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Behind the Model-Minority Stereotype: Voices of High- and Low-Achieving Asian American Students

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This article examines the complex relationship between Asian American student identity(ies) and perceptions regarding future opportunity and attitudes toward schooling. The article argues that identity and attitudes toward schooling are not static, as some have argued, but are negotiated through experiences and relationships inside and outside of school. Data for this article were collected as part of a larger ethnographic study on Asian American high school students.
ASIAN AMERICAN, MODEL-MINORITY STEREOTYPE, HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, MINORITY ACHIEVEMENT

Asian American students are commonly depicted as academic superstars or model minorities. According to the model-minority stereotype, Asian Americans are successful in school because they work hard and come from cultures that believe in the value of education. Scholars and the popular press have contrasted the success of Asian American students to the underachievement of other minorities.

In an attempt to understand differential achievement among minority groups, cultural ecologists have pointed to the ways in which identity, historical experiences, and perceptions of opportunities affect school performance (Gibson 1988; Matute-Bianchi 1986, 1991; Ogbu 1978, 1983, 1987, 1989, 1991; Suárez-Orozco 1989, 1991). Ogbu distinguishes between what he calls voluntary and involuntary minorities (Ogbu 1989). He defines voluntary minorities as immigrants who voluntarily come to this country (e.g., Asian Americans) in search of a better life and involuntary minorities as those who were incorporated into the United States through slavery or conquest (e.g., African Americans, Mexicans, Hawaiians, etc.). Ogbu argues that differences in achievement levels between voluntary and involuntary minorities are related to their respective perceptions regarding future opportunities and their perceptions and responses to schooling (Ogbu 1987:313). According to Ogbu, voluntary minorities tend to do well in school because they see schooling as a necessary step to social mobility. They see themselves as guests in the United States who must live by the host's rules. Furthermore, they interpret the cultural and language barriers that they face in the United States as things that they must overcome in order to succeed there. On

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the other hand, because of persistent economic and social discrimination, involuntary minorities do not believe in the possibility of social mobility. These minorities reject the dominant culture and develop an oppositional culture. In short, Ogbu argues that involuntary minorities underachieve in school because they view schooling as a threat to their oppositional cultures and identities.

Ogbu's framework provides important insight into the relationship between a group's perception of schooling and that group's achievement in school, but his categories promote the stereotype that Asian Americans are a monolithic group with shared achievement levels and shared attitudes toward schooling. In short, while the cultural ecological perspective points to significant intergroup differences, it does not uncover the equally significant intragroup differences. One result is that Asian Americans are once again seen as model minorities whose diverse and complex experiences remain hidden.

This article will attempt to lift the veil of the model-minority myth and reveal the lives of the students behind the stereotype. Through excerpts from ethnographic interviews we will hear what Asian American students have to say about their identity, schooling, and the model-minority stereotype. Like the cultural ecologists, I address the relationship between students' perceptions of opportunities, their perceptions of schooling and students' achievement, but I also focus on intragroup differences among Asian American high school students. The article will examine how different groups of Asian American students define themselves in terms of ethnic/racial identity and how their different identities influence their attitudes toward schooling and their achievement.

Background of the Study

Data for this article were collected as part of a larger ethnographic study on the development of identity among Asian American high school students. The fieldwork was conducted at a school that I call Academic High School. The fieldwork consisted of participant observations, interviews, and analysis of site documents. The quotations used in this article are verbatim transcriptions from interview tapes. Academic High is a public, coeducational high school located in Philadelphia. Admission to Academic High is open to students throughout Philadelphia on the basis of grades and standardized test scores. During the 1988–89 school year when this data was collected, there were 2050 students enrolled at Academic High. The racial makeup of the student population was: white (45%); African American (35%); Asian American (18%); and Latino (2%). Although there were a few American-born Asian students at the school, the Asian American population consisted primarily of students from Cambodia, Laos, Korea, Taiwan, Vietnam, Hong Kong, and China.

