. Thus my presentation of the findings is organized along thematic lines rather than these other group characteristics.

INTERPRETING "ASIAN AMERICAN"

Of the eighty-eight respondents in the sample, seventy-seven stated that they would consider themselves "Asian American." I found evidence for the influence of the aforementioned four factors in my interviewees' explanations for the term *Asian American*, as suggested by previous research. Importantly too, these interpretations overlapped considerably in the responses I heard from different interviewees; that is, a number of responses contained several of the meanings one would expect to hear. For some the label referred to the ethnic diversity it encompassed, but a tension appeared in many responses over what that diversity includes. Some viewed the term as referring to religious diversity or to Asian American evangelicalism. Some respondents stated that the term reminded them of the model minority image and the constraints they felt it imposed on them as a controlling image. But others viewed this image favorably, emphasizing a presumed set of shared values among all Asian Americans. More so than some of the other interpretations, the interviewees viewed the term as a description of themselves, the second generation, who must negotiate both the culture of their parents and the culture of the American mainstream. Others argued similarly, but their emphasis was one of an inevitable loss of their ethnic culture and the gradual replacement with the American mainstream culture. In the following section I provide examples of each of these four themes along with the interpretive distinctions I suggested earlier.[12]

Ethnic Diversity and "Asian American" Identity

A dominant theme among these responses is the significance of the ethnic diversity encompassed in the pan-ethnic identifier, and most of their interpretations emphasized this characteristic. *Asian American* is a label encompassing a large array of ethnic groups. However, within this array, an informal hierarchical pattern arose, resembling Espiritu and Ong's (1994) observations that pan-Asian organizations are more often led by Chinese and Japanese Americans due to the general class differences between these groups and others. East Asian ethnic groups, namely Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, are often the first groups to come to mind when reflecting on the term *Asian American*. But given the increasing diversity of Asian ethnic groups, most respondents usually continued their explanation and expanded the number of groups to include, first, Southeast Asian groups (such as the Vietnamese or Filipino), followed by South Asians (such as Indian and Pakistani). This pattern was fairly consistent across responses, even across ethnic groups (i.e., no group exclusively selected only East Asian Americans when defining the term according to ethnicity). For example, Raj, an Indian Hindu, explained:

> I definitely think of Asians. Like Chinese and Korean, that Asian. But I would definitely be considered Asian American like on the ACT when I took the test, I

> definitely marked "Asian American" . . . it always reminded me more of
> Asians but . . . in a broader sense . . . India is definitely part of Asia so and I'm
> definitely American, so I would consider me an Asian American.

His first impression immediately begins with Chinese and Koreans. But in his
next remark, Raj includes himself in this category as well, because of his experiences with the racial labels listed on standardized tests. Put differently, no respondent excluded East Asian cultures in their definition of who is included in the
term. But particularly among the non-South Asian respondents, a sizeable minority specifically exclude Asian Indians from the term's meaning.[13] When I asked
these interviewees to elaborate on why they do not include Asian Indians, most
could not articulate a clear reason beyond perceived difference in culture or
physical appearance. Andrea, a nonreligious Chinese American, exemplified
this difficulty:

> That's a tough one because [when] I hear the term *Asian American* I consider
> them [Asian Indians] as separate, not Asian. I know India is located [in] Asia
> but then I always thought of it as separate . . . because to me it seems different.

Andrea acknowledges that the nation of India is located in Asia and yet struggles
with why she does not include or imagine them as fitting under the term *Asian
American*. The consistent inclusion of East Asians and the subtle hierarchical pattern of including Southeast and (usually) South Asian groups can be represented
by a series of overlapping circles, where certain clusters of ethnic groups are more
fully embraced in the larger circle of Asian American ethnic diversity as seen in
Figure 1.

Surprisingly, despite the divergence in the amount of diversity accounted for in
the term *Asian American*, the meaning of the term did not hinge on this description. Instead, respondents tried to make sense of the term in light of that ethnic
diversity. Typical in these explanations was a struggle between whether any
shared cultural similarities existed or whether the term encompassed too much
difference. Angela, a Filipina Catholic stated:

> [Asian Americans are] each individually different nationalities. But I think
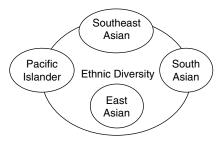> there's a common ground somewhere but I can't really put my finger on it yet.

