

Message from the Editors

AAPI Nexus Special Issue on Higher Education

Mitchell J. Chang and Peter Nien-chu Kiang

In 1854, Yung Wing (容闳) became the first Asian to obtain a bachelor's degree from any university in the United States when he graduated from Yale. It would take over one hundred more years after Yung earned his degree before such educational opportunities became more widely available to Asian American and Pacific Islanders (AAPIs). When key obstacles were lifted to improve opportunity, AAPIs began to steadily transform the landscape of U.S. higher education. The *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2009) reported that 98,730 bachelor's degrees or 6.5 percent of bachelor's degrees conferred were awarded to AAPIs in 2006/2007. Although AAPI enrollment has increased steadily since the mid-1960s and comprises the largest proportion of overall undergraduate enrollment on some campuses, there has not yet been a commensurate level of research on this population. According to Museus and Kiang (2009), virtually no attention has been given to AAPIs in five of the most influential academic journals in the field of higher education. The deleterious impact on students related to this oversight, which renders AAPIs invisible, exacerbates problems associated with mental health and exclusion from educational resources and opportunities. Those problems are well documented in Li and Wang's (2008) edited book, *Model Minority Myth Revisited: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Demystifying Asian American Educational Experiences*.

This issue is the second of three special issues of *AAPI Nexus* that focus on education. The first published in the spring of 2010 focused on the changing landscape of K-12 education for AAPIs, and this issue continues that focus on a different context, namely U.S. higher education. As with the first issue, we also had the benefit to review far more articles submitted from the field than what we could accept for publication due to journal page limitations. We

were again pleased to see submissions for this issue that expand the horizon of AAPI educational research in exciting ways that extend beyond well-trodden “model” minority paradigms. Although the model minority characterization continues to be an alarming concern, the contributors for this issue did not allow this mischaracterization of AAPI communities to preoccupy their inquiry. Instead, they rightly focused on serious educational challenges and on offering potential solutions that have implications for future generations of AAPI college students.

In this special issue, we are also pleased to engage a range of scholars who entered into academic research at different time points. At one end of this continuum is Ling-chi Wang who is a professor emeritus at UC Berkeley, and at the other end are Oiyen Poon, Julie Park, and Anthony Lin who were graduate students at UCLA when their manuscript proposals were submitted. Although each generation of scholars brings a new voice and set of pressing issues to examine, we find that all contributors continue to share a deep and common interest in addressing the welfare of marginalized populations. It speaks well for where our emerging field concerning the educational inquiry of AAPI populations stands and how it will continue to progress. When we (guest editors) first met as graduate students more than twenty years ago, we could not have imagined at that time that we would reconnect two decades later to compile scholarship that can potentially influence future research regarding our emerging field. By highlighting the work of scholars at different points in their academic engagement, we hope that it will also allow current and future scholars to imagine focal points for their own collaborations that will result in a long-term engagement with and vision for educational inquiry concerning AAPIs. The potential and promise of such engagement and vision today is far more exciting and dynamic than it was for us twenty years ago.

It is fitting then that this special issue begins with an article by Ling-chi Wang who helped to launch Asian American studies in the early 1970s and, for this issue, documented the struggle to establish a Chinatown campus of the City College of San Francisco. Since 1997, the people of San Francisco Chinatown waged an uphill war to win the right to build the campus within their neighborhood. Wang adeptly traced, with years of insider wisdom, exactly how the community had to politically mobilize to fight for their

educational rights over the course of nearly thirty years. Wang makes clear the important role not only of political mobilization but also of community colleges for AAPIs. These roles are examined within the context of shifting neighborhood demographics and political alliances.

Rick Wagoner and Anthony Lin also focused on community colleges but placed their attention on Southeast Asian student transfer to four-year institutions. Drawing from their analyses of twenty interviews, they identified five major areas that impact the likelihood of transfer for those community college students. By focusing centrally on this population, they embarked upon two important research areas that have received insufficient attention in educational inquiry of AAPI populations—community colleges and Southeast Asian students. They argue that when state- and federal-level policies overlook the circumstances of Southeast Asians in community colleges, this neglect undermines efforts to address serious educational shortcomings that negatively impact an even wider range of students.

This special issue of *Nexus* also addresses the long-standing controversy regarding AAPIs and selective admissions, which is still far from settled even after the U.S. Department of Civil Rights investigated some of the nation's most prestigious universities in the late 1980s for discriminating against AAPIs by allegedly capping their enrollment. Julian Liesemeyer and Oiyen Poon each bring fresh insights into this controversy. In her article, Liesemeyer drew parallels between exclusionary quotas against Jewish students in American universities and the controversy over AAPI enrollment. The similarities uncovered in her analysis of historical discourse regarding the discriminatory treatment of these two groups shed new light on the enduring hidden motivations behind selective admissions practices. In contrast, Poon examined recent proposed changes to the University of California's (UC's) admissions eligibility policy, which redefines which high school graduates are eligible to have their applications reviewed in the admissions process. This policy change is expected to go into effect in the fall of 2012. Although an underlying intent of this change is to address racial inequities in the UC admissions process, some fear that increasing the numbers of applicants from underrepresented groups may well come at the expense of AAPI applicants. Poon addresses implications of this policy and calls for the establishment

of a national research-based organization to collectively address such proposals in the future.

