

In Search of the Right Spouse: Interracial Marriage among Chinese and Japanese Americans

COLLEEN FONG AND JUDY YUNG

Through in-depth interviews with Chinese and Japanese American women and men who are or have been married to Whites, this study examines factors involved in contemporary Asian-white heterosexual marriages. We¹ chose to focus on Chinese and Japanese because they have a long presence in the United States and were the first Asian Americans to outmarry, usually to Whites, in the largest numbers.² Specifically, we wanted to find out what factors were involved in their decision to outmarry—which factors were shared by both the women and the men and which were unique—and why a higher proportion of women than men outmarried.

This research broadens the parameters of existing work on Asian American outmarriage in several ways. First, it is gender-comparative, looking at both Asian American women and men who have outmarried. Much of the recent interest in Asian intermarriage focuses only on the pairing of Asian women and white men. While this can be explained in part because higher proportions of contemporary Asian American women than men have outmarried, the gap is closing.³ Furthermore, the focus on women has at times been divisive, racist, and sexist, as indicated by the record number of letters sent to the editor following the publication of one such article.⁴ Second, our research draws from qualitative interview data and fleshes out the demographic profiles of outmarried Asian Americans provided by most other studies on the topic.⁵ Finally,

COLLEEN FONG is associate professor of ethnic studies at California State University, Hayward.

JUDY YUNG is assistant professor of American studies at University of California, Santa Cruz.

our work goes beyond the assimilationist interpretation of out-marriage, which posits that once the physical and social distance between members of different racial groups is minimized, romantic love and marriage will follow.⁶ While our findings support the view that intermarriage is facilitated by the dismantling of racial barriers and the assimilation process, they also indicate other factors are involved, such as: aversion to Asian patriarchy; overbearing Asian mothers; cultural and economic compatibility, particularly with Jewish Americans; upward mobility; and media representations of beauty and power. Thus, intermarriage may be tied to racial and gender power relations in our society.

Interracial marriage, as we know it today, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Anti-miscegenation laws which date back to the 1660s, were an outgrowth of slavery that reinforced a racial/class/gender hierarchy with white, male property holders at the top.⁷ In California, marriage between Chinese and whites was deemed illegal in 1880. By 1933 the statute had been amended to include all other "Mongolians" (namely Japanese, Koreans, and Indians—predominantly Sikhs) and "Malays" (namely Filipinos). In 1948, California repealed its anti-miscegenation law, after Congress amended the War Bride's Act of 1945, which permitted the entry of Japanese brides married to American soldiers. But it was not until 1967, at the height of the civil rights movement, that the U.S. Supreme Court declared all anti-miscegenation laws unconstitutional.⁸ As a result of these legal actions and improved racial relations in this country, marriages between Asian and white Americans first occurred in noticeable numbers during the post-World War II period and increased dramatically in the post-civil rights era.⁹ In 1980, the majority of Asian Americans in the state of California were married within their own ethnic groups; however, 25 percent of married Asian American women and 14.4 percent of married Asian American men were intermarried, compared to 8.2 percent for other racial/ethnic groups. Of the Asian American wives, 73 percent had white spouses compared to 54 percent of Asian American husbands.¹⁰

Many studies have explained the increasing rate of interracial marriage among Asian Americans since World War II. Utilizing demographic profiles based on marriage license applications or census data, most support the assimilationist interpretation epitomized in the works of Emory Bogardus and Milton Gordon. While Bogardus regards intermarriage as the pinnacle of racial acceptance and toleration on the part of the dominant group in his Social Distance Scale,¹¹ Gordon defines it as the step toward the

final stages of assimilation where a sense of peoplehood is established in the absence of prejudice, discrimination, and value or power conflicts. According to Gordon, "If children of different ethnic backgrounds belong to the same play-group, later the same adolescent cliques, and at college the same fraternities and sororities; if the parents belong to the same country club and invite each other to their homes for dinner; it is completely unrealistic not to expect these children, now grown, to love and to marry each other."¹² Given that proximity is at the heart of the assimilation theory, it is not surprising that despite differences in theoretical orientation, the findings of most studies on Asian American intermarriages can be used to support an assimilationist interpretation. Implicit in these studies is that increased contact between Asian Americans and Whites leads to increased intermarriage with Whites.¹³

A few studies go beyond the theoretical interpretation that Asian American interracial marriage represents little more than the natural outcome of the assimilation process. In *Mixed Blood*, Paul Spickard chooses to look at both changing social structural factors and racial/gender images. He points out, "As more Japanese Americans become middle class, their outmarriage rate has shot up. But intermarriage patterns, particularly gender patterns, are not just functions of social structure. They depend in large part on the images that people of the various ethnic groups have of each other and of themselves."¹⁴ In a study based on the 1980 California census data, Larry Shinagawa and Gin Yong Pang use the theory of hypergamy to explain why Asian Americans, especially women of high socioeconomic class background, are marrying Whites. As they conclude, "Intermarriage is not distributed proportionately throughout the classes, but is concentrated disproportionately among the higher classes of Asian Americans, who marry the more advantaged members of the white population. . . . Asian Americans outmarry to individuals who are more advantaged than they are, and who enjoy a better socioeconomic and racial status than potential Asian American mates."¹⁵ Betty Lee Sung's study of intermarriage among Chinese Americans in New York can be said to support the assimilation theory in that she points to the large Chinese immigrant population there as the cause of their low intermarriage rate. However, her interviews with fifty intermarried couples reveal other factors were involved in their decisions to outmarry, including psychological motives, political ideology, Asian patriarchy, and racial/gender images.¹⁶ Our findings complement these studies in showing that interracial marriage is a complex phenomenon—the result of assimilation factors to be sure,

but more importantly, additional factors intimately related to issues of racial and gender power relations.