FIGURE 1

Degree of Inclusion of Ethnic Groups in the Label *Asian American*

Angela first points out the uniqueness of each Asian nationality, and yet she adds, there must be "a common ground somewhere." Joseph, a Japanese American Buddhist, stated similarly:

> I'd say they have a lot in common but I'd say mainly it's centered around the fact that they're Asian. Other than that, Japanese culture is totally different from Korean culture and Korean culture is totally pretty different from Chinese culture. I mean there's some underlying things that are the same but . . . other than that, you know the cultures are different.

Similar to Angela, Joseph articulates the uniqueness of each Asian culture, but the fact that they are Asian still draws some kind of cultural boundary (i.e., "underlying things that are the same") that brings these groups together. In both cases, the tension between seeing differences across Asian ethnic cultures and seeing similarity among them remains unresolved.[14] The label captures a diverse collection of unique ethnic cultures; and at the same time, these cultures have some shared cultural similarity defined by this pan-ethnic label. This extends what Kibria (2002: 121) described as "ethnic pan-Asianism," an interpretation of the term Asian American that emphasizes the shared experience of being a second-generation individual of Asian descent. Not only do second-generation Asian Americans view their experience as similar, but they also ascribe similarity to their cultural values.[15] This also complicates ethnic pan-Asianism by pointing out the tension between ascribing similarity and difference to Asian cultures when defining what *Asian American* means.

Religious Diversity and Asian American Identity

Often seen as a subset of culture, religious diversity as an interpretation for "Asian American" did not appear as often in the students' answers. But certain aspects of these cases warrant consideration in understanding the pluralized nature of the term. When I ask Han, a Korean student leader of an Asian American evangelical Protestant group, what he thought of the term *Asian American*, he replied:

> Usually I think of like Chinese people and Korean people . . . Japanese people too but they don't come to mind as easily like, when I hear the term I usually think Chinese and Korean. Just because that's the environment I'm in. There's a lot more Chinese and Koreans than there are almost any other people . . . like in just the environment I'm in and exposed to. So . . . that's what I see . . . Asian American.

He further clarified:

> I think of Asian American Intervarsity. It's mostly Chinese and Koreans. Just kind of the environment I'm in.

Han attributes his interpretation of the term to participation in an Asian American religious organization, an organization specifically intended to cater to the religious needs of one racial minority. He associates "Asian American" with particular ethnic groups, but those ethnic groups dominate in the pan-ethnic

religious-specific organization he helps lead. Thus the religious identity of the organization, coupled with the racial/pan-ethnic term, shapes a particular interpretation to the term.

The response given by Eunjoo, a Korean Protestant leader of a multiethnic evangelical organization, also exemplifies this pattern where a major world religion (again Christianity) interprets the pan-ethnic term:

> Immediately I think Christians. I think yeah probably because I've been exposed. Every time I've met an Asian they've belonged to a church or something. But I think instantly when I think Asian American I think, you know, Christian.

Eunjoo's comment is particularly remarkable as she associated a racial category with a religion (in contrast to Han, who notes specific Asian ethnic groups). Whether this is more the exception than the rule deserves further inquiry with larger samples, but work by Russell Jeung (2005) suggests that the use of Asian American as an identity is not uncommon in many pan-ethnic churches. This type of emphasis is not limited to Asian American Protestant evangelicals. Maryam, a Pakistani Muslim, provided a similar example:

> I think a lot of their morals, or respecting of parents and this and that. The way we grew up is kind of similar. A lot of morals and things. I know there's a lot of Muslims in Singapore and Malaysia and stuff so I guess religion too could be similar. . . . There's Chinese Muslims too, which I didn't realize until I came to University of Houston, you know, that there were Muslims in that part of the world. Which is stupid of me but you don't know until you meet people.