Achievement among Asian Americans at Academic High

During my first days of fieldwork at Academic High School, teachers and administrators were eager to show me that their Asian students were doing well (that is, that they were model minorities). Teachers pointed to the bulletin board in the main corridor which listed the names (many Asian) of the top ten students in each graduating class, in order to show me that Asians did well at Academic High. An overview of such indicators of academic achievement as academic awards, and enrollment in Advanced Placement (AP), Honors, and Mentally Gifted classes suggested that at least some Asian Americans at Academic High were successful. The class of 1990 had six Asian American students ranked in the top ten, a fact that led students to nickname the class the "Asian class."

Despite the high proportion of Asian students who are at the top of the academic rankings, a thorough examination of the rankings illustrates that not all Asian American students are successful. During the 1988–89 school year, 15 Asian students were deselected from Academic High because of weak academic performance and sent back to their neighborhood schools. Of the 18 students in the class of 1989 who were deemed ineligible to graduate with their class, three (16%) of them were Asian. These three students eventually received Academic High diplomas after completing summer school classes. In the class of 1989 one out of the four students who were ineligible to receive an Academic High diploma was Asian. All four of these students were deselected from Academic High and transferred back to their neighborhood schools. In addition to these students with serious academic troubles, the successful students told me that there were many Asian students who "just get by."

While a survey of class rankings and other statistics told me that Asian American students experienced varying levels of achievement, these facts could not tell me who the different students were or what they thought about schooling. In order to find out whether achievement levels are related to identity and perceptions of schooling, I set out to uncover the stories behind the numbers.

Asian American Identities at Academic High School

When I arrived at Academic High, I was told that Asian American students had split themselves into two major groups: Koreans in one group, and all other Asians in another group. I found this observation, as a gross generalization, to be true. While Asians from China, Hong Kong, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and Taiwan expressed a panethnic identity usually referring to each other as Asian, Koreans identified solely as Korean and never as Asian or Asian American. However, Asian students who shared a panethnic identity did not make up a single identity group but divided themselves into three identity groups: Asian, Asian new wave, and Asian American. Thus the Asian American stu-

dents at Academic High divided themselves into four identity groups: Koreans, Asians, Asian new wavers, and Asian Americans. Each identity group had a unique perspective on schooling which influenced their experiences at Academic High. Matute-Bianchi (1986) discovered similar variations among Mexican American students in her study.

Koreans

Korean students identified solely as Koreans and not as Asians or Asian Americans. They rarely socialized with Asians from other ethnic backgrounds and even took steps to distance themselves from the other Asian students at Academic High. Korean students formed their own separate club (the Korean Students' Association) and refused to participate in the Asian Students' Association (ASA). They explained to me that Koreans were "superior" to other Asians. Korean students' notions regarding Korean superiority were based on their belief that Southeast Asians were poor and unsophisticated. The majority of the Korean students at Academic High were children of merchants, and they thought of themselves as being middle class. Korean students criticized Southeast Asians for being "welfare sponges," and they ridiculed them for wearing "tacky" clothing. In writing about Asian American panethnicity, Espiritu (1992) noted that social- and economic-class differences have historically limited the development of a pan-Asian identity. At Academic High, the Korean students used social class as a marker of difference.

Koreans' attempts to distance themselves from other Asians were motivated by their efforts to get closer to whites. Korean students told me that their parents instructed them to socialize only with Koreans and whites. Peter Choe said:[1]

> When I first came to [the] U.S., they said I should get—should hang out with American kids so I could get Americanized. So, I hang out with American kids.

When I asked Peter to define what he and his parents meant when they used the term *American*, he and his Korean friends responded in unison with "White! Korean parents like whites." They said that their parents believed that "learning American ways" was essential to success in the United States and that by socializing with whites they could learn "American ways." It is important to point out that Korean students recognized that not all whites have equal social status and that they targeted the more socially elite groups as their role models. Thus the white upper-middle-class students, often referred to as "Chestnut Hillers" or "Chestnut Hill types," were the ones whom the Koreans chose to emulate. Specifically, the Korean students looked to the "Chestnut Hill types" to find out what kind of clothes to wear and where to buy them.

