Four

Asian Americans

[divider]

Non-European and Nonwhite

Pure Patriots, Perpetual Paradoxes

*The luncheon tables* were adorned with purple paper stars. At scores of circular tables, each setting included a red, white, or blue napkin, standing at attention at the right side of the plate. The purple stars on the bread plate shined because Hawaiian elementary students had generously decorated each one with bright sparkles, gold stars, and a different, child-scripted comment. Mine said, “God bless America,” a fitting way to open a veterans luncheon sponsored by the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL).

The league celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in August 2004, and the luncheon offered everyone a perfect opportunity to say thank-you to the “Go for Broke” regiment, a group of Japanese American veterans who had participated in some of the great ground battles of World War II. In one legendary assault, the regiment saved 211 Texans caught behind German lines in the Vosges Mountains. After three days of fighting, with little progress, the Go for Brokers decided to shoot the works. The segregated unit of Japanese American soldiers weathered ferocious, face-to-face combat, suffering more than 800
casualties. As the Defense Department later noted, “For its size and
time in combat, less than two years, the 442nd regiment is the most
decorated unit in U.S. military history.” Its men received no less than
eighteen thousand individual awards.¹

At the luncheon’s head table, nine of the Go for Broke veterans—
many in their eighties—wore loose-fitting white shirts and button-cov-
ered caps from their organization. The other invited guests included
Filipino veterans; a member of the Tuskegee Airmen; a group from
the Navajo Code Breakers; and, finally, a group of women veterans
who had served as Air Force service pilots. The JACL wanted to cele-
brate, prominently and publicly, the efforts of soldiers who still wore
the psychological scars of prejudice and segregation. The Go for
Broke veterans recalled storming into Dachau with the very first Amer-
ican contingent. Japanese Americans happily freed the Jewish prison-
ers waiting to die. However, because the United States was using
barbed wire and armed guards to hold more than 110,000 Japanese
Americans in relocation camps back home, the military’s public rela-
tions experts erased the role of Japanese American soldiers. Instead of
missing in action, the Go for Broke regiment found itself missing in
history.²

No one tried to hide these scars at the weeklong convention, JACL
national director John Tateishi stressed that “what defines the organi-
zation is memory,” the memory of prejudice, segregation, relocation
camps, and the uncommon valor of men who proudly fought for
America even though their parents could never become U.S. citizens.

Yet, despite these ugly memories, the event betrayed no hint of bit-
terness. The moderator asked that we stand for the march of the flags
from the Punahou School Junior ROTC. I thought he meant Ameri-
can flags; instead the young cadets marched in with the flags of the
fifty states. Delaware, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Georgia, and Con-
necticut: the flags arrived in the order of their state’s admission to the
Union. With obvious reverence, the youngsters set their banners on
the stage until sustained applause greeted Hawaii.

Each of the veterans at the Go for Broke table stood at attention,
saluting the flag with pride and passion. Many of the veterans and the
audience of roughly five hundred people placed hands over their
chests and sang, often with eyes closed, the national anthem. To an outsider, it looked like a Fourth of July celebration sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution.

After lunch, Hawaii's senior senator, Daniel Inouye, finally took the stage. The buzz at lunch centered on what he would say and how he would manage emotionally a luncheon that meant as much to him as it did to the nine men at the Go for Broke head table.

Senator Inouye was just about to celebrate his eightieth birthday. He walked slowly, weighed down by age and a chest full of military decorations, including the Congressional Medal of Honor. Inouye had enlisted when he was nineteen and lost an arm in combat. With tears in his eyes, Inouye told the story of returning home to California to see his parents. After the war, he wanted to look his best, so he went for a haircut. When he tried to sit down in the chair, the barber abruptly told the soldier without an arm: “We don’t cut Jap hair.”

This story was old news. The day before, veteran Mas Hashimoto told us he never gets into a barber’s chair without thinking of Senator Inouye. One hateful incident can sear with the impact of a branding iron. It is a memory that never fades. Yet the JACL and its members transcend the obvious pain.

Senator Inouye accentuated the positive. “All men are created equal,” he reminded the crowd. If we embraced the human revolution proposed by Jefferson and his colleagues, we would understand America’s importance in the world, which moved young men to “shoot the works” for God and country.

In Hawaii, pure patriots celebrated the country they love and the political principles that govern their lives. And yet, after a century of complete assimilation, Japanese Americans are still treated like outsiders. Conversations with a wide cross-section of the JACL membership revealed that they often had to endure questions like, “Your English is so good, what nationality are you?”

Why were so many Americans surprised that Hiro Nishikawa, Mas Hashimoto, or John Tateishi speak perfect English? Through the schedule of JACL workshops and luncheons, the strongest accent I heard was my own, from Brooklyn. Everybody spoke effortless English, and, when an Arab speaker used Japanese during a presentation, he
joked that no one understood what he had just said. These all-Americans generally speak only one language: it is English. And they artfully use it to underline their terrible predicament. In everyday interactions, Asian faces often make other Americans act like customs officers in an airport. It is as if they are being asked, “Your passport please. Tourism or business? And how long will you be staying in the United States?”

Japanese Americans—like millions of Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, or Cambodian Americans—are perpetual foreigners, because American culture still teaches its children to underline race rather than character, to see an allegedly “exotic” face rather than another human being. During a workshop, Tateishi pointed out that when ice skater Sarah Hughes defeated Michelle Kwan in the Olympics, the headlines in some U.S. newspapers read: “American Beats Kwan in the Olympics.” The born-in-California Chinese woman suddenly lost her citizenship in another everyday manifestation of making Asians America’s perpetual foreigners.

As one reaction to their treatment, Asians have begun to regard themselves as people of color because rejection by the mainstream has fostered their identification with other minorities. In interviews and conversations during the conference, I asked if this was not a self-defeating tactic. To embrace the identity “person of color” is to accept white as the hidden dictator of racial standards, and, just as ominously, our society poisonously divides itself into us versus them, the victims versus the victimizers.

I consistently got the same response: What is the alternative? Where is the language and set of attached beliefs that will finally allow fourth- and fifth-generation Japanese to be 100 percent Americans? To many members of the JACL, talk of a cultural revolution seemed like dreaming, while, in the real world, Japanese Americans were still regarded as citizens with a foreign passport. In response, they embraced the identity “people of color” and stood up for anyone who reminded them of themselves.

In a forum entitled “Issues Facing the JACL,” speakers noted that, after years of struggle, the JACL finally received a prominent, public apology for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War
II. They even received a small amount in reparations; but what came next? How was the Japanese experience relevant in the twenty-first century?

The answer was 9/11. The day after the hideous attacks on the World Trade Center towers, the JACL formally offered its assistance to Arab Americans throughout the United States. Arguing that “We know what it feels like to be the object of hatred,” the JACL extended the open hand of solidarity to all Arab Americans in the event that, once again, an entire ethnic group should become a candidate for abuse or incarceration. Ironically, just days before the JACL conference began, Michelle Malkin published *In Defense of Internment*, a forceful justification for the incarceration of 112,000 Japanese Americans in World War II. Malkin posited Japanese internment as a template for what a nation needs to do when, as on 9/11, it is under assault.