Maryam understands Asian American similarities in terms of morals and values. But her next association is embedded within her religious identity as a Muslim. Like Christianity, Islam is present in a variety of Asian cultures, an observation that only occurs to her when she entered college, where she realized that Muslims are not only from Pakistan and Arab nations but from many parts of Asia as well. Her reasoning behind her definition of *Asian American* foregrounds her religion similar to some Asian American evangelicals. In both cases the interpretation of the term *Asian American* focuses primarily on religion.

Asian cultures are largely pluralistic in terms of religion. There are certainly larger representations of some religious groups in different Asian nations, but the image that many Asian Americans have is an awareness of religious pluralism. Thus pan-ethnic identity for Asian Americans refers to a combination of Asian-based religions and Asian-ethnic embodiments of Western religions. Takatoshi, a Japanese Buddhist, articulates this most succinctly:

> I would have to say, religion would be a similarity. A lot of Asian Americans [are either] Buddhist, Christian, and Catholic. And within those subgroups I would have to say, a lot of my Korean friends are Catholic and they have their own clique or circle of friends which are around that religion.

What Asian Americans share in common is a limited set of diverse religions. From Takatoshi's experiences, each religion correlates with a particular ethnic culture.

Ajit, an Indian Hindu from Chicago, makes a similar observation by using Chinese religious diversity as an example:

> Religiously . . . if you look at Chinese religion, a lot of them are into Confucianism, Buddhism, a lot of my Chinese friends are Christian or Catholic too. If you look at Buddhism, it's based on Hinduism. I mean Buddha was Hindu at first, then he started his own religion so you see a lot of similarities in the religion in the beliefs in the religion.

Ajit first argues that the Chinese carry a diversity of religions including Asian-based and Western-based religions. But Ajit also makes an interesting claim when he argues that Buddhism traces its roots back to Hinduism. Thus not only does each Asian ethnic culture contain a diversity of religions, some religions share the same origin. Thus Asians share some proto-religion and by extension a primordial culture in common. Thus to be Asian American is to belong to a set of Asian ethnic cultures with a plurality of religions, some of which share a common source.

Asian American as the Model Minority: Successful Habits of a Stigmatized People

Aside from ethnic and religious diversity interpretations of the term *Asian American*, a number of respondents mentioned the model minority stereotype. Helen, a Korean Buddhist, articulated the constraints felt in the personal lives of Asian Americans as a result of expectations implied by the model minority image:

> Being Asian American, people have certain expectations from us. For example, in school they expect us to be in the top percent. They expect us to be good students, not rebellious, listen to [our] parents. Follow the norms that exist in this society. They really don't consider us a bad influence. I think that puts a lot of pressure on us as far as who we want to be and choosing a major. Not only do your parents give you the pressure . . . but I think that society itself has made this pre-set road as far as what you should do. "You shouldn't do this; you shouldn't do that because you are Asian American." You are supposed to be in this high level of education so I think it puts a lot of pressure on us as far as what we should do.

The model minority stereotype includes a variety of characteristics, all of which form a particular set of parameters that place limits on what an Asian American can be. In other words, as Helen argues, Asian Americans cannot perform as "normal" students, cannot be countercultural, contentious, unconventional, or lead an independent lifestyle. The ramifications are not that the image itself is threatened but that the individual is somehow less authentically Asian American if he or she diverges from it. It is an identity imposed by others and places considerable constraints not only in the area of study one selects but the very trajectory of one's work and contribution to society. Again we should note that respondents like Helen still identify with the term despite its undesirable connotations.

Alternatively, others mentioned the model minority stereotype in an empowering sense. Being "Asian American" means exhibiting cultural values that are conducive to socioeconomic success. The term is appropriated with the very definition of

the popular stereotype without any critical evaluation. "Asian American" reflects a unified immigrant experience shared by all Asian ethnic groups. It includes hard working parents, a commitment to education, and a strict upbringing. Similar in some respects to the patterns we saw concerning ethnic diversity, a shared value system is implied here. While some respondents have difficulty articulating the shared values of Asian Americans, the model minority stereotype helps bring focus to these characteristics. To some degree the model minority image racializes the immigrant narrative for Asian Americans. For example, both Neha, an Indian Hindu, and Kajal, an Indian Protestant, illustrate this pattern in their explanations:

