

“Asianness” under Construction: The Contours and Negotiation of Panethnic Identity/Culture among Interethnically Married Asian Americans

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Abstract

Based on life-history interviews of interethnically married U.S.-raised Asians, this article examines the meaning and dynamics of Asian American interethnic marriages, and what they reveal about the complex incorporative process of this “in-between” racial minority group into the U.S.. In particular, this article explores the connection between Asian American interethnic marriage and pan-Asian consciousness/identity, both in terms of how panethnicity shapes romantic/marital desires of individuals and how pan-Asian culture and identity is invented and negotiated in the process of family-making. My findings indicate that while strong pan-Asian consciousness/identity underlies the connection among intermarried couples, these unions are not simply a defensive effort to “preserve” Asian-ethnic identity and cultur against a society that still racializes Asian Americans, but a tentative and often unpremeditated effort to navigate a path toward integration into the society through an ethnically based, albeit hybrid and reconstructed identity and culture, that helps the respondents retain the integrity of “Asianness.”

Keywords

Asia/Asian American, race and ethnicity, intermarriage, immigration

In recent years, there has been growing attention to the trend among Asian Americans to marry along interethnic lines. Since the mid-1960s, it has been a well-established fact that Asian Americans have had one of the highest rates of intermarriage—a term that I use here to refer to *both* interracial and interethnic (pan-Asian) marriages—of all minority groups in the United States, with the majority of those married to whites (Lee and Yamanaka 1990; Qian and Lichter 2007).¹ However, since the 1980s, not only has the overall rate of intermarriage lessened somewhat, but *interracial* marriages have been on a decline, while Asian *interethnic* marriages have been on the rise (Fu and Hatfield 2008; Le 2013; Lee and Fernandez 1998; Qian 2007; Qian, Blair, and Ruf 2001; Rosenfeld 2001; Shinagawa and Pang 1996; Swarns 2012).²

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Although several media articles have recently taken notice of this upward trend in Asian interethnic marriages (Swarns 2012; Yang 2012), there have been few, in-depth qualitative treatments of this highly interesting phenomenon. This topic, however, is one that begs for scholarly exploration because, within the shifting contours of American and global racial and gender politics and international migration flows, it addresses a number of significant sociological issues pertaining to immigrant incorporation processes of this racially “in-between” minority group,³ America’s changing color boundaries, and the construction, reinvention, and evolution of ethnic and racial group identities, consciousness, and culture in the United States.

Based on life-history interviews of 15 U.S.-raised (30 individuals),⁴ middle-class, interethnically married Asian American couples, this article investigates the meaning and dynamics behind Asian American interethnic marriage and its implications for this group’s incorporative process. In particular, I explore how interethnic marriages might be connected to pan-Asian consciousness and identity, both in terms of the role pan-Asian identity may play in the respondents’ decisions to interethnically marry, and how pan-Asian identity is forged and maintained through the process of negotiating and crafting pan-Asian culture between the spouses and through the process of family-making. In addition, this article will conduct an exploratory analysis of the issue of conflicts within Asian American communities that may arise from internal hierarchies among Asian nations and/or ethnicities, a topic that has been underexplored in previous studies.

Existing works on Asian American intermarriage, including quantitative studies aimed at describing general patterns and macro-level structural determinants of intermarriage, have pointed out the need to supplement structurally oriented explanations with subjective and/or cultural explanations of marriage patterns and choices, because the former are not adequate to fully understanding intermarriage patterns (Alba and Nee 2003; Kalmijin and Van Tubergen 2010; Lee and Fernandez 1998; Mok 1999; Okamoto 2007; Song 2009). For example, to explain rising rates in interethnic marriage, a number of quantitative studies have honed in on the possible effects of increased group sizes due to immigration replenishment, showing that ongoing immigration for a group leads both to increased endogamy (marrying within one’s ethnic or national group) as well as to interethnic unions, while suppressing interracial marriage (Lee and Fernandez 1998; Okamoto 2007; Pew Research Center 2010, 2013; Qian and Lichter 2007). Although immigrant expansion and group size on intermarriage patterns may have some effects for the Asian American community on the whole, the impact of these factors, when broken down by generations, is not as clear-cut. Numerous studies show that regardless of community size or immigrant replenishment, the tendency toward Asian marital panethnicity increases in the second generation and beyond (Feliciano 2001; Fu and Hatfield 2008; Rosenfeld 2001), and that Asian marital panethnicity is stronger down the generations than would be predicted by the size of the group. This is true even when compared with other ethnic and racial groups that have experienced immigrant replenishment, for example, Hispanics, whose marital panethnicity tends to erode down the generation (Rosenfeld 2001).

When it concerns interethnic marital choices of U.S.-raised Asian Americans, there are clearly other forces at work than demographic-type structural factors such as group size (or residential segregation patterns, education/class/income), not to mention that structural or cultural factors (such as larger ideological factors) affect immigrants and U.S.-raised Asian Americans in different ways. Focusing on the U.S.-raised group, I aim in this article to tease out some key cultural factors, informed from subjective viewpoints, that help to shape romantic desires and marital choices of U.S.-raised Asian Americans. Moreover, the article will focus on the nature of panethnic cultures and identities being constructed within these marriages and families in relation to the dominant American ideological and racial structures—a process that turns out to be a lot more complex and subtle than one might presume—and discuss its implications for the incorporative process of Asian Americans.

Asian Americans, Intermarriage, Assimilation, and Race

Although quantitative studies examining Asian American intermarriage have been valuable, in-depth qualitative studies that focus on subjective dimensions of romantic desires and spousal choices, especially within the larger ideological context of our society, are critical because these studies help us better understand the culturally oriented factors that inform the choices of individuals. They also assist in explaining wide variations between different racial groups that cannot be explained by demographic factors alone, and even unexpected variations within the same racial group. For example, it has been well established that at least in the United States, intransigent racism against blacks is largely responsible for the historically low rates of intermarriage between American blacks and whites—although this rate has somewhat increased in the last few years (Childs 2005)—and that it is to America's racial structure we must look to explain rapid generational assimilation of most "white" European immigrant groups. Furthermore, macro-level structural explanations cannot fully explain the gender dimension to intermarriage—Why Asian women historically have had much higher rates of interracial marriage than Asian men, or why black men marry white women at higher rates than vice versa, nor some of the variations in intermarriage patterns we see among different Asian-ethnic groups.

With regard to Asian Americans, who, like the Hispanics, occupy an "in-between" position in America's traditional white-black racial divide, the initial debates had to do with what the surprisingly high rates of *interracial* marriage means for Asian Americans, and what this really indicates about their social assimilation and acceptance into American society. At the crux of this debate is the role of race for Asian Americans and their interracial marriage choices and family-making, with a number of recent studies showing that interracial marriages among Asian Americans may not be the indicator of assimilation as many would like to believe (Chong 2013; Olzak 1992; Song 2009). To complicate this debate further, the recent uptick in the rates of Asian *interethnic* marriages has intensified attention to the question of whether Asian Americans are really on the way to assimilation as viewed from a classic "straight-line" assimilation perspective (Gordon 1964), or whether it signifies something more complex about the social position of Asian Americans, their group identity, and path of assimilation.

In relation to interracial marriages, a number of qualitative studies in recent years have helped shed light on the subjective dimensions of dating and spousal choices and romantic desires. These studies are valuable because they illuminate important sociological factors that inform individual choices from the perspective of the respondents (Chong 2013; Chow 2000; Fong and Yung 2000; Kibria 2002; Nemoto 2009). The articles by Colleen Fong and Judy Yung (2000) and Sue Chow (2000), focusing on Japanese and Chinese Americans in interracial marriages, were one of the first to bring attention to factors related to issues of racial and gender power relations in interracial marriages. Both studies foregrounded the issue of racial inequality in America, pointing out how Euro-American standards for attractiveness and culture often led to negative perceptions of fellow Asians, leading to Asian Americans' "aversion to marrying within the same race." Most recently, a book by Kumiko Nemoto (2009) that looks at out-married Asian American men and women of different national origins and nativity status also delves into the racialized desires of these individuals and how they interact with larger ideologies along the lines of gender, class, and nation. A recent article by Kelly H. Chong (2013) compares the perspectives of out-married U.S.-raised Asian Americans and their white-ethnic spouses, revealing as well the issue of race and power in shaping the marital dynamics of interracial marriages, child raising, and the struggle over Asian American ethnic and racial identities.

