

Is There a Future for Our Past?  
Cultural Preservation  
Policy

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It is clear to everyone, by this time, that ethnicity, race and class play crucial roles in our world. The “rebalkanization” of Central Europe and the disintegration of the former Soviet Union are but two examples of a process in which ethnic groups—nearly ten thousand according to some estimates<sup>1</sup>—are asserting their rights to self-determination. Although definitions vary, ethnic groups tend to be unified by some combination of history, language, culture, gene pool and geography. Some, like the Kurds in the Middle East, form pockets of minority groups in several major nations. Others, like Native Hawaiians, are oppressed and dispossessed in their own, tiny and remote, ancestral lands. Still others, like the various Asians in America, are struggling to come to terms with the demands of acculturation and the sometimes countervailing forces of ethnic identity and cultural preservation.

In the complex and shifting ethnic and racial dynamics in the United States, there is increasing attention being paid to Asian Americans as the fastest growing racial group. Numbering approximately 1.5 million in 1970 (.7 percent of total U.S.), Asian Americans increased rapidly, just about doubling to 3.5 million (1.5 percent) in 1980 and 7.2 million (3 percent) in 1990. Assuming stable immigration and birth rates, there should be over 11 million in the year 2000 and between 15 and 20 million

in 2010. Lest this appear to be too far in the future to apprehend, we might remember that children born in 1992 will (if accepted) be college freshmen in 2010.

### Fear of a New “Yellow Peril”?

Recently, media images of Asian American “whiz kids” squeezing out other groups in competition for places in colleges and elsewhere have given rise to the fear of a new “Yellow Peril.” This time around, however, there is a different cast to the old threat. The original version conjured up the specter of fanatic militarists in Japan leading hordes of Chinese against the bulwarks of Western civilization on the shores of the West Coast. This time, the menace comes from within: from the seemingly unstoppable Korean, Chinese, South and Southeast Asian youngsters who have a superhuman capacity for sheer study and preparation.

We have, to be sure, witnessed numerous variations on this ugly theme. Indeed, there is more than a hint of the image of the Chinese soldiers we faced during the Korean War whose capacities to do battle against American troops were disparaged as the mindless “Oriental” ability to accept propaganda, subsist on a handful of rice each day and embrace death as the supreme act of self-sacrifice. These qualities we ascribed to them helped rationalize our retreat southward as the media reinforced the images of massive numbers of Chinese in “human wave” attacks to overwhelm, temporarily, superior American troops. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor was a classic example, including for many, still, the image of Hawai’i residents of Japanese ancestry conducting espionage and sabotage on a massive scale.

In this wildly distorted and deterministic scenario, we are reassured that “we” ought not be expected to “compete”—that these antagonists have created an unfair arena; that the playing field is hardly level. It is an old theme, harking back to Chinese cigar wrappers in San Francisco Chinatown in the 1870s condemned for being “willing” to live in cubicles and subsist on rats. The same could be said of Japanese farmers in the Central Valley in the 1920s, sending wives and toddlers into the fields. How, it was reasonably asked, could decent white workers or farmers be expected to compete if it meant lowering living standards to levels long since discarded as unacceptable in our civilized world? Somehow, in the twisted logic of racism, the struggles and achievements of the oppressed

can be turned against them—in ways reminiscent of the Nazi rationalizations for exterminating Jews. The notion of an international conspiracy of Jewish capitalist communists became useful in creating a scapegoat, no matter the oxymoronic nature of the allegations. The lesson is clear: the only thing worse than being labeled inferior and incompetent is appearing too competent.

In an interview with upscale *Town and Country*, sociologist E. Digby Baltzell discussed his ongoing battles with America's WASP establishment.<sup>2</sup> Baltzell had popularized the acronym WASP in the 1960s and continues to decry its demise. "Ethnicity and race are much deeper than we would ever have admitted 30 years ago—10 times as important as class. And the whole thing behind the Iron Curtain was ethnicity, wasn't it? I think that's appalling." Asked which group, assuming WASPs lose their grip on the U.S., would rise to power, Baltzell suggests the "post-Vietnam War wave of Asian-American immigrants."

But Asians in the United States, both foreign-born and American citizen alike, have been among the smallest of the identifiable "racial" groups. This will continue to be the case in spite of the fact that it is also the fastest growing of our racial groups. Even the projections for the year 2000, which suggest that the number of Asian Pacific Americans will climb to about ten million, suggest that this will be a mere 4 percent of the total American population, according to the Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP) Feasibility Study.<sup>3</sup> The twin trajectories of increasing Asian Pacific numbers within a dramatically rising nonwhite population are producing both anxiety and anticipation, especially among those involved with allocation of resources and power. Under these conditions, the experience of Hawai'i, with an unbroken tradition of a population dominated, numerically, by people of color, may be more instructive than a casual look at the figures may warrant.