With incarceration even a remote possibility panelists stressed a painful point: “Our genealogy should scream, ‘pay attention’.” Accept “the discomfort of witness” and assist Arab Americans by endorsing the values and beliefs celebrated at the veterans luncheon. One after another, panelists told the audience that the U.S. Constitution is a wonderful blueprint for political behavior because it guarantees the civil rights of all its citizens. They wanted to make sure that all Americans get and retain those rights and offer special support to Arab Americans because no one should repeat their history in U.S. history.

The JACL stood behind Arab Americans. When it was time to say good-bye, the organization spotlighted them at the “Sayonara Banquet”: the meals were blessed by an Arab cleric, in English, Arabic, and Japanese; and the JACL proudly presented its Edison Uno Civil Rights Award to Ismael Ahmed. The Brooklyn-born cleric heads an ethnic organization devoted to “combating intolerance toward Arab Americans throughout the United States.”

As I left the banquet, I recalled Samuel Huntington’s *Who Are We: The Challenges to America’s National Identity*. To Huntington, America’s significance as a civilization revolves around the “American Creed” and “Anglo-Protestant culture.” Lose either one and you sacrifice the values and beliefs that make the United States a role model for the entire world.
It is an interesting argument, especially for Japanese Americans, who after a spectacularly successful assimilation endorsed the American political creed with unrivaled passion and commitment. Yet Anglo Protestant culture created the racial prejudices that exclude Japanese Americans—and all Asian Americans—from full acceptance into American society. A white/black world leaves no room for Asians. Too many still recall the words of Congressman John Miller (D-Washington) in 1923. In justifying the exclusion of all Asians from American life, Miller said, “a Japanese frequently wants to marry a white woman . . . and ‘a half caste’ is a failure in most cases . . . the half-caste Indian is a failure; the half-caste black man is very likely to be a failure; but the half-caste oriental is worse. He seems in the majority of cases to inherit the vices of both races and the virtues of neither. It makes, as a general rule, a bad product.”

Miller not only wore his prejudices on his sleeve but forgot why Japanese men often married white women. Since the United States forbade the immigration of Japanese women, white women were one of the few available marriage candidates. This history is a terrible legacy of mainstream Anglo Protestant culture, and the legacy lingers every time someone asks an Asian why she or he speaks good English.

Here are just a few of the peculiar paradoxes confronted by Asian Americans:

- Stalwarts like Samuel Huntington want Asians to embrace an Anglo Protestant culture that, into the twenty-first century, often refuses to embrace them.
- Asian Americans perceive the profound inadequacy of the white/black dichotomy but, lacking any alternatives, often identify as people of color. They define themselves as victims of a nation for which their family and friends fought and died.
- Asians marry outside their ethnic group with increasing frequency. In 1923 Congressman Miller called the children of these unions “half-breeds,” the “bad product” of a match made in the streets. We still call them halves (or hapas), and the absence of progress is as obvious as the children’s and our confusion.
Because Asians confront these all-American paradoxes on an everyday basis, many seek to transcend the categories imposed by Anglo Protestant culture. They struggle to liberate themselves from a dichotomy that relegates them to the nonwhite margins, as it simultaneously reaffirms white superiority. In plain, JACL English, millions of America’s most patriotic citizens are asking the rest of us to rethink the meaning of Asia and something called Asian Americans.

Asia as a European Fiction

Consider two examples.

On the west side of Amsterdam’s seventeenth-century Royal Palace, Atlas carries a huge globe; his bulging muscles work to hold, literally, the world in his hands. Just below Atlas’s statue, the city maiden of Amsterdam relaxes. Wearing a crown and a smile, she lounges on her throne, arms graciously open to the four continents of the world. From either side of her throne, masters and slaves rush in, offering everything from elephant tusks to gold; the world exists to satisfy the maiden’s whims, needs, and fancies.

On the frontispiece of an eighteenth-century English book, the city maiden of London lounges on her throne, a small globe at her side. The globe is surrounded by gross caricatures of Africans, Americans, and Asians; the page caption reads in part, “She rules Asia’s fertile Shores, Wears her brightest Gems, and gains her richest Store.” An Asian slave is poised by her side with a fan and a wooden umbrella. It looks exactly like the miniature umbrellas served with drinks in thousands of America’s Chinese restaurants.

These examples demonstrate ethnocentrism at its worst. Europe is the world’s axis; indeed, in its contemporary meaning the word Asia did not even exist until Europeans decided that, as the most civilized people on earth, they deserved to rule the world. As one scholar stresses, “there is no equivalent word in any Asian language nor such a concept in the domain of geographical knowledge, though expressions such as the ‘Sea of China’ or the ‘Sea of Hind’ held certain analogous meaning in Arabic and some of the Indian languages.”

Asia is a European invention. It may trace its earliest origins to the
Assyrian *asu*, meaning “east,” or it could have had its deepest roots in local names that, over time, grew to encompass a group of incredibly diverse cultures and geographical regions. Whatever the case, the word very effectively separates us from them, Europe and the land mass to our east. As David Theo Goldberg stressed in 2006, “the long historical presumption of Europe” is that it “assumes whiteness and Christianity”; everyone else “is not of Europe, not European, doesn’t (properly or fully) ever belong.”

The Asia concept homogenizes cultures as different as China and India, Korea and Afghanistan, Iran and Japan; the word deliberately ignores reality because its only aim is to create a series of exclusions. First is Europe and then everything that is “not Europe.” You begin with a positive, and, as if using a racial hierarchy, you descend the continents that, as inferiors, rush into the embrace of the city maiden of Amsterdam.

Asia only exists in relation to Europe, so adopt the terminology and you willingly or unwillingly adopt the firmly attached prejudices: Europe is superior. And Asians are yellow, exotic, mysterious, inscrutable, underdeveloped, docile pagans who, for much of U.S. history, only existed in the imagination of European writers and the occasional traveler. Iris Chang writes that, as late as 1848, less than fifty Chinese people lived in the continental United States. Small numbers of Japanese university students first arrived in 1868, followed by laborers who initially flocked to the sugar plantations of a remote island called Hawaii. Recruited by labor “body shops,” Koreans and Filipinos trailed the other ethnic groups as agricultural interests sought, as with Mexicans today, a cheap and expendable labor force.

Well into the late nineteenth century, actual experiences with Chinese or other “far east Asian” cultures were in very short supply; so, before and after the American Revolution, even independent Yankees rooted their thinking in European models. Henry David Thoreau advised his fellow citizens, in 1849, to “behold the difference between the Oriental and the Occidental; the former has nothing to do in this world; the latter is full of activity. The one looks in the sun until his eyes are put out; the others follow him prone in his westward course.”