Methodology

A total of nineteen women and twenty-four men were interviewed for this study. Most of the interviewees were born in the 1940s or 1950s, representing the generation most affected by the repeal of anti-miscegenation laws and the civil rights movement. Most interviewees live in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, where Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans have consistently resided since the beginning of their immigration in the mid-nineteenth century. Among the women are thirteen of Chinese descent (six foreign-born) and six of Japanese descent (all U.S.-born). Among the men are thirteen of Chinese descent (six foreign-born) and eleven of Japanese descent (three foreign-born). All except one has attended college and most hold professional occupations, thus corresponding to the middle-class background of Asian Americans who have outmarried, according to statistical studies.

Interviewees were obtained from four sources: 1) a snowball sample beginning with our Asian American acquaintances; 2) responses to one of several classified ads which appeared in Asian American and Chinese-language newspapers; 3) responses to one of several classified ads which appeared in a San Francisco Bay Area free weekly newspaper; and 4) responses to letters requesting an interview sent to interracial couples who had filed for marriage licenses at the Alameda County Courthouse in 1986.

The interviews were usually conducted in the homes of the subjects and averaged two hours in length. Asian American female interviewers were used to interview the women and Asian American male interviewers for the men. Interviewees were assured that their confidentiality would be protected and all names used here are pseudonyms. Open-ended questions were asked about family background, childhood, education, and social life prior to marriage, and most important, interviewees were asked to describe their lives at the time they met their partners and decided to marry. Finally, interviewees were asked about their married lives, children (if applicable), in-laws, and so forth.

Proximity: A Precondition for Marrying for Love and Compatibility

Most men and women interviewed met their spouses at school or at work and described their marriages as the outgrowth of compatibility, love, and trust—factors which are based primarily on romantic

love.¹⁷ Chinese American Byron Woo and his wife met in college in the 1970s through mutual friends. They started dating and after a year or so moved in together. Upon graduation they purchased a house together. Once co-owners of a house, Byron says, "In essence we were married." A few years after buying the house they decided to get married. The marriage appears to be the culmination of a long-term relationship. They had been a couple for so long the wedding ceremony itself was, in Byron's words, "no big deal." They went to Reno to get married.

Third generation Japanese American Kevin Osuga met his wife Susan at an academic conference while they were both graduate students in the early 1980s. After an intellectually stimulating plenary session, Kevin and Susan went out with a large group of people. The next day they attended a number of sessions together and continued their intellectual conversation. At the end of the conference he headed back to the East Coast and she to the South. Even though they were both involved with other people at the time, they broke off these relationships and Susan arranged to study on the East Coast. Kevin comments on the strength of their relationship, "We're both academics. We're both interested in the same kinds of things—theoretical stuff, political things, involved in the same kind of work. We share those kinds of struggles in terms of understanding the nature of the pressure [of academic work]. We laugh because in the first part of our relationship it was fun to go to a bookstore and browse for hours. That was a cheap date!"

These are examples of interracial marriages that seem to have grown out of mutual attraction and love. As third generation Chinese American Daniel Chan comments, "I meet who I meet. I get along with who I get along with. The cards fell where they did." Born in 1954 in Hawaii, Daniel's comment reflects his age cohort in that when he began dating in the early 1970s, legalized segregation had been outlawed and anti-miscegenation laws had been repealed. In this sense these interviews can be used as evidence of the assimilationist understanding of outmarriage in that without prior "contact" between members of different races these love relationships could not have developed. While this is a legitimate explanation for the increasing rate of outmarriage among Asian Americans, responses in our interviews indicate that other factors are also involved.

Timing and Unavailability of Asian American Partners

Timing is an important factor in the decision to marry. Some interviewees were more cognizant of this than others. Third generation

Chinese American Marcia Ong was in her late thirties when she was interviewed. She said she finally felt ready to commit herself to marriage after "pretty much" accomplishing what she wanted professionally and personally. No doubt she would have married an Asian American in the 1970s because being a part of the Ethnic Studies movement then, that was all she dated. But she had "out-grown" that "anti-white" phase and was now dating a "Jewish, white guy." Women in particular mentioned they were getting older and felt the time was right. Whom they married sometimes seemed less significant than their readiness. These women believed that if they did not marry soon they would "lose" the opportunity. In 1976 Chinese American Diana Prentice was twenty-eight and still living with her immigrant parents close to San Francisco Chinatown when she met Dan at work. She admits she was not attracted to him at all because he had "long hair, a beard, and always wore sandals." But after he showed interest in her and other co-workers told her he was "nice," she accepted a date with him. She says, "I was feeling kind of bad that I was getting so old and I hadn't really dated and been around men much. That [her inexperience] really bothered me." Dating Dan prompted Diana to move out of her parents' home. They dated for seven years and then married.

Some Asian American men and women married Whites because Asian American partners were not available in the geographic areas in which they grew up or in their places of work or professional fields. Wes Gin, born in 1943, grew up in a small, coastal California town where he had little contact with other Chinese Americans. The pool of women from which he dated were white and it is no surprise that both his first and present wife are white. Lorelei Fong was born and raised in a large metropolitan area full of other Chinese Americans, but she found herself having less contact with Chinese American men as she became more involved in her field as a performing artist. Although she went to a college with many other Chinese Americans, she says they were not in her field and, "I just wasn't interested in dating Chinese engineering students at that time in my life—I was into the arts!" At age twenty-eight when she met her future Jewish-American husband, she had not had an Asian American boyfriend for a number of years. "The kinds of things I was doing [professionally] just didn't expose me to Asian American men. . . you can look at the field today and see how many Asian American men are there and of the ones who are there, they're usually married to white women."