Because it is a newer trend, less attention, however, has been paid thus far in terms of in-depth qualitative studies of *interethnically* married Asian Americans. Mia Tuan (1998) was one of the first to address the topic of Asian American interethnic marriage; in her book *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites*, she devotes a small section to intermarriage, focusing particularly on the

phenomenon of the recent rise of Asian interethnic dating and marriage and what this might mean. In this discussion, Tuan explicitly links Asian interethnic dating to the strengthening of Asian panethnic consciousness, and the identification of Asian Americans along racial, rather than, ethnic lines. She says,

. . . their openness to dating other Asian-Americans can also be seen as an example of new and thriving racial salience. Increasingly, the issue is not whether they date co-ethnics, but whether they date others within the same panethnic and racialized category as themselves. (Tuan 1998:120)

Two recent qualitative studies on Asian American intermarriage also deal with issues of interethnic attraction and what this might mean but, like Tuan's work, are not full-fledged studies of interethnically *married* unions. Building on works like Tuan's, and on some of the earlier quantitative studies that have linked Asian interethnic marriages to the possible growing strength of panethnic identity and consciousness, a recent article by Kibria (1997) explores the phenomenon of Asian American "ethnogenesis" among certain segments of second-generation Asian American population that may lead to interethnic relationships or marriage. She finds that among the many individuals she interviewed, a sense of pan-Asian identity is developed that goes beyond "strategic political considerations" (Kibria 2007:524), and is driven by the society's racial labeling of them as "Asian race" as well as by a feeling of cultural kinship based on certain "Asian" values. The article by Chow (2000), surveying a mixture of married and nonmarried individuals and the significance of race in U.S.-raised Asian Americans spousal preferences, partly deals with the issue of interethnic attraction; she demonstrates that a sense of equality, racial empathy, cultural comfort level, and the desire to preserve ethnic culture was central to those who prefer other ethnic Asians over whites in a society characterized by a racial hierarchy. Recently, popular media explanations for the rise of Asian interethnic marriages (Swarns 2012) point possibly to the fact that Asian Americans might be marrying each other because they are looking to tap into their ethnic roots and maintain them, or that improvement of societal and media images of Asian Americans is removing the barriers to attraction among Asian Americans (Yang 2012).

Although these studies provide fruitful insights, we need a more comprehensive, in-depth picture of what Asian-ethnic marriages mean, and why individuals choose them. There is no question that the analysis of Asian-ethnic marital and romantic preferences (or any type of marital preferences) must be situated within the context of contemporary American and global racial/gender politics against which spousal selection is negotiated. Persons of Asian descent in the United States, more specifically, are subject to ongoing societal assignment of them as "racialized ethnics," which renders ethnic and racial identification less than voluntary and generates a conflict between their assimilative desires for "whiteness" and their continued status as a subordinate, racialized minority (Ancheta 1998; Lowe 1991; Omi and Winant 1994; Tuan 1998). Such racialization process, according to Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1994), occurs within the context of particular institutional or national "racial projects," which are defined as, "efforts to institutionalize racial meanings and identities in particular social structures, notably those of individual, family, community, and state."

Building on previous studies, this article on Asian interethnic marriages contributes by focusing on the narratives and experiences of couples who are already married, which enables us first to ascertain more accurately the motivations for the interethnic spousal and romantic preferences, and second to examine the evolution of panethnic identification and the nature of panethnic culture as these are being actively negotiated, invented, and emerging within the context of marital relationships and bicultural family-making. Furthermore, by expanding the participant sample beyond those of Asians of East Asian origin typical of previous studies of interethnic marriages, this article explores how inter-Asian power dynamics might influence the negotiation of pan-Asian identity and culture.

What my study shows is that, indeed, pan-Asian marriages are related to the existence and the strength of a certain level of Asian panethnic group consciousness and identity, which is necessarily formed in dialogue with the contemporary American racial politics. At the same time, my findings do not reveal that pan-Asian marriages are simply a form of defensive assertion of ethnic identities and cultures in opposition to an “American” identity and culture and against a society that negatively racializes Asian Americans, but a tentative effort to navigate a path of integration into American society through an ethnically and racially based, albeit hybridized and reconstructed, identity and culture that would help the respondents retain the integrity of what many of them referred to as “Asianness” (Espiritu 1992; Lowe 1991). Much of this is shown by the extent to which the respondents, though they care a great deal about being part of an Asian interethnic coupling as a form of identity in response to a society that continues to racialize them as non-white, struggle with a tension between their “American” identity and culture—and a sense of and desire for being “American”—and their wish to maintain “ethnic” identities and cultures in some form: “Asianness.” This “Asianness” is, however, one that is often weak in “thick” content, reinvented, and ill-defined in reality, though it is by no means completely “voluntary,” “optional,” nor without any concrete substance, and is central to indicating group distinctiveness.

Data and Method

This article is based primarily on in-depth life-history interviews of 15 Asian American interethnically married couples (30 individuals), conducted between 2009 and 2014. In addition to these couples, the article also draws on insights gained from interviews with 8 Asian American individuals who are in long-term relationships. The participants were drawn mostly from three large urban metropolitan areas in the United States: Greater Los Angeles, Chicago, and the Washington, D.C., areas, where large Asian American populations reside. Two couples resided in a medium-sized town in a large southern state with sizable Asian populations. Although not all grew up in the cities in which they now lived, the majority were raised in major metropolitan areas with sizable Asian American populations.

The national origins of the participants included four Chinese/Japanese American couples, three Chinese/Korean American couples, one Taiwanese/Korean American couple, two Korean/Vietnamese American couples, two Chinese/Vietnamese American couples, two Korean/Filipino American couples, and one Korean/Cambodian American couple (see Table 1). Most of the participants were second generation but included five individuals who were third or fourth generation at least on one side of the family, and were between the ages of 30 and 52, with all but two individuals under 45. Most had children under the ages of 15, except one couple, whose oldest child was 19 at the time of the interview.

The informants were acquired through snowball sampling after my initial contacts with Asian American professional, political, and community organizations, or with individuals I knew personally or met through professional organizations. All participants in my sample belonged to the middle and professional class; all received college education and many had professional degrees, such as in law, medical, or business, or PhD degrees. Because this study focuses primarily on the middle- and professional-class couples, its findings are not generalizable to the experiences of working-class couples, nor of the larger population of Asian interethnic couples as a whole, of which we know little (Lee 2004). There are only a small number of studies on working-class Asian Americans, and the results are contradictory, with some showing that working-class Asian Americans have a weaker sense of ethnic identity and tend to marry across racial boundaries, and others suggesting the opposite.⁵ As for the middle class, extant studies suggest that the strength of panethnicity may be significantly related to college experiences, where interaction with large numbers of fellow Asian Americans increases the likelihood of developing pan-Asian identity (Espiritu 1992; Shinagawa and Pang 1996). We need more studies that examine the race/class

Table 1. Table of Respondents.

Cambodian American and Korean American	
Female	Male
Chinese American and Japanese American	
Male	Female
Male	Female
Male	Female
Male	Female
Chinese American and Korean American	
Male	Female
Female	Male
Female	Male
Chinese American and Vietnamese American	
Female	Male
Male	Female
Filipino American and Korean American	
Female	Male
Female	Male
Korean American and Vietnamese American	
Female	Male
Female	Male
Taiwanese American and Korean American	
Male	Female

intersection with regard to Asian interethnic marriage. Furthermore, although an analysis along the lines of gender can be pursued for a study such as this, I do not address the issue of possible gender differences in this article. I interviewed all persons individually to obtain particular perspectives of both husbands and wives, and sometimes together afterward. All interviews were conducted either face to face in the participants' homes or in places of business, or by phone. The interviews typically lasted from one to three hours, and most were tape-recorded and transcribed. For eight informants, follow-up interviews were also conducted.

This study utilizes the grounded-theory method, which is designed to generate original insights, concepts, hypotheses, and theories from data during both the collection and analysis phases, especially through careful attention to the participant's own narratives and perspectives, rather than testing data based on established theory (Glazer and Strauss 1967). Individual interviews typically began with a set of semistructured questions about the participants' background, including childhood history, family and social environment, educational background, and general experiences growing up. They were asked about the dynamics of their current marital and family life, including questions related to their and their children's identity development. They were asked about relationships with their spouses and issues regarding ethnic and cultural negotiation and transmission. Although the respondents were approached with a set of prepared questions I wished to cover, I tried to leave the interviews as open-ended whenever possible to allow them to discuss topics that were most meaningful for them. All data were coded, first with open/substantive coding that helped me identify major concepts and categories, then with axial coding, which helped me find connections between the categories (Strauss and Corbin 1990). I analyzed and coded my data simultaneously during the collection and analysis phases, which allowed me to remain open to emerging themes and to adjust my questions and analytical categories as the data collection and analysis proceeded. This approach enabled me to be maximally interactive with my data during all phases of my research and in generating concepts, categories, and theories.