Although, Korean students were taught to emulate their white middle-class peers while at school, their parents also encouraged them to maintain their Korean identities at home and in the Korean community. Mrs. Kyung Clark, the only Korean teacher at Academic High, promoted the strategy of a dual identity among her students. For example, she encouraged her students to speak Korean when they were among Koreans, but she also encouraged them to adopt "American names" to use among "Americans." This strategy of maintaining a dual identity is similar to the strategy of "accommodation without assimilation" that Gibson describes the Punjabis adapting in California (1988). In both cases the parents and the immigrant communities promote the adaption of "American" values while at school and the maintenance of traditional values at home.

Koreans believed school success was the other ingredient necessary for social mobility in the United States. According to many Korean students, success would be a high-paying job in business, or a career as a doctor, lawyer, or engineer. Students often stated that their parents decided to come to the United States because of the educational opportunities for children. Some students spoke of the responsibility and guilt that they felt for their parents' sacrifices. As a result, Korean students worked hard in school. But despite the group's positive attitude toward schooling, achievement among Korean students varied. Korean students with limited English proficiency experienced the greatest academic difficulty.

One response that Korean students had to differential achievement within the Korean student population was that the higher achievers would help the lower achievers. Kay Row, a high-achieving Korean 11th grader, had been in the United States since she was very young and was more comfortable speaking English than Korean. Kay explained that she felt it was her responsibility to use her English language skills to help younger Korean classmates who had problems at Academic High. Another way that Koreans responded to differential achievement among Koreans was to promote the model-minority image. Jane Park made this statement to a few of her Korean peers:

> American kids have this stereotype, like, [that] we're smart. We are smarter. I mean, I don't think it's a stereotype—Look at our report cards. We are better, and we have to show it.

When I asked Jane about the low-achieving Koreans, she stated that Koreans were "still smarter." Jane and her friends believed that by being like model minorities Koreans could earn the respect of whites and move up the social ladder.

Asians

Students who identified as Asian represented a range of Asian ethnicities and a range of social-class backgrounds. This group included American-born Chinese, immigrants from Hong Kong and Taiwan, and Southeast Asian refugees. These students believed that all Asians regardless of ethnicity shared common experiences in the United States. In addition to their Asian identity, these students also identified with their specific ethnic group. Loosely speaking, students would stress their Asian identity in interracial situations and would stress their specific group affiliations within Asian circles.

Of all the Asian American students at Academic High, the Asian-identified students most closely resembled the quiet, polite, and hard working student exemplified by the model-minority stereotype. I often found these students studying before school and during lunch periods. Asian-identified students dreamt of jobs in medicine, engineering, computer science, or other science-related fields. These students told me that their parents had taught them that doing well in school was important in order to do well in this country. Although these students believed in the value of hard work, they also seemed to accept that discrimination would limit their potential. They did not challenge discrimination but instead altered their expectations to fit what they perceived to be their opportunities. For example, most Asian-identified students believed that their Asian "accents" would keep them from doing certain things in the United States, but none questioned the fairness of this discrimination. One Asian identified informant told me that, although he wanted to be a lawyer or politician, he planned to be an engineer because of his "accent."

Like the Korean students, Asian-identified students were motivated to work hard because they felt obligated to their families for the sacrifices that they had made. Asian-identified students spoke about their desire to get good jobs in order to help support their parents. Suárez-Orozco (1989) reports similar achievement motivation among students from Central America. Although the students who identified as Asian worked hard and held positive attitudes toward schooling, these students ranged from high achievers to low achievers. The experience of the low achievers suggests that positive attitudes and hard work do not necessarily guarantee school success.

High Achievers

Thai Le is a high-achieving student who identifies as Chinese and as Asian. Ranked number three in his class, Thai has always been an exemplary student. Thai takes AP and Honors classes and earns straight As. In elementary school, his academic talent allowed him to skip two grade levels. During his junior year at Academic High, his academic

prowess won him a full scholarship to participate in a special summer program at Carnegie Mellon University.

