Asian Americans and racial politics: a postmodern paradox.

by Dana Y. Takagi

The controversy over Asian American admission to universities between 1983 to 1990 has three historical periods with corresponding centers of discourse. From 1983 to 1986 Asian Americans characterized admission problems as racial discrimination. Between 1987 and 1988 university officials countered charges of racism by focusing on the need for diversity. In 1989 to 1990 conservatives and neoconservatives interpreted the controversy as a result of affirmative action.

Asians Americans are simultaneously central to race politics and yet often peripheral to discourses about race politics. What is postmodern about this condition is that the apparent solution -- adding the category "Asian American" to discussions about race -- produces yet another layer of paradox. For the category "Asian American" is itself an unsettled and contradictory set of identities (Lowe, 1991; Espiritu, 1992). For example, claims that Asian Americans, like many blacks, support a civil-rights agenda must be balanced against 1992 election results, which show that Asians were proportionately more likely than any other racial group, including whites, to vote for ex-President George Bush. I do not mean to suggest that the categories "black" and "white" are not also unsettled and troubled. Like other identities that we thought we "knew" -- including "black," "white," "woman," and "gay" -- the meaning of "Asian American" is variably determined and claimed through discursive and political struggles.

In this article, I explore the relationship between Asian Americans and racial politics by looking at a recent controversy over Asian American access to higher education. The controversy over Asian American admissions, 1983--1990, although often overlooked as an eventful development in race politics, should, I suggest, be seen as an historically pivotal chapter in the evolution of American postwar understandings of race and equity. That debate over Asian American admissions frequently passes unrecognized as both reflective and constitutive of changes in racial politics in America reinforces my central point: the category "Asian American" is interior to racial politics at the same time that it is peripheral to racial discourses.

Asian American Admissions

Beginning in the early 1980s, Asian American students and faculty accused the top universities of using quotas and ceilings to limit the enrollment of Asian American applicants in higher education. These complaints marked the starting point of the most significant public debate about race, equity, and affirmative action since Bakke. Whereas the Bakke case was an expression of white anxiety about racial preferences for minorities, the Asian admissions controversy narrates a somewhat different angst, white nervousness about Asian American achievement.

The Asian American admissions debate is an outstanding example of a "shifting discourse" in which the center of the debate moves as participants define and rearticulate others' definition of the issues (Takagi, 1990; 1993).
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the first period of the controversy, 1983--1986, Asian American students and faculty defined Asian admissions as a problem of racial discrimination; in the second period, 1987--1988, university officials' response to charges of discrimination shifted the focus to issues of diversity and meritocracy; and in the third period, 1989--1990, conservatives and neoconservatives shifted the center of the debate once again to affirmative action.

My periodization of the Asian American admissions controversy is neither exact nor strict. I have organized my discussion in terms of these three periods as a means of establishing the main pattern and organizing themes of the controversy. Although the three centers of discourse -- discrimination, diversity, and affirmative action -- are reflective of a particular period, they are not wholly consigned to that period.

The single most dramatic aspect of the Asian admissions controversy is its relation to popular and intellectual discourses about affirmative action. The shifting discourse of admissions facilitated a subtle but decisive transformation in public and intellectual discourses about educational equity. The core of this transformation was that affirmative action, a policy typically conceptualized as a problem of racial discrimination, shifted the focus to issues of diversity and/or minority representation. The practice of "race-based" admissions policies to mean that applicants are admitted solely on the basis of their racial background. Admissions officials are quick to point out that such programs, called "set-asides," were judged to be illegal in the 1978 Supreme Court decision on Bakke. Echoing what has been a well-accepted interpretation of Bakke, admissions officers at private universities describe race as "one among several factors" that are taken into consideration during selection decisions. At schools like Harvard and Princeton, for example, making race a factor in admissions decisions means that minority students, along with legacies (children of alumni) and athletes, receive "tips," or preference, in the admissions process.