Lastly, Julie Park and Mitchell Chang examined the development of legislation to create a federal designation for AAPI serving institutions. They traced this development through the experiences of policy makers, congressional staffers, and community advocates in order to better understand the motivations behind establishing this designation and the related challenges encountered. Similar to the other articles, Park and Chang also hint at the improved influence of AAPI communities in shaping legislation but also echoed Poon's warning that this type of political influence cannot be sustained without a better coordinated infrastructure to advocate for the educational interests of AAPIs.

Taken together, the contributors address current educational problems and issues that will have profound implications on whether AAPIs stand to engage fully in higher education. The contributors also guide us in understanding better the complex historical, political, economic, and social landscapes negotiated by AAPIs in pursuit of further educational attainment. To better appreciate these inquiries into U.S. higher education, it is instructive to briefly note just how remarkable this educational context has been for AAPIs, as hinted at in the beginning of our editorial remarks.

The Number of Bachelor's Degrees Awarded to AAPIs in 1854: 1

After Yung Wing was awarded his degree at Yale, he wanted to ensure that he would not be the first or last Asian to graduate from a U.S. university. According to Schiff (2004), Yung later established the *Chinese Educational Mission* and helped to eventually enroll twenty-one students at Yale. However, Yung had to abolish this effort in 1875 when Chinese were targeted as a "Yellow Peril," and this national vilification was institutionalized with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 followed by the even stricter Immigration Act of 1924. In all, Schiff reported that the mission succeeded in bringing only 120 students to the United States. Racism and federal limits on immigration essentially froze the Chinese community in place in 1882 and limited them from growing and broadly accessing higher education. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed by the 1943 Magnuson Act when Japan be-

came the target of U.S. antipathy, significant growth in the Chinese American population did not happen until after the passage of the Immigration Act of 1965. Prior to the establishment of more favorable immigration policies and an enforceable civil-rights agenda, the overall numbers of AAPIs enrolled in U.S. colleges and universities were negligible. So Yung's dream of increasing educational access did not gain considerable momentum until more than one hundred years after he first received his degree.

The Number of Bachelor's Degrees
Awarded to AAPIs in 2007: 98,730

If Yung were alive today, he would likely be quite surprised by and perhaps impressed with the trajectory of the enrollment growth for AAPIs within such a short time span. To put this degree-attainment growth into perspective, it occurred in a time frame that is shorter than the life span of the Chinese Exclusion Act (61 years). Within such a relatively short period, AAPIs have reached a critical moment in U.S. higher education—a moment described by sociologists as a “tipping point.” According to Gladwell (2000), tipping points are the levels at which the momentum for change becomes “unstoppable” and is the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point. The articles in this special issue of *Nexus* identify some key issues at this tipping point moment, and, more importantly, the resolution of these pressing issues can well steer the future trajectory of AAPIs in higher education.

At least one bright development in higher education suggests that the momentum for AAPIs is moving in a positive direction. This modest, recent policy decision enables the bestowing of honorary degrees on Japanese American students from the early 1940s who were forced to interrupt their education when federal orders sent Japanese Americans to internment camps during World War II. At the UC campuses alone, more than seven hundred students were displaced by the World War II directive. The UC Board of Regents voted in July 2009 to suspend its moratorium on honorary degrees in order to recognize those mainly Nisei students who had been forced from UC classrooms. That within one's lifetime, a group of individuals shifted from being vilified and then incarcerated as enemy combatants to being celebrated and honored in a university commencement, suggests that AAPIs have achieved remarkable public gains. However, it remains to be seen if the mo-

mentum behind such landmark moments will actually be “unstoppable.”

In a February 17, 2010 press release, Don Nakanishi, former director of the UCLA Asian American Studies Center, noted that by honoring these former Japanese American students, “We acknowledge the many diverse contributions they made to campus life in student government, athletics and academics and formally welcome them back to our academic communities” (Luther, 2010). In that spirit, we hope that the efforts of this special issue will provide additional momentum to generate more research and discourse that will help those in higher education better recognize the many diverse contributions and needs of AAPI students. In doing so, we also hope that educators will not wait until AAPI students graduate to welcome them back but will also fully embrace them throughout the course of their educational aspirations.

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