### **"Survival Needs" vs. "Access and Equity"**

The sharp rise in numbers of Asian Pacific Americans and the unprecedented forms of diversity now manifest in the United States have evoked concerns over galvanizing these apparently irreconcilable constituencies into a unified force for political, economic and public policy advances. The LEAP Feasibility Study itself defines the polarities as between "Survival Needs versus Access and Equity" with the former

being projected by refugee groups like the Hmong, Lao and Cambodians and the latter represented by more established groups like the fourth or fifth generation American-born Japanese and Chinese.

Survival needs, according to LEAP, include the following, by priority:

1. Problems with acculturation and assimilation
2. Need for job training programs and unemployment services
3. Serious concerns about youth-related problems, including youth gangs and delinquency
4. Need for the development of and education in language skills
5. Counseling service centers
6. Programs for the elderly
7. Establishment of mental health centers
8. Family resource centers

Access and equity issues, on the other hand, involve:

1. Discrimination issues, focusing on violence against Asians and growing anti-Asian sentiments
2. Economic issues, such as economic barriers imposed by the "model minority" myth and the "glass ceiling" syndrome
3. Concerns about education, principally admissions policies and equal access to universities
4. Empowerment issues, politically as well as economically and socially
5. Services for the elderly
6. Conflicts, such as cultural identity issues and concerns about the rate of intermarriage
7. Need for leadership development programs including those that address upward mobility and career development issues

8. Health and family resource services
9. Youth-related problems, including gangs and drugs
10. Low income medical services

The LEAP Study acknowledges that there is considerable overlap and that “it is merely a matter of degree as to how much each need is experienced within various subgroups. . .the needs of diverse Asian Pacifics can no long[er] exist in isolation of each other. The future well-being of each segment is necessary to the well-being and advancement of the community as a whole.”<sup>4</sup> It will require careful discussions and extended negotiations to convince both “sides” that they do indeed have a common agenda and can work together for public policy advances. One likely arena that may not be immediately evident is the promotion and preservation of ethnic culture.

In considering the protection of cultural heritage, history and identity, it is presumed that ethnic groups privileged with power and elite status within any given society and any particular historical context, will extend their hegemony to this critical arena. Thus, in the United States, there is a clearly established hierarchy of cultural backgrounds and hierarchies within each ethnic culture as well. The long accepted symbols of “high culture”—European classical music and opera, the theater, art and history museums and the literary world—remain dominated by WASP notions of what constitutes a “canon.” We have, to be sure, made progress in breaking down barriers to racial participation in many spheres of activity and there is plenty of evidence that more challenges are in the making.

Sports is an appropriate and useful metaphor for the gains and limitations of that progress; professional baseball, football and basketball include numerous multi-millionaires of color. We can see this change extended into privileged positions like the quarterback in football and with people of color on golf courses and in swimming pools—arenas kept lily-white until very recent times. But management and ownership are still extremely delicate subjects as the 1992 purchase of the Seattle Mariners major league baseball team by a Japanese capitalist indicates. And, as in athletics, the museums which epitomize the canonization of the experiences, art and artifacts deemed worthy of preservation, exhibition and interpretation, have been subject to enormous stresses in the

wake of these demographic changes.

In an earlier era, African Americans formed their own Negro Leagues to provide venues for outstanding athletes locked out of racist institutions. Similarly, we are constructing separate and viable museums like the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles to provide access denied by traditional history museums. It would be unfortunate to interpret these new enterprises as necessary consequences of a mainstream elite incapable of embracing ethnic diversity and as continuations of the old Negro League phenomenon. These are, rather, new organizations serving dynamic manifestations of a new America coming into being, however awkwardly and reluctantly. There will be pressure and initiatives for more inclusive policies on the part of established institutions like the Smithsonian at the same time that new ethnic-based institutions are created. This latter development is part of a related social force in which hundreds of new historical museums and societies have mushroomed throughout the U.S. in the last two decades.

