



## CHAPTER I

# Asian Americans: The Absent Minority, the Silenced Minority, and the Model Minority

On June 21, 1989, Academic High School held its graduation ceremony for the class of 1989. In keeping with tradition, Academic High held its ceremony at the Academy of Music. This beautiful, historic landmark is the home of the city orchestra and the city opera company. Graduation was set for 10:00 A.M. I arrived at 9:00 A.M. and found crowds of graduating seniors and their families spilling over onto the boulevard. I met parents, served as a photographer, and even got included in a few snapshots.

This was to be a big day in Academic High School's history. In the words of the principal, "It was a year of firsts." The principal was alluding to the fact that it was the first year that Academic High had a female valedictorian and the first year that the school had a female senior class president. Thus this graduation marked the success of coeducation at a school that had resisted admitting girls until the 1980s. For the principal it was a personal success. For many of my Asian American student informants, it was also a year of firsts. For Meng, Pho, Lin, and many others, this marked the first time that someone from their families would graduate from high school in the United States. Thu, Sam, and Grace would be the first in their families to go on to college. After months of fieldwork I considered many of these students to be my friends, and I was happy for them and proud of them. The day seemed perfect, and for a while I forgot that I was there as an ethnographer and began to get caught up in the excitement of the day.

At 9:45 A.M., I went inside the hall where parents and friends filled the seats. At 10:00 A.M. sharp, the Academic High School orchestra began to play *Pomp and Circumstance*, and the faculty, dressed in academic garb, began to file into the auditorium. After the faculty, the graduating seniors began to march down the aisles; the audience began to cheer and cameras began to flash. The auditorium shook with excitement until the proces-

sion reached the letter *C*. With the letter *C* came the first large group of Asian American students. At that moment the audience suddenly grew silent. It was as if no one cared about the achievements of this group. Suddenly I heard the sound of hissing and booing emerge from the front of the auditorium. My jaw nearly dropped to the ground, and my eyes began to well up with tears. While I was upset for my informants, I also felt personally attacked. Once again, I was reminded that as Asian Americans, we are not always welcomed. After I overcame my initial anger, I realized that this was an ethnographic moment that had to be recorded. Thus this event shook me out of the clouds and back to my purpose as an ethnographer.

This book is based on an ethnographic study of the Asian American students at a school I call Academic High School. The focus of the book is on how the Asian American students formed their ethnic and racial identities within the context of the interracial relationships at the school. In short, I will examine how Asian American students formed their identities (i.e., sense of self) in relation to others. As I will argue, the events at the graduation reflect the fact that many people did not see the Asian American students as legitimate members of the school or of U.S. society. Some saw the Asian American students as outsiders/foreigners who were pushing their way into the school. They resented what they believed was the overachievement of Asian American students. Still others held Asian Americans up as exemplars of the American dream of success (i.e., model minorities).

I will pay particular attention to how the stereotype of Asian Americans as model minorities affected the Asian American students' experiences, their relationships with non-Asians, and their self-defined identities. Through observations and conversations with students, I learned that Asian American students at Academic High divided themselves into four self-defined identity groups. Each of the four identity groups had distinct attitudes toward schooling and interracial relationships, and each had a unique response to the model minority stereotype. By drawing attention to the students' voices, I hope that this book will go "beyond [the] silencing" (Weis & Fine, 1993) that surrounds Asian American experiences. As Osajima (1988) notes, Asian American voices have been conspicuously absent from the literature that describes Asian Americans as model minorities. Broadly speaking, I will focus attention on a minority group that has been simultaneously ignored and exalted in the U.S. imagination. This book is about students who live behind the model minority stereotype.



### DISCOURSES OF EXCLUSION: THE ABSENT VOICE(S) OF ASIAN AMERICA

In the United States discussions of race are generally framed in terms of blacks and whites. Despite the fact that Asian Americans have been on the mainland of the United States for more than 150 years, Asians are still regarded as "strangers from a different shore" (Takaki, 1989) and voices from Asian America are excluded from the mainstream discourse on race. Two recent books that perpetuate the black and white discourse on race are Studs Terkel's *Race: How Whites and Blacks Think and Feel About the American Obsession* (1992) and Andrew Hacker's *Two Nations: Black and White, Separate, Hostile, Unequal* (1992). Although both books mention other racial groups, the authors define race relations in black and white terms (Winant, 1993). In his reasons for excluding Asians from his discussion of race, Hacker (1992) suggests that, due to the stellar achievements of Asian Americans, Asians may soon be considered to be white. The widespread popularity of these books suggests that many Americans have been influenced by the black and white view of race.