> I do not want to make an assumption, but a lot of people who are born or raised in Asia or who have parents and relatives with Asian descent tend to live off the same types of values when it comes to relationships or education or work, especially with my friends. We are all different types of Asian backgrounds, but our parents all strongly believe in . . . similar things. (Neha)

> I believe that some of the values that we all share. Like I know most of our parents instilled in us, to get a good education, to study hard, to work hard at whatever we do, and not to let people discourage you when they say you can't do something. That connects us in some way. . . . And how strict. . . . From my experiences I noticed that Asian American parents are more strict on their kids, especially the girls, and in some cases the boys. But I know that they're more strict on everything like who they could date or what time they could stay out and stuff. More than other cultures like whites or blacks, or Hispanics. I see more Asian American parents being strict than other cultures. So I think that kind of ties us a little bit into the same category. (Kajal)

Asian Americans include both parents and children in this explanation, and the experience of being a part of a strict household "connects" Asian ethnic groups. It is clear from Kajal's answer too that this connection is understood within a specific racial context as he compares this experience in contrast to whites, blacks, and Hispanics. There is no mention here of the kind of tension and pressure that Helen reports when she thinks of the term in this manner. It is as if they are borrowing from different cultural discourses that focus on specific inflections of this definition.

Asian American as Shared Distinctive Bicultural Experience

Interpretations of the term *Asian American* that incorporate the model minority stereotype to some extent imply a shared immigrant experience that these interviewees associate with the pressure to succeed resulting from the demands placed on them by parents who are new to the United States. This "second-generation" orientation illustrates the impact of a fourth social influence on the label. "Asian American" in this sense is a specifically second-generation identity as it entails negotiating the values instilled by one's parents and the values perceived to be "American." This second-generation perspective highlights both the "foreignness" and racial quality of an Asian heritage. The tension between acknowledging the unique cultures that make up the ethnic diversity of Asian America and the primordial similarity they all share is less important here. Instead Asian ethnic

cultures have an understood similarity that justifies generalization when comparing those cultures to their understanding of the American mainstream.

"Asian Americans," therefore, share the experience of having to negotiate between two distinct sets of values and cultures. To be Asian American is to belong to a third culture, as one respondent put it—a combination of both Asian values and American values. This concept encapsulates the idea that pan-ethnicity refers to a distinct subculture set apart from the two worlds in which Asian Americans inhabit. As Tia, a Chinese-Filipina Catholic, describes:

> Well I consider myself Asian American because, there's cultures that I'm from but also I have a third culture *here*, that I think my parents really helped me to develop because they're both from different cultures. Some people I knew, some of my friends they were pushed to learn Chinese or needed to do, or had to be a certain way. But my parents, because of their situation, I was like: "I have a different culture. I have to have that mix of culture," because my friends didn't speak the same language [or have the same] religion. So I feel like I took some aspects of both and took on a different culture there.

Tia's mixed Asian heritage made it necessary for her to work out an identity based in a hybrid alternative to both the Chinese and Filipino cultures of her parents. More so, this identity must be congruent to the cultural distinctions she perceives between herself and the culture of her friends who adhere to neither of her parents' ethnic identities or religions.

This bicultural negotiation was sometimes described in very empowering terms. To be Asian American was to have the choice of two sets of values from which one might construct an individual value system. Nikhil, an Indian Hindu, states that being Asian American implies having cultural options:

> I think to me it means, it gives me other options. It opens other doors that I can see this life and still know what it's like to be Asian, [or] to be Indian. . . . I know what it's like to be Asian and I guess both roles that I can choose from. [N]o way does that hold me back. I feel real lucky that like I belong to both. . . . But one of the problems that I see with Asian American. . . . There are other people who like ignore India, ignore Asia who say like "We're Americans. That's it." There's nothing else to it. [But I think] there's that middle ground. You can have the opportunity to have both. For them you can't have both; you have to have one or the other. So I like the idea of being Asian American.

Nikhil sees Asian American identity as an asset rather than a liability. He interprets his knowledge of both Indian and American cultures as an opportunity. Being Indian and being Asian run together for Nikhil since they are ways of defining that part of his cultural background that does not seem "American." He contrasts his perspective with those who completely embrace or assimilate to the American mainstream. Here again he fluidly states India and Asia as being one and the same since they are compared to America. In this instance he criticizes this assimilationist approach of some of his peers since it denies the opportunity of choosing Indian or Asian values that can coexist with American values.