### **Preserving and Promoting Ethnic Cultures**

One of the characteristics of this new America will be its aggressively plural nature with regard to points of view and promotion of cultural heritages. In the last section, this paper discusses policy recommendations dealing with ethnic culture promotion and preservation. Promoting ethnic cultures and traditions and preserving or perpetuating them are related concepts but they are not synonymous and need to be clearly distinguished. They are critical functions and most ethnic groups tend to pursue both simultaneously—but not necessarily by the same individuals or organizations and not necessarily for the same ends. For example, the various ethnic associations of merchants or attorneys or doctors or dentists may band together to promote business or protect their sense of identity but they do not necessarily preserve or perpetuate ethnic cultures or traditions. The same individuals might, however, belong to other organizations which do promote and preserve cultural traditions including martial arts, literature or music. Assuming that these efforts are of value, it may be helpful to examine some of the ways in which Asian Americans have thought about preserving their cultures and experiences.

The major Asian immigrant groups in the U.S. in the 19th century

were the Chinese and Japanese, although there is evidence that Filipinos, for example, had been in Louisiana as early as the 18th century. In the 19th century, the decisive role in promoting Asian culture or civilization was played by political, business, intellectual and artistic mediators in the white West. Here, the dominant images alternated between ancient civilizations worthy of cultural respect and emulation and effete or barbaric obstacles to the advancement of Western civilization.<sup>5</sup> The rarity of Asian communities in the U.S. in the 1800s made it inevitable that American perceptions of these minority communities be based on the Asian models. This was so even though, by the turn of the century, there were sizable proportions of Chinese in Chinatowns of San Francisco and Honolulu and the 60,000 Japanese in the Territory of Hawai'i made up 40 percent of the population—a ratio which would remain for the next four decades.

The immigrant communities and their leaders worked to promote their own interests, of course, although the efforts sometimes merged with activities based in their homelands, as in the case of reform leaders from Qing China active in the Chinatown communities or the leaders of the San Francisco Six Companies who tried to deal with local politicians.<sup>6</sup> This was also the case with the Japanese Christian leaders in Hawai'i and the San Francisco area in the late 19th century.<sup>7</sup> In most of these cases, the leadership understood that the "American" perception of the Asian immigrant communities was absolutely based upon images of Asia (to a degree only hinted at by contemporary standards). In any case, the community leaders themselves were never far from the possibility of returning to Asia to live, and improving conditions in their native countries made good sense, especially when American racism directed at Asians was so commonplace and overt.<sup>8</sup>

Within the Asian immigrant communities, however, the picture looked very different. There, individuals and organizations actively promoted and practiced their cultural traditions. Asian language schools were almost mandatory for the American born for communication within the family, for employment in the community and for possible relocation to the country of ancestral origin. With language training came a host of activities and traditions including histories, music, games, stories, calligraphy, dance and sports. Many of these activities evolved into new forms as the immigrants adapted or adopted resources and material from their new environment. The Japanese in Kona, Hawai'i, for

example, continued the tradition of *hanami*—viewing cherry blossoms with food, drink and merriment. Without cherry trees, however, they turned to their coffee trees in full bloom and spread mats under the pure white petals in the moonlight where they created a new version of an old tradition. They did this, too, with old folk melodies which they used to compose new *holehole bushi* lyrics which told of life, love, sex and work in Hawai'i.<sup>9</sup>

The second and third generations of Asian Americans were pushed and pulled into a monocultural and monolithic version of WASP America. In the process, many artifacts and experiences were irretrievably lost to storytellers and researchers who now try to recreate and analyze the development of these ethnic groups. World War II was an especially traumatic period when cultural practices and material possessions were jettisoned or confiscated. The 120,000 residents of Japanese ancestry were most affected, to be sure, but all Asian Americans were taught that close connections to Asia could be dangerous, that those connections could be cultural as well as political or economic. The fact that the first few hundreds of Japanese to be interned after Pearl Harbor were almost invariably Buddhist or Shinto priests, language school personnel, martial arts instructors or cultural leaders made this point with great effectiveness.

Now, when attempts are made to analyze the Asian American experience, there are large gaps in available sources and information. When, for example, the National Historical Publications and Records Commission of the National Archives provided a substantial grant for the survey of uncollected records of ethnic organizations in Hawai'i, we uncovered approximately two thousand linear feet of documents. These form the bulk of Okinawan, Japanese, Chinese and Filipino records extant but Korean and native Hawaiian sources remain to be surveyed. The survey was conducted in 1987-89, through the offices of the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts and implemented by the University of Hawai'i at Manoa's School of Library and Information Sciences and Ethnic Studies Program. While the results were gratifying in the variety and richness of documents uncovered, these records remain uncollected and unavailable for use by students and scholars. Worse, the survey made clear the vast amounts of material that, over the decades, have been discarded or have deteriorated. As a result, much of our social and cultural histories will never be recovered.