Thai explained that his mother has always encouraged him and his sister to do well in school. He explained that he did not have any chores around the house because his primary responsibility was to get good grades. Thai's mother, a cosmetology student, dreams that her children will become white-collar professionals who will achieve the American dream. Thai's family came to the United States as refugees from Vietnam. Thai told me that his family had lost everything to communism and that he planned to help his family regain their economic security. His plans were to do well in school, win a scholarship to a prestigious university, get a good job, and make a lot of money in order to support his parents.

Although Thai's mother has high expectations for her son, she has warned him that as a Chinese person he must choose his career carefully. Thai explained that his mother counseled him against a career that would require public speaking because he has a Chinese accent. Thus, while Thai would like to be a lawyer and a politician, he says that he plans to be an engineer.

Mei Mei Wong, another high-achieving student, identifies as both Taiwanese and Asian. Like others who identify as Asian, Mei Mei works hard in school and believes that her hard work will one day pay off in the form of a good job. Mei Mei often worried that she would not succeed. By many standards, Mei Mei is a highly successful student. Within five years of coming to the United States, Mei Mei had already earned academic success at an elite American high school. She is ranked in the top ten of her class, takes Honors and AP classes, plays in the orchestra, and is a member of the softball team. Her academic prowess won her the honor of attending the 1989 Pennsylvania Governor's School for agriculture. Despite this success, Mei Mei is uneasy. In the following quotation, Mei Mei talks about how the model-minority stereotype has affected her sense of self:

> They [whites] will have stereotypes, like, we're smart—They are so wrong; not everyone is smart. They expect you to be this and that, and when you're not— [*shakes her head*]. And sometimes you tend to be what they expect you to be, and you just lose your identity— just lose being yourself. Become part of what—what someone else want[s] you to be. And it's really awkward too! When you get bad grades, people look at you really strangely because you are sort of distorting the way they see an Asian. It makes you feel really awkward if you don't fit the stereotype.

Mei Mei's statement illustrates the pressure that the model-minority stereotype places on Asian students to achieve. Mei Mei's statement points to the way that the stereotype influences how she sees herself. Despite her success, Mei Mei often spoke of her "poor" performance. Mei Mei's teachers and her non-Asian classmates were all aware of Mei

Mei's fear of failure. Because the model-minority stereotype sets the parameters for "good" and "acceptable" behavior, students like Mei Mei may fear that a failure to live up to these standards would mean being perceived as "unacceptable."

Low Achievers

Like their high-achieving counterparts, the low-achieving students who identified as Asian worked hard in school and believed that schooling was the key to a secure future. I stumbled upon my first group of low-achieving Asian-identified students during my initial weeks at Academic High, but since these students fit my stereotype of model achievers rather than my image of academically troubled students, it took me weeks before I made my discovery.

Ming Chang was one of these seemingly model achievers who turned out to be a low achiever. When I met Ming, he was eating lunch with a group of extraordinarily quiet Asian males. When I arrived at their table, they acknowledged me and then quickly went back to playing chess. Their behavior fed into my stereotype of quiet and studious Asian students. Since they did not talk to me, I decided to tell them a little about my research. They told me that they were all from Cambodia (ethnic Chinese or Cambodian). Since I had not met many students from Cambodia, I asked them whether or not they would agree to be interviewed. Although nobody refused, it was clear that they were not eager to talk to me.

At the end of their lunch period, Ming lingered for a few moments and then suddenly began to tell me all about his escape from Cambodia and the recent death of his brother. Ming explained that these incidents had sapped him of his energy. It was with this rather dramatic disclosure that Ming and I began our relationship. I followed him to classes and ate lunch with him and his group on a regular basis. Despite all of this contact and the fact that he regularly shared information about how he was feeling, I had little information about his academic achievement. In my mind, Ming was a diligent and quiet student. He seemed to fit the image of a model minority.

It was Ming's government teacher, Brian Johnson, who finally told me about Ming's academic problems. Ming was on the verge of failing government—a major course needed for graduation. Mr. Johnson approached me about Ming because he felt that he could not reach him and thought that I might have some advice. In his words, "I just don't know what to do. He won't come to [group] tutoring sessions, and he won't come to me for help. We don't have problems personally.... In fact, Ming talks to me about his personal problems all of the time." When I spoke to Ming about his problems in government, I learned that he was also failing his English class and that he was having problems in physics. The most surprising fact, however, was not that he was having academic difficulty but that many of his peers assumed that Ming was academi-

cally successful. On at least one occasion a member of the ASA tried to recruit Ming as a tutor for their peer-tutoring program.