Cultural Affinity: The Jewish Connection; The Hawaiian Propensity

Although Lorelei married a white man she married a white, Jewish man and it appears that there is a propensity for our interviewees to meet and date Jews in college or in their professional fields and marry them. Eighteen percent of the Chinese and Japanese American women and men we interviewed were married to Jewish partners. Five described how they shared a cultural affinity with their Jewish spouses; most often they mentioned how both cultures valued strong family ties and educational achievement. Interviewees also described their Jewish spouses as having a sense of "ethnic tradition" and an immigrant legacy found lacking in non-Jewish whites they had known or dated. Calvin Jung pointed out that both he and his wife were third generation and how her grandfather, an immigrant from Russia, enjoyed trading stories with Calvin about his Chinese immigrant grandparents. Similarly, Nellie Tsui, born in Boston in 1950, reported she and her Jewish husband often joke about possibly being "related" since his grandfather traded on the Chinese silk road. Marcia Ong says her husband, who is aware of the history of anti-Semitism, understands her sense of racial justice. "I don't have to explain it," she says. In all of these cases, there is also the added factor of economic compatibility in that both spouses shared similar middle-class values and socialized in the same professional circles.

There also seems to be a propensity for individuals who grew up in Hawaii to outmarry. Unlike the mainland, Hawaii has a long history of marital mixing.¹⁸ Japanese American Mary Fujimoto, who lived in Hawaii from age fifteen to twenty-five, said she was used to being around people of all different backgrounds and in fact always considered "hapa [racially mixed] children cuter." She dated Asians and Whites before marrying her white, college sweetheart. Third-generation Chinese American Timothy Tom grew up in a multiracial Hawaiian neighborhood of Japanese, Portuguese, Hawaiian, Puerto Rican and other Chinese. He believes it was this environment that provided him with an openness to other groups and most importantly an openness to Whites who do not occupy the same dominant position as they do on the mainland. He later chose to marry a white classmate he met and dated while attending college on the mainland.

Aversion to Marrying within the Same Race

Even when potential Asian American spouses were available, many of the Asian American men and women we interviewed found them

“less attractive” than the white partners they eventually chose. Analysis of these interviews reveals both men and women had formed negative opinions and feelings about Asian Americans of the opposite sex. On the one hand, cultural attributes such as a patriarchal family structure, an overbearing mother, or growing up in an ethnically insulated neighborhood turned them away from seeking Asian American partners. On the other hand, the media promotion of white beauty and power encouraged them to date and marry white Americans.

A number of our interviewees grew up in repressive family situations where one or both parents were unbearably domineering and manipulative and where negative reinforcement and strict discipline were practiced. They said this resulted in views of their parents as anti-role models and an aversion to marrying within the same race. “I knew I didn’t want to marry someone like my father [or mother],” was one of the more common responses from women who described their fathers as too patriarchal, insensitive, and non-expressive and from men who characterized their mothers as manipulative and complaining. Hoping to escape what they perceived to be unhappy marriages of their parents’, interviewees placed great emphasis on marriages based on romantic love and grounded in mutual respect and equality.

THE WOMEN’S PERSPECTIVE

Mimi Kato, a third-generation Japanese American woman born in the early 1940s, was very aware of both the patriarchal oppression in her mother’s two in-marriages and the status mobility to be gained by marrying someone white. Mimi’s father walked out on the family when she was five and her stepfather was physically abusive to both her and her mother. She knew at an early age that she did not want to end up victimized like her mother and powerless to resist the abuse. Mimi dated Japanese American men but found them too protective and the relationships “suffocating.” While most of the interviewees’ parents had strong objections to interracial dating and marriage, Mimi’s mother encouraged her in that direction for reasons of class mobility. Media messages that “white is right, beautiful, and acceptable” also encouraged Mimi to date white men who shared her interest in art and literature. In searching for her “white knight,” someone who would be the kind father she never had, she settled upon Dave, her Teaching Assistant in a literature class. As she admitted some twenty years after their divorce:

He was very sensitive, very bright, very very good as a writer, and he was really kind and very tolerant. He was the kind of person that I would really want to be the father of my child. I think I had decided at that time that I wanted a child that was half-white [because]. . . . I was raised with all the values that white was infinitely more attractive, infinitely more acceptable, infinitely more powerful. And I wanted my child to have half the power, to have all that that dream represented, all that that program represented.

However, as with a number of other interviewees, when Mimi became politicized by the Third World strike at San Francisco State University,¹⁹ she reassessed her motivations for marriage and the marriage ended in divorce.

The women interviewed reported that Asian American men tended not to treat them as equals. This they learned from either observing real situations in their own families or through first-hand dating experiences. Born in Hong Kong in 1950, Nellie Tsui came from a well-to-do family. She remembers that while her brother was groomed to follow in the footsteps of their father, a successful businessman with a Harvard degree, she was expected to marry and become a housewife like her mother. When she immigrated to the United States after high school, Nellie's parents expected her to date and marry Chinese. She consciously dated Chinese American men in college with that in mind, but found them unattractive or thought they found her unattractive because she was tall, dark, and had a tendency to be outspoken. In the end, she married a white, Jewish colleague who offered her what she found lacking in Chinese men like her own father. "Bill was very feminine, very caring, and very verbal," she says. "He's a great cook, and he's always done the dishes no matter who cooks." As she told her mother right after she met Bill, "I said I think I met the man I'm going to marry, and I said jokingly, 'he has my martini ready for me when I come home from work.' And that was the kind of person he was. There's no way my father would do that. You know, it's too demeaning." Upon further analysis, Nellie realized that her father's cultural upbringing and insecurities—which stemmed from his awareness of his racial minority status—prevented him from being more giving and encouraging. Whereas her father had devalued her, Bill always made her feel good about being an Asian woman.

