Chapter 26
Asian American Perspectives on Education and Technology

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ABSTRACT

This chapter, based on fieldwork conducted in 2007 at a large public university in Hawaii, explores Asian American college students' relationships with education and technology, and the role of educational and technological factors in their process of negotiating professional and cultural self-identities as contemporary Americans of Asian descent. The chapter elaborates upon the following key factors in this regard emerging from the study: (a) Education; (b) Access; (c) Prestige; (d) Survival; (e) Avoidance; and (f) Transnationalism. The chapter subsequently outlines a theoretical framework – based on Willis' (1977) reformulation of the Marxian concept of "praxis" – characterizing the informants' educational and technological endeavors as proactive attempts to create an empowered self-identity in response to their socio-cultural environment.

INTRODUCTION

This article seeks – with the aid of insights obtained from in-depth interviews conducted among informants sampled from a large public university in Hawaii – to describe the complex issues pertaining to the negotiation and development of professional and cultural self-identity among Asian American college students. From the perspective of our field, investigating the roles played by education and technology in this regard should be of particular interest, given that Asian Americans collectively exhibit some of the highest levels of educational attainment and technological access amongst the different cultural groups making up U.S. society – and display a disproportionately strong presence in the technical professions – all while simultaneously facing a plethora of socio-economic, political and cultural challenges owing to their ethnic minority status in their country of citizenship.

Policymakers, researchers, and educators have historically ignored Asian American issues; the

traditional scholarship about race in the U.S. has for long focused primarily on the dichotomy between black and white, with occasional forays into Latino/a and Native American issues (see Yu, 2001; Wu, 2002a). Particularly within our discipline of educational technology – a field long distinguished by its remarkable neglect of racial and cultural factors (as documented in Subramony, 2004) – issues facing Asian American learners have received little to no attention whatsoever (see Subramony, 2007). This article may be seen as an attempt to set the ball rolling in this regard. It seeks to examine the place of education and technology in the lives of young Asian American college students pursuing a variety of academic and professional career paths, with a view towards understanding their relationship with these realms, and the role that educational and technological factors might play in the latter's process of negotiating their self-identity in a society wherein they occupy a rather unique place (as detailed below).

A "HYPHENATED" CONDITION

Citizens of Asian ancestry – constituting 4.3 per cent of the U.S. population in 2005 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007) – form an important part of the U.S. social fabric, and – from the perspective of scholars interested in exploring the complex intersection of education, technology, race, culture, and power – must clearly constitute one of the most remarkable groups of learners and technology users in the country, given how they occupy such a distinctive position within the U.S. socio-economic system, one that is "hyphenated" just like their label sometimes is.

On the one hand, commentators have frequently described Asian Americans as a "model minority," given their impressive aggregate socio-economic, educational, and technological achievements in comparison to other racial groups (see Humes & McKinnon, 2000). Specifically

education- and technology-related factors named in this regard include: (a) Asian Americans constitute the best-educated ethnic group in the nation (Humes & McKinnon, 2000); (b) Asian American students' enjoy a disproportionately strong presence in elite educational institutions (Yin, 2001; Stafford, 2006); (c) Asian American students are overrepresented in the high-status STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) fields (Farrell, 2005; Schmidt, 2006); (d) Asian Americans display the highest levels of access to computers in the nation (Rohde & Shapiro, 2000; Cooper & Gallagher, 2004; Borja, 2005); (e) Asian Americans count among the heaviest Internet users in the nation (Spooner, Rainie, & Meredith, 2001); and (f) Asian Americans are over-represented in specialty professional and technical occupations (Humes & McKinnon, 2000; Ong, 2004).

On the other hand, much has been written about the evil effects of the "model minority" label (see Prashad, 2000; Cheryan & Bodenhausen, 2000; Yin, 2001; Wu, 2002b). Meanwhile, a host of other socio-cultural factors also serve to offset the economic, educational, and technological gains made by Asian Americans and consign them into the margins of society. They include: (a) the "perpetual foreigner syndrome" – which, based on the traditional view of real "American" being exclusively white, places an indelible stigma of foreignness upon Asian Americans, even those who have been in the country for generations (Takaki, 1993; Wu, 2002a; Wu, 2002b; Osajima, 2003); and the closely related problems of (b) "invisibility" – referring to the disproportionately small presence of Asian Americans in U.S. news media, popular culture, and national consciousness (Zia, 2000; Wu, 2002b); and (c) the so-called "bamboo ceiling" – referring to the virtual absence of Asian American leaders within the nation's corporations and government (Saigo, 1999; Gupta, 2006).

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