Because of the black and white discourse of race, most Americans do not view Asian Americans as legitimate racial minorities. Given this thinking, when institutions think about increasing racial diversity, they often focus on African Americans and sometimes on Latinos. Asians, on the other hand, are not seen as people who add to racial diversity, and thus they are largely absent from the discourse of diversity. For example, in constructing categories for minority scholarships and in recruiting minority students for admission, many universities exclude Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans. In her research on the controversy surrounding Asian Americans in higher education, Takagi (1992) found that Asian American students were "at odds with university goals of diversity, in terms of either, and sometimes both, academic achievement and racial mix of the student body" (p.81).

The reasons given for excluding Asian American perspectives from discussions of race fall into three categories. The first category includes explanations that center around the argument that there are not enough Asian Americans to warrant consideration. At a recent lecture on race in higher education, I was struck by the fact that the researcher had designed her research without consideration of Asian Americans. Her study, which examined attrition and retention rates across racial groups, included three categories for students: black/African American, Hispanic, and white. When asked whether she included students of Asian descent in her study, she responded by saying that there were not enough Asians in her study to constitute a separate category and that where there were Asians, they

had been subsumed under the category of whites and others. Ironically, one of the states included in her study was California, a state in which 14% of the higher education enrollment in 1993 was Asian American.<sup>1</sup> In 1982, Betty Waki, a Japanese American art teacher in the Houston Unified School District, was classified as white because the system did not recognize Asians as a racial category. Her racial status denied, Ms. Waki subsequently lost her job because there were too many "white" art teachers in the district (Omi, 1992).

Another reason that Asian Americans are excluded from the discourse on race in the United States is that Asian Americans are perceived to be unassimilable foreigners as opposed to American minorities. The image that Asians are always foreign(ers) has been perpetuated by the Orientalist discourse which holds that there are innate differences between the East and the West (Cheung, 1993; Said, 1979). The Orientalist discourse suggests that an Asian person can never become an American. Rudyard Kipling's phrase, "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet," expresses this sentiment. Thus, regardless of the number of generations an Asian American person's family has been in the United States, he or she has probably been asked: "What country are you from?" In my experience as a third-generation Asian American woman, I have fielded many questions concerning my origins. When I tell people that I am from California, most respond by asking yet another question: "But where are you really from?" Their response to me suggests an unwillingness to accept me or any Asian as American. The persistent image of Asians as foreigners/outsideers implies that Asians are not legitimate members of U.S. society. This image silences Asian Americans by denying them "the right to say anything except words of gratitude and praise about America" (E. H. Kim, 1993a, p. 223).

Related to the image that Asians are foreigners is the fact that Asians in the United States are often seen as immigrants as opposed to minorities. In writing about differential educational achievement across minority groups, John Ogbu (1987, 1991) has perpetuated this distinction. According to his framework, which I will discuss in Chapter 3, Asians in the United States are immigrants, while African Americans are domestic minorities or involuntary minorities. While some Asians in the United States are immigrants, others are refugees, and still others have been here for

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1. According to the California Postsecondary Education Commission (1995), in the Fall of 1993, 36,111 of the 122,271 undergraduate students enrolled in the University of California system, 47,468 of the 262,492 undergraduate students enrolled in the California State University system, and 146,006 of the 1,074,174 undergraduate students enrolled in California community colleges were categorized as Asian/Pacific Islanders or Filipinos.



numerous generations. Thus we are left wondering if Asians ever cease being immigrants. Are second-, third-, and fourth-generation Asian Americans still immigrants?