Narratives of Romantic Desires and Spousal Choices: The Appeal of Asian Americans as Romantic and Marital Partners

A number of recent studies on cross-border marriages among Asians (especially women) and Westerners (especially men) have highlighted the importance of viewing romantic/sexual desires and love not just as private emotion or feeling, but as something socially constructed, shaped particularly by the societal or global politics of gender and race embedded in interstate power relations (Cheng 2010; Constable 1995; Kelsky [2001] 2006): “Desire . . . is a historically, socially, and culturally produced field of practices” (Rofel 2007:14). Particularly for many women of Asia who choose interracial marriages, the cultural-political-economic hegemony of the West, and of the United States in particular, has historically helped create erotic imaginings and yearnings for the West, Western men, and for whiteness. Studies of interracial marriages within the United States between Asians and whites mentioned earlier have also shown that individuals of Asian descent in the United States are not immune from similarly racially charged global-level power dynamics; by holding up whiteness as the ideal and a core sign of being American within its own borders, America has historically produced powerful assimilative yearnings in terms of desire for whiteness in its minority population (Frankenberg 1993; Pyke 2010a; Roediger 2007; Rothenberg 2012). For interethnically marrying Asian Americans, especially the second generation and beyond, the interesting question, then, is not just why they find other Asian Americans appealing, but how they are also able to resist this cultural pressure for white privilege.⁶ In my study, I have found several prevailing themes.

The Role of Parental Influence and the Salience of Pan-Asian Identification

The participants in my study spanned the spectrum in terms of the kinds of neighborhoods they grew up in, from predominantly white-ethnic areas to ethnically/racially diverse neighborhoods and predominantly Asian areas. The mixture of friendship associations growing up varied as well, from those whose friendships were mainly with Asian Americans or coethnics, to those with friends that were a mixture of races and ethnicities, or mostly with whites. The possible effects of friendship composition—often related to neighborhood composition—on partner choices have been examined in some previous studies (Joyner and Kao 2000; Lee 2004; Mok 1999; Spikard 1989; Sung 1990), and there is evidence from these studies that preference for coracial potential dating partners may be related to a high level of coethnic or coracial composition of friendship networks growing up. Although my qualitative study does not contradict these findings, my findings suggest that for my interethnically married participants, another key factor—also identified in other studies as a possible factor in fostering panethnic associations (cf. Mok 1999)—appears to play a major role in the development of panethnic identity and later pan-Asian partner preferences across different neighborhood backgrounds: parental attitude toward and expectations regarding intermarriage.

In previous literature, and those on second-generation Asian Americans in particular, one of the prominent themes is the parental attempts to influence the dating and marital choices of children, especially toward in-marriage (Kibria 2002; Maira 2002).⁷ In contrast to these findings, data from my interethnically married couples show that the parents of these individuals were relatively *laissez-faire* regarding the dating and marital choices of my participants, irrespective of their neighborhood background. When asked about parental attitudes toward intermarriage, a Chinese American man from an Asian-dominated neighborhood married to a Japanese American stated, “No, they didn’t care . . . they never said we had to marry anyone in particular . . . for us, it was very open.” Another Chinese American man from a similar neighborhood, also married to a Japanese American, said that his family had “expectations” that he would marry a Chinese woman, but in the end were fine as long as the partner was of Asian descent. Thus, unlike many

immigrant parents who insist that their children select coethnic (same nationality) marital partners for reasons of cultural ease or imagined possibilities of ethno-cultural preservation, the parents in my study displayed rather progressive attitudes toward intermarriage.

However, a pronounced theme in my findings was that more than three-quarters of the parents of my participants were not as *laissez-faire* about their children marrying non-Asians, including whites. Most were flexible as long as the spouses were of Asian origin, but drew a firm line in regard to marrying across racial lines, expressing explicit displeasure.⁸ One Japanese American woman, married to a Chinese American, commented,

I never felt any pressure to marry a Japanese American guy. My brother married a Vietnamese woman . . . my sister married a Japanese American guy . . . But I think my parents . . . would have had a more difficult time if we were to marry a non-Asian person.

One participant who spent some early years in Hawaii, where Asian ethnics enjoy high social status, explained that her parents went as far as to consistently warn the children about the dangers of marrying whites:

When my older sister started dating whites, they gave her a really hard time . . . they warned her about white people . . . they would say things like they were smooth-talking, be careful . . . they were distrustful of white people because their mentality was that the whites took over the island and things.

Echoing findings of previous studies on interracial dating/marriage for other ethnic and racial groups that have described negative parental messages toward dating across racial lines (Childs 2005; Morales 2012), Asian American parents in my study demonstrated similar disapproval toward and fear of cross-racial dating. In the quote above, the disapproval of parents seems to be based on an awareness of racial hierarchy in America and that the children might be subjected to negative treatment by whites. There were two cases where the parents were at first adamant that the children marry coethnics, but relaxed this demand as the children got older, extending their blessings to Asian-ethnic partners. With parental assent to cross ethnic boundaries, though not racial boundaries, most respondents in my study thus never considered dating or marrying beyond their own national or ethnic group as an issue (cf. Mok 1999; Tuan 1998).

This did not, however, mean that the respondents all automatically became oriented toward fellow Asian ethnics as romantic and marital partners, though the liberal parental attitude removed barriers to looking beyond coethnics. In fact, a number of those in my study did not view Asian ethnics as potential romantic partners until college and beyond, while others never considered dating anyone but Asian. Not surprisingly, those who were raised in areas with a critical mass of Asians, areas that were also frequently racially and ethnically diverse, grew up associating along panethnic lines from early on; a Japanese American man who grew up in an area populated heavily by Asians in California observed,

So growing up, we were pretty much just surrounded by Asian people . . . so you just kind of end up hanging out with all Asian people. I dated some different kinds of people but I kind of pretty much stayed with just Asian people. Some people were mixed along the way, but I dated a lot of Japanese girls, Chinese girls—everyone was Asian.

Although panethnic associations may not have precluded non-Asian friendships or even romantic engagements with non-Asians, a strong identification as Asian American often seems to have extended to dating.

Those who spent their growing up years in predominantly white-ethnic areas, on the contrary, professed that they were not as strongly oriented toward Asian American or ethnic identity when young, nor particularly desired Asian Americans as dating partners. However, growing up as

minorities in white-ethnic areas, these participants struggled, not unexpectedly, with their minority status, feelings of inferiority as Asians, and desires for white privilege and acceptance. According to one participant,

. . . whiteness was the sea we swam in . . . it had a profound effect on my racial identity. I think we struggled a lot with inferiority and never wanting to be different and always just trying to conform and fit in.

In terms of dating, these participants often described a romantic orientation toward whites but also disclosed an accompanying sense of nagging self-doubt and inferiority in regard to dating. One participant put it this way:

My first real boyfriend I would say was a white boy in between middle and high school. He was someone that I grew up with and . . . I actually do remember . . . that my girlfriend was white and we both liked him at first and I do remember getting jealous because . . . I thought he must like her better because she's white and I'm not . . . There was another white boy throughout elementary and middle school that I was totally in love with, and again, I remember thinking he doesn't like me because I'm not white. He actually ended up dating a couple of Asian girls, so what the heck was wrong with me for thinking that way?

A male respondent, who said he continually had "crushes" on white women in secondary school, confessed,

I don't know why I didn't date white girls as much as I wanted to . . . I think it was because there wasn't a lot of reciprocity in terms of, like, attraction, you know, with the exception of a couple . . . The types of girls I wanted were the cheerleader types, and I was shy with them.

In their reflection of their prior desires for white romantic partners and simultaneous sense of inferiority, we clearly see on the part of the respondents an awareness of internalized racism (Pyke 2010a, 2010b).