Although preferences for class are rarely formally inscribed in admissions policy at the elite private universities, the rhetoric of class has become increasingly prevalent, particularly when the discussion turns to Asian American applicants. In the early 1980s, Brown University, for example, proposed either to exclude Asian Americans from affirmative-action admission procedures or, alternatively, to divide the Asian American applicants into a low socioeconomic status pool, eligible for affirmative action, a non-affirmative action pool. At Harvard, although Asian American students have been eligible for minority "tips" since 1976, a Harvard admissions officer explained to me that during the 1980s, "only working-class Asians" were given special preference in the admissions process.

The practice of using class criteria to differentiate which Asians are eligible for affirmative action and/or minority preferences and which are not is surely a reflection of the wide range of socioeconomic status among Asian Americans. Yet the fact that some schools prefer certain classes of Asians while others do not is a sign of the trouble university officials experience in thinking consistently about Asian Americans and affirmative action. In the early 1980s, for example, a working-class Asian American applicant might be eligible for a "tip" at Harvard on the basis of class, but be advantaged at Brown because s/he was Asian. That same student would not be eligible for any preference or tip at Berkeley.

University admission officials are not the only ones who have had a difficult time deciding whether Asian
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Americans deserve any special consideration, that is, preference based on race or class, in admissions decisions. Asian Americans themselves are deeply divided about the issue. While popular opinion polls report that the majority of Asian Americans do not support affirmative action, virtually all of the Asian American critics of university admissions policies during the 1980s were ardent defenders of affirmative action.

Discrimination, 1983--1986

Between 1983 and 1986, Asian American admissions emerged as a local issue at many of the leading institutions of higher education -- including Berkeley, Brown, Harvard, Princeton, Stanford, and UCLA. Asian American students and faculty, issuing two basic complaints, accused officials at these schools of intentionally discriminating against Asian American applicants. One complaint concerned the admission rate of Asian American applicants (defined as the ratio of Asian American students admitted relative to the total number Asian American applicants), while a second complaint focused on Asian American enrollment. Using figures and data from their local admissions officers, Asian American activists argued that admission rates had not kept pace with large increases in the number of Asian American applicants. For example, Asian American students at Brown University in 1983 complained that in spite of a 750% increase in applicants during the early 1980s, the admission rate actually declined, falling from 44% to 14% between 1979 and 1987 (Asian American Students Association, 1983). In addition to concern about falling admission rates, Asian American activists were suspicious that steady enrollment figures might be the result of an intentional "ceiling" imposed on Asian American applicants by university officials. As Professor Don Nakanishi of UCLA and a former Yale undergraduate told the Chronicle of Higher Education in 1986, "I think a lot of elite institutions have defined a certain number of Asians they should have on campus, and that has discriminatory outcomes" (Biemiller, 1986).

Nakanishi's concern about enrollment figures was not new to the many Asian American students attending elite private institutions on the East Coast. In 1983, the East Coast Asian Student Union, a consortium of Asian American student groups from schools like Cornell, Princeton, Harvard, and Yale, surveyed 25 eastern colleges about their admissions policies and concluded that an "alarming barrier" was in place to "keep Asian Americans from seeking higher education and better lives" (Ho and Chin, 1983).

All of the universities denied that their admissions policies were discriminatory. They argued instead that Asian American applicants were either overrepresented or not qualified for admission to their university. Yet media reports, featuring sympathetic stories about Asian American applicants with outstanding academic records who could not gain admission to the top schools, suggested otherwise.

One of the best-known cases of media coverage, which angled to feature the human-interest side of Asian admissions, featured a young man named Yat-pang Au who felt he had been unfairly rejected from Berkeley in 1987. Although his story may not be the most convincing example of discrimination against Asians, the publicity surrounding his rejection made him a cause celebre of Asian American critics of university admissions.

Mr. Au, the eldest son of Vietnamese immigrant parents, scored an impressive 7,210 points out a possible total of 8,000 on an "academic index" (a composite of grades and test scores) used in Berkeley admissions. His academic prowess was supplemented by an inspiring set of extracurriculars -- he ran track, taught math to elementary school children, and was a student leader in the math and science clubs at his high school. In spite of his academic record, Mr. Au could not gain admission to the School of Engineering at U.C. Berkeley. The Los Angeles Times Magazine reported the story this way: "And yet one goal, the honor he had most coveted to cap his high school years, eluded Yat-pang. He was rejected by the University of California, Berkeley" (Mathews, 1987). Although Berkeley officials defended Mr. Au's rejection, saying he was a "good but not exceptional" student, Asian American critics argued the issue was racial. The complaint at Berkeley in the wake of the Yat-pang Au case echoed earlier charges that had been raised at other highly selective universities.