When I suggested to Ming that he attend the tutoring sessions, Ming shook his head and said that he would not even consider attending these sessions. Ming said that it would be embarrassing to reveal his academic difficulties and that Asians did not talk about their problems. In his words:

> You know, Asians don't talk about their problems—We just keep it inside—My father would kill me if I talk about stuff.

Ming was referring to the Asian ethos that states that an individual's first loyalty is to his/her family and that "bad" behavior (i.e., disclosure of failure) on the part of an individual shames the entire family (Sue and Sue 1971).

The ironic thing, however, was that Ming often spoke to non-Asians about his personal problems. The stories about his experiences in Cambodia and his experience as a refugee were well known among teachers. Why, then, did Ming feel comfortable sharing these stories and not feel comfortable asking for academic help? In order to answer this question it is crucial to consider the difference between revealing stories of personal trauma and information about academic problems.

Stories of Cambodia evoked everything from respect to pity from his teachers and non-Asian peers. Refugee stories conform to the image of Asians as long-suffering people who struggle against the odds to achieve. In short, stories of personal struggle support the model-minority image depicted by the popular press during this period. The 1987 *Time* article that characterized Asians as "whiz kids" who overcome incredible odds to succeed in school is one example of the articles that glorified the model-minority image (Brand 1987). Although many of the articles that appeared in the 1980s recognized the potential danger of the model-minority stereotype, the articles continued to cast Asian Americans as academic stars who achieve success through sheer effort (Osajima 1988). These articles ignored the problems of Asian American students who are low achievers. It should be noted that Ming and other Asian American students at Academic High were aware of the model-minority image depicted in the popular press and that some students spoke specifically about the "whiz kid" piece in *Time*. Many of my Asian American informants expressed pride in the whiz-kid image. I would argue that Ming's reluctance to seek academic support was based on his desire to live within the boundaries of the model-minority stereotype. Since academic failure clearly contradicts the model-minority stereotype, Ming felt that admitting his academic failure would cause his family to lose face (be ashamed). In the end, Ming's refusal to seek help for his academic difficulties perpetuated his academic problems and left him feeling isolated and depressed.

Ming's academic problems were related to his difficulties with English. Ming had been in the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) program in middle school and during his ninth-grade year at Academic High. Although he was deemed eligible for mainstreaming, he still had trouble with reading and writing. During the remainder of the year I met several Asian-identified students who were having academic difficulties related to their problems with the English language. Like Ming, these students tended to be rather quiet, and hesitant about reaching out for academic support. They often spoke about their inability to communicate in English. Thus, in addition to the limits that the model-minority stereotype places on these students, another explanation for their reluctance to ask for help might be their discomfort with any interaction that requires verbal interaction in English. Thus, their problems became self-perpetuating.

Asian New Wavers

Most of the students who identified as new wavers were Southeast Asian refugees from working-class and poor families. New wavers had a panethnic identity similar to students who identified simply as Asian. New wave students were named after the new wave music that many of these students were said to like. The new wavers were easily identifiable because they almost always wore black clothes and spiked up their hair. The other Asian American students described new wavers as the students who "liked to party."

Unlike the students who simply referred to themselves as Asian, the new wavers did not see school as the key to success in the United States. In fact, the new wave students were almost flamboyant in their disrespect for academic achievement. Like the lads in Willis's study (1977), the new wavers refused to conform to the rules required for academic success (e.g., regular attendance, studying). Their primary goals were to get around the school rules and to pass their classes without having to do much work. When asked what they planned to do after high school, most new wavers responded with vague plans to work or attend community college. Although some spoke of getting high-paying jobs, they did not have concrete ideas about how to achieve these goals. Matute-Bianchi (1986) reported similar findings among some Mexican-descent students.