For these respondents, it is in college, most of which had large populations of Asian ethnics, that identification along pan-Asian lines was often initiated, through encounters and friendships with other Asian ethnics and by way of taking Asian American studies courses, which confirms findings from other studies (cf. Espiritu 1992; Lee 2004; Shinagawa and Pang 1996). While respondents from more diverse areas seemed to have continued their pan-Asian identification and associations without undue interruption, drawing from their primary associational pool of Asian ethnics for dating, participants from predominantly white areas generally underwent a more disruptive and conscious reflection process about their dating choices, which occurred as a result of their ethnic "discovery" and exploration in college after coming into contact with large numbers of Asian Americans. One Vietnamese American man, who grew up in a white midwestern town, described such an ethnic discovery process when he enrolled in a large urban East Coast university:

When I went to my university, that is when I started grasping more a sense of my Asian identity . . . I started hanging out with this cadre of six Asian dudes in the game room in my dorm—I became really close friends with those guys. I told them, "the first time I saw you guys, the six of you Asian guys, you were, like intimidating, a pack of like six guys." . . . That's when I realized I was being more Asian . . . After hanging out with them, I joined Asian student union and stuff, the Vietnamese Student Association, though it was boring as heck at first.

Never having associated with nor dated Asians much until college, this man first formed friendships with fellow Asian ethnics in college, an event that catalyzed his awareness and pride as

an Asian American, which he said led him eventually to his preference for Asian American women.

A Korean American woman also similarly described her high degree of white-identification while growing up in a predominantly white area, and discussed how her ethnic identification was galvanized in college and beyond through her exposure to other Asian Americans and becoming aware of Asian American and race/ethnicity issues, which led to a conscious decision to seek an Asian-ethnic marital partner. Describing herself as completely “white-washed” until about the end of high school, she stated,

And these [Asian American studies classes, political groups, etc.] really politicized me in a lot of ways . . . I had already kind of been slowly politicizing . . . in high school, and realizing the fact that I was a minority, and the fact that what the white guys and white people would say would piss me off so much. So I was already kind of there, and then of course I went to college and college is such a politicizing institution.

For these participants, there is little question that the Asian-population intensive and politicizing environment of universities they attended was key to their ethnic “self-awakening.” But as I discuss below, the development of panethnic identification, particularly in relation to preference for coracial mates, is often closely intertwined with parental influence. At the same time, I show that pan-Asian identification, which may lead to eventual marital preference for fellow Asian ethnics, does not necessarily signify an absence of attraction to other racial groups, nor a lack of desire for social or cultural acceptance by the mainstream society.

“It’s Just Easier, but with an Asian of a Different Flavor”

If the development of Asian American identity, mediated through parental expectations, can be seen as one of the starting points for choosing the path of interethnic marriage, what then is exactly the appeal of Asian ethnics as romantic/marital partners that might override the possible desires to date or marry across racial boundaries? The respondents mentioned three main features: (1) simply being more attracted to Asian Americans physically, (2) cultural comfort level/similar values, and (3) desiring someone other than coethnics.

In my research, there was a subgroup of respondents who were simply always attracted to Asian Americans physically and never considered dating others. As discussed above, there were others who were not exclusively attracted to Asians earlier in their lives, but came to be so later. In fact, it is important to note that the latter group of respondents more often than not admitted that they were attracted to many kinds of partners—whites, Latinos, blacks, and other minorities—but simply said that they came to prefer Asian Americans, especially as marriage partners. As one male participant made a point to say: “I found whites attractive . . . Latinos, blacks . . . everyone. But in terms of, like settling down, I figured it would be within an Asian race . . .” One female participant attested, after a great deal with dating experimentation across racial lines, “I just got to the point where I just felt like I should just be with someone like me.”

One prominent reason given was the greater cultural “comfort level” provided by some sense of shared “Asian” cultural connection, though no one in my study openly declared that the goal of marrying a fellow Asian was to get back in touch with their ethnic roots, or because of a particular desire to preserve the Asian race. One woman simply stated, “although growing up, there were no attractive Asian guys to admire on TV and stuff, but when I started dating, I was attracted more to Asian guys. I just felt more comfortable with them.” Although one Korean American man married to a Filipina American never cared about marrying another Korean American that much, he said he “always thought he’d marry within the ‘Asian race,’” though not necessarily Korean: “It was because I felt more comfortable.” With his wife being Filipina, in particular, this

man said that the final “clincher” was that she was instinctively respectful of elders, which made her the next best thing to a Korean American daughter-in-law:

Yeah for sure, it was the way she interacted with my parents . . . that definitely helped a lot . . . when my mom passed away, she came to the funeral and she was always trying to help . . . and you know how in Korean culture, you pay your respects to elders and bow and she is so keen on that, asking how do you do it here, how do you do it there . . . the fact that she tries . . . yeah, that definitely made a big difference.

A Chinese American man said that what he found most attractive about his Japanese American wife were her “traditional” values: being responsible, hardworking, and being family-oriented. Another Chinese American man explained that, for him, it was a “conscious” decision to marry an Asian American because with Caucasians, one has a “vastly different cultural system.” Saying “I’m talking about things like ambition, focus on education, certain common childhood experiences . . .,” he added,

For example, I don’t think I would have problems with putting my kids through an Ivy League education or private school education paying \$30, 40, or 50,000 a year if that is the best school that he or she got accepted in, no matter what, versus, oh, I can’t afford it so the kid needs to go to a public school. Because that is what my father has done for me. . . . I understand it’s not necessarily the better education but it’s the exposure that I want him or her to get. And some of my Caucasian friends don’t understand . . . So in my perspective, I am willing to pay for my kid to have that vision of the world, yeah, it will be . . . three times more expensive, but you need to broaden their horizons when they are younger so they can look at the bigger picture.

One Chinese American woman explained it this way: “Even if I were attracted to them, to non-Asians, it’s just too complicated. You have to explain too much.” The narrative that “it’s just easier that she or he was Asian” arose again and again.

Although some declared that their choice to interethnically marry was a result of a “conscious” decision, the ones raised in predominantly Asian areas tended more often than not to downplay the “conscious” aspect of the choice to select an Asian-ethnic partner. To them, dating and marrying a fellow Asian ethnic was so normalized as to require no particular explanation. One woman said,

Mom had earlier wanted me to marry a nice Chinese boy if possible, so that was in the back of my mind, but marrying an Asian was not a conscious decision or anything. I was not unattracted to non-Asians, but I never thought about it much . . . we just met and fell in love, and for me, it wasn’t even the Asian thing . . . but I do remember thinking it was easier that he was Asian.

Marrying a fellow Asian ethnic was normalized because these participants from Asian-dominated areas also did not seem to have engaged in anxious struggles with negative stereotypes of the opposite sex (see Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Although it may appear at first glance that for many in this study, dating and marrying Asian ethnics seems to be a way of following the path of least resistance, especially in the face of parental disapproval of interracial marriage, there is an important and subtle dimension to their choices that bears scrutiny; desiring a fellow Asian-ethnic over a coethnic. All participants in my study mentioned that they never had any desire to in-marry. In fact, many professed explicit preference for marrying someone within the Asian race over coethnics. One Korean American woman, who never dated a Korean American, said that an important reason why she married a Vietnamese was because although she was sure she wanted to marry a fellow Asian ethnic, “I wanted to be with someone that was *different* from me.” Another Korean American woman, married to a Taiwanese

American, said that although her teenage years were more oriented toward coethnics, she made a conscious decision that she was not going to date a Korean guy by the time she got to college. In college, she started to identify herself increasingly as an Asian American rather than Korean American because she did not want to be just “immersed” in the Korean American world, which she felt would narrow her horizons and social interaction. Nonetheless, she wanted to marry an “Asian,” someone who “gets being a minority in America.” My findings indicate that participants who eventually chose to intermarry with Asian ethnics, regardless of whether their growing up years were more ethnically or white-oriented, tended actually to be attracted toward *diversity* in associational terms, with other minorities as well as with whites, suggesting a surprising lack of racial in-group orientation. But as to why they chose ultimately to stay within the racial fold and not cross-racial lines in marriage, a prominent theme that emerged in their narratives had to do, again, with the participants’ strong desire to meet the expectations of their parents/families for avoiding out-marriage, which rendered the issue of cultural “comfort” or “easiness” especially salient for the respondents.

The power of parental expectations is further demonstrated by a case of a female respondent, a Korean American, where the parents insisted that she in-marry. This individual, however, was not interested in the least in marrying someone of her own nationality, and desired to date across racial lines, and did so. Unable to withstand parental opposition, however, this self-described “banana,” in the end, chose a Chinese American to marry, a solution that she saw as a compromise meeting of her parents “half way.” As someone who felt she could have married just about anyone, the discourse she engaged in of appreciating cultural “comfort” she shared with her husband was largely a statement of how marrying another Asian American eased her family relations.