Although the specific complaints varied from school to school, all of the Asian American claims of discrimination shared a basic racial thrust. That is, Asian American applicants were defined as racially disadvantaged subjects in the admissions process.

Diversity, 1987--1988

Between 1987 and 1988, university officials' response to Asian American charges of discrimination portrayed Asian American applicants as academic "nerds." Officials accomplished this by shifting public discourse about Asian American admissions from a focus on charges of discrimination to a focus on issues of diversity and merit. Though the specific claims varied from school to school, when considered together, officials issued two main countercharges.
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First, many officials claimed that Asian American students were overrepresented in U.S. universities. The New York Times reported that a Princeton faculty member, after rejecting an Asian American applicant, said to his colleagues, "You have to admit, there are a lot" (Winerip, 1985). Second, several key university administrators charged that Asian Americans students, though qualified, were not competitive enough to gain admission to the highly selective schools. According to some of these officials, Asian American applicants were "flat" and "not well rounded."

In-house reviews at several universities produced mixed results. At Brown and Stanford, university-sponsored studies conceded that the admissions process was biased against Asian American applicants. At Princeton, a university committee found no evidence of bias. At Harvard, no investigation was performed by an independent faculty committee, but admissions officers conducted an in-house study and found no evidence of bias. At UCLA, similarly, there was no faculty committee investigation, but top administrators assured the public that there had been no foul play. At Berkeley, where the controversy was the most embittered, investigations by two different faculty committees took over three years to conclude that there was no systematic bias against Asian American applicants.

Regardless of the outcomes of these investigations, university officials responded to charges of discrimination by parlaying facts about Asian American admissions into broad public discussion of diversity and merit in higher education. One argument raised by numerous officials was that Asian American students were overrepresented at the university compared with their proportions in the general population. Indeed, the very language used by university officials to describe minority/majority under-- or over-- "representation" in the student body reveals a racialized consequence of a legitimate and justifiable policy that was resonant with what the President of the University of California, David Gardner, referred to as a "desirable ethnic mix." Gardner was explicit about the zero sum relationship between Asian Americans and the larger "context" of diversity: "Twenty to twenty-five percent of our undergraduate enrollment are Asian Americans, while they represent six percent of the population of the state. This is part of a much larger and more complicated issue, and I think it's only within the context of that larger picture that I can give you a reasoned response. The number of black and Hispanic youth enrolled in the University of California is not below their rate of U.C. eligibility, but it is below their rate of proportional representation with the high school graduation pool" (San Diego Union, 1986).

A third response to the charges of discrimination, one that was invoked at Princeton University in 1985 and fully explicated by Harvard in 1988, was that private school preferences for groups other than Asians explained and justified the fact that Asians were the least likely of any racial group to gain admission to the university. Thus, according to both Princeton and Harvard officials, the fact that Asians were less likely to be admitted than whites was not a racial problem, but rather was the unintended consequence of a legitimate and justifiable policy that preferred the children of Harvard alumni.

These different responses by university officials in turn contributed to a reshaping of the popular image of Asian American students as a "model minority." The stereotype of Asians as hardworking, diligent, and family-oriented lingered though the 1980s. In higher education, Asian Americans often dazzled administrators and admissions officers with their impressive grade point averages and high SAT scores. In California, for example, based on strict academic criteria alone (grades and test scores), Asian Americans are the best-prepared group to enter the U.C. system (California Post-Secondary Education Commission, 1992).