Another way that new wavers differed from those who identified as Asian was that they were peer oriented. While Korean- and Asian-identified students emphasized family obligation, the new wavers were most concerned with what their peers thought. New wave students understood that non-Asians stereotype Asians as good students or nerds, and they believed that these images prevented Asians from gaining social acceptance among non-Asians. In an attempt to be accepted by non-Asians, new wave students rejected all behaviors associated with nerds. One new wave girl told me that her new wave friends often cut classes

in order to be "more American . . . more cool." Other new wavers simply told me that they wanted to be "cool." They defined cool people as those who are fashionable dressers, good dancers, partygoers, and popular, especially with the opposite gender. These students told me that cool people are not supposed to be overly concerned with academic achievement or rules. In short, cool people know how to have fun, a definition that is in direct contrast to the model-minority stereotype of Asians.

I learned that new wavers often socialized on the southeast lawn of the school grounds before, during, and after school. Although male students outnumbered female students on the southeast lawn, girls were generally present. I met Lee Chau, an ethnic Chinese from Vietnam who identified himself as Asian and socially new wave at an ASA bakesale. Lee sat at the bakesale for three class periods in a row. Although he did not work at the bakesale, he used it as an excuse to miss his classes. We chatted informally about his ideas about Academic High and about my research. Personable from the beginning, Lee invited me to a dance party at a local club that weekend. Although I did not attend the party, Lee agreed to show me life on the southeast lawn.

As an informant, Lee proved to be rather colorful. Since he was often truant, it was difficult to schedule appointments with him. But because he held high status on the southeast lawn, his acceptance of me proved to be helpful in my efforts to gain the trust of his buddies. Lee was popular among his male and female peers. An athlete, Lee is well built and, according to his friends, "able to handle himself." In his own words, "I'm not a wimp. I can defend myself. A lot of Asians can't fight; so they have to go around in gangs. They're small. You know Asian guys." During his junior year at Academic High, Lee and another Asian American male were the victims of a racially motivated attack that took place at a subway station near school. Although Lee was able to get away with minor injuries, this incident confirmed his belief that he had to be able to protect himself.

As a car owner, Lee earned extra status. During the spring, his car stereo provided music for the group on the southeast lawn. In addition to musical entertainment, cars provided students with a means of escape. This is what Lee told me when I asked him about his "extracurricular adventures."

> *SL:* What do you do when you cut class?
> *Lee:* You know, we hang on the southeast lawn. Sometimes, if enough cars are available, we go places. Last year a lot of Asians owned cars, and we used to drive to Atlantic City to shoot pool. If we go, you could come with us. Sometimes we just go to the Gallery [a shopping mall near Chinatown] and eat.

On the day that I tailed Lee, we spent most of the day on the southeast lawn, where he smoked, listened to music, played volleyball, and talked.

Unlike Ming, Lee's academic problems were not related to problems with English. Lee simply did not go to his classes or do his work. His teachers described him as "bright but lazy." Veronica Jefferson, his math teacher, said, "Oh, Lee's a character. He's not like my other Asian students. . . . He's capable of doing better, but he didn't bother to take a test. He's getting a D, and his attitude is 'I'm passing.' " This laissez faire attitude earned him a place in the bottom quarter of his class.

Lee explained that he did not care about his grades at Academic because he did not have any intentions of going on to college. His plans included a stint in the U.S. Navy, where he would learn a mechanical skill. For Lee, the biggest attraction to the navy, however, was not the vocational training or the idea of serving his adopted country but the fact that it offered him an opportunity to develop his boxing skills. Lee's athletic abilities set him apart from most other Asians. In addition, Lee had been in fights with non-Asians. Athletic prowess is not typically included in the stereotype of Asian men. In fact, the model-minority stereotype creates an image of Asian men as small weak men who develop their minds while ignoring their physical development. Hence, we have Lee's comment about not being a "wimp" and his disparaging remark about Asians who "can't fight." Lee's rejection of school was influenced by his desire to emphasize his physical strength.