Passing down “Asianness”: Cultural/Ethnic Negotiations and Reinvention in Marriage and Family-making

Once united, how do interethnic couples negotiate their respective ethnic cultures within the context of marriage and family? If what we are witnessing is a kind of pan-Asian “ethnogenesis”—formation or emergence of ethnic groups—what is the nature of culture and ethnicity that is being blended, retained, discarded, or being constructed? Are there any implications arising from hierarchies *within* the Asian community? Despite the widespread perception that people with “Asian” national origins share a common cultural core, often of Confucian derivation, this is not only false but fails to recognize that even Confucian cultures differ dramatically across nations and take on different forms and valences across national and ethnic boundaries within Asia. Expressing her incredulity, one respondent related to me how one white American colleague, after watching an Asian American couple argue in a restaurant, made a statement, “What do they have to fight about? They’re all the same!”

No matter what the nationality or ethnic combination of my respondent couples, my findings clearly suggest that considerable amount of cultural and ethnic identity negotiations occurs between couples, affirming the idea that the dynamics of ethnic negotiation that occur among the couples in my study is clearly a process of identity and cultural reconstruction that happens in response to and within the context of the larger, socially imposed definitions of the “Asian” (Nagel 1994). One of the most ironic aspects of the ethnic negotiations that can be observed among the couples occurs along two dimensions: (1) couples who, once married, consciously or proactively made an effort to maintain and pass down respective ethnic culture and identity within their marriages and to their children but end up with a weak, diluted, “reinvented” form of amalgamated/hybrid “Asian American” culture because of their own ethnic cultural incompetence (not knowing the language well enough nor the substance of their own ethnic culture); or

(2) couples who do not view themselves as *actively* trying to preserve anything cultural in particular ways for themselves and their families, but are nonetheless doing so by virtue of their having chosen an Asian American mate and through primary association with Asian American family members and friends. Cultural and identity negotiations among individuals with panethnic “Asian American” identities are particularly interesting because not all of these individuals simply view themselves as trying to actively preserve their ethnic identities, but are nonetheless involved in transmitting some form of ethnic culture and identity in unorthodox, often unreflexive ways, through a process of blending and negotiating through a vehicle of pan-Asian identity and culture, which itself emerges in a complex negotiation with the white-oriented, hegemonic conception of “Americanness.”

Making Stuff Up as We Go Along

A quarter of respondents in my study were highly articulate about their desire to maintain Asian American identity in themselves and their children. Having chosen an Asian American as a mate, often consciously, these individuals were expressive about the fact that retaining and passing down Asian American identity and culture in their children was a necessity and a priority, whether in the form of a hybrid pan-Asian identity, or in the combined form of two ethnic identities and cultures. One Japanese American woman, married to a Chinese American, asserted, “I’m raising my kids as Asian American. I want them to retain a strong Asian American identity. I want them to see themselves as Americans of Asian descent.” However, for many, the fact that their kids need to be aware of and possess this Asian American identity signals the recognition that their Asian appearance does set them apart. One male respondent expressed this sentiment emphatically: “We are different because we *look* different. People treat us differently because we look different.” According to another respondent, “We want them to know the language, where they came from, culture, and be proud of their race. We don’t want them to be ashamed.”

The other individuals or couples in my study were not nearly as articulate about their intentions to maintain ethnic identity and culture. Several individuals attested to the fact that they never explicitly talked with their spouses about passing down ethnic culture to children, nor how to do it. Nonetheless, when pressed, they admitted that they were engaged in transmitting ethnic identity and culture, although not in any systematic or planned manner. One theme that emerged repeatedly was that transmission of culture and ethnicity was often an uncoordinated, unpremeditated affair, accompanied by the oft-repeated statement that “we make it up as we go along,” or “we just sort of do it.”

A most ironic fact from my study is that, because of the lack of cultural competency on the part of most parents, the actual “content” of what was being passed down was not very different between the two groups described above. When pressed, the four key elements of ethnic culture were language, food, holiday celebrations, and values. However, according to my findings, food and secondarily holiday rituals were the only cultural elements that were being passed down in any concrete and consistent way (cf. Guevarra 2012; Kibria 2002; Tuan 1998). All respondents said that they ate ethnic food at home, food belonging to the ethnicities of both parents. Although the parents routinely cooked mainstream “American” food as well, such as spaghetti or hamburgers, Asian-ethnic foods were something that the parents themselves spent their lives eating, and thus a practice that they had no reason to discontinue doing.

Almost all respondents expressed a strong desire for the kids to learn languages of both spouses, but lamented that this was difficult to pass down as they themselves did not know the language well. Many couples often grew up in households where English was primarily spoken. The respondents perceived the presence of grandparents as central to the efforts to pass down language; in some cases, this was successful, but in most cases, it was not, because either the grandparents were not around as much as they expected, or the grandparents often chose to speak

English to the grandchildren to remove barriers to communication with the kids. Three respondents surprisingly did not consider language to be an important cultural capital to pass down, and did not attempt to push it on their kids (though language schools were expressed as an option), with the exception of teaching “little phrases.”

As for “values,” the answers were surprisingly similar across the board. The “Asian” values the respondents agreed upon were things like “respect of parents and elders,” “importance of family,” “hardwork,” “being stoic,” “education,” “not talking back to grownups all the time,” or mundane practices like “taking off shoes inside the house.” Interestingly, values were something that respondents felt were being passed down as much at a subconscious level as consciously: As one parent explained,

we pass down things because that’s who we are. It’s not intentional . . . even with food. You need to know how to eat rice because we are Asians and it’s more like we’re eating rice tonight because we like it, so you [children] are going to eat it too.

For this parent, in other words, “Asian” values constituted a part of the “Asian” habitus, which, by virtue of being part of an Asian family, the children came to embrace.

The individuals who did not view themselves as *actively* passing down much Asian culture often talked about how “Americanized” they and their kids were. One couple said that when all of their Asian American couples get together, it “tends to be Americanized,” where “only food is sort of ethnic.” Most speak only English at home. In short, these couples recognize that sometimes, the “default” culture for the families and children end up being “American” rather than ethnic, that culturally their kids are just as immersed in the mainstream culture as they are in ethnic cultures, and even feel that their families are as American as anyone else’s. One parent, a Filipina American married to a Korean American who wanted their kids to know their ethnic cultures, said,

. . . but if they [the children] don’t know the languages, what makes them Asian? I don’t know . . . Maybe it’s food that makes them Asian, but then they eat a lot of American food too . . . They’re very Americanized. But I guess they do have values like respecting elders, taking slippers off in the house . . . But I don’t know if that’s an Asian thing or just something our parents just taught us.

In the discourse of some respondents, it appears that except for the Asian “looks” and the presence of cultural elements such as food, they “feel” just as American as anyone else. Despite this rhetoric, the interesting point here is that these couples do pass down ethnic cultures, even if passively, but that they do not see themselves as doing so, or being able to do so, and whatever they pass down, they see themselves as doing it by virtue of just “being Asian.” One woman stated, “We pass things down because that’s who we are,” while another woman reflected that “it’s hard to talk about what I’m passing down to my children because I myself struggle with what is Chinese, what is Chinese American, what is Vietnamese. It’s really hard to distinguish because it’s just who I am.”

There is, however, another way in which these parents ensure that something of “Asianness,” a word often used to describe the “hybrid” culture the kids were getting, gets passed down: living among other Asian Americans. A number of individuals expressed how important it was for their kids to live in places with other Asian around so that they can maintain their ethnicities, and also, feel “normal” about who they are. One woman said, “That all plays into where we choose to live because I don’t want the kids to live where they are tokens. There are a lot of Asian Americans here and they can be themselves.” According to another, “One thing I want to say is that even though we may not be intentional about these things [ethnic culture], it’s important that they be around Asians.” Yet another woman, who admitted that she never sat down and had any extended

conversations with her kids about their backgrounds, said that “just by virtue of the fact that they’re living amongst Asians in California, I know they’re getting Asian culture. It’s kind of sad, but my kids are Asian by association!” Another person put it this way: “So it’s not that I’m ignoring Asian culture, but I just don’t have to work very hard at it because of we have the Asian environment.”