We found that Asian American interviewees who identified as feminists had the hardest time accepting sexist attitudes and behav-

ior. Their coming to a new sense of consciousness as a result of the growing women's liberation movement of the 1970s no doubt contributed to the increased rate of intermarriage among these women. As feminists, they were much more aware of patriarchy and less willing to tolerate it. Alice Stein, who grew up in China after the 1949 Revolution, had feminist beliefs even before she came to the United States. Upon arrival as a foreign student in 1980, she was immediately struck by the sexism that pervaded American culture and the attitudes of the Chinese American men she met:

I guess growing up in a Communist society, at least the Communist Party advocates equality a lot between men and women. That's one thing that I was hit [with] the minute I got here. Everything is so sexually oriented, putting women on such a degrading [level]. All the selling of cars and everything has a woman perched on it. I felt it very strong among Chinese American men, not only among the two that I met but even with other Chinese American men that I talked to. So I sort of got turned off real fast.

Having experienced an unhappy marriage in China, Alice was determined not to marry until the right person came along however badly she needed a green card to stay in the United States. What drew her to marry Joseph—a white, Jewish man—was his non-sexist attitude. He had an appreciation for Chinese culture and for her as a person. "He was very open, very equal, and communication with him was very easy," she says.

While the women recognized certain positive characteristics in Asian American men—well-educated, stable, reliable—these qualities were evidently not enough for them. As Marcia Ong says of Terrence, her Asian American boyfriend of many years, "He was the kind an Asian woman would really like. He's educated, polite, generous, kind, and tall. My mother really loved him." But like her father, he was not expressive or nurturing enough. According to Marcia:

I would say, "I need to hear from you. I know you care, but you're just like my Dad." He would show me by being reliable and doing things for me, but I would say, "You have to TELL me. I need to hear it. I need more. Do you care about me? How do you feel about me?" It was not okay because I had to ask. I wanted him to volunteer to talk about it. It was difficult. As I have become better at expressing myself, I've expected my partners to be good at expressing themselves.

What Marcia found lacking in Terrence she found in Clarence and John, her African American and white, Jewish boyfriends respec-

tively. Both were good about expressing their appreciation of her, their feelings about what they liked or disliked, and unlike Terrence, they had a sense of humor. Also unlike most Asian American men she had known, neither Clarence or John were threatened by her tough personality and her outspokenness. Both men saw and appreciated what she called her "compliant" self underneath her "tough" exterior. "With Asian guys, I would have to pursue them," says Marcia. "Black and white men take the chance. They are persistent. John said if we hadn't been introduced he would have found a way to meet me." This difference in courtship patterns can be deemed an indication of where the racial power lies in our society because like their male counterparts, white women were reportedly more aggressive than Asian American women in pursuing men—four of the male interviewees admitted to being pursued or "pushed into marriage" by their white girlfriends.

THE MEN'S PERSPECTIVE

The male interviewees talked in similar ways about Asian cultural attributes in women they wanted to avoid in a marital relationship. Although they may have been favored as sons, they too found their family environments oppressive, with one or both parents too domineering and manipulative. While the Asian patriarchy no doubt benefited them in some ways, they wanted no part in it. At all costs, they did not want their marriages to end up like their parents' and so they consciously looked for partners whom they felt were kind, sensitive, and egalitarian. These spouses turned out to be white women.

Third-generation Japanese American Vincent Kaneko describes his father as "abusive, dominating, and cheap," and his mother as "very shy, giving, loving, and tolerant." It was an unhappy marriage that lasted fifty-two years "only because my mother was the most tolerant person in the world." He admired and loved his mother as much as he despised his father. Knowing that his mother did not approve of interracial dating or marriage, he chose to date and marry a Japanese American woman whom he thought would be like his mother. Vincent was eighteen-years old at the time; the year was 1963. But his wife turned out to be more like his father, "the grouchiest Japanese woman I've ever known in my whole life." They divorced eleven years later and he swore he would never date another Japanese American woman as long as he lived. To get himself out of what he called "the syndrome of marrying [his] father," Vincent turned to dating white women. As he admits, he had

been conditioned by television and magazines to regard "the white female body as the best overall." What surprised and pleased him, because he had been teased as a youngster about being short and nerdy, was that white women found him sexually attractive. This boosted his self-esteem and male confidence. After a number of relationships, Vincent married again. His second wife was a white, Jewish woman who proved to be very unlike the mother figure he was searching for. Not only was she aggressive and outspoken, but she was in his words a "confirmed lesbian." At the time of the interview, they had just divorced after a stormy marriage and he was engaged to a Chicana he had met at work.