Over time, New England’s inhabitants laid a fresh layer of their
own conceits over the European foundations they had inherited. America may have lacked the maidens of London and Amsterdam, but it did have a “city on a hill.” Think of Woodrow Wilson and his unquestioned, fundamental axiom, “What America touches she makes holy.” It is a twentieth-century example of an eighteenth-century proclamation. America was the redeemer nation; “and American ‘exceptionalism’ began in the conviction that God created only one truly free and democratic nation on earth and that it was in the best interests of all other nations to study America and learn from her.”

Here is an important insight, credited to Samuel Huntington. America is and is not a nation of immigrants. The first immigrants settled the United States. Over two hundred years, they established a set of beliefs and practices, and when other immigrants arrived after the American Revolution they did or did not fit into the cultural rules and recipes created by those who, after they killed many of the continent’s first inhabitants, then settled the New World.

From Massachusetts to Georgia, Anglo Protestant culture adopted Europe’s attitude toward the place called Asia and added to it the notion that only free white people could be citizens of the United States. When large numbers of Chinese and Japanese immigrants came to the U.S. mainland in the middle and late nineteenth century, they entered a nation that, by definition, saw them as non-European foreigners. They were peculiar, backward, and exotic. But, at least initially, no one knew if they were white or capable of assimilation into the New World created by the first settlers.

In the South, the few Chinese who crossed the continent found themselves in the same predicament faced by the JACL veterans fifty years later. Given the scarcity of Chinese women, Chinese men who wanted to establish families in the New World often married white women. In the South at least, those marriages generally escaped the opprobrium reserved for marriages between whites and blacks. After all, many Chinese sported lighter skin than whites. It took time to classify these foreigners, and early Chinese immigrants sneaked through the cracks. They were almost Americans because they were almost white.

Congress finally resolved the ambiguity in 1869, when Senator
Charles Sumner of Massachusetts asked his Senate colleagues to stop using color as a basis for a person’s chance to vote or to hold office. Sumner’s colleagues leaped into action but not as Sumner had intended. Senator James R. Doolittle of Wisconsin summed up the opposition: let Sumner continue with his “sledge hammer blows against the terrible word white” and he would immediately jump from voting rights to citizenship. When Sumner replied that he had just such a bill locked in a Senate committee, Doolittle and his colleagues first paused for laughter and then moved into action.\textsuperscript{13}

Senator John Conness of California said that, if courts applied the citizenship laws in an even-handed fashion, Sumner’s ideal meant the possible inclusion of Chinese citizens, admitted because unscrupulous politicians wanted to get votes by any means possible. However, Conness and all Americans “acquainted with the Chinese character and population knew that not one in ten thousand of them has any capacity whatever for American citizenship.” So, he continued, “I wish to continue the word ‘white’ in the naturalization laws because it excludes no one that may not properly be excluded unless perchance a man in ten thousand of Chinese origin.”

Senator Oliver P. Morton of Indiana agreed. The Chinese “belonged to another civilization, one that can never unite or assimilate with ours. They can never become Americans in heart and feelings. They can never fuse with us. They have a civilization that holds them from us and will do so as long as we shall live; and I doubt whether their children born in this country can or will assimilate with our civilization.”

The senator also worried about justice. For example, from 1852 to 1870 the “foreign miner’s tax” collected from primarily Chinese miners totaled five million dollars; that sum equaled 25 to 50 percent of California’s state revenues during the eighteen-year period.\textsuperscript{14} Senator Morton agreed that “in California and everywhere on the Pacific Coast” Americans treated the Chinese “most cruelly”; they have “suffered cruelties and indignities and outrages that, as we are informed, would shock humanity itself.” So what would happen if the Chinese increased in numbers; quickly “outnumbered the white people on that coast”; and, with no exclusion clause in place, decided to become
Americans citizens? Eventually they might seek redress of their grievances. Senator Morton said, “Who could blame them?” However, the Senate still needed to exclude the Chinese because the United States needed to protect against the “catastrophe” of population growth coupled with a demand for equal rights and opportunities. Remember, “They can never mingle with us. They can never be a part of the American people. They will have a civilization that will stand like a wall of iron over them and us, between their children and ours.”

White stayed in the naturalization laws, and this debate helped transform the Chinese into an Asian archetype against which Japanese, Korean, Indian, and Filipino immigrants would soon be judged. Greed and selfishness as well as economic and political interests certainly played a part in the brutal reception granted to the Chinese immigrants. Throughout the nation, labor unions fell back on a common hatred of the Chinese as a way to create solidarity among their members. Samuel Gompers began his organizing career by launching a boycott of Chinese cigar makers, demanding that consumers only buy boxes stamped “Made by White Men.”

The Asian newcomers fit into none of the approved racial categories. After the Civil War, people of African descent were reluctantly granted the right to citizenship, while Asians found themselves on the docks, ready for deportation to their country of origin. As Samuel Huntington rightly stresses, “American national identity and unity derived from the ability and willingness of an Anglo elite to stamp its image on other people coming into this country.” In the case of the Chinese, the stamp said, “Rejected.” The Anglo Protestant elite resolved its immigration problems by establishing a new assumption of American culture: After 1870, and especially after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, “far east” immigrants represented a triple negative—not European, not white, and not capable of assimilation.

The last of these negative epithets is especially important because the persistent myth of the American melting pot ignores the nineteenth-century exclusion of Chinese and other Asian immigrants. Asians were, by definition, a forbidden ingredient, forever incapable of adding something positive to the American mix.

One cruel contradiction of American history is that, despite the
institutionalized disdain (after 1882) of mainstream American culture for people of Asian descent, many Americans continued to recruit the Asians, who could never assimilate even if they imitated the behavior of Boston Brahmins. Asians endured the contradiction as American policymakers created another. The nation that venerated its Declaration of Independence also established, after 1898, a new colony in the Philippines. In 2006 close to two million Filipinos live in the United States. After the Chinese, they are the second largest Asian American ethnicity. Yet, until very recently, Filipinos received treatment similar to the Japanese American Go for Broke soldiers at Dachau. Filipinos were missing in American domestic history because they were lumped into a category that only contains negatives. And, just as important, Filipinos recall a history that few Americans wish to remember.

Our Little Brown Brothers

*What Americans call* the Spanish-American War is known in Havana as the Cuban War for Independence. Move to the mainland and the Cubans take a backseat to the great powers who decided destinies in the Caribbean and in the Pacific. As President William McKinley put it in a note to himself, “While we are conducting war and until its conclusion, we must keep all we can get. When the war is over, we must keep what we want.”¹⁷ As it turned out, we wanted Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam. But, once we owned them, what would we do with them?