Yet the educational achievements of Asian American students were, and continue to be, followed by a wave of reaction. The image of Asian Americans as
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"superstudents" has often kindled resentment in other students. With increasing frequency, Asian Americans have become the object of campus racial jokes. Articles in the popular press reported that MIT stood for Made in Taiwan and UCLA stood for the University of Caucasians Living Among Asians. White student anxiety about Asians was humorously captured in a series of comic strips. A nationally syndicated Doonesbury strip shows Kim, a National Merit Scholar, talking with her high school teacher. The teacher, offering congratulations on her achievement, says, "It's very good news for the school, it demonstrates that the failure of so many kids to learn here isn't just the school's fault. It reaffirms the importance of discipline and personal motivation." Kim responds that not everyone in the community agrees. In the final panel, Kim's parents are talking with neighbors, who are pleading, "She's throwing off the curve for the whole school! Couldn't you get her to watch more TV?"

If the stereotype of the model minority seemed to fit well with race politics in higher education during the 1960s, it was less viable in the context of the 1980s. During the 1960s, Asian Americans were stereotyped as living proof of the "Horatio Alger" success story, the proof that minorities could make it, if only they tried. However, 20 years later, praise turned to criticism, words of encouragement drifted toward platitudes. The new discursive rhetoric about Asian Americans students blended criticism with old stereotypes. Compliments for Asian American students were routinely qualified by negative remarks.

They were diligent, but too narrowly focused; dedicated to the pursuit of higher education, but to a fault, and at the exclusion of a "well rounded" life; hardworking, but lacking in creativity. Perhaps inadvertently, the rhetoric used by well-intentioned university officials to preserve diversity and define merit provided just the institutional voice for white students and their parents, like those in Doonesbury, to express their anxiety about Asian American achievement. Characterizations of Asians by university officials as "overrepresented" and "good but not exceptional" students furnished the critical rhetoric that transformed the "model minority" into "academic nerd."

Affirmative Action, 1988--1990

Between 1988 and 1990, conservatives and neconservatives shifted the center of discourse about Asian admissions from a focus on diversity to a focus on affirmative action. Conservative intervention in Asian admissions discourse maintained that discrimination against Asian American applicants was the logical outcome of affirmative action for blacks and Hispanics. In effect, neconservatives used the admissions controversy to reconstruct debate about affirmative action. The "old" complaint about affirmative action was that preferences for minorities discriminated against whites. In that old scenario, whites were constructed as unwitting "victims" of racial preferences for minorities. But the admissions controversy offered conservatives a propitious opportunity to change the color of the "victims" of affirmative action. In the "new" scenario, Asian American applicants replaced whites in conservative renderings about victimology and affirmative action. The conservative reconstruction of affirmative action was introduced by Attorney General William Reynolds (1988), chief of the Civil Rights Division of the U.S. Department of Justice in late 1988: "There is substantial statistical evidence that Asian American candidates face higher hurdles than academically less qualified candidates of other race, whether those candidates be minorities or whites." Similarly, James Gibney (1988), noted in the New Republic, "If Asians are underrepresented based on their grades and test scores, it is largely because of affirmative action for other minority groups."

Asian American critics of university admissions policy were dismayed by neoconservative claims about Asian Americans and affirmative action. As Henry Der, Director of Chinese for Affirmative Action suggested, conservatives were "using our issue to try to undo affirmative action, and we can't go along with that" (Jaschik, 1989). Der, along with all of the Asian American students and faculty who initially complained of discrimination against Asian applicants, was a staunch supporter of affirmative action. In 1989, when Congressman Dana Rohrabacher (R.--Long Beach) introduced a bill condemning the use of illegal quotas and urging universities across the country to scrutinize their admissions policies for possible bias against Asian American applicants, Asian American activists like Der became alarmed. For example, the Asian American Task Force on University Admissions, a group of Asian American professionals and activists based in Berkeley, were convinced that Rohrabacher's interest in Asian admissions carried a hidden agenda, namely an attack on affirmative action.

Although Rohrabacher's bill (HR 147) carried no legal punch or remedy for discrimination, it represented a highly symbolic show of Republican Party interest in Asian admissions. Asian American admissions offered Republicans a propitious opportunity to link concerns about racial discrimination with the Republican Party. As Representative Duncan Hunter (R.--San Diego) commented, "I think it's important to show that the Republican Party is sensitive to discrimination, and that's what we were doing" (Halpert, 1989). Rohrabacher's bill, when first introduced in the Congress, was backed by an unusual combination of liberal and conservative
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supporters: B’Nai Brith, the Heritage Foundation, and the Organization of Chinese Americans. Cosignatories on the bill were 22 other members of Congress, including the co-author of the resolution, an Asian American Republican from Hawaii, Patricia Saiki. In addition to the cosigners, several Asian American representatives lent initial support for HR 147 -- including Robert Matsui, a Japanese American democrat from California.