The final and perhaps most insidious reason given for excluding Asian voices from the discourse of race is the stereotype that Asians do not have any problems (i.e., they are model minorities). In the minds of most Americans, minorities like African Americans, Latinos, and Native Americans are minorities precisely because they experience disproportionate levels of poverty and educational underachievement. The model minority stereotype suggests that Asian Americans are "outwhiting whites" and have overcome discrimination to be more successful than whites. Ironically, this reason for excluding Asians from the discussion of race (i.e., that they are model minorities) is the very way in which Asian Americans receive the most attention in the discourse on race (E. H. Kim, 1993b). That is, when Asians are included in the discourse on race it is usually to talk about their "success." Asian Americans are described as hardworking entrepreneurs who are doing well economically (e.g., Korean merchants), and they are described as hardworking students who excel in math and science (e.g., Asian American whiz kids). While Asian Americans are stereotyped as model minorities, other racial minorities are stereotyped in overtly negative ways. In describing the 1980s discourse on race in the United States, Sleeter (1993) writes:

The media frequently connected African Americans and Latinos with social problems that many Americans regarded as the result of moral depravity: drug use, teen pregnancy, and unemployment. Asian Americans are hailed as the "model minority" portrayed as achieving success in the U.S. through hard work and family cohesiveness (Suzuki, 1989), following the same route to success that many whites believed their ancestors followed. (p. 160)

Thus, within the model minority discourse, Asian Americans represent the "good" race and African Americans represent the "bad" race. Asian Americans represent the hope and possibility of the American dream.

## **MODEL MINORITY STEREOTYPE AS A HEGEMONIC DEVICE**

By describing Asian Americans as model minorities, the diverse and complex experiences of Asian Americans remain hidden. Instead of seeing different Asian ethnicities as being separate and distinct, the model minority stereotype lumps diverse Asian ethnicities into one racial/panethnic group. This representation silences the multiple voices of Asian Ameri-

cans, thereby creating a monolithic monotone. In addition, by painting Asian Americans as a homogeneous group, the model minority stereotype erases ethnic, cultural, social-class, gender, language, sexual, generational, achievement, and other differences. Furthermore, by describing Asian Americans as model minorities, the dominant group is imposing a categorical label on Asian Americans. Espiritu (1992) writes:

An imposed category ignores subgroup boundaries, lumping together diverse peoples in a single, expanded "ethnic" framework. Individuals so categorized may have nothing in common except that which the categorizer uses to distinguish them. (p. 6)

The stereotype suggests that all Asians are the same because they all experience success. Thus the stereotype denies the poverty and illiteracy in Asian American communities (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 1992). In addition to silencing the wide range of Asian American experiences, the stereotype silences the fact that Asian Americans experience racism (Chun, 1980; Kwong, 1987; Suzuki, 1980; Takaki, 1989).

As a hegemonic device, the model minority stereotype maintains the dominance of whites in the racial hierarchy by diverting attention away from racial inequality and by setting standards for how minorities should behave. The model minority stereotype emerged during the 1960s in the midst of the civil rights era. Critics of the stereotype argue that the press began to popularize the stereotype of Asians as model minorities in order to silence the charges of racial injustice being made by African Americans and other minorities (Osajima, 1988; Sue & Kitano, 1973). Prior to this period, Asian Americans had often been stereotyped as devious, inscrutable, unassimilable, and in other overtly negative ways.

Articles that chronicled the success of Asian Americans began to appear in the popular press in the mid-1960s. In December of 1966, *U.S. News & World Report* published an article lauding the success of Chinese Americans. The author wrote, "At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own—with no help from anyone" ("Success Story," 1966, p. 73). The article went on to praise the good citizenship of Chinese Americans and the safety of Chinatowns.

The prescriptive nature of the model minority stereotype is striking in this 1966 article. Chinese Americans were singled out as good citizens precisely because the status quo saw them as the quiet minority who did not actively challenge the existing system. That is to say, Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans were seen as model minorities because



they were believed to be quiet/silent and hardworking people who achieved success without depending on the government. In reflecting on how Asian Americans have been characterized, Filipina fiction writer Jessica Hagedorn (1993) writes, "In our perceived American character we are completely nonthreatening. We don't complain. We endure humiliation. We are almost inhuman in our patience. We never get angry" (pp. xxii-xxiii). Within the model minority discourse, "good" minorities, like "good" women, are silent (Cheung, 1993). "Good" minorities know their place within the system and do not challenge the existing system. *U.S. News & World Report* implied that other minority groups should model their behavior after Chinese Americans rather than spending their time protesting inequality. Thus Asian Americans were included in discussions of race in order to exclude/silence the voices of African Americans.