In some cases this activity of choosing and selecting from different value systems was framed as an experience of cultural erosion. The picking and choosing

eventually will favor the American value system, rather than sustaining both sets of values in equal tension. As Steve, a Chinese Protestant, explains:

> I do think [Asian Americans are] losing their culture. Like me, I'm not going to be able to teach *my* children. But my parents and my grandparents would teach their children. It's getting lost so much. I think it's sad, I think it's inevitable. Because we're not just Asian anymore, we're Asian American. So if you combine the two words you have to combine the two cultures. And you have to move some things out of the way.

In contrast to Nikhil, Steve argues that the combination of two cultures must result in the sacrifice of some cultural habits or attitudes, and this loss is always taken from one's ethnic heritage rather than the American host culture. The process is unidirectional: It is not possible to hold both cultures, ethnic and American, together in their full richness. Implicit in all of these responses again is this acceptance of a racializing of ethnic values as different from "American." For some it is a "both-and" proposition where one can be both "Asian" and "American," but for others it is an either/or distinction where one must concede being "Asian" in favor of being "American." The term encapsulates this negotiation by racializing one set of values and at the same time accepting the racialization since it sustains the essence of the values that are seen as not "American."

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

These findings show that while most in this sample of second-generation Asian American student leaders readily identified with the term *Asian American*, the term is used in diverse ways. Respondents appropriated different cultural and demographic changes to explain distinct and different ways of categorizing the term *Asian American*. Ironically, it is this pluralization of the term's definition that is responsible for continued identification with the term, as well as a lack of identification with it. The term may be significant to some because one can appropriate a variety of meanings to it, and it can be less salient to others precisely because it can refer to any number of meanings.

Secondly, within each definition, I saw a recurring tension between viewing the term as an appropriate descriptor of some racial similarity and viewing the term as a descriptor of cultural diversity. I suggest that this may be indicative of two interrelated cultural discourses that influence the ways in which one interprets this pan-ethnic racial label. The first discourse emphasizes a "racialization of ethnicity," as shown earlier (Kibria 2002). In Kibria's (2002: 72) formulation of the "racialization of ethnicity," her focus is on the association of ethnicity with a racial label (e.g., Korean or Chinese values are Asian values). I significantly extend this concept by emphasizing the cultural referent by which "Asianness" is evaluated.[16] Racialization not only amalgamates ethnic cultures into a racial whole but also changes the focus of cultural negotiation. Racialization of ethnicity emphasizes a presumed "Asian" culture rather than specific Asian cultures, in an environment where the cultural mainstream is implicitly white. This approach was evident in some of the respondents' answers, when they used the label *Asian American* to refer to a shared cultural characteristic or experience as particularly

"Asian," rather than "Korean" or "Filipino." Being Asian American is to share in a unified Asian culture or set of values. An individual is not free to construct her work identity like the white mainstream; she is Asian—the model racial minority. A person is not Protestant like other white Protestants; she is Asian Protestant. In the process of negotiating between two cultures, eventually one must yield one's Asian heritage in lieu of the dominant white mainstream.

Racializing ethnicity was not the only discourse used to interpret the definitions of the label. Other respondents recognized the great diversity of cultures and experiences captured by the term *Asian American*. In so doing the meaning and significance of the term inverts by emphasizing intra-Asian pluralism bounded by the racialized unit. I describe this as a "multiculturalist influence," where each ethnic culture is seen as unique and distinct from the others (Hollinger 2000). Each ethnic culture retains its own logic, customs, and values. American culture is a conglomeration of many cultures, including Asian cultures. Hence "Asian American" refers to any number of Asian ethnic backgrounds. It legitimates the popular definition of the "model minority" image by framing Asian ethnic cultures as suited for American socioeconomic success. It includes a rich diversity of religious faith traditions. In negotiating with two cultures, it posits a "both-and" perspective—being Asian American includes selecting from both ethnic roots and mainstream values.