The Philippines presented a peculiar problem. As Senator Horace Chilton of Texas told his colleagues when they debated, on February 4, 1899, the treaty that ceded the island nation to the United States, “there is no homogeneity among those people. Some have never been under the actual sovereignty of Spain. The natives represent all grades of society from rank savages to the semi civilized children of Spanish and Chinese fathers and Malay mothers.” Chilton understood the “vastly exaggerated” economic possibilities but wondered, “Why are we asked to run the risk of admitting large numbers of Chinese and crossbreeds of Chinese and Malays into the Republic, to say nothing of
the vast Malay millions that stand behind them. In the Philippine Islands today are more than 500,000 Chinese and descendants of Chinese.18 Senator Albert Beveridge of Indiana echoed these concerns. “What alchemy will change the oriental quality of their blood and set the self-governing currents of the American pouring through their Malay veins?”19

No alchemy could accomplish this goal because, as William Howard Taft, the first American governor of the Philippines, assured his colleagues, our “little brown brothers” needed at least fifty or hundred years just to understand the concept of “Anglo Saxon liberty.” However, despite the roadblocks erected by biology, destiny called. Senator Edward Wolcott of Colorado championed “Anglo Saxon restlessness.” He argued that the “blood of the race beats” with the need “to plant our standard in that far-off archipelago which inevitable destiny has entrusted to our hands.”20

We needed to be there. Unfortunately, locals proved so “abysmally backward” that the American administrators were compelled to bar them from joining the Elks Club and, except as servants, from even entering the army or navy clubs.21

Faced with backwardness, Congress decided to create something new, declaring Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam the first unincorporated territories in U.S. history. From the Louisiana Purchase to Hawaii, all territories received the promise of eventual statehood. Puerto Rico, the Philippines, and Guam were different, however, because no one wanted to promise statehood to territories with populations as incompatible with Anglo Saxon liberty as the Chinese and the Malay. And, since Article IV, Section 3 of the U.S. Constitution gave Congress the right to make “all needful rules and regulations” for U.S. territories, the islands became a part and not a part of the United States. The Constitution would and would not be applicable, but no one knew for sure because this was groundbreaking colonialism. For example, it took more than twenty years for the Supreme Court to decide that colonial subjects did not have the right to a trial by a jury of their peers.

By creating the legal hybrid of an unincorporated territory, Congress squared the circle, achieving the desired economic and military
advantages without according citizenship to the Chinese and Malay masses. In 1902 Filipinos became “citizens of the Philippine Islands” and, simultaneously, “nationals” of the United States of America. They theoretically received freedom of entry to the United States. But, when it came to citizenship, Congress followed the advice of Senator Orville Platt of Connecticut: the new noncitizens had whatever rights “Congress pleases to give them.”

Philippine nationals never received a right to U.S. citizenship. In Hawaii, Alaska, and California, Congress—and the agricultural and cannery interests—slowly let Filipino immigrants become a powerful Asian force in American life, but, as nationals instead of aliens, Filipinos led a precarious existence. The Senate and House could revoke their peculiar status at any time, knocking them right back into the alien category.

Filipinos received only one guarantee: that they would receive the same treatment as other Asians. In the 1930s, Filipino men, like their Chinese and Japanese American predecessors, dated white women in the absence of Filipino alternatives. In the city of Watsonville, California “racial mixing” generated such animosity that vigilante groups attacked Filipinos for five days. The riots scared the nation and stimulated a congressional desire for territorial changes. Congress passed the Philippine Independence Act in 1935; the idea was to give the Filipinos sovereignty and then subject them to the same restrictions as Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans. As a sovereign nation, the Philippines got a maximum quota of fifty new immigrants a year.

It is hard history to accept yet essential for any understanding of the roots of Filipino migration to the United States. They became “almost Americans” because the expressed will of Congress accurately reflected the expressed will of the American people or, perhaps more accurately, the imposed will of the Anglo elite.

A Sociological Obsession

Congress closed America’s doors in 1924. For the next forty years, newcomers from England, Ireland, and Germany made up roughly two-thirds of all desired immigrants. The old-seed immigrants were delib-
erately used to replenish America’s contaminated genetic stock while the Asians who remained in the United States tried to survive as not European, not white, and not capable of assimilation. The last issue bothered a discipline out to prove that sociology deserved recognition as a hard science, as a body of knowledge proffering truths as reliable as any mathematical or chemical theorem.²⁵

American sociologists consistently focused on immigration and assimilation. Fascinating in their own right, these topics also acted as hot-button public issues for more than a generation.²⁶ America excluded new immigrants, but millions of old ones remained, and sociologists thought they knew exactly what would happen.

Robert Park called it “the assimilation or Americanization cycle.”²⁷ Using the same language employed by missionaries and by politicians as different as Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson, Park and his University of Chicago colleagues argued that, as scientific truth, immigrants and Americans always engaged in the same cycle of four quite predictable stages. The groups competed; they experienced conflict; they accommodated one another; and, finally, the immigrants always assimilated into the host culture.²⁸

Park convinced so many colleagues to follow his lead that his text received the nickname “The Green Bible.” Assimilation became the only or principal object of inquiry for American sociologists studying immigration and its consequences. Because the discipline knew what would always happen, the focus on assimilation acted like blinders on a horse. In Cuba (see chap. 1), the anthropologist Fernando Ortiz proved that interacting cultures often produce social change rather than accommodation and assimilation. But American sociology stubbornly focused on assimilation. Immigrants became Americans, and those who did not—for example, the Asians or Orientals—were regarded as the exceptions that caught the eye of inquiring sociologists.

For Asian Americans the single-minded focus on assimilation acted—and acts—like a boomerang. Since Asians could not assimilate—recall the assurances provided by Senator Conness in 1869 and Senator Chilton in 1899—they became the “oriental problem.” Sociologists tried to understand their inability to complete the Americanization cycle, and, as Asians yet again became a sociological dilemma
to be resolved, scholars laid a new layer of exoticness onto the already marginalized group. Chinese, Filipino, and Japanese Americans were already despised in everyday life; however unintentionally, sociology stamped this marginalization with the imprimatur of science: Asians were the outsiders who never fit in.

Since sociological theory demanded assimilation, sociologists naturally wanted to solve the oriental problem. Tragically, the discipline never questioned the merits of the civilization to which Asians were expected to assimilate. Given the hatred and animosity expressed toward them by the Anglo elite, why would any sane person of Asian descent willingly embrace a society that preached hatred of self and hatred of his or her backward, Asian heritage?

In *Growing Up Nisei* (*Nisei* means second-generation Japanese American), author David Yoo remembers how, during the thirties and forties, many well-intentioned European Americans advised him and his friends: Separate yourself from the blacks and you stood a good chance “to advance and attain the title of honorary Aryans.”\(^2^9\) If that was the pot of gold at the end of the assimilation rainbow, who wanted it? Perhaps the real problem was the beliefs and values enshrined in mainstream Anglo Protestant culture.

Sociology rarely if ever asked these questions. Instead, it accepted U.S. culture and, with it, the white/black dichotomy that helped make Asian Americans perpetual outsiders. On a city map showing the “distribution of racial groups,” the sociologists put a black spot for Negroes; a white spot for Caucasians; and a half-white, half-black spot for Orientals. Even when they recognized difference, the supposedly objective sociologists taught generations of their students to think only in white, black, and the polka-dot exceptions.