During the 1980s the model minority stereotype reached beyond Chinese and Japanese Americans to include Southeast Asians as well. In his analysis of the evolution of the model minority stereotype, Osajima (1988) asserts that, although the popular press began to recognize the potential negative implications of the model minority stereotype during the 1980s, it continued to portray Asian Americans as exemplary minorities who gain success through sheer effort and determination. The cover story for *Time's* August 31, 1987, issue illustrates Osajima's point. The article, "The New Whiz Kids: Why Asian Americans Are Doing So Well, and What It Costs Them," lauded the academic achievement of Asian American students (Brand, 1987). It included stories of Southeast Asian refugees who overcame extreme obstacles to achieve academic success. In the author's words, "By almost every educational gauge, young Asian Americans are soaring" (p. 42). Once again, Asian Americans are depicted as brave, silent, and long-suffering people. The implicit message is that individual effort will be rewarded by success and that failure is the fate of those who do not adhere to the value of hard work. During my research, one of my earliest cues to the significance of the model minority stereotype for Asian American students' identities was that Asian American students repeatedly mentioned that they had read the aforementioned "Whiz Kid" article.

The model minority stereotype of Asian Americans is alive and well in the 1990s. The popular press and public figures from the New Right and neoconservative movements have continued to hold up examples of Asian American success as evidence that minorities can succeed in the United States (Hamamoto, 1992). Herrnstein and Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life* (1994) once again casts Asian Americans as model minorities and African Americans as inferior. In the traditional family rhetoric espoused by neoconservatives and the New Right, Asian American families have been singled out as examples of old-



fashioned, tight-knit families (Hamamoto, 1992; Palumbo-Liu, 1994). The stereotypic functional Asian American family is contrasted with the stereotypic dysfunctional black family headed by a single black mother on welfare. In his attack on political correctness and affirmative action programs, D'Souza (1992) argues that Asian Americans are a deserving minority being hurt by affirmative action programs. According to D'Souza, Asian American "success" is being punished, while African American or Latino "failure" is being rewarded.

In the 1992 riots that followed the Rodney King trial, the model minority image of Asian Americans was once again paraded across TV screens and newspaper headlines. This time Korean Americans were held up as legitimate victims who bravely sought to protect their private property. The conservative press represented Korean Americans as stand-ins for white, middle-class America. Korean Americans were depicted as hard-working, self-made immigrants whose property was threatened by the unlawful anger of black America. Palumbo-Liu (1994) argues that, in the media coverage, "Korean-Americans were represented as the frontline forces of the white bourgeoisie," and he also argues that Korean Americans literally served as a "buffer-zone between the core of a multiethnic ghetto, and white, middle-class America" (p. 371). Asians were once again used as hegemonic devices to support notions of meritocracy and individualism. The sad irony, however, was that even while Asians were being used by the mainstream press to support dominant-group interests, Asian immigrants were abandoned in their time of need (Cho, 1993). Caught in the buffer-zone between blacks and whites, Asian Americans suffered significant losses.

In all of its permutations, the model minority stereotype has been used to support the status quo and the ideologies of meritocracy and individualism. Supporters of the model minority stereotype use Asian American success to delegitimize claims of inequality made by other racial minorities. According to the model minority discourse, Asian Americans prove that social mobility is possible for all those who are willing to work. Asian Americans are represented as examples of upward mobility through individual effort. Charges of racial inequality are met with stories of Asian American success, thereby reifying notions of equal opportunity and meritocracy (Chun, 1980; Hurh & Kim, 1989). As L. M. Wong (1993) notes:

Asian Americans have embodied the liberal image of the acculturated racialized minority who have made it in white society. They are "useful" to those who are at the nadir [*sic*] of the stratification because they provide the "legitimate" and "correct" ways of social mobility. (p. 24)

Implicit in the argument that equal opportunity exists is the fact that the system is freed of any responsibility for inequality. According to this argument, if minorities (i.e., African Americans and Latinos) fail, they have only themselves to blame (Hurh & Kim, 1989). This victim blaming was clear in the 1966 *U.S. News & World Report* article.