Born in 1960, fifth-generation Chinese American Winston Fong cites his troubled family background as a factor contributing to his outmarriage. In his words, his father was a "spoiled, rotten brat" who was used to having his way. He controlled his wife and children "out of fear, not out of respect or love or anything like that." He had violent fits and would not think twice about hitting his children at the dinner table if he felt like it. His mother "was pretty screwed up" too, often lying to the children in order to manipulate them. Pressured to date and marry Chinese, Winston's first serious relationship was with Pearl, a Chinese American classmate from high school. But she was too much like his father. "I was not about to go through life with someone who throws tantrums and calls everyone stupid," says Winston. "She was a pretty spoiled kid, fairly well taken care of throughout life." Although he dated other Chinese American women and had every intention of finding one who was soft, outgoing, energetic, and family oriented, he ended up marrying his colleague Betty, who was white. They lived together for five years before the wedding. He reported that unlike his parents, they had an equal relationship and hardly fought despite their differences; they could communicate well and had common interests and goals.

In at least two cases, Chinese American men reported they could not consider dating or marrying a Chinese American woman because it would be like marrying their own sister—incestuous. Wes Gin, born in 1943, grew up in a tight-knit Chinese American family in a predominantly white community. In high school Wes dated Japanese American women. After college, as soon as anti-miscegenation attitudes began to change in the mid-1960s, he dated white women. Wes married twice, both times to white women. He said his first wife Grace resembled the media stereotype of feminine beauty. After nine years of marriage they divorced. His second wife Leah was "calm, intelligent, dependable," and Jewish—someone who

shared his values and goals in life. "It seems like I'm enough different from Leah where it doesn't feel like it's hugging my sister or myself," he replied when asked why he married her.

Although Calvin Jung spent his childhood years in San Francisco Chinatown, he shared Wes Gin's sentiments about not wanting to marry someone who was Chinese American like him:

The Chinese [American] women that I knew growing up I knew all my life, sort of like your sisters—[beginning in] first grade. And I keep running into these people now, you don't really think of them as marriage partners. They're too close. They remind you of your mother—voice, intonation, and the ease in which they operate in Chinatown. All the things I was running from. They were just what I was trying to escape. Also, you were so familiar with them, it was almost like incest.

His family was the first Chinese American family to move into a white suburb outside of San Francisco. It was 1950 and his parents wanted their children to assimilate and lose their Chinatown accents, but not to go so far as to risk eliciting white racism by dating or marrying a white woman. So Calvin went steady with a Japanese American classmate throughout high school:

Anyway, we looked right. We were the cute couple and all that. She was bright and we were all headed for [the University of California at] Berkeley. She was going to be an English teacher and I was going to be the dentist. And everything was going to work out just fine.

By the time Calvin attended college in the early 1960s, he discovered that white attitudes had changed and he began to date white women. Also, living in Europe for a year opened up doors to him in terms of interracial romance. "Gee, you got to know [white] girls and go out and be civilized and all that," said Calvin. "So by the time I got back to school again, I had finally outgrown my insularity."²⁰ Calvin was also aware of the empowerment resulting from relationships with white women. As he says,

You have more access in the society if you're connected with the majority. I realized that very early on. I don't think it was any conscious thing that I was only going to date white in order to get into these places, but in fact, you operate in a fashion where you take chances you wouldn't take. I don't have to protect, be in a position of being responsible for my Chinese [American] wife if someone calls her a Chink or [threatens] to beat her up. You're connected to the majority. That dynamic is very real.

As it turned out, Calvin married Jean—a white, Jewish woman who shared his interest in the fine arts. Although Calvin's sense of ethnic pride and solidarity was awakened by the Third World strikes at San Francisco State and the University of California at Berkeley in 1968-69, he did not abandon his marriage as a result. His wife Jean was supportive and encouraged his political activism while she went off to pursue her own interests in theater.

Power Relations behind the Stated Motivations

Both female and male interviewees shared a common complaint about the Asian Americans they dated—they were disinterested in or ignorant of the popular youth culture of the period. This limitation spilled over to other areas, namely their dates' inability to meet Western standards of attractiveness or to fit into mainstream society. Women reported they found Asian American men physically unattractive, conservative, and boring. They claimed the men weren't into exciting things like parachute jumping, camping, motorcycle rides, and Bob Dylan. Male interviewees complained that Asian American women were workaholics and too serious about relationships. They claimed the women weren't vivacious and were too laden with Asian cultural baggage. Unlike white women they dated, Asian women were reportedly too introverted and not into fishing, partying, and backpacking. In other words, both women and men faulted the opposite sex for the same weaknesses: being overly-serious, having pragmatic occupations or narrow interests, being rather lackluster and not a part of the dominant or counter culture.

Such complaints are reminiscent of two pieces published in an early Asian American anthology, *Roots: An Asian American Reader*. In "White Male Qualities," an anonymous third-generation Japanese American woman explains why she intends to marry a white man. She describes Asian American men as "short, ugly, unconfident, clumsy, [and] arrogant." In contrast she describes her white fiancé as "tall, handsome, manly, self-confident and well-poised" and someone who because he doesn't have any "hangups about proving his masculinity," treats women with respect. She believes that "Sanseis [third-generation Japanese Americans] marrying other Sanseis will grow up to be exactly like their parents." She faults Asian American men for having cultural "hangups" about sex. She writes, "After an Oriental boy has seduced his girl friend, she will expect to marry him, and he begins to take her for granted." She says she aspires to something better—something which she can obtain from a relationship with a white man.²¹

Similarly, in the poem, "I Hate My Wife for Her Flat Yellow Face," Japanese American author Ron Tanaka describes how his Japanese American wife pales in comparison to a white (presumably) Jewish woman named Judith Gluck. Tanaka explains how his marriage was one of convenience and how he initially had hoped that he could learn to love his wife and that she, steeped in traditional Japanese ways, could save him from "bopping round L.A. ghettos, western civilization and the playmate of the month." Finding he could not love her, he faulted her for "her lack of elegance and lack of intelligence compared to Judith Gluck." Tanaka goes on to describe his wife as a "stupid water buffalo from the old country" who knows nothing "about Warhol, Ginsberg or Viet Nam."²²

The question arises, "If the anonymous author of "White Male Qualities" and Ron Tanaka met, would they find each other attractive?" Interviewee Calvin Jung specifically addressed this issue when he remarked:

I did date other Asian [American] women at UC Berkeley. The reason why I was attracted to them was because they were like me; but like me, they were also looking elsewhere. The reason why I was charming and appealing [to them] was because I was conversant in American society.