Those exceptions could make progress. When, in 1926, Robert Park met a woman who talked and acted like the Americans I met at the JACL, he made this comment: “I found myself watching her expectantly for some slight accent, some gesture or intonation that would betray her racial origin. When I was not able, by the slightest expression, to detect the Oriental mentality behind the Oriental mask, I was still not able to escape the impression that I was listening to an American women in a Japanese disguise.” To Park this validated the socio-
logical view of the world. Despite her features, this woman had become “the embodiment of successful assimilation at its extreme, a perfectly normal American wearing an exotic Halloween mask.” With his eyes closed, Park saw a woman as American as the disdain for Asians. With his eyes open, Park suddenly saw the Japanese disguise, and the woman who was once the same as anyone else became as foreign as her origins.

Park, literally, could not believe his own eyes, nor could he question the unstated assumptions that guided—and still guide—many sociological studies. Park wanted his former students—many of whom were now professors at universities throughout the United States—to examine the intermarriages of white and Asian people. Unfortunately, the very idea of intermarriage depended on the unstated assumption that homogeneous racial groups existed. You could, after all, only have inter- or mixed marriages if you first assumed that definable races—that is, Caucasians—existed and that those wholes created “mixed breeds” when someone married outside the race.

Instead of questioning the racial system that caused so many problems for Asian Americans, Park and his colleagues reaffirmed it. They saw a white and black world, and they taught at least two generations of the best students in the best American universities that Asians represented the “ultimate symbol of exotic difference.”

Of course, if you managed to close your eyes, the differences disappeared.

Chinatown, Prejudice, and Ethnic Extremes

For Asian Americans one continuing tragedy is that, instead of Anglo Protestant America making the admittedly hard commitment to challenge the past, recent history only repeats and reinforces the poison that is already there. This was especially true from 1924 to 1965 because the Asian population concentrated itself in very few locations and, when European Americans did actually encounter an Asian person, they did it in places like Chinatown, a word that connotes, in the United States, an exotic enclave where “they” live.

In 1940 Rose Hum Lee found that twenty-eight American cities
contained the Chinatowns that provided most Americans with their only image of Chinese people and culture. In Washington and Honolulu, prominent signs still direct tourists to Chinatown. But, once you arrive, Chinatown is more memory than reality. “They” once lived here, but that was years ago. In the nation’s capital, the signs above the storefronts are in Chinese script, but down below it is Fuddruckers, Chili’s, or Burger King.

In San Francisco or New York, Chinatown remains a magnet for tourists. In Manhattan, they eat at one of the 450 restaurants that provide jobs for more than fifteen thousand people. But, never go to the traps reserved for the tourists. Instead, make contact with a sophisticated New Yorker and the insider whispers the location of a place that serves “real” Chinese food, a touch of Beijing reserved for those who know how to bypass the hayseeds looking for egg rolls and fried rice.

San Francisco also remains a haven for the exotic, but it is a sanitized version of what awaited travelers during the Depression. Businesses lacked customers, so “they redoubled their efforts to draw tourist revenue, no matter what the means: Make tourists WANT to come; and when they come, let us have something to SHOW them.”

Tourists in the thirties and forties saw a labyrinth labeled “the wicked city.” Insider guides took tourists to “the world under Chinatown, a world filled with narcotics, gambling halls, and brothels, where beautiful slaves, both Chinese and white, were kept in bondage.” As a bonus, the wide-mouthed voyeurs also visited “fake opium dens and fake leper colonies.”

In Los Angeles, youngsters pulled rickshaws for the “white sightseers.” In New York, they cautioned visitors to hold hands; criminals lurked behind every door, waiting to snatch anyone stupid enough to walk the streets alone. Chinese merchants even paid awful actors “to stage elaborate street dramas, including knife fights between opium-crazed men over possession of a prostitute.”

Locals protested. Watching the ridiculous, if popular, Charlie Chan movies was bad enough; but, given the ugliness in front of their doors, residents like Lung Chin first seethed and then acted. He fought with the guides because they nurtured and sustained the prej-
udices that existed. On many occasions, he shouted, “that’s a lie” and then “hit them.”

To survive during the Depression Chinese merchants seconded the prejudices displayed in Congress. As Iris Chang rightly emphasizes, “the guides cultivated fear and suspicion among white tourists, whose brief glimpses of Chinatown may have been their only contact with Chinese Americans during the exclusion era.” No one “knows how many people walked away certain that the Chinese could never assimilate.” Nor does anyone know “how many Chinese Americans endured racial discrimination and a hostile job market in the United States as a direct consequence of the myths fostered by Chinese tourism and spread through white communities by tourists who ‘saw it all’ firsthand.”

What we do know is that, even in 2006, Chinatown offers many Americans their only easy opportunity to see it like it is. Here are just some of the states where Asian Americans represent less than 1 percent of the total population: Maine, Kentucky, Indiana, Arkansas, Alabama, North Dakota, South Carolina, Vermont, and Wyoming. Here are states where they represent 1–1.5 percent of the population: Idaho, Iowa, Michigan, Oklahoma, Ohio, New Mexico, New Hampshire, Nebraska, Missouri, and Wisconsin. Corresponding figures for other states look like this: In Hawaii, 63 percent of the people are Asian or Pacific Islander. In California, it is 12 percent. No other state is in double digits. The figure for New York is 5 percent.34

As with whites and blacks (see chap. 2) America represents for Asian Americans a nation of geographic and ethnic extremes. “They” are out there; meanwhile the rest of us rarely or never see “them.” And, when we do, too many of us still expect a performance like the one given by Rose Hum Lee in the forties and fifties. Speaking “perfectly fluent, flawless English,” she first gave a seriously informed lecture titled “The Chinese in America” or “The Nationalist Party.” She then went backstage, changed her clothes, and wearing a traditional cheong sam (long silk dress) sold Chinese souvenirs to an audience who thrived on knowledge of the exotic.35

Chinatowns are but one symbol of American exclusion. After Pearl Harbor, hatred of the Japanese became so fervid that other Asian
Americans took to wearing distinguishing buttons. Knowing that “we all look alike” to European Americans, Koreans announced, “I Hate the Japs More Than You Do”; Chinese placed signs in their stores that read, “This is a Chinese shop,” and they wore pins that said, “I am Chinese.”

The Nisei lacked any shields as they tried to protect themselves from a fourth negative imposed by the federal government. In addition to being non-European, nonwhite, and incapable of assimilation, Nisei were now designated as “nonaliens.” It was a peculiar term, even in a world at war. Technically, only their parents, ineligible for citizenship, expected to be pariahs, but, once the war began, Nisei found that, as “nonaliens,” all generations received the same treatment. Everyone took a train ride to the relocation camps while, yet again, Europeans immigrants received different treatment than they.