Apple and Weis (1983) have written that "hegemony requires the consent of the dominated majority" (p. 19). Asian Americans who seek acceptance by the dominant group may try to emulate model minority behavior. At Academic High, many Asian American students willingly embraced the model minority stereotype. I would argue that their embrace of the model minority representation was partially motivated by the fact that the characterization of Asian Americans as model minorities seems positive and even flattering when compared with the stereotypes of other racial minorities. Furthermore, Asian American students at Academic High were often rewarded with teachers' praise and high grades for performing like model minorities. In their attempts to live up to the model minority standards, many Asian American students censured their own experiences and voices. Self-silencing and the uncritical acceptance of the model minority stereotype represent Asian American consent to hegemony. Back in the 1970s, Frank Chin and Jeffery Chan (1971) referred to this kind of behavior as the acceptance of "racist love." They write, "If the system works, the stereotypes assigned to the various races are accepted by the races themselves as reality, as fact, and racist love reigns" (p. 65). Although the majority of Asian American students at Academic High School spoke proudly of being stereotyped as model minorities and even engaged in the self-silencing of their experiences, there were Asian American students who actively resisted the conditions of the model minority stereotype.

As noted earlier, the model minority stereotype takes attention off the white majority by pitting Asian Americans against African Americans. When Asian Americans and African Americans engage in interracial competition/tension, they are consenting to hegemony. While Asian Americans and African Americans are fighting among themselves, the racial barriers that limit Asian Americans and African Americans remain unchallenged. The resentment that the model minority stereotype engenders contributed to the racial tension in the 1992 riots in Los Angeles. Although there was evidence of tension between Asian Americans and African Americans at Academic High, there was also evidence of resistance to the model minority construction of race. There were a few Asian Americans and African Americans who attempted to build a coalition of racial minorities to deconstruct white dominance. In this book I will examine both consensus and resistance to the hegemonic discourse of the model minority stereotype.



## OVERVIEW OF THE RESEARCH PROCESS

I began doing fieldwork at Academic High in January of 1989 and left on the last day of the school year. During my time at the school, Dr. Levine, the principal, allowed me significant freedom to wander around the school. I was fortunate to be allowed into classrooms, club meetings, and social cliques. I spent an average of four days a week at Academic High. I attended sporting events, extracurricular activities, and two proms; I also served as one of two adult supervisors for the girls' badminton team trip to the Great Adventure amusement park. I took extensive fieldnotes of my observations and informal conversations with faculty, staff, and students. These notes appear throughout the book. I interviewed Asian and non-Asian students, as well as members of the faculty and staff. During the course of my research, I had regular contact with approximately 82 Asian American students at Academic High, and I conducted semistructured interviews with 47 of these students. The semistructured interviews with Asian American students were audiotaped, and the quotations that appear in this book are verbatim transcripts of these interviews. Semistructured interviews with white and African American students were also audiotaped and transcribed. I did not audiotape interviews with faculty and staff, but I did take written notes. I observed classes, ate lunch with students and staff, and followed students into their communities.

Throughout the summer of 1989 I continued observing and interacting with eight Asian American student informants. During the 1989-90 school year I continued to have contact with informants through phone conversations. My contact with Academic High ended on June 13, 1990, when I attended Academic High's 1990 graduation ceremony.

Throughout the book I use pseudonyms for all my informants. Because of the importance of ethnicity, I made every attempt to give informants pseudonyms that match their ethnic backgrounds. I also pay attention to giving gender-specific names and titles. I use pseudonyms for the school and the city as well. Although people familiar with public high schools on the East Coast may be able to identify the school, I use a pseudonym to shift the focus away from this particular school and to redirect the focus toward public schools in general. I want to stress that it would be unfair to isolate this school for any "blame." The findings—"positive" and "negative"—were only discovered because Dr. Levine gave me access to the school and the teachers and students allowed me into their lives. While particular events and people are unique to this school at a particular historical moment, I want to stress that the questions and concerns raised by the data speak beyond the school.