In sum, one of my findings with regard to interethnically married Asians was that while some made extra efforts to transmit their ethnic cultures to their bicultural children because they feared ethnic “cultural erasure” in relation to the mainstream culture at some level (cf. Kibria 2002), others, counterintuitively, took a certain amount of cultural transmission for granted just by virtue of the fact that they are in an Asian family unit, obviating the need in some cases to try as hard as they can to actively pass down ethnic culture.⁹ This questions the possible thesis that pan-Asian couples may necessarily be highly bent on consciously “preserving” their ethnic cultures or that they are more successful in passing down or maintaining their cultures than, for example, interracially married couples. In fact, when asked to imagine what they would do if they were married to a white-ethnic spouse, several individuals definitely stated that they would probably make *more* of an effort to pass down their ethnic culture to make sure the kids “got their side of the story.”¹⁰

Conflicts in Cultural Negotiation: Inter-Asian Hierarchy?

To what extent do interethnic couples struggle over negotiation of their respective cultures? Parallel to other findings regarding interracial couples (Chong 2013), the interethnic couples in my study, as noted above, rarely talked explicitly about cultural negotiations, neither with each other nor with regard to passing it down to their children, and explicit tensions and negotiation over culture, if any, seemed to emerge almost always only when children entered the picture. In almost all cases, the couples stated that they would like their respective cultures to be passed down equally to children, but the reality is that the contribution of each parent to the passing down of his or her ethnic culture, or the emphasis of it, is more often than not uneven. This was sometimes openly admitted to me, but did not appear to generate a great deal of overt conflict between the spouses, but in other cases, overt conflicts emerged, with one spouse complaining of the other spouse for emphasizing his or her culture too much, or not enough.

One Chinese American wife, married to a Vietnamese American, explained that because she is at home with her kids more, she ends up teaching them more Chinese things. One Japanese American wife thought that her husband’s Chinese side overshadowed the Japanese side, because the husband’s family was into maintaining its cultural traditions while her third-generation family was more low-key about it:

I have more challenges navigating my life in his family than he does in my family . . . they have all these cultural customs . . . like for our wedding, they had all these cultural things that we had to do, which irritated me because it wasn’t a part of any wedding that I had been in, and you know, because I’m not Chinese . . . the only custom we had was the dove and crane thing . . .

Furthermore, she talked about conflicts arising from her husband’s subconscious tendency to assert and value his ethnic culture and identity over hers, which included fights, for example, over their different approaches to the value and use of money:

The first fight we had was over money because my husband’s [being Chinese] been raised to be aware of the value of money, whereas the way I grew up, I didn’t have a checking account until I went to college . . . And when I get upset, my husband would often say things to kids like, “Oh mommy is just upset that she’s not Chinese” and I told him that you’ve got to quit saying that because the kids

think being Chinese is better and he's like "well it is," and I told him that if you thought that you should not have married me . . . It's harder to be a non-Chinese in a Chinese culture than to be a non-Japanese in a Japanese culture.

Her husband, to the contrary, told me that he and his wife were trying to raise their children as "Asian American" and "not trying to push one culture over another." However, he admitted,

We want both sides to be represented equally, but what we do is not conscious sometimes. I would consciously try to do things the Chinese way, and my wife would protest, "but there is another half here! . . ." And I admit I do say to kids things like "because you have Chinese blood . . . etc." and my wife says things like, "In Japanese culture, we do it like this, etc." . . . So we do have a conflict over a way of doing things sometimes, but it's hard to talk about it, like how you do things in a certain way, even washing dishes . . . we don't really have a conversation about how we do little things, so if I teach one way and my wife another way, and I see kids doing it another way, I'm like, "oh, why are you doing it like that?" I don't even realize I'm doing that.

A Chinese American woman talked similarly about the increasing need to engage in cultural negotiations with her Korean American husband as their kids are growing up, though cultural differences were never a problem when they were dating. When asked about the couple's process of cultural negotiation regarding the kids, she said,

They're not huge issues at this point but we have had discussions about things like, how are we going to raise our kids, have them be aware of who they are, because they're half Chinese and half Korean. One simple example is, do we send kids to Chinese [language] school or Korean school? Is it beneficial to send them to both or to one . . . I'm Chinese and I want to teach my kids about their Chinese background, so I think we are going to have to address that as they get older . . . But I don't know if either of us are willing to compromise . . . So as they get older, we are going to have to face more decisions about how we expose them to their backgrounds. Another example is, my son is getting older and we want to enroll him in classes. So I was talking to another mom, a Korean woman, and she signed her kids up for Taekwondo before and she realized that it was not that practical and signed them up for Jujitsu and . . . the kids find it very fun. . . . So I said to my husband, why don't we just sign our son up for Jujitsu and he was like nope, our son *has* to take Taekwondo. He said, "That's the one thing that I want him to keep. He doesn't have to continue it, but as a Korean man, it's one thing I want him to try and do." . . . So now as we are raising our kids, our opinions about kids come up.

A message that was clearly conveyed in this woman's comments was that she foresaw a substantial need for cultural negotiation with her husband, even possibly conflicts, because both she and her husband felt equally strongly about transmitting their respective cultures, and she wanted to make sure that her side did not get subordinated.

This brings us to an interesting issue of possible intra-Asian-ethnic hierarchy with regard to the process of family-making. Existing literature is replete with works that examine inequalities between the dominant "majority" cultures and "minority" cultures. Within the U.S. context, a central theme within the study of race and ethnicity and immigration, of course, has been the dynamics and ramifications of unequal power relationship among the majority whites and groups of color. The literature, however, is relatively scant in investigating hierarchies within the same ethnic and racial group, in this case, among Asian Americans of different origins.¹¹

Even though it appeared in my study that the extent to which the spouses were more passive or active in maintaining ethnic culture seemed random, or were determined mostly by the cultural competence of the spouse involved—and this might be true in some cases—I have found that subtle dynamics of intra-Asian inequalities at times may be at play for some couples, along the lines of national origins. First of all, there is no question that the different Asian groups, among

themselves, have stereotypes about each other, and perceive that there is a hierarchy among nations designated as “Asian-Pacific.” When asked if there are hierarchies among Asian groups, the answers from the participants were invariably as follows: Chinese or Japanese at the top, Koreans next, then perhaps Vietnamese, Filipinos after that, and the other South Asians at the bottom. In terms of stereotypes, the Chinese, for example, are commonly described by the participants as “frugal,” and fixated on money matters, but quite ethnocentric about their culture. To my surprise, more than one Japanese American I have spoken to have been given admonition by their parents or family to avoid marrying a person of Chinese descent because the Japanese culture will be “erased.”¹² The Koreans are across the board described as having rigid patriarchal social and familial systems, and the men as “angry,” “bad tempered,” “hard drinking,” and the women as “materialistic.” Chinese men are seen as more softly patriarchal, more willing to cook and do housework, but Chinese women as “headstrong.” Vietnamese are also viewed as materialistic as well, but in a more “flashy, showy” way, with the implications that they are the least disciplined about money. Filipinos are viewed as being least ethnocentric and most willing to out-marry with whites. Japanese Americans are viewed as laid-back and more subtle about their cultural assertion, but have stereotypes as being “imperialistic,” as well as being “very proper,” having “tolerance, honor, trying not to stand out and expose their culture too much.”

Although the respondents do not like to admit that there are any inequalities or hierarchies in their marital or cultural dynamics, I detected a pattern where national inequalities may play into the dynamics of cultural negotiation for some of the couples. Spouses of both Japanese and Korean descent married to Chinese Americans, for example, have expressed concerns that their heritage may get a short shrift if they do not make an effort. One highly Americanized Korean American man observed that his Chinese American wife wants to draw on her side of culture in the upbringing of their children, and worried that there might be a conflict between his wife and himself about this:

I would like my children to know who they are and know what being Korean is about. So one of the things I'm worried about is that there might be a sort of a clash, where more would be based on the Chinese side and Chinese culture and the influence of my wife's family. It's a very narrow time frame when it comes to grabbing hold of the kids, and I know that the Chinese culture is going to be probably more because of the importance my wife's placed on that.

To the contrary, another Korean American man, married to a Filipina wife, said he did not have much cultural conflict with his wife, but admitted that the kids were much more surrounded by Korean friends and kids than Filipinos. His wife affirmed this, but seems to “resolve” the issue of implicit inequality by taking the “default” position of raising the kids as Americans where possible. One Vietnamese American man, married to a Korean American—both self-admittedly highly “Americanized”—confessed that he may not be doing such a great job of passing down his side of the culture compared with his wife and speculated that his more lackadaisical attitude about ethnic culture may come from the fact that he was perhaps ashamed of being from Vietnam growing up:

Yeah, I look back now at what we went through just to get here, and I'm actually very proud of it and I share that story with other people openly when they ask. But I think as a kid . . . I was more ashamed of it than I was proud and just did not reveal to anybody that I was from Vietnam and whatnot.