Kevin Ng was another new waver who bragged about his academic weaknesses. He was ethnic Chinese from Vietnam. Kevin had been a high achiever during his elementary and middle school years. During elementary school, Kevin received the ultimate legitimation of his intellectual abilities—the mentally gifted (MG) label. At Academic, however, Kevin adopted a low-maintenance attitude toward his schooling. He went to class only when it was absolutely necessary (tests) or when it struck his fancy, and he did the minimum amount of studying in order to pass his classes.

Kevin often joked that his favorite subject was lunch. In his words, "I never cut lunch!" During the second semester of his senior year, the only classes that Kevin attended on a regular basis were mechanical drawing and Spanish. He explained that he went to mechanical drawing because he liked it and that he went to Spanish in order to "flirt with all the girls." During this same report period, Kevin received grades that ranged from a B in mechanical drawing to a D in elementary functions. Kevin proudly reported that he had received a D in elementary functions despite the fact that he had cut this class 40 times.

According to Kevin, the best way to get through school was to do the minimum amount of work and to have the maximum amount of fun. In his opinion, high academic achievers were missing out on the fun. Kevin explained that he was "more relaxed" about school than other Asians were because he knew that there was "more to life than studying." Kevin criticized his Asian peers for not being able to get along with non-Asians. He believed that studying and doing well in school prevented Asians

from being accepted by non-Asians. Kevin wanted to be accepted by non-Asians and believed that being less fixated on school would help him. Despite his efforts, I never observed him socializing with any non-Asian students. Kevin spent all of his lunch periods socializing with other Asian males.

The peer orientation of new wavers was likely influenced by the negative experiences they had with adult authority figures in the United States. For example, new wavers complained of being unfairly hassled by police. In this quotation, a new waver complains about experiences that he and his friends have had with security guards at a local mall:

> The security there—I think they're prejudice[d]. So, every time we stand around, not in the way of other people, still they tell us to "move along or else I['m] gonna throw you out." They did not tell the Americans to pass along. They only pay attention to us.

Because of experiences with police and security guards, these students come to school suspicious of all authority figures, including teachers. Soloman (1992) asserts that negative experiences with authority outside of school can leave students with latent resistance.

New wave students complained that teachers were insensitive to them. They spoke of teachers whom they thought were "anti-Asian." For their part, teachers seemed to view new wavers as Asian students who had gone wrong. Erickson (1987) has written about the importance of trust between teacher and student in creating positive educational experiences. The new wavers did not trust the teachers to be fair, and the teachers did not trust that the new wavers wanted to learn. The experiences that the new wavers had with adults inside and outside of school confirmed their belief that they could only depend on each other.

The new wavers' social experiences in school may also have contributed to their resistance. As noted earlier, new wavers like Lee and Kevin had rather tenuous relations with non-Asians. In addition, Korean and high-achieving Asian-identified students viewed new wavers with contempt. The problems that they had with their Asian and non-Asian peers further encouraged new wavers to stick to themselves.

The case of the new wave students suggests that students' identities and responses to schooling are constantly being negotiated. Ogbu's exclusive concentration on what students bring to school because of their particular minority status (i.e., voluntary or involuntary) overlooks this fact. The new wavers' experiences with their peers, their teachers, and adult authorities outside of school all contributed to their resistance.

Asian Americans

The smallest group of Asian American students consisted of those who identified themselves as Asian American. As a group these students were diverse in terms of ethnicity, social class (working class and mer-

chant class), and length of time in the United States (4 to 12 years). Like the Asians and the new wavers, Asian Americans socialized primarily with other Asian American students and expressed a panethnic identity. Like the high-achieving Asians, Asian American–identified students worked hard and did well in school. Their motivation for working hard was the belief that education would give them the tools to fight racism. These students spoke about studying law, journalism, film, and ethnic studies in college.

Unlike Asians and new wavers, Asian Americans were outspoken about racism. Although students who identified as Asian and those who identified as new wave spoke about experiences with discrimination, neither group seemed to feel empowered to challenge or question white authority. The Asians dealt with discrimination by emulating model-minority behavior, and the new wavers responded by resisting behavior that promoted school success. On the other hand, Asian Americans fought racism directly. One of the ways that they fought racism was by speaking out about the model-minority stereotype.