## **Academic High School**

Academic High School is a public high school located in a major city on the East Coast, north of the Mason-Dixon line. As a special-admit school, Academic High accepts students from throughout the city on the basis of standardized test scores and grades. At the time of my research there were more than 110 teachers on the faculty, and many held advanced degrees. The curriculum included standard academic offerings as well as a course in Asian Studies and one in Hebrew. At the time I entered the school there were 2,050 students enrolled at Academic High. The racial breakdown of the student population was 45% white, 35% black/African American, 18% Asian American, and 2% other. The 356 Asian American students at the school represented a range of social class backgrounds and ethnicities. I chose Academic High as my research site because I believed the diversity of the Asian American population would enable me to observe a range of intra-Asian interactions and a range of identity groups.

Even before I ever set foot on the grounds of Academic High School, I heard from a variety of people in the city that Academic High was "different," "special," and "better" than the other high schools in the city. Teachers from other public schools and community members told me that Academic High students were "smarter" and "nicer." Upon entering Academic High for the first time, I was immediately impressed by how the students were free to simply wander the halls. At other high schools in the city there were strict rules against students being in the halls during class periods, and students found breaking those rules were treated like petty criminals. When I entered the main office, I was struck once again by how different Academic High seemed. While most other high school offices were dreary places that were painted an institutional green or beige, Academic High's office was lined with student artwork.

When I met Dr. Benjamin Levine, the principal of Academic High, he described Academic High students as being "the nicest kids in the world." When I was introduced to Dr. Rafferty, the teacher of English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), he proudly asserted that Academic High was an intensely academic institution that had been named one of the best high schools in the nation. The idea that Academic High is a special institution pervades the Academic High experience and plays a significant role in race relations among the students.

## **The Impact of My Identity on the Research**

As an Asian American woman of Chinese descent, I represent different things to different people. According to some non-Asians, I am Asian



and therefore a foreigner—not American. To others, I am the model minority. Among older Chinese immigrants, I am thought of as a "jook sen," which literally translates into "hollow bamboo." "Jook sen" are ridiculed for having lost their "Chineseness." My point here is that individuals' responses to me and perceptions of me are influenced by their own social identities.

Based on my personal experiences and on the belief that all research is partial and located (Kondo, 1990; Rosaldo, 1989), I assumed that my identity would influence the relationships I developed with my informants. Prior to entering the school, I assumed that my prospective Asian American informants would see me as Chinese, American-born Chinese (ABC), Asian, or Asian American. I also expected that a few informants might assume me to be a member of another Asian ethnic group. I was interested in whether my Asian American informants would view me as an insider (i.e., fellow Asian American) or as an outsider, and I decided to use their interpretations of my identity and their responses to me as data. When I arrived at Academic High, I quickly learned that most Korean students thought of other Asian Americans as being innately inferior to Koreans and distanced themselves from all other Asian students. Based on this information, I made concerted efforts early in the research process to develop contacts within the Korean student population. Although the Korean students always saw me as Asian/Chinese and therefore different, they identified other aspects of my social identity that redeemed me in their eyes (e.g., my educational background and middle-class background). As a result of my relationship with the Korean students, I began to understand the significance of social class in their identities.

In addition to my ethnic/racial identity and social-class identity, I discovered that my gender, age, American-born status, and position as a graduate student influenced how informants reacted to me. At the time of my research, I was in my late 20s and the fact that I looked relatively young led some students to view me as an "OK" adult. Although many of my Asian American informants remarked that anyone over 21 was "old," many also asserted that I looked young because I was Asian. I became a confidante to many students, who shared their stories about romantic flirtations, family problems, and future plans with me. Some Asian American students referred to me as an older sister or aunt. As a graduate student, I gained some status in the eyes of the high-achieving students and in the eyes of some Korean-identified students. These students asked me about my educational background and about my personal experiences applying to college. While my status as a graduate student helped me in my contacts with high-achieving students, it made it difficult for me to gain the acceptance of the low-achieving Asian Americans who were expressing resis-

tance to schooling. These students, known as the new wavers, saw me as part of the authority structure and viewed me with suspicion. Eventually, I was able to gain their trust, and some of them began to see me as a potential homework assistant.