Some of these gaps are being plugged through the use of oral history techniques and these are immensely valuable.<sup>10</sup> In some cases, the use of oral history is the preferred methodology to generate personal and internal views or perspectives that are not routinely documented in writing. This is true for many individuals as well as for groups. Too often, however, it is the absence of other forms of evidence that forces us to resort to interviews in spite of limitations involving personal bias, the nature of memory and the problems, inherent in the technique itself.

When in, say, the year 2020, historians and other scholars of the Lao, Hmong, Vietnamese and Cambodian experience in America sift through the documentary evidence to provide the basic knowledge of which self-esteem, pride and cultural awareness are constructed, what will they find? They will be researching half a century of shared experiences in America since their involuntary removal from their homelands, and the second and third generations of Southeast Asians will be trying to recover languages, traditions, memories and values, the passing of which their own groups and, perhaps the whole society, will lament. They will be pleased to know that some “outsiders” thought enough of their lives to record some experiences.<sup>11</sup>

When pioneering film and video students attempted to capture their communities’ experiences through moving images in the early 1970s, there was little in the way of encouragement or resources. Nevertheless, some of the most remarkable projects were among the earliest. Eddie Wong’s insightful film on his father, *Wong Sin-saang*, remains a classic effort of a young and talented second generation Chinese American who had every opportunity to “make it” in the widest possible sense of the term. The son chose, instead, to focus on the need to demonstrate the validity and integrity of his family and community. He makes his father, a laundryman, come to life for us in ways that would never have been possible without this endeavor. “Mr. Wong” is revealed at work in day-to-day laundry activities; the mundane and endless actions are punctuated by the meaningless pleasantries of his customers. But at home, this seemingly colorless figure—just another laundryman—is transformed into a vital student of Chinese calligraphy and *tai chi chuan*, protecting his individual and ethnic identity in proud and dignified fashion.

Bob Nakamura’s early film, *Wataridori—Birds of Passage*, is in the same genre: the work features three apparently ordinary Issei—Japanese

immigrants in America, including the filmmaker's father. Nakamura takes the title to reflect on the image of Asian immigrants as sojourners; as people somehow devoid of the right to be acknowledged because they contemplated the possibility of returning to their homelands. But in America they formed families and communities and many sank deep roots into hostile soil. In the process, they took whatever they knew and transformed the culture, the knowledge, the values and the energy into the establishment of a new version of America. Nakamura's father is a gardener, and he is filmed on his daily rounds and as he reminisces about his life's work and meaning. The Chinese laundryman and Japanese gardener are the quintessential stereotyped male characters of early Asian America. Perhaps it was not coincidental or accidental that these two early and brilliant films came from sons who needed to provide the reality behind and beneath the stereotyped vacuum: to restore to the rest of society a capacity to appreciate its own humanity.

Fortunately for the new immigrants and refugees, there is a baseline expectation born of the efforts of Wong and Nakamura and a few others. Visual Communications is the company they helped to establish and "VC" continues to support filmmakers and videographers seeking to document the Asian American experience. Indeed, *Pak Bueng on Fire*, a film created by a Thai about Thai in Los Angeles, is certain to inspire other recently arrived Asians to continue this tradition. But for too many, these activities will be too little, too late—just as it was for the first and second generations of Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Filipino communities in America. This conclusion suggests policy directions which impact on current concerns of the apparently divided needs of established Asian American communities and the survival issues of post-1975 refugee Asians in America.

### **Staking Claims to Cultural Hegemony**

The most important insight to be derived from this attempt to determine whether our past has a role in our future is that we need a deliberate and carefully delineated plan to preserve and perpetuate our diverse cultures. This is not simply a vision of better scholarship in the 21st century, although that would be an important goal in and of itself. It would be a critical attempt to engage all segments of Asian America in mutually reinforcing action programs to stake claims to cultural hegemony. Refu-

gee groups cite “acculturation and assimilation” as their top priority. One of the “lessons” learned from previous generations of Asian Pacific Americans is the importance of dealing with the objectives and goals; especially the nature of the society into which we strive to assimilate. This is especially true in a period when many Americans of many ethnic backgrounds are raising identical concerns. What kind of America are we creating? What roles can Asian Pacific Americans play in the process—what resources and experiences and expertise do we have to contribute? How do we advance the causes of our own groups and communities as we relate to these larger issues?