Calvin, who also mentioned the feelings of incest when he dated Chinese women, went on to say that all the Asian American women he found attractive and dated ended up like him—marrying Whites. As he concluded, "Why pick an imitation if you can get a real one?" In a similar vein, Ben Fong-Torres laments the fact that his former Chinese American girlfriend is now dating a white man:

Michelle had said she could relate to me because I was a Chinese guy who knew about rock-and-roll and the arts. Now, she'd found a [white] guy who played music, who could write songs, and perform with her. With me she'd gone from Chinatown Chinese to an Americanized Chinese. Now, at my expense, she was graduating.²³

In both of these cases, white American culture is regarded as superior. Asian Americans like Calvin and Michelle are attracted to those who are part of the dominant culture; but if given two equally acculturated Americans, they will choose the "real" American who is white over the "imitation" who is Asian American.

While the attraction to the "real" is an important factor in Asian American interracial marriages, it does not explain why higher proportions of Asian American women than Asian American men have

married Whites—which departs significantly from patterns of other groups (for example, African American and Jewish men tend to outmarry more than their female counterparts). Our findings indicate that the dominant U.S. racial and gender hierarchy and its concomitant stereotypes play a crucial role. On the one hand, the mass media portrays Asian American women as petite, submissive, and sexually desirable, which departs little from the mainstream image of what constitutes an attractive, feminine woman. This image, combined with notions of the “exotic,” may make Asian American women attractive to white men. At the same time, white men may be gravitating to Asian women because they perceive white American women as too liberated, career-minded, and demanding. On the other hand, popular images of Asian American men as small and socially inept depart significantly from what is considered to be an attractive masculine man. Based on these images, white and Asian American women would most likely not be attracted to Asian American men. These negative images combined with the psychological needs of men to be “taller” and “stronger” than their female partners led someone like Nellie Tsui, who is five feet nine inches tall and muscular, to difficulties when it came to finding Asian American dating partners. She said Asian American men were just not attracted to her. She ended up marrying a white man who was over six feet tall.

However, these negative images and psychological needs are changing. There may be a correlation between the increasing rate of outmarriages among Asian American men and three recent trends: (1) *macho* and romantic images of Asian American men are appearing in movies (Bruce Lee, Jason Scott Lee, Russell Wong) and in calendars like the *Asian Pacific Islander Men, 1991*;²⁴ (2) Asian American men are perceived as more economically stable and supportive than men of other races (vis-a-vis the “model minority” stereotype); and (3) the definition of an “ideal man” is moving beyond physical stature to include qualities such as expressiveness and nurturing—qualities previously used only to describe women.²⁵ Thus, we can make sense of Chinese American Lance Jue, who is five-feet-four-inches tall, when he reports that a white female friend told him, “You’re a very big little man, Lance” and Wayne Fong’s comment that his white wife didn’t initially consider him “attractive” but told him, “I got past the look and got to your soul.”

Conclusions

Our data indicate that Asian American outmarriage is not simply the “natural” outcome of more contact with white Americans, as

assimilationists would have us believe, but also the result of a number of complex factors, some of which have been raised by Spickard, Shinagawa and Pang, and Sung. While proximity is a necessary precondition to interracial marriage, other factors intimately tied to issues of race and gender power relations are also involved. Interviewees who grew up in Hawaii, where interracial marriage was not as negatively sanctioned as on the mainland, seemed to be more open to outmarriage in general. Other interviewees were attracted to Jewish Americans because they shared certain middle-class values and traditions. A few admitted they married Whites for some measure of upward mobility—clear cases of hypergamy. Both male and female interviewees stated outright that they had an aversion to marrying a member of their own group because they wanted to avoid replicating their parents' marriages. Finally, both men and women complained that their Asian American dates were too out of touch with the popular youth culture of the time—music, literature, fashion—and over-burdened with the protocol dictated by traditional Chinese or Japanese culture. Aware of the race/class/gender hierarchy in American society, they opted to marry white Americans over Asian Americans who were equally acculturated into the dominant lifestyle. Likewise, they chose Whites over other groups such as Hispanic or African Americans because of the racial hierarchy of preference ingrained in them through their parents and popular media.²⁶

Despite the overwhelming overlap in motivation shared by the women and men, some differences do stand out. Asian American women, in particular, seemed to have outmarried in part to escape from what they perceived as Asian patriarchy. These women reported that Asian American men treated them in less egalitarian ways than men of other races and they wanted equal partners in a marriage. This combined, with the fact that Asian American women have been "positively" depicted in the mass media while Asian American men have been "negatively" depicted, provides some insight into why Asian American women outmarry at higher proportions than men. Timing also played a more crucial role for women who outmarried than men. Women more often felt they were running out of time or getting too old to be considered marriageable. Asian American men reported that white women appreciated their economic stability and emotional support. They also said that dating and marrying white women, upon which standards of beauty are based, boosted their self-esteem. Some who grew up in predominately white areas discussed their aversion to marrying Asian

American women as rooted in the incest taboo. Dating other Asian American members of the community—families that had considered themselves like fictive kin for decades—seemed incestuous.