One of my most interesting findings in regard to my identity was that most Asian American students did not think of me as an American even once they learned that I was born and raised in California. To many students of Asian descent, only white people were considered to be Americans. Although many of my informants had difficulty accepting that I was American, some of my informants also found my behavior to be un-Asian. Dorrine Kondo (1990), a Japanese American anthropologist, encountered similar reactions from her Japanese informants in Japan, who found her to be both Japanese and not Japanese. One of my informants found my habit of bringing my own lunch in a brown paper bag to be very "American." In an almost accusatory tone he said, "You are like an American—you bring your own lunch. Only Americans bring their lunch!" When I asked him why Asians did not bring their own lunches, he told me a story about a time in elementary school when he had to bring his lunch to school because his class was going on a fieldtrip. He said, "You know, I brought some kind of Asian food, and the kids made fun of the way it looked and smelled." He asserted that he thought most Asians had been teased for bringing Asian food. Through this interaction I learned how some Asian American students had been silenced by the ethnocentric behavior of their non-Asian peers. The interaction also made me aware that these students were watching me and trying to decipher me, just as I was watching them. According to this student, I was acting like one of the people who had denigrated him. Finally, the interaction made me reflect on my actions and my own identity.

It would be false to suggest that my identities only influenced the ways that my informants saw me and did not influence how I saw them. The reality was that my background, politics, and experiences did influence how I felt about the things students said and did. In the beginning, I hid my attitudes, politics, and beliefs. I made every attempt to appear neutral. Whenever students asked me what I thought, I attempted to redirect the conversation back to them. By taking this position, I was able to establish relationships with a variety of students from often conflicting camps. Eventually, however, I found that my silence was not neutral. Because I am an Asian American adult and because some of the students teased me about being like their sister or aunt, I realized that students might see me as a role model. Thus I feared that my silence in the face of racist, sexist, homophobic, classist remarks might be interpreted as sanctioning. On the other hand, I did not want to force my opinions and ideas



on my informants because I believed that I would then be guilty of silencing my informants in much the same way that the stereotypes and institutional structures had silenced them. In the end, I adapted an approach whereby I attempted to challenge students and encourage them to examine their racism, sexism, homophobia, and so forth (Lather, 1986; Roman & Apple, 1990).

In places in the book my voice(s) will appear alongside those of my informants. I will include my voice when it is most relevant to understanding how my identity and voice influenced the research process. In this way, I hope to call attention to the relationship between Self/researcher and Other/informant, thereby "working the hyphen" (Fine, 1994). Fine (1994) asserts that, by "working the hyphen" in qualitative research, "researchers probe how we are in relation with the contexts we study and with our informants, understanding that we are all multiple in those relations" (p. 72).

### **A Note on the Politics of Identity Labels**

Throughout the book I will use the term *Asian American* when referring to students of Asian descent as a group. The specific Asian ethnic groups included in this study were Cambodian, Chinese, Korean, Lao, and Vietnamese. Although there were a few American-born Asians at the school, most of the Asian American students at Academic High were immigrants from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Korea or refugees from Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. It must be emphasized that the term *Asian American* is my term and not the term used by the majority of Asian American students at the school. With the exception of a small group of students who identified themselves as Asian American, most students of Asian descent did not identify with the label. Interestingly, most of the students had trouble with the *American* part of the label, not the Asian part. In fact, with the important exception of Korean-identified students, most students of Asian descent shared a panethnic/racial identity as Asians.

Originally, the dominant group imposed the term *Asian American* on people of Asian descent because they saw Asian Americans as a homogeneous group (Espiritu, 1992; Lowe, 1991). Other examples of panethnic categories created by the dominant group include Latino/Hispanic, Native American/Indian, and African American/black (Cornell, 1988; Espiritu, 1992; Keyes, 1981; Trottier, 1981; Waters, 1990). During the 1960s Asian American activists representing different ethnic groups joined forces to fight for equal rights and embraced the term *Asian American* as a political term (Espiritu, 1992; Lowe, 1991; Omi & Winant, 1986). In writing about

the disability rights movement, Fine and Asch (1988) noted that a common experience of discrimination brought together a diverse group of people with disabilities to fight for civil rights:

Why would a limb deficient girl, a teenager with mental retardation, or a blind girl have anything in common with each other, or with a woman with breast cancer or another woman recovering from a stroke? What they share is similar treatment by a sexist and disability-phobic society. (p. 6)

For Asian Americans, an analogous question might be: What does a fourth-generation Japanese American have in common with a Cambodian refugee? Those who would argue for an Asian American identity would assert that one thing they share is the experience of racism. Like disability activists, those who identify with the Asian American label have formed their identities in response to social conditions.