He wishes the kids will identify as Asian American, or as a hyphenated American, despite his inability to do much for them. One Filipino American man with a Korean American partner said that he wants to pass down Filipino culture to his children. However, he pointed out that it is harder for the Filipinos because there are less numbers of “institutions they can get that”:

“Koreans have their churches, Sunday schools, but we don’t as much.” He felt that the only element of Filipino culture he can pass down would be holidays.

The issue of hierarchy is subtle and difficult to tease out and requires further research. But there is a sense in which, for a number of the couples in my study, the side that is lower on the ethnic hierarchy may take an attitude of “deference” in some key ways to the one with the higher ranking, all things being equal. One Cambodian American woman married to a Korean American man, even after admitting that her relatively “Americanized” husband does not do much to pass down his culture, said that she embraced his culture more than he did hers, and thinks that the kids would identify as a Korean American rather than Cambodian American, or even rather as American or as Asian American. This is curious given that she is the one who is more ethno-culturally fluent in the marriage. In some cases, it may be that the greater cultural competency of one partner may override the possible consequences of any interethnic hierarchy, but the issue of intergroup power dynamics and how this may interact with the issue of cultural competence may be worth investigating further in future research. Another clue of the possible relevance of this hierarchy is that the issue of inter-Asian hierarchy is most often voluntarily brought up by the individuals belonging to the group lower on the ranking. One Vietnamese American man, saying clearly that “yes, there is definitely a ‘pecking order’ among the Asian groups,” related a story about his brother who had married into a Korean American family and the mistreatment that he received within that family. His brother for a long time had a “really hard time” in that family, and received a “fair amount of prejudice” from them, receiving “rude” comments like they had never seen a Vietnamese man as tall as he was: “They thought that was a compliment, but it was offensive.”

Conclusion

Whether or not Asian interethnic marriage continues to be a growing trend into the future, the topic is worth examining in depth because a great deal of evidence regarding Asian American interethnic marriage rates down the generations suggest that Asian panethnic identity and consciousness has been, and remains, strong, especially when compared with another “in-between” group like the Hispanics. A major finding of this study is that the experiences of interethnic couples reflect a highly complex process of assimilation that challenges our assumptions at different levels. On one hand is the somewhat expected finding that the classic, straight-line assimilation path of immigrant incorporation (Gordon 1964) still cannot be assumed for individuals of Asian descent because of their continuing status as “racialized ethnics” (Tuan 1998). Much evidence from this study suggests that the sense of bond, affinity, and commonality Asian Americans feel with one another that underlies much of pan-Asian attraction—despite the fact that “Asian Americans” are a highly diverse group in terms of nationalities and ethnicities—stems from a feeling that they are not afforded the privilege of complete inclusion and social citizenship (N. Y. Kim 2008; Park 2005) in the definition of “American” because of their physiology, regardless of how far from the immigrant generation they are.¹³

Asian panethnicity, which was originally coined to describe a process of ethnogenesis driven mainly by political interests among Asian Americans of differing national origins in the 1960s, has now become as much a cultural phenomenon as a political one (Kibria 1997; Lopez and Espiritu 1990). The affinity Asian Americans tend to feel for each other in this study arises mainly from a sense, imagined or not, that they share some kind of cultural and racial commonality that can transcend different nationalities or ethnicities, and bind them together as a distinctive group referred to as “Asian Americans.” To be sure, we know that this categorization is also contested, even among Asian Americans themselves, many of whom feel that it elides the differences and variations among Asians, and feel that not all “Asian American” groups are represented or viewed equally within this category.

On the other hand, departing from what has been shown from studies of African American intermarriages, for example, where the black family opposition is quite strong toward interracial marriages, especially with whites, because of the perceived need to assert racial pride and preserve racial and community boundary in a racist society (Childs 2005), this article challenges the idea that the development of pan-Asian bonds and interethnic marriage might simply represent a defensive or a “reactive” kind of assertion of racial boundary and culture against the majority white culture and society who deem them inferior—that is, becoming more racial and/or ethnic as a result of experiencing discrimination. For one thing, despite what it might appear at first glance to outsiders, the narratives of respondents in this study did not reveal that they, for the most part, chose to marry fellow Asian ethnics with the primary purpose of preserving Asian racial boundaries and culture, resist oppression, or to shout out racial pride. Although parental/family pressures to stay within the racial fold, coupled with their own perception of society’s racialization of Asians, played a large role in their marital decisions, most respondents embraced diversity and attraction to persons of different races and culture. Even for the few that expressed a higher degree of racial politicization, most of the respondents in this study were in fact remarkably open-minded, and saw little wrong in crossing cultural and/or racial boundaries in the matters of love, especially in regard to their children’s future mates.

It is the contention of this study that it would be remiss to view interethnic marriages among Asian Americans as simply connoting a kind of “racial closure,” or the absence of desire for mainstream acceptance, or a rejection of majority culture due to experience of racialization. Rather, for a racially “in-between” group enjoying the ambivalent status of a “model minority,” Asian interethnic marriage and the panethnic identity and culture it helps to create can be seen as an alternative, ethnically and racially based way of being and becoming American in a society that nonetheless continues to racialize Asian Americans as foreign and not fully American. In fact, what stands out most for these middle-class, professional Asian Americans is the tension they seem to experience between desiring to be accepted as a “normal American”—or to put it in another way, the difficulty of “racial incorporation” (Roth 2012)¹⁴—and the need to maintain and craft a sense of panethnic identity and culture, sometimes reluctantly, in the face of such a racially charged and structured social environment. It seems reasonable to suggest then that Asian Americans in my study may be undergoing a process akin to what some scholars have referred to as a “racialized assimilation” process (see Golash-Boza 2006).

Related to this, one interesting aspect to note is that although all of my respondents emphasized the benefits of Asian intermarriage, some of the participants also showed awareness of its “trade-offs” within the context of a society where race matters and being American is still equated with being “white”—the “trade-off” being the potential loss of white privilege. Even the participants who did not struggle over the decision to marry fellow Asian ethnics believed to a certain extent that interracial marriages to whites would have the benefit of “elevating” their status somehow within the mainstream society, and that by marrying a fellow Asian ethnic, they paid the “price” of giving up this potential access to white privilege. One participant put this poignantly, “I might have made it more in the world, would have made it higher in the world had I married a white guy, but I would not have been as comfortable.”

We have also seen very clearly in this article that “Asianness” as it is being constructed and negotiated within these families is hard to define, made up as the respondents go along; it is an ongoing construction. For one thing, my study confirms some previous studies (see Kibria 1997) that what primarily constitutes this sense of panethnic bonding was a sense of “Asian” cultural similarity—what my respondents often referred to vaguely as “Asianness.” But my study highlights the highly constructed and imagined nature of this “Asianness” in showing that even as the respondents cite some of the “Confucian-type” cultural features as being common among all “Asian American” groups—including Filipinos—they question whether some of these features are even all that “Asian.” Indeed, while the respondents grope for a set of common cultural

features that they can hold up as tangible evidence of pan-Asianness, a process sometimes shot through with interethnic power dynamics, what stood out was not only their inability to define it or negotiate it clearly, but their frustration at not having themselves and their ethnic cultures accepted as “normal” and “American” in the first place.

Furthermore, despite the flexibility the respondents seem to have in being able to craft this pan-Asian ethnicity and culture, seemingly not much different from “optional” ethnicity, I underscore that Asian Americans are not able to exercise the “optional” or voluntary ethnicity in the manner that European Americans have historically, because for Asian Americans, maintaining their racial and cultural distinctiveness is still not an option in America, but a requirement. Thus, I suggest that despite its reinvented and undefined nature, the pan-Asian identity and culture being crafted here reflects more closely what scholars have referred to as a process of “selective” ethnic formation and assimilation (Gibson 1988), whereby racialized minority individuals attempt to retain certain elements of their ethnic culture—albeit reinvented—that they deem are advantageous to them in pursuing economic or even social upward mobility. Indeed, “Asianness” we observe in this article is a form of identity and culture that is hardly oppositional to the mainstream “white” culture; it is a hybrid product that incorporates elements of mainstream culture into various Asian-ethnic cultures being negotiated within families. Subject to ongoing construction, its pursuit often approached with passivity, and difficult to pin down because of its lack of concrete content, “Asianness,” for this “model minority” group, nevertheless seems to be something that allows the respondents to assert and “perform” their difference from the mainstream society, while signaling their acceptability to that society by downplaying their closeness to it, akin perhaps to what Gayatri Spivak (1988) has called “strategic essentialism.”