Clearly the complexity of the factors involved in outmarriage uncovered by this study indicates that beyond simply proximity lies a whole host of factors. Future research in this area might explore some of the more interesting findings of this project such as: the cultural affinity and economic compatibility between Asian and Jewish Americans; Asian American aversion to Asian patriarchy and matriarchy; the perception of in-marriage as a violation of the incest taboo; and the impact of political activism and ethnic consciousness on marital choice in the 1960s, particularly between the various Asian groups and between Asians and other groups of color. Other topics we hope to explore in future studies include: warbrides and military wives; foreign students; mail order brides; those who married during the anti-miscegenation era; views of white partners married to Asian Americans; the current generation of marriage-age Asian Americans; gay/lesbian couples; and racially mixed Asian Americans.

Notes

1. Both authors contributed equally to this work; the order of the authors is alphabetical. We wish to acknowledge Elaine Kim for initiating this research project, the CSUH Affirmative Action Faculty Development Program for partial funding, and Pat Guthrie, Rivka Polatnick, Ann Lane, Warren Lane, Deborah Woo, Rudy Busto, and Peggy Pascoe for their helpful comments. We are also grateful to the interviewees who took part in this study.
2. Our larger sample of interviewees includes Korean American women and "mail order brides," mostly from the Philippines. We plan to treat these populations separately in future writings. In this paper, White is used to denote the race of spouses as reported to us by the interviewees.
3. See Larry Shinagawa and Gin Yong Pang, "Intraethnic, Interethnic, and Interracial Marriages Among Asian Americans in California, 1980," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 33 (1986), 95-114; and Betty Lee Sung, *Chinese American Intermarriage* (Staten Island, New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1990).
4. See reaction to Joan Walsh, "Asian Women, Caucasian Men: The New Demographics of Love," *Image, San Francisco Examiner/Chronicle*, December 2, 1990, in the January 6 and 13, 1991 issues.
5. See Sharon M. Lee and Keiko Yamanaka, "Patterns of Asian American Intermarriage and Marital Assimilation," *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* 21:2 (1990), 287-305; Shinagawa and Pang, "Intraethnic, Interethnic, and Interracial Marriages"; Akemi Kikumura and Harry H. L. Kitano, "Interracial Marriage: A Picture of the Japanese Americans,"

- Journal of Social Issues* 29:2 (1973), 67-81; Harry H. L. Kitano and Lynn Chai, "Korean Interracial Marriage," *Marriage and Family Review* 5 (1982), 75-89; Harry H. L. Kitano and Wai-tsang Yeung, "Chinese Interracial Marriage," *Marriage and Family Review* 5 (1982), 35-48; and Harry H. L. Kitano, Wai-tsang Yeung, Lynn Chai, and Herbert Hatanaka, "Asian-American Interracial Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (1984), 179-190.
6. See D. Yuan, "Significant Demographic Characteristics of Chinese Who Intermarry in the United States," *California Sociologist* 3 (Summer, 1980), 184-96; John N. Tinker, "Intermarriage and Ethnic Boundaries: The Japanese American Case," *Journal of Social Issues* 29 (1973), 49-66; Donna Lockwood Leonetti and Laura Newell-Morris, "Exogamy and Change in the Biosocial Structure of a Modern Urban Population," *American Anthropologist* 84 (1982), 19-36; C. K. Cheng and Douglas S. Yamamura, "Interracial Marriage and Divorce in Hawaii," *Social Forces* 36:1 (1957), 77-84; John Burma, "Interethnic Marriage in Los Angeles, 1948-1959," *Social Forces* 42:2 (1963), 156-165; Che-Fu Lee, Raymond H. Potvin, and Mary J. Verdieck, "Interethnic Marriage as an Index of Assimilation: The Case of Singapore," *Social Forces* 53:1 (1974), 112-19; Joseph J. Leon, "Sex Ethnic Marriage in Hawaii: A Nonmetric Multidimensional Analysis," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 34 (1975), 775-781; Larry D. Barnett, "Interracial Marriage in California," *Marriage and Family Living* 25:4 (1963), 424-27; and Teresa Labov and Jerry A. Jacobs, "Inter-marriage in Hawaii, 1950-1983," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 48 (1986), 79-88.
 7. The first anti-miscegenation law was passed in the colony of Maryland in 1664. Some forty states and colonies did likewise; sixteen of which still had anti-miscegenation laws in force when the U.S. Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional in 1967. See David Fowler, *Northern Attitudes Toward Interracial Marriage* (Garland, 1987), xi. For a discussion of interracial marriage as an issue of both race and gender relations, see Peggy Pascoe, "Race, Gender, and Intercultural Relations: The Case of Interracial Marriage," *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 12:1 (1991), 5-18.
 8. See *Loving v. Virginia* 388 U.S. 1 (1967); Megumi Dick Osumi, "Asians and California's Anti-Miscegenation Laws," in *Asian and Pacific American Experiences: Women's Perspectives*, edited by Nobuya Tsuchida (Minneapolis: Asian/Pacific American Learning Resource Center and General College, University of Minnesota, 1982), 1-37; and Anselm Strauss, "Strain and Harmony in American-Japanese War-Marriages," *Marriage and Family Living* 16 (1954), 99-106. Strauss estimates that between 1947 and 1952, 10,517 U.S. citizens, mostly white military personnel, married Japanese women.
 9. For studies of increased outmarriages among Chinese Americans and Japanese Americans during the 1960s and 1970s, see D. Yuan, "Significant Demographic Characteristics of Chinese Who Intermarry in the United States"; Tinker, "Intermarriage and Ethnic Boundaries: The Japanese American Case"; Russell Endo and Dale Hirokawa, "Japanese American Intermarriage," *Free Inquiry in Creative Sociology* 11:2 (1983), 159-62, 66; and Leonetti and Newell-Morris, "Exogamy and Change in the Biosocial Structure of a Modern Urban Population."