Yet organizations such as the Asian American Task Force on University Admissions were quick to point out that Republican Party interest in discrimination against Asian Americans might be an early warning sign of renewed attack on affirmative action. In the fall of 1989, bipartisan support for HR 147 soured as some of the initial backers withdrew their support. All of the defectors worried that the bill was a veiled attack on preferential policies for underrepresented minorities. In spite of Rohrabacher’s insistence that the bill said "nothing about affirmative action,"(6) Representative Matsui and the Organization of Chinese Americans retracted their support for the bill, as did the Jewish American Committee, an organization that had indicated its intent to support the resolution, but later reversed that decision after some members expressed concern about the effect it might have on affirmative-action policy. Some additional groups who were asked to support the bill -- for example, the Japanese American Citizens League -- declined. The Republican core of support for Rohrabacher’s bill was disappointed by the loss of their left flank, particularly the Asian American sector. Rohrabacher defended his resolution as simply a statement that "quotas and other racial discrimination have no place in our nation’s schools.... Why are civil rights and other ethnic culture groups scared of that?"(7) In effect, conservative claims about Asian admissions constituted a political move that, while arguably advanced on behalf of Asian American interests, was accomplished over the protest of Asian American activists.

If neconservatives were unable to gather widespread support for their cause from Asian American civil-rights organizations and Asian American critics of university admissions, they were relatively successful in linking Asian American claims about discrimination to public anxieties about affirmative action.

Neconervative arguments about Asian admissions began to appear in commentaries, articles, and editorials in late 1988 and early 1989. During this period, neconervative interventions in the discourse on Asian admissions were occasional and episodic. Longer articles appeared in outlets for conservative thought such as the New Republic or the Public Interest; shorter opinion pieces were published in major newspapers such as the Los Angeles Times. In several cases, the focus of the articles was not Asian admissions, but some other topic, for example, racism on campus or affirmative action, and Asian admissions was mentioned only as an afterthought, or perhaps in order to illustrate an assertion about the inequity of affirmative action.

By the end of 1989, however, public discourse about Asian admissions was centered on affirmative action. News coverage of the issue featured fewer accounts of disputes between Asian Americans and university officials and an increasing number of stories about how affirmative-action programs or diversity politics might have caused discrimination against Asians.

Neoconervative claims about Asian admissions were viable because they resonated so well with racial politics in American society in the late 1980s. Conservative disenchantment with higher education counted a litany of concerns, almost all of which concerned race -- declining "standards," debates over the canon, renewed concern about affirmative action, and "political correctness." In their tirades against liberalism in higher education, conservatives demeaned ethnic studies as "rap sessions," complained of "minority terrorism," and bemoaned what they saw as the abandonment of meritocracy in student admissions, faculty hiring, and promotion.

Conservatives brought Asian admissions into this arena of racial politics by insisting that Asian American concerns such as discrimination against applicants in the admissions process, narrated wider public discontent with liberalism: preferences for blacks generated discrimination against Asians.

Paradox and Race Politics: Asian Americans

A crucial element in the neoconervative capture of the Asian American admissions controversy is the status of the category "Asian American" in postwar racial politics in the United States. Neconervative reconstruction of the affirmative-action debate, in which Asians became the new "victims" of racial preferences, points out the unique situatedness of the category "Asian American" in racial discourses that are defined mainly by the poles of black experiences on the one hand and white experiences on the other.

Central to the position of Asian Americans in racial politics is the process of producing them as racialized subjects. In the first period of the controversy, Asian American activists effectively racialized complaints of discrimination by arguing that Asian American students were unfairly turned away from universities because they were Asian. In the second period of debate, many university officials sought to deracialize the controversy by arguing that Asian
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Americans were "good but not exceptional" students.