Xuan Nguyen is an example of a student who identified as Asian American. Xuan took Honors classes in English and social studies and was a student in the mentally gifted program. Additionally, she was one of the first Asian students at Academic High to be a National Merit Scholarship semifinalist. Born in Vietnam, Xuan came to the United States in 1975 with the first wave of Vietnamese refugees. Xuan is the kind of student that teachers raved about. She is a bright and conscientious student who is not afraid to speak her mind. Upon my arrival at Academic High, the principal asked Xuan to serve as my first student "guide" through Academic High. He described Xuan as a "neat kid" with leadership ability. The following are Xuan's comments regarding the model minority.

> I used to go into classes, and if you don't do that well in math or science, the teacher is like, "What are you? Some kind of mutant Asian? You don't do well in math. . . ." You see, I'm not that good in math. I also find that a lot of my friends become upset if they're not good students. . . . I don't think it's right for them to have to feel defensive. And for people who are doing well, it's just like, "Oh, they (Asians) didn't have to work for it. . . . They're just made that way.

Xuan points to how the stereotype affects high- and low-achieving students. Xuan's understanding of how the model-minority stereotype affects low achievers is based partly on her own experiences. An average math student, Xuan has often been made to feel like a low achiever simply because she does not fit the stereotype of the Asian math genius.

Another factor that distinguishes students who identify as Asian American from others with a panethnic identity is that Asian Americans see themselves as American and Asian. For them, being Asian American

means forging a new identity based on their Asian and American experiences and identities. In Xuan's words,

> I have experiences that are similar to other Asians that live in America: that my culture is not all Asian and it's not all American. It's something entirely different. And it's not like some people say, that it's a mixture. It's like a whole different thing. When I say I'm Asian American, I feel like I establish a root for myself here. May parents think of themselves as Vietnamese because their roots are in Vietnam. Being Asian American is like a way to feel I belong.

By establishing "roots" in the United States, Xuan feels entitled to the things that other Americans are entitled to have. Unlike her parents and the students who identify as Asian or new wave, Xuan does not see herself as a visitor who must adapt to the host's demands.

Conclusions

The data presented in this article supports Ogbu's assertion that perceptions regarding future opportunities and attitudes toward schooling are linked. Unlike Ogbu's work, this work points to variation within a minority group. Korean students and Asian-identified students held positive attitudes toward schooling based on their belief that education would help them to achieve social and economic advancement. Both groups attempted to live up to the model-minority standards. Korean students and Asian-identified students were motivated by a sense of guilt and responsibility to their families. High- and low-achieving Asian identified students experienced anxiety as a result of their efforts to live up to the standards of the model-minority stereotypes. Students unable to do well academically felt depressed and embarrassed. This embarrassment prevented them from seeking necessary academic attention. New wave students resisted any behavior that encouraged academic achievement. Their resistance challenges the cultural ecological position that, as a group, recent arrivals to the United States hold positive folk theories of success. Furthermore, the new wave identity suggests that identity is not something simply located in minority status (i.e., voluntary or involuntary) but something negotiated through lived experiences. Students who identified as Asian American were high achievers who worked hard in school. Although they did not believe that education would guarantee them equal opportunity, the Asian Americans believed that education would allow them to more effectively fight racism and other social inequalities. The Asian American–identified students' continued efforts in school, despite their perception of racism, challenges the cultural ecological position that minorities either downplay racism and embrace schooling or perceive limited opportunities based on racism and resist schooling. Asian American–identified students saw school success as a necessary part of resisting racism.

In short, this study, like the work of Trueba, Cheng, and Ima (1993), suggests that there is variability within groups in Asian American achievement. The experiences and attitudes of the various Asian American identity groups at Academic High School point to the complexity of Asian American achievement. Asian Americans do not see themselves as being the same, they do not share a common attitude regarding future opportunities, and they do not share a common attitude toward schooling. If we are to move beyond a stereotypic image of Asian Americans and understand the diversity of Asian American experiences, more ethnographic studies on Asian American students are necessary.

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Notes

1. All names used in this article are pseudonyms.

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