Two ethnic groups occupy the top spots on the federal government’s summary list of immigration to the United States: Germany and Italy. In 1941 the United States also declared war against fascist Germany and Italy. And, in addition to maintaining strong ethnic ties, many German and Italian Americans imitated the Nisei: They were second-generation Americans. For example, from 1891 to 1900, 505,000 immigrants arrived from Germany and 650,000 from Italy. The figure for Japan was 26,000. In the decade 1901–10, 341,000 immigrants came from Germany and more than two million came from Italy. The figure for Japan was 130,000.36

Why were Japanese Americans shuttled off to prisons while their first- and second-generation German and Italian contemporaries remained free? As knowledge of the German genocide of millions of Jewish people spread, why were German Americans not tarred with the same brush used to paint the Japanese? Why were Americans so inconsistent in assigning an ethnicity the collective guilt for the sins of its country of origin? To be sure, the genocide occurred in Europe, while Pearl Harbor was a direct attack on Americans. Nevertheless, how many barbers said to a German American, “We don’t cut ‘Kraut’ hair”?

In *Yellow*, Professor Frank Wu writes “that more than any other episode, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II
confirmed that Asians Americans are not accepted.” When it was suggested to FDR that Italian Americans be interred like their Japanese American contemporaries, Roosevelt laughed it off: “They were a bunch of opera singers.” Moreover, if Italians were interned, that meant that Joe DiMaggio wore a different kind of striped uniform. He could play ball in Arizona while his father, who settled in San Francisco in 1915, watched from the sidelines.37

The second-generation Yankee Clipper epitomized the myth of the melting pot. He is the quintessential all-American, yet his second-generation background is very similar to that of the Nisei. In explaining the different treatment, those who defend internment argue that, “because so many Americans had German or Italian ancestry,” any effort “to evacuate all ethnic Germans or ethnic Italians away from coastal areas would have done more harm than good to the war effort.”38 So, if this argument is followed to its logical conclusion, the federal government knowingly allowed millions of potential German and Italian spies and saboteurs to remain in positions of authority and opportunity, while the much smaller number of Japanese required an unprecedented incarceration.

The situation in Hawaii is even more baffling. Michelle Malkin begins In Defense of Internment with a Hawaiian example of Japanese American support for the Japanese enemy. She wants to show us that the military necessity argument was valid but neglects an obvious fact: No one interned the Japanese in the very place Japanese Americans were theoretically most dangerous. Instead, because Hawaii was home to many Japanese, the United States used the same argument for them that it had employed with German and Italian Americans: It was impractical to put them in camps because, if we did so, the island’s economy might collapse.39

Pearl Harbor certainly played a role in the differential treatment of the Japanese. The brutal attack enraged a nation. But the rage took root in nearly a century of Anglo Protestant antipathy toward Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, and other Asian people. Separate the rage from the years of congressional and everyday diatribes against the “yellow menace,” and you ignore the differences that made Joe DiMaggio such a suitable spouse for Marilyn Monroe. Even in one generation, a
European American with especially appealing skills could assimilate with alacrity. FOB (fresh off the boat) became a positive attribute when mythmakers extolled the wonders of the European American melting pot.

In sharp contrast, the Japanese could never assimilate; the only thing they fit into was the camps that forced Mas Hasimoto’s father to make a decision never required of a first-generation German or Italian. Asked to swear loyalty to the United States and “forswear any allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor,” the Issei (first-generation Japanese American) faced an impossible choice. If they renounced the emperor, they disavowed the only citizenship to which they were entitled. If they swore allegiance to the United States, they became stateless, since, by definition, they could not be American citizens.

After the war ended the lasting reservoir of prejudice against the Japanese in particular and Asians in general offered the only available template for assigning the role of Asians in American life. As late as 1964, only 1.5 percent of all immigration slots went to immigrants from Asian and Pacific countries. Even with President Kennedy’s white knights of Camelot in charge, half the world’s population received virtually no right to enter the United States.

Representing the JACL, Mike Masoka told Congress in 1964 that it was finally time to end the racist system that assigned immigration spots based on national origin. Instead of being labeled “an unwanted and inferior people,” Asians desired full and enthusiastic acceptance into American life. Congress could never erase the indignity, the hurt, and the humiliation caused by the exclusionary laws; but, as a new beginning, Congress could abolish the institutionalized hatreds that had lasted through two world wars.

Congress agreed. It opened America’s doors to the world in 1965, but with no expectation and absolutely no desire for significant numbers of Asian immigrants to America. As we know, the change was intended to benefit Europeans in general and Greeks and Italians in particular. That was Lyndon Johnson’s private promise to a reluctant Congress. He never meant to open the floodgates to millions of Asian immigrants; and he certainly never meant to lose the war in Vietnam,
which brought millions more Asians to the shores of a nation already embroiled in a struggle between whites and blacks.

Model Minorities and New Whites

*It is a historical paradox:* after 1965 the civil rights movement makes the color of your skin more important than ever before. By 1970 or so, black replaces Negro as a positive identity; and, in 1976, the federal government begins to require that all Americans check an appropriate box—white, black, or other—on the census forms. Race formally receives recognition as a cornerstone of American national identity at the very time that the United States admits immigrants whose previous exclusion rested on a triple negative: Asians were non-European, non-white, and not capable of assimilation.

Over forty years the United States forever changed the ethnic composition of the American people. Chinese, Korean, Indian, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Hmong, Amerasian, and especially Filipino immigrants arrived in large numbers, only to learn that, in addition to the traditional American prejudices, Asians lacked any way of easily adjusting to the dominating dichotomy. As a second-generation Vietnamese youngster put it in an article entitled “Splitting Things in Half Is So White,” “this is a phenomenon that a lot of people go through where you know you are conscious of the fact that you are different and that you are who you are, except there is no name for it.”

Anglo Protestant culture lacked a basic vocabulary to describe the newcomers as something other than racial afterthoughts, the “others” of American life. So, the Census Bureau created new, made-in-America races. After white, black, and Native American, the bureau turned a long list of ethnic groups—Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Guamanian, and Samoan—into races. While that made the “racial” categories more bizarre than ever, old and new Asian Americans nevertheless struggled to make sense of the confusing categories. And yet, even as they tried to fit in, to their surprise and amazement, many white Americans said they fit in better than anyone else did. Asian Americans were now the model minority, a success story that made America look better than ever before.
It started in the late sixties and has reached such a crescendo that one activist at the JACL conference in Hawaii told the audience that, in California, Chicanos sometimes call her “master.” As a sarcastic sign of respect to the “new whites,” Chicanos sometimes bow down before her.