It is hard to tell what the future of pan-Asian identity will be in America. Most recent statistics on Asian intermarriage in America show that out-marriages to non-Asians still compose the largest portion of intermarriage, indicating that not all second and later generation of Asian Americans are attempting to remain within their racial fold. However, as we have seen, interracial marriages may not signal an endpoint of assimilation for Asian Americans. In fact, as long as Asian Americans continue to be racialized, Asian Americans will also continue to struggle with the tensions between their desire to be accepted as fully American and their inability to completely do so. In this situation, interethnic marriage may continue to serve as a vehicle through which many Asian Americans attempt to incorporate themselves as Americans; even as they attempt to signal their mainstream acceptability, they assert their difference by sustaining a distinctive racial/ethnic identity, ward off a measure of cultural loss, and perhaps negotiate a life less riddled with racial tensions, and, in the process, struggle for social citizenship on their own terms.

The implication of this may be that Asian Americans, who, like other immigrant groups of color that wish to become part of the American mainstream but face difficulties because of the society’s denial of their full social citizenship and racial incorporation, may be undergoing a kind of racialized assimilation but are also contributing toward building a pluralistic, multiculturalist society that may transform our ethnic and racial landscape and the meaning of being American. If the boundaries of whiteness in the United States do not expand to include those groups of “color,” such as Asian Americans or Hispanics, as some scholars predict (Yancey 2003), the meaning of being American, in optimistic terms, may herald the development of a society that embraces multiple racial identities and cultures on equal terms including identities forged by panethnicity. At the same time, given the fluid and tentative nature of Asian American culture that is being forged in a variety of ways by the families as described in this study, panethnicity that is being constructed by Asian Americans may not represent a straightforward racialized assimilation process or a movement toward one-size-fits-all “racial solidarity,” but what some scholars have referred to as a “bumpy-line” assimilation in which the level and kind of ethnic identities and cultural attachments that are being forged, even within a panethnic/racial group, may remain varied and open-ended (Gans 1992; Vasquez 2011). This research’s findings point to

areas for future research. We need studies that examine possible variations in the formation of Asian American ethnic and racial identities/culture and assimilation trajectories along class lines as well as along the lines of gender. To what extent would data from working-class families differ in the ways they construct ethnic identity/culture and boundaries with other groups in society? How do the assimilation process and the attitudes toward cultural transmission/family-making differ between men and women? We can also benefit from studies that closely examine the dynamics and degree of coracial attraction/distancing among Asian Americans who are not in interethnic unions. Finally, we need studies that explore in greater depth issues related to interethnic tensions as they may manifest themselves within the process of family-making and marital negotiations, as this would contribute to deepening the knowledge of diversity within the Asian American community.

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Notes

1. According to data Zhenchao Qian and Daniel T. Lichter (2007) provided, in 1990, the percent of intermarriage—marriage with a partner of different race and ethnicity—was 47 percent for Asian, the second highest rate after American Indians (61 percent). The percent for Hispanics was 27 percent.
2. One of the earliest quantitative examinations of Asian intermarriage in relation to panethnicity was conducted by Larry H. Shinagawa and Gin Y. Pang (1996); comparing 1980 and 1990 Census data for California and for the United States, the authors showed that over that span of a decade, Asian interethnic marriages were catching up with, if not exceeding, interracial marriages at a national level, and in those regions with high numbers of Asians, interethnic marriages were the dominant form of intermarriage, regardless of nativity. The authors attribute this to the growing panethnic awareness and identity. In the same vein, Michael J. Rosenfeld (2001) argued that Asian Americans, especially the second generation, marry interethnically more often than predicted in certain geographic locations, which may indicate a strong presence of Asian panethnicity. Sharon M. Lee and Marilyn Fernandez (1998), comparing 1980 and 1990 Census data, and Dina G. Okamoto (2007), adding the 2000 data, also established that while overall out-marriage rate has declined for Asian Americans, Asian American interethnic marriages have increased relative to interracial marriage to whites (see Min and Kim 2009 for differing analysis). Other recent studies have highlighted that despite the increasing trend toward inter-Asian marriages, the rates of interethnic marriages vary among different Asian origin groups as well as by nativity, for example, Asian Indians and Vietnamese being exceptionally endogamous (Le 2013; Qian, Blair, and Ruf 2001; Qian and Lichter 2007).
3. Here, I refer to Asian American's "middle" position in the American black/white racial divide. Elaine Kim (1998:3) utilized the term "in-between" to signify other ways Asian Americans are situated in this ambiguous "middle" groups position in contemporary American society; "in-between" signals, she said, being "on the cusp, at the interstice, in the buffer zone—of Asia and America, between black and white, between old-timer and newcomer, between mainstreamed and marginalized."
4. "U.S.-Raised" refers to those who are either born in the United States (the second generation or higher) or came to the United States at age 12 or younger (the "1.5" generation). This term seems most useful

to include all those we refer to as “second generation”—which scholars often use to include the “1.5” generation—and the later generations.

5. There is sparse literature on working-class Asian American marriage patterns, and little data on the class breakdown of Asian American marriage patterns. However, Sharon M. Lee’s (2004) study on second-generation Korean Americans in New York City suggests that working-class individuals have a weaker sense of ethnicity and greater proclivity to marry across racial boundaries, while Vivian Louie’s (2004) study of working-class Chinese Americans suggests that they are more infused with ethnicity than their middle-class counterparts because of their greater likelihood of living in a Chinese enclave.
6. In recent years, we have seen the emergence of key pieces of literature that deal with different pathways of immigration assimilation, especially for minority groups of color. These new theories include “segmented assimilation” theory (Portes and Zhou 1993), which envisions several different modes of immigrant incorporation, starting with the classic, “straight-line assimilation” path followed by many light-skinned immigrant groups into the middle class, and the “downward” assimilation into the racialized underclass as experienced by some recent immigrant groups of color (such as the Miami Haitians), to the “selective assimilation” process in which immigrants voluntarily preserve and draw upon certain aspects of the immigrant community’s values and solidarity to achieve upward mobility (see Gibson 1988). Nonetheless, I contend in this article that the desire for “whitening” and white privilege is a force that still powerfully operates globally and in the context of the United States, and I seek to explore exactly how the respondents navigate the desire for both white privilege and the emerging desire for “racial assimilation” via “racialized” panethnic identity as Asian Americans.
7. This is more true of some groups than others. Filipinos are one group where out-marriages are not viewed in as negative light by the community in general, and correspondingly, Filipinos display high out-marriage rates. Asian Indian women, on the contrary, are notable for their particularly high endogamy.
8. See Erica Chito Childs (2005) for an extensive discussion on the disapproval of cross-racial marriages among white and black parents.
9. Nazil Kibria (2002) referred to this as “cultural loss.”
10. See Chong (2013) for an extended discussion on this topic regarding interracial couples.
11. There are a few exceptions. One article that explicitly addresses the issue of inter-Asian hierarchy in the context of marital and dating preference is by Gin Yong Pang (1994). Kibria (2002) also reported on inter-Asian preference of her informants in terms of dating and marital preference. Both studies discuss the inter-Asian nation-based rankings in a general way, but these rankings both confirm my findings in this article.
12. Evidence suggests that in Hawaii, where the Japanese occupy the top of the ethnic and racial hierarchy, the situation is not quite the same; the general sense there is that the Japanese culture dominates others.
13. Studies such as those by Rosenfeld (2001) suggest that it is due to this intransigent process of racialization of Asian Americans stemming from their appearance, and the experiences of discrimination stemming from it, that may underlie their particular strength of panethnicity down the generations, as compared with, for example, Hispanics, whose panethnicity tends to weaken down the generation in general because of greater ease of racial integration—although there are variations within the Hispanic population regarding this (see Vasquez 2010, 2011). He argues that for Asian Americans, factors such as racialization and discrimination experiences outweigh structural factors such as neighborhood composition and even immigrant replenishment in accounting for the increasing strength of Asian American panethnicity with generations as measured by interethnic marriage rates. See also Yen Espiritu (1992).
14. Wendy Roth (2012) pointed to a need to distinguish between structural assimilation and racial incorporation.

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