These two influences do not act independently, but rather they are simultaneous and interlacing. The recognition of multiple cultures is constrained by the racialized label, and the tendency toward reducing unique and multiple cultures into a single race is undercut by multiculturalist logic and discourse. These two themes interact with one another to reflect what I call "racialized multiculturalism." Racialized multiculturalism is the dynamic interplay between the constraints of social discourses based on racial categories and the legitimation of cultural diversity within a given racial category (see also Garces-Foley and Jeung 2005; Jeung and Chan 2006). These dynamics and their application are suggested in Table 1.

Multiculturalist influences help draw out the ethnic diversity within the term *Asian American*, whereas racialization influences an interpretation toward a primordial cultural solidarity. Recognizing the diversity of religions within Asian ethnic

TABLE 1
Asian American Definitions and Interpretations

Cultural Discourse	Ethnic Diversity	Religious Diversity	Model Minority Image	Second-Generation Cultural Negotiation
Multiculturalist	Asian ethnic groups differ from each other	A diversity of Asian religious groups	Empowering: ethnic values lead to success and achievement	Balancing or selecting from an Asian ethnic culture and the American mainstream culture
Racialization	Asian ethnic groups are similarly "Asian"	A particular identity for Asian Protestants	Limiting: exclusion white middle-class freedom	Gradually losing one's Asian-ness and gaining American mainstream values

groups is similar to the ethnic diversity pattern. But the association of the term with a subcultural form of mainstream evangelical Protestantism reflects the racial distinctions perceived to exist among American Christians. The model minority stereotype emphasizes the unique cultural traits that each Asian ethnic group possesses, which explain their collective success. Such traits, however, are sometimes seen as a liability toward complete integration with a predominantly white mainstream. As Okihiro (1994) points out, the model minority stereotype, while seemingly positive, still marginalizes Asian Americans as nonmainstream. Finally, a multiculturalist influence helps some second-generation Asian Americans to see their bicultural experience as a "both-and" proposition since all cultures are readily acceptable to society. But a racialization influence interprets this bicultural negotiation as a gradual acquiescence to the white American mainstream. In short, a multiculturalist influence interprets *Asian American* to mean "types of Asian ethnic Americans," whereas the racializing influence interprets the label to mean "a nonwhite racial American."

Several implications follow from this study. Pan-ethnic identity formation may also have important influences from multiple macrocultural discourses. Comparative studies including second-generation Asian, African, and Latino immigrants may help verify this claim. Class and generational statuses were held constant in this study, and these demographic cleavages should be considered also in understanding both the multiple definitions of *Asian American* but also the influence of racialized multiculturalism. Additionally, an analysis of second-generation Asian Americans over the life course may help us see how panethnic identification changes not only over the life of the individual but also as cultural and demographic conditions change in the United States.[17]

The term *Asian American* has come a long way from its roots in the movement of the 1960s, when it was first appropriated to address racial injustices both stateside and abroad, as well as to meet the needs of the vulnerable within its many communities. The movement has waxed and waned depending on the larger political currents in American society over the decades. But the term itself has transformed and diversified as the population of Asians in America has grown and diversified. This study provides empirical support for the significance of these demographic influences on the definition of this ubiquitous term. While the alternative meanings do not directly oppose the original formulation of the term, the availability and use of the term in these multiple forms may encourage more individuals to identify with "Asian American" while at the same time diminish the potential effectiveness of the label as a unifying and activating symbol.

NOTES

1. Following Fong (2002), I use the term *Asian American* as opposed to *Asian Pacific American* since I am not comparing the perspectives of native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders in this analysis.

2. The Asian American movement experienced a brief retreat from campus politics during the mid-1980s as the emergence of the "unmeltable ethnics" countermovement grew. Takagi (1992) notes that the neoconservative campus politics, especially among Asians, was problematic in sustaining affirmative action policies. In the early to mid-1990s, however, campus politics experienced a renaissance of organized protest for greater awareness of ethnic studies. Not least of these was the development of over fifty new programs in Asian American studies on college campuses all over the United States (Lien 2001). Lien (2001) and Espiritu (1992) both note that the nature of Asian American politics has experienced an important shift since the early 1990s. Asian America as a panethnic national political identity was emerging. No longer were coalitions of ethnic groups occurring on the national scene, but rather pan-Asian political groups formed independently and welcomed all interested individuals and groups to participate in this wider identity for political causes. A recent example of this has been the 80-20 vote developed to encourage bloc voting among all Asian Americans for candidates who recognize the needs and interests of Asian Americans (Lien 2001).