In writing about the politics of an Asian American panethnic identity, Lowe (1991) warns against "essentializing" Asian America and silencing the diversity of Asian American experiences:

A politics based on ethnic identity facilitates the displacement of inter-community differences—between men and women, or between workers and managers—into a false opposition of "nationalism" and "assimilation." (p. 30)

In writing about the different groups, I will attempt to pay attention to the ways that gender, social class, sexual orientation, and other variables influence an individual's experience and his or her identity.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

This book centers on the experiences of the four Asian American identity groups at Academic High School. The following questions emerge and reemerge throughout the book:

- What do Asian American student identities tell us about the formation of ethnic/racial identity?
- How does the variation in Asian American student identity contribute to our understanding of the literature on immigrant minorities (e.g., Gibson, 1988, 1991; Ogbu, 1987, 1991)?
- How did the model minority stereotype influence Asian American student identity?
- What identities were encouraged and discouraged by the school?



- How did the model minority stereotype influence race relations?
- What influence did the school have on race relations?

In Chapter 2, I introduce the four self-defined Asian American identity groups. Attention is on the similarities and differences among the groups and on the relationships among the groups (i.e., intra-Asian dynamics). A central theme is the formation of panethnic identity among Asian Americans. Panethnic groups consist of individual ethnic groups that have united in order to promote collective interests despite distinct cultural, tribal, or national histories (Espiritu, 1992). For Asian Americans, a panethnic identity is equivalent to a racial identity. My original assumption prior to conducting the research was that Asian American students would form panethnic/racial identities in response to negative experiences with non-Asians. In other words, I viewed ethnic groups as "communities of interest" who organize around common concerns and experiences (Espiritu, 1992). This chapter focuses on students who embrace panethnicity by identifying as Asian and/or Asian American and on students who identify solely with their specific ethnic group. Other issues considered are the salience of social class and gender to identity.

Chapter 3 turns to stories of Asian American student achievement. Voices of high- and low-achieving students are highlighted. The focus is on how students' identities influenced their attitudes toward schools and their achievement. Questions to be considered include: What were their perceptions regarding future opportunities? How did they view the role of schooling in their lives?

Chapter 4 deals with how race relations at Academic High are constructed. The focus is on how school policies influenced race relations.

In Chapter 5 we hear about race from the perspective of African American, white, and Asian American students. This chapter examines how school forces and the model minority stereotype influenced race relations at the school.

Chapter 6 revisits the major issues in the book. I will refocus on issues of identity, school achievement, and race relations.

As a whole, this book attempts to underscore the insidious ways in which the model minority stereotype affects Asian American students.

## CHAPTER 2

# What's in a Name? Asian American Identities at Academic High School

May 4, 1989—This was a really busy day. After school I ran back and forth between the girls' badminton game and the Korean Students' Association meeting. One minute I would be in the bleachers with several of my Asian-identified informants cheering on the badminton team, and the next minute I would be sitting among my Korean informants listening to them discuss election procedures. It was a little frustrating because I felt like I kept missing things in both places, but I had to show up in both places so that it would not appear as if I were favoring Koreans over Asians or vice versa.

When I first arrived at Academic High School, several teachers informed me that the Asian American students had split themselves into two groups: Koreans in one and all other Asians in another. On the surface, the teachers' observations seemed to be accurate. I found that, with the exception of most Korean students, who identified solely as Korean, Asian American students at Academic High shared a panethnic identity. However, while they shared a panethnic/pan-Asian identity, they did not make up a single identity group but divided themselves into three subgroups: Asian, Asian new wave, and Asian American. Thus the students I termed *Asian American* at Academic High divided themselves into four self-defined identity subgroups (i.e., how they referred to themselves and to each other): Korean-identified, Asian-identified, Asian new wave-identified, and Asian American-identified. Identity groups usually translated into social groups or subcultures, but membership in a subculture was also influenced by academic achievement and academic tracking. For example, high-achieving students often crossed identity groups to socialize with other high-achieving students. Since students' identities were fluid and not static, movement among identity groups did occur. Finally, it