The model minority myth rests on a very shaky foundation—the idea that immigrants’ economic success is the consequence of their cultural background. In his book *Money*, Andrew Hacker compares “median household income” to “region of ancestry.” As with our analysis (in chap. 6) of Cuban success in Miami, the unstated assumption is that ancestry equals success. “Culture is taken at face value and treated as self explaining.”41 No one asks why, if Asian culture is such a powerful positive force, poverty still exists in Korea, China, or India. Is the culture only activated when immigrants arrive in the United States? And even if that were so, the cultural explanation of immigrant success neglects a crucial fact: immigrants rarely offer a representative sample of their culture of origin. Coming from a Buddhist nation, many Korean immigrants are Christians. And one in nine Indian men in the United States is a physician, who arrives speaking perfect English. Can we explain the success of these immigrants based on their continent of origin, or do we need to spotlight their extraordinarily levels of education, linked to language skills and job openings throughout the United States?42

A variety of variables always affects the economic success or failure of particular immigrant groups.43

- What is the attitude of the federal government? Does it offer the massive assistance offered to Cubans or the temporary assistance offered to Amerasians who, as a negative “bonus,” arrive in the United States with no language skills and very little education?
- What is the nature of the job market? As with master’s degree computer specialists coming from China and India, does the economy desperately want what the immigrants offer, or, if your immigrant cohort boasts fewer skills, do you find yourself doing twelve- and fourteen-hour shifts driving a cab in New York or Washington, D.C.?
Finally, do immigrants find an already existing and thriving immigrant community? Koreans, for example, not only received substantial support from their governments, but, over time, they created the Koreatowns that, like Little Havana in Miami, make it much easier for new immigrants to succeed.44

To accept a continent or a culture as an explanation of immigrant success is to grossly oversimplify a very complex topic. For Chinese, Japanese, or Filipino immigrants, the praise of Asian cultures seems like a trip to the fun house. In the twenties, their cultural origins entitled them to exclusion from the United States. Now, after 1965, those same cultural origins are the source of Asians supposed amazing success in the United States. For an aged Asian, the laugh is at the expense of Anglo Protestant culture. In a relocation camp in the forties, the same Japanese American now comes from one of the world’s premier cultures. Over only one lifetime, a man like Mas Hashimoto finds himself transformed; formerly a “nonwhite,” he is now a “new white.”

When we ignore the many factors contributing to immigrant success or failure, we also ignore the millions of Asians who barely survive on the lowest rungs of the U.S. ladder. Asian scholars like Sucheng Chan stress that, as early as 1970, “fully 25% of all gainfully employed Chinese men in the United States were cooks, waiters, busboys, dishwashers and janitors.” They also stress that to cite family income as an indicator of success is to forget the real reasons why so many Asian women are in the labor force. Boosters of America suggest that the high number of Asian women who work is a sign of their ready acceptance by employers. The truth is “that more Asian American women are compelled to work because the male members of their families earn such low wages.”45

Finally, in Forbidden Workers, Peter Kwong reminds us that the allegedly great Asian cultures produce people who eagerly and exhaustively exploit their own. In New York, agencies around East Broadway advertise jobs up and down the East Coast. Good ones pay one thousand dollars a month; those provided for the illegal Asian immigrants offer wages that can net as much as two or three dollars an hour.46
Yet, despite the absence of substantial theoretical or practical support for the myth, it persists. Why? Henry Yu offers this awfully accurate answer: “Thinking about Orientals has always been thinking about what it means to be American.” Asians turn into a model minority because—what irony!—they can assimilate into the United States, while blacks and Latinos never behave as admirably as the new Japanese, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, and Cambodian immigrants do.

Perversely, the reappraisal of Asians occurs because white Americans remain the axis around which all ethnicities revolve. Following the process laid out by Robert Park in the twenties, today’s Asians supposedly prove that anyone—even Asians—can assimilate and succeed in the United States. Just close your eyes, and you can see the fulfilled promise of the American Dream as plainly as the sun shining over that city on the hill.

While the rest of America embraces the myth, Asians struggle to debunk it. In addition to underlining the poverty of millions of Asian immigrants, critics stress that the model minority myth conceals an “invidious” assessment of African Americans. The successes of Asians apparently prove that any failures of African Americans stem from their own cultural deficiencies. Asians who want to be people of color find that, instead, they have been designated “honorary Aryans,” whose purported success feeds into existing resentments of many African Americans. As early as 1970, Albert Murray suggested that the last thing he wanted to hear was a new arrival complaining about the “lack of initiative, self-help and self-pride” among black people.

In truth, Asians rarely make those accusations. Whites make them for Asian Americans when they employ the model minority myth. Whites then go home and leave Chinese or Filipino activists exposed to the heat from comparisons they neither made nor endorsed.

But the good qualities with which Asian Americans have been saddled can become a liability. As Frank Wu writes, “Every attractive trait matches up neatly to its repulsive complement.” If Asians become more successful than whites, suddenly “intelligent” becomes “calculating and too clever” for your own good. Superb in science? You must be mechanical and not creative. Polite? No way. Instead, you are...
“submissive and inscrutable.” Even economic success can make you “deviously aggressive and economically intimidating.”

This is a classic no-win situation that utterly ignores three continuing facts of Asian American life. Asian Americans do hit a glass ceiling; they do experience continuing and significant prejudice; and, in a world of whites and blacks, they remain none-of-the-above. For example, as of August 2004, no Asian American was the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. And, Hollywood produces television shows about Hawaii—a state where 63 percent of the population is Asian or Pacific Islander—that have no Asian characters, not even Filipino or Chinese servants.

Asian Americans know what they oppose. But, when it comes to actually creating that new “synthesis” beyond white and black, as Eric Liu argues, “What’s missing from Asian American Culture is culture.”

Asian American Panethnicity

Liu is both right and wrong. In the sense that Japanese, Korean, Filipino, or Vietnamese ethnicities each represent a particular language and history, Asian Americans lack a single, collective culture. No one set of beliefs, values, and practices even remotely links the six most populous of these groups: Chinese (2.3 million), Filipino (1.8 million), Asian Indian (1.7 million), Vietnamese (1.1 million), Korean (1.1 million), and Japanese (796,000). Turning to the smaller groups—Cambodians (172,000), Hmong (169,000), Taiwanese (118,000), and Thais (113,000)—the differences multiply as the possibility of a unifying culture diminishes.

But Liu is wrong because, for example, the very words used to define the groups are both negative and all-American. In the Census Bureau’s affirmation of Anglo Protestant culture, Asia includes India but not Afghanistan or Iran. The divisions are arbitrary, reflecting a set of beliefs and values shared by Americans and Asians for nearly 150 years.

Here are four contemporary examples of a shared Asian American culture. In the summer of 1968, a group of Sansei (third-generation
Japanese American) organized a college conference called “Are You Yellow?” In an attempt to reach out to the many ethnicities encompassed by the Asian American terminology, the group changed its name after the conference to “Oriental Concern.” A year later, recognizing that “Oriental” conjured up images of Charlie Chan and his children, the group changed its name to “Asian American.” All three labels—especially the use of color—reflect American beliefs about Asian people. But, in addressing their concerns, the students shared the language: it was American English in the era of civil rights. Like the Mexicans who became brown (see chap. 3), the Asian youngsters embraced yellow against a backdrop of white and black.