First, we need to support the efforts of well-meaning individuals in all of the major institutions in American life from public schools to political parties to repositories of cultural heritage such as museums, that are wrestling with the need to address issues of cultural diversity. If for no other reason than financial survival, even the most powerful of the elite WASP institutions such as the Smithsonian are making ethnic and cultural pluralism a priority. The voices of progress in these institutions, including foundations, private corporations and universities are still relatively few and isolated. They must be supported in their struggle to bring their own institutions to the table. The immense resources, to which we as Asian Pacific Americans contribute through taxes, consumption and donation, need to be more equitably allocated so that the burden of supporting activities which empower and document does not fall only on the communities involved.

Second, we need to work on specific needs which cut across ethnicity and generation. All of the issues, on both sides of the spectrum noted in the LEAP Study, are amenable to resolution. One example: empowerment via education involving the youth. This is critical whether the discussion focuses on entry level jobs for refugee communities with 60 percent unemployment or “glass ceiling” problems for middle-class college graduates. In all cases, a knowledge of the racial, ethnic, economic and political terrains will be essential for individual and community progress. Knowing the history of the community; knowing the legal, educational, political and social service resources available locally, regionally and nationally; knowing the languages and cultural traditions of the ethnic group; knowing the problems from within the community itself and its multiple perspectives; all of these have policy implications.

Every scholar with Asian American Studies ties or policy-maker with an Asian American constituency can develop a relationship with one or another of these issues whether labor or labor union related, housing, pre-school education, secondary school co-curricular, political party platform development, family conflict resolution or many others.

It would be fascinating, for example, to take second generation Japanese American Nisei beyond the history of the legal victory (at the U.S. Supreme Court in 1927) to retain language schools and the intra-ethnic dialogues, often bitter, about the advisability of continuing such education, into the advocacy of cultural retention programs for recent immigrant groups or for the Hawaiian language immersion programs. Or to take second generation Korean Americans beyond the fascinating history of immigrant nationalist movements to liberate Korea from Japan prior to World War II to the political conditions confronting Southeast Asians looking to their own homelands. The possibilities are nearly endless; the potential for advancement is great.

Finally, we need to support the institutions which attempt to deal specifically with these issues: the Asian Law Caucus, Na Loio no na Kanaka (Lawyers for the People, in Hawai'i), Asian American Journalists Association, Visual Communications, National Asian American Telecommunications Association, Association of Asian American Studies, Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics, National Asian Pacific American Bar Association, etc.

The Hawai'i example has been cited as one which may be especially instructive in the decades to come. Hawai'i has always had a majority of people of color but it has always, since the early 1800s, been subject to the arbitrary demands of European and American hegemony. As part of the United States since 1898, it has always been subject to the demands of American racism as well. In spite of these conditions, considerable gains were possible and the forging of multiethnic communities of interest, however fragile or temporal, were possible. But if there is any lesson to be learned from the Hawai'i example, it would be that progress required careful planning and sustained effort and sacrifice for modest gain.<sup>12</sup> None of the vaunted progress made by Asian Pacific Americans in Hawai'i came solely or primarily by virtue of numbers; and the immediate future is clouded by anxieties felt by those—especially the Japanese Americans—who have achieved modest levels of power in the public sector.

We need to consider the possibility and potential of combining the issues of empowerment with the imperative of cultural preservation. This is the single strategy with the power of incorporating the wide diversity of ethnic, generation and class groups among Asian Americans. It would also suggest a means by which all Americans might find some common ground to develop a unified vision of a new society, embracing the diversity which now threatens to rend it asunder.

### Notes

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3. Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP), *A Feasibility Study on Establishing an Asian Pacific American Public Policy Institute*, Los Angeles, 1991, Appendix C.
4. *Ibid.*, 4.
5. Richard Halloran, *Japan: Images and Realities* (New York: Random House, 1969); and Harold Isaacs, *Images of Asia* (New York: Torchbooks, 1972). For a useful summary, see Sucheta Mazumdar, "Asian American Studies and Asian Studies: Rethinking Roots," in *Asian Americans Comparative and Global Perspectives*, edited by Shirley Hune et al. (Pullman: Washington State University, 1991.)
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10. Akemi Kikumura, *Through Harsh Winters: The Life of a Japanese Immigrant Woman* (Novato, California: Chandler & Sharp, 1981); and Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *Issei, Nisei, War Bride: Three Generations of Japanese American Women in Domestic Service* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986); Craig Scharlin and Lilia Villanueva, *Philip Vera Cruz: A Personal History of*

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11. Peter N. Kiang and Man Chak Ng, "Through Strength and Struggle: Boston's Asian American Student/Community/Labor Solidarity," *Amerasia Journal* 15:1 (1989); James Freeman, *Hearts of Sorrow: Vietnamese American Lives* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).
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