3. Espiritu and Ong (1994) suggest that class differences between Asian ethnic groups may account for problems in developing a pan-ethnic solidarity. Chinese and Japanese Americans are seen as more upwardly mobile than other groups like Filipino Americans, and they maintain more positions of leadership in pan-Asian organizations.

4. While historians and religious studies scholars have pointed out the long history of these faith traditions in the United States (e.g. Eck 2001), some scholars stress that the recent significance of these religions is due to the increasing felt impact of these faiths. Wuthnow's (2005) recent study of religious diversity and engagement finds that large sectors of the U.S. population know someone or are aware of a local community of Buddhists, Hindus, or Muslims.

5. Curiously absent in research is the Asian presence in American Catholicism.

6. Scholars have argued that adjustments accounting for the human capital resources available upon immigration, number of workers per family, and cost of living will significantly correct the apparent "success" of Asian Americans (Fong 2002; Ong and Hee 1994).

7. While Kibria articulated this concern (with respect to inclusion of South Asians) over a decade ago (Kibria 1996, 1998), very little qualitative research has explored this (the notable exception is Lee 1996, who included East and Southeast Asian high school students in her study).

8. By "second generation," I include those who are "American born" as well as those who are "American raised," that is, those respondents who arrived to the United States prior to the age of twelve (a group sometimes defined as the 1.5 generation) (see Danico 2004; Park 1999). No significant interpretive differences appeared between the answers of these two groups, so I treat them as a single unit.

9. Given that the sample is limited to college-attending second-generation Asian Americans, class and generation differences suggested in previous research could not be directly tested. However, as I will show in the following, even controlling for these demographic characteristics revealed surprising diversity within class and generation.

10. Intentionally sampling from universities with the highest proportions of Asian American undergraduates allowed for a greater diversity of religious and ethnic subsamples. However, sampling from such schools is not representative of Asian Americans who attend schools where they are equally or less represented. In such environments panethnic identity negotiation may differ from the types of responses found here.

11. It is possible that the de facto composition of a group may actually be a specific ethnicity or racial group. To account for this, interviews were coded for mono-ethnic or mono-racial group composition and repositioned within the fourfold typology.

12. Clearly a small nonrandom sample such as this will not provide statistically representative evidence but rather shows examples of the concepts and interpretive dynamics with respect to this term.

13. Of the sixty-nine second-generation non-South Asians, fourteen (about 20 percent) excluded Indians as part of their understanding of the term's meaning and inclusiveness.

14. In subsequent analyses, I divided the responses between those who included Asian Indians as Asian Americans and those who did not to see whether ethnic diversity explanations differed along these lines. The only unique difference between these two sets of answers was the extent to which specific cultural values could be attributed to Asian Indian culture just as much as any other Asian ethnic culture. Jaehoon, a Korean Protestant, did not include Asian Indians but felt that Asian Americans "focus more on the family. . . . I think there's a general focus on respect for your elders, [and] taking care of your parents." Parminder, an Indian Hindu, states similarly but includes her culture in this characteristic: "And I think that the value system of family and respecting your elders . . . are very similar between the cultures."

15. Kibria (2002) defines this as a "racialization of ethnicity."

16. Kibria (2002) and Pyke and Dang (2003) argue similarly that Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese second-generation Americans continually operate between two referents: the "foreigner" or "FOB" ("fresh off the boat") and the white mainstream (e.g., becoming white-washed). My emphasis is on the latter referent and its relationship to a second discourse, multiculturalism, which I describe later.

17. An important contribution in this direction is Thai's (1999) interviews with young adult second-generation Vietnamese Americans in the San Francisco area. In this study, the authors showed that recalling past events triggers different interpretations over the salience of ethnic identity. Further research that explores pan-ethnic identification should explore the impact of different life stages and specific events that affect the salience and meaning of being "Asian American."

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