Conservatives effectively played both sides of the racialization "equation." On the one hand, they used the Asian admissions issue to appeal to public disdain for racial discrimination by calling attention to the plight of Asian American students. On the other hand, they retreated from the issue of race by insisting that the solution to racial discrimination was to institute deracialized admissions policies, that is, to end affirmative action. In short, conservatives deployed Asian admissions as a racial problem as a means to a deracialized end, the abolition of affirmative action.

The struggle over racializing Asian American students -- taken up mainly by Asian Americans, university officials, and neoconservatives -- reveals four paradoxes that characterize the relationship of Asian Americans to race politics. First, the category "Asian American" is a political category that indifferently casts together foreign-born Asians with Asian-Americans, without regard to nationality, language, or culture. The differences within the category "Asian American" challenge us to rethink the appropriateness of global categories.

Second, the category "Asian American" is ambiguously related to the category "racial minority." University statistics about the racial composition of their students or faculty always include Asian Americans. Indeed, at the University of California, Berkeley, as at many other campuses, Asian Americans constitute a majority of the minority undergraduate population. Although Asian Americans might be thought of as part of "diversity," they are rarely, if ever, given racial preference in university admissions. In other words, Asian Americans are a racial group that is variably defined and counted as a minority.

Third, even though Asian Americans are part of an "emerging majority,"(8) they are not often central to the discourses about themselves. Put another way, the Asian American experience is often "owned" by non--Asian Americans. The controversy over Asian admissions is a particularly striking example of how Asian Americans become marginalized from discussions about racial politics. For many Asian Americans, the irony is a painful political problem. As the admissions controversy demonstrates, issues that affect Asian Americans often have dramatic consequences for non--Asians. The evolution of the debate, from discrimination to diversity to affirmative action, reflects a steady but gradual shift away from Asian American claims of discrimination on the basis of race and increased attacks on affirmative action. Issues that face Asian Americans can be the basis for coalitions with other minority groups or can be the political wedge that separates racial-group interests. In the case of admissions, the original framing of the controversy as a problem of discrimination implicitly portrayed Asian Americans as having political interests compatible with blacks and other minorities. However, as the issue slipped into neoconservative accounts, Asian Americans became competitors, not coalition partners, with other minorities.

Finally, that neoconservatives can claim to speak on behalf of an "Asian American interest," even though such an interest would not be recognizable to a majority of Asian American claimsmakers over admissions, raises the question of authenticity and Asian America. The addition of "Asian American" to discussions about race is not as simple as it might seem at first glance. For us to "add" the "Asian American(s)," we must first know which identities are authentically "Asian American" and which are not. The notion of an authentic "Asian American," while seductive particularly in a political sense, is elusive. Yet the task of searching for an authentic "Asian American" identity or an authentic "Asian American" politics is a crucial part of political struggles about race. For as the admissions controversy demonstrates, race can be commodified and appropriated by different and competing political interests. If we are to avoid the transgressive nature of neoconservative capture of an "Asian American" experience or, for that matter, conservative capture of other racialized experiences, then it is a preliminary first step that we recognize these paradoxes of race.

NOTES

(1.) For example, popular and academic discussions of Asian Americans as a "model minority" have emphasized the ways in which Asian culture is thought to be compatible with the values of middle-class, white America.

(2.) This comment was made in a forum on the Los Angeles riots that was held at the 1992 American Studies meetings in Costa Mesa, California.

(3.) The constructed nature of the category Asian American must be seen as part of a wider move to theorize racial identity. See, for example, Omi and Winant (1986); Gilroy (1987); Waters (1990); Goldberg (1990).

(4.) Theorizing racial identity has been a larger part of thinking theoretically about identities in general. Feminists and "queer" theorists have grappled extensively with identity and the instability of identity categories. See, for example, Fuss (1991), Butler (1990), Nicholson (1990), and Scott (1988).

(5.) See also Wang (1988).

(6.) Interview with Congressman Rohrabacher.
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(7.) Interview with Congressman Rohrabacher.

(8.) Thanks to John Brown Childs, who coined this useful phrase for describing shifts in the racial composition of the nation.

REFERENCES


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