10. Shinagawa and Pang, "Intraethnic, Interethnic, and Interracial Marriages," 103. National statistics drawn from the 1980 U.S. Census, as presented in Lee and Yamanaka, "Patterns of Asian American Inter-marriage and Marital Assimilation," gave a comparable picture: 25.4 percent of Asian Americans were intermarried (31.5 percent among Asian American women and 16.6 percent among Asian American men); 76 percent of them to white spouses (290, 294).
11. See Emory Bogardus, *A Forty Year Racial Distance Study* (Los Angeles: University of Southern California, 1967).
12. Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), 80.
13. See Kitano, Yeung, Chai, and Hatanaka, "Asian-American Interracial Marriage," *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 46 (1984), 179-190; C. K. Cheng and Douglas S. Yamamura, "Interracial Marriage and Divorce in Hawaii," *Social Forces* 36:1 (1957), 77-84; John Burma, "Interethnic Marriage in Los Angeles, 1948-1959," *Social Forces* 42:2 (1963), 156-165; Yuan, "Significant Demographic Characteristics of Chinese Who Intermarry in the United States;" and Tinker, "Inter-marriage and Ethnic Boundaries."
14. Paul R. Spickard, *Mixed Blood: Intermarriage and Ethnic Identity in Twentieth-Century America* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), 19.
15. Shinagawa and Pang, 109.
16. Betty Lee Sung, *Chinese American Intermarriage*.
17. A few interviewees mentioned other factors in the decision to marry: pregnancy, leaving for the armed services, and a strong taboo against "living together" among both sets of parents.
18. But, as Spickard points out in *Mixed Blood*, the intermarriage rate among Japanese Americans in Hawaii is lower than that of the mainland because the large Japanese community in Hawaii works to discourage outmarriage (73-84). For a discussion of intermarriage patterns in Hawaii, see also Labov and Jacobs, "Intermarriage in Hawaii, 1950-1983."
19. In November 1968, students of color at San Francisco State University, inspired by the civil rights movement, went on strike to demand the establishment of an autonomous Ethnic Studies program. See Karen Umemoto, "'On Strike!' San Francisco State College Strike, 1968-69: The Role of Asian American Students," *Amerasia Journal* 15:1 (1989), 3-41; and William Wei, *The Asian American Movement* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993), 15-24.
20. In another case, Wayne Fong, who was expected to marry another Chinese American in particular because he was the only son in a family of five children, found that being away from the social pressures of home afforded him opportunities to date outside his group. His decision to marry a white American woman he met while serving in the Peace Corps would not have been as possible if he were home in the United States.

21. "White Male Qualities," in *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, edited by Amy Tachiki, Eddie Wong, Franklin Odo, and Buck Wong (Los Angeles: Asian American Research Center, University of California, 1971), 44-45. This article was originally published in *Gidra*, an Asian American periodical, in January 1970.
22. Ron Tanaka, "I Hate My Wife for Her Flat Yellow Face," *Roots*, 47-48. This poem was originally published in *Gidra*, September 1969.
23. Ben Fong-Torres, *The Rice Room* (New York: Hyperion, 1994), 137.
24. This calendar featured six Asian American men fully clothed and then in "beefcake" poses. For a discussion of how this calendar can be viewed as both subversive of and subverted by hegemonic culture, see Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, "Subverting Desire: Reading the Body in the 1991 Asian Pacific Islander Men's Calendar," *Critical Mass: A Journal of Asian American Cultural Criticism* 1:1 (Fall 1993), 63-74.
25. See Marie Richmond Abbott, *Masculine and Feminine* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1992) and Michael S. Kimmel and Michael A. Messner, eds., *Men's Lives* (New York: Macmillan, 1992).
26. Statistics for California and the United States indicate that Asian Americans also marry interethnically (for example, Chinese Americans to Japanese Americans) and interracially to other groups of color (for example, Japanese Americans to African Americans) but not to the same extent as to Whites. Lee and Yamanaka found that among Asian Americans who were intermarried in 1980, 76.6 percent had white spouses, 10.7 percent Asian spouses, 5.2 percent black spouses, 3.3 percent Hawaiian and Pacific Islander spouses, 2.5 percent Hispanic, and 1.7 percent American Indian, Eskimo, Aleutian, and other spouses ("Patterns of Asian American Intermarriage," 291). Responses from our interviewees about their racial preferences in spouses prior to their marriages concur with the aggregate findings in Shinagawa and Pang that was based on a cross-tabulation of actual and expected frequencies of marriages between certain racial/ethnic groups ("Intra-ethnic, Interethnic, and Interracial Marriages Among Asian Americans in California, 1980," 101-103). Asian Americans' first choice of spouse was a member of their own ethnic group; second choice, other Asian/Pacific Islanders; third choice, Whites; and fourth choice, Hispanic and African Americans. In anticipation as well as in actuality, there appears to be a low incidence of intermarriage between Asian Americans and other groups of color. We attribute this to proximity and assimilation; but more important, the low socio-economic status of a high proportion of Hispanic, African and Native Americans.

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