In the summer of 2004, Bill Parcells, head coach of the Dallas Cowboys, explained football strategy to a group of reporters. “You’ve got to keep an eye on these two, because they’re going to try to get the upper hand. Mike wants the defense to do well, and Sean, he’s going to have a few . . . no disrespect for the Orientals, but what we call Jap plays. OK, surprise things.” At the conclusion of the press conference, Parcells repeated himself: “No disrespect to anyone.”

In response, a Texan named George Hirasaki made this comment: “Parcells probably was not realizing that he was being a racist by using a word that he thought was acceptable.” As long as he says, “no offense,” the slur disappears; furthermore, in using the word Oriental, Parcells casually employed the loaded language that dates back to the earliest years of raw prejudice against Chinese and other Asian immigrants. America is still “rough on rats.” Meanwhile, in responding to the prejudice, George Hirasaki used perfect American English to refer to “racism.” He agreed that Japanese people are a race and therefore locked himself into the Anglo Protestant thinking that also dates from the mid-nineteenth century.

In 1999, Thomas Kuwahara, a Japanese American helicopter pilot from Hawaii, driving through Fannett, Texas, came across a street labeled “Jap Lane.” How could such a slur exist on a public road? Kuwahara subsequently discovered that a broad coalition of people of color had been fighting to change the name since the mid-nineties. He joined their battle, and in July 2004 the local county commissioners finally agreed to erase Jap Lane. Pressured by negative publicity in
the *New York Times* and a letter from Senator Daniel Inouye, Jap Lane became Boondocks Road, “despite the vocal and universal opposition of the Lane’s residents.” Apparently, residents saw nothing wrong with the word *Jap*. It was just another example of outsiders imposing “politically correct” speech and, in the process, trying to rewrite Texan and American history.52

Meggy Wang was born in Michigan and raised in northern California. She attended Los Gatos High School in California. Meggy speaks some Chinese, but her accent is from California, and her Chinese vocabulary is limited. When she and her brother got lost during a visit to China with their mother, she told two uniformed train officials, “we’re from America, you see, so we don’t really know what we are doing.” His interest piqued, one official asked, “what state?” Meggy had no idea how to say California in Chinese so, stuttering her way through the encounter, she managed to blurt out, “we’re from San Francisco, which literally translates to ‘Old Golden Mountain’ in Chinese.”

Both officials laughed. Meggy was a Chinese joke. “You don’t know how to say California in Mandarin?” Caught with no appropriate words to use, Meggy’s pride sank. She simply said, “No I don’t,” provoking more laughter from the officials. The encounter in China also brought another negative memory to Meggy’s mind. When she and her family visited the botanical gardens in Seattle some time earlier, they asked an elderly man to take a family photo. He happily agreed and, as he was about to click the camera, asked, “so are you visiting the country?” Meggy wanted to cry because “it was there in the train station in Tainan that I realized that I was a foreigner everywhere I went, no matter how fluent I was in English or how un-American my facial features were. I could be mistaken for an Asian tourist as certainly as I could be laughed at for being an ill spoken A.B.C. (American Born Chinese).”53

Meggy Wang is an all-American Asian American. A prisoner of American history, she is a foreigner in her country of birth, and she also possesses the kind of “un-American” face that moves so many young Asian Americans to use glue or tape to create “white eyes.” The kids fold the tape into their eyelids, and, with luck, they stay white until they return to their Asian American homes.
Meggy’s predicament symbolizes the tragic side of Asian American culture, in which one absorbs the beliefs and values of the Anglo elite and then makes a response that somehow offers a sense of self-esteem and *ethnic* worth in a society that says you come from an inferior race.

Asian Americans respond with short- and long-term strategies and solutions. As they did with Jap Lane or Chink’s Peak (formerly in Pocatello, Idaho), a variety of Asian American organizations fight prejudice wherever it exists. Meanwhile, on the Internet, *Asian Week* is a cheeky publication that takes no prisoners. In a September 2004 Arizona Republican primary between David Schweikert and Garry Ong, Schweikert sent out invitations to a barbecue fund-raiser with this advisory: “No Tofu Dogs allowed.” Ong filed a complaint with the Anti-Defamation League; *Asian Week* instantly cited “Big Trouble in Arizona,” as it took their case and Schweikert’s response to the nation. He offered no apology. After all, “it was just for the fun of it.”

Seeking an apology or a street name change is the necessary and admirable pursuit of reform. Seeking a transformation of Anglo Protestant culture is to storm the city on the hill, to cultivate change that utterly rejects the language and the attached beliefs internalized by Asian and “all” Americans.

Like the teenagers using tape and glue, Eric Liu always sought to defy stereotypes about Chinese people. “If Asians were alien, I’d be ardently patriotic. If Asians were shy and retiring, I’d try to be exuberant and jocular . . . If they were perpetual outsiders, I’d join every establishment outfit I could and show that I, too, could run with the swift.” Ultimately, Liu concluded that he had locked himself in a “do it yourself” prison: “The irony is that working so dutifully to defy stereotype, I became a slave to it. For to act self-consciously against Asian ‘tendencies’ is not to break loose from the cage of myth and legend; it is to turn the key that locks you inside.”

What a great line! As with black anti-intellectualism, whites still rule the day whenever a Chinese person strives to prove “them” wrong. Whites never need to threaten or use force because once you padlock your mind you live in a cell with no need for guards. You guard yourself, all the while working to sustain whites and their Anglo Protestant culture.
As one of a bevy of Asian American activists, Eric Liu calls for a new synthesis, a “made in the U.S.A.” model for looking at self in a manner that transcends the white/black dichotomy. From this perspective, “Asian American is but a cocoon, something useful, something to outgrow.” But when? Liu and his colleagues are part of a generational change. The most recent Chinese immigrants not only resist assimilation; they actively engage in a “reverse re-segregation process.” Instead of defining success as a move to the suburbs, they favor the same three cities pioneered by their ancestors: San Francisco, Los Angeles, and New York. Fully 70 percent of the two million Chinese Americans live in five states: California, New York, Texas, New Jersey, and Connecticut.55

These culturally creative newcomers live between past and future; and, like the rest of us, they need to answer two crucial questions. How do we all break out of our cocoons? And how can we offer all Americans an equal opportunity for self-respect and ethnic pride in a world with just one human race?

Liu wants to rely on his children and his children’s children. That is an option if they begin life as Asian Americans. In Hawaii, the leadership of the JACL also emphasized that the organization’s future rested in the hands of its youth. But, during one of the breakout workshops, an aged veteran posed an important question: What ethnicity were the youth? All of his children had married outside of their ethnic group. They were fusions of Japanese and, in many instances, European ethnicities. Conceivably, they would choose to identify with their Japanese roots. But, defying stereotypes, the aged veteran suggested a new name for the JACL. Perhaps the organization needed to rethink its identity in the twenty-first century.

His suggestion fell on deaf ears. It made little sense to a group of people who seemed to know more about what they opposed than what they proposed. Radical change can only occur when we each unlock our own mind.