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*Notes and Suggestions from Chapter 6, The Privileged Classes,  
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In Asian American Studies, many scholars have addressed the “model minority myth,” “tiger moms,” and those “crazy rich Asians,” all of these tropes suggestive of how many Americans regarded Asians, Asian immigrants, and Asian Americans as successful, ambitious, and wealthy, at least by the mid-1980s. I went to college during this moment, when a great many senior scholars had devoted their professional lives to de-bunking these myths—progressive intellectuals pointed out that some Asian ethnic groups showed rather high rates of poverty, that not every Asian person was good in math, and that pushing the kids too hard caused many of them to derail into depression, anxiety, and suicide. Either there was no model minority, or, even if there was, it was hard to be a member.<sup>1</sup>

All of these counter-arguments proved true, by the way, but without question, various statistical indices about persons of Asian ancestry also proved persistent and interesting: persons of Asian ancestry had higher household incomes; they attained significantly higher rates of education, through college and into the graduate schools; and they were wealthier and healthier compared to national averages. Thus, although it may have been true that not all persons of Asian ancestry were successful or doing well, a significant, large fraction was doing just fine—these folks were replicating their successes across generations, and they were the first obvious “racial minority” to out-live and out-school white folks.<sup>2</sup>

Students nowadays might think nothing of the large numbers of Asian students on the UC campuses, year after year, but trust me, this was a new thing in the 1980s. About one hundred years ago, Asian students in the UC system were numbered in the dozens, not the thousands, and most Asian students at UCLA or at Berkeley were from regions close to their families, either greater Los Angeles or the Bay Area. By 2010, however, students of Asian descent were some of the most numerous and most diverse throughout this elite public university system, and they came from all over the world. Those who’ve traveled the furthest were the most obvious beneficiaries of the transportation and communications revolutions that we’d discussed in the first chapter of this book. In 1918, being a foreign student from China meant a very long trip on a ship, so difficult and arduous that going home for the winter and summer breaks was not an option. Nowadays, a student at UCSB from China often hails from a high school that’s much better funded and supported than the average public high school in California, and in many cases (not all cases), the tuition for international students does not pose a significant financial problem

for their families. Flying back and forth—not an option at all in 1918—is common and inexpensive in 2018. Not all Asians are crazy rich, of course, but this doesn't mean that there aren't a significant number of crazy rich Asians.

Because Asia is such a big place with many pockets that are super rich, and because so many young people from those places will come to study in the United States, these Asian immigrants will appear as members of the privileged classes in the United States for many years to come. We are still likely on the front end of a mass migration of highly motivated, highly ambitious immigrants from Asia. It's also very likely that we will see, in greater numbers, highly skilled, highly motivated people from Mexico and Latin America, the Middle East, as well as Africa and the Caribbean. All of them are going to challenge our prevailing conceptions of race and class, and these highly educated, highly motivated transnational people—flying back and forth—will also force us to re-think the importance of international boundaries. For these folks, are the boundaries really that important? For example, if you have the means to travel several times from Los Angeles to Beijing, and to enjoy restaurants, shops, and housing that are similar there and here, are you both Chinese *and* American?

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These questions didn't make it into this chapter in any length, but they're some of the more compelling dynamics that we see in migration. To be sure, this kind of international travel—summer and fall in Europe, winter and spring in New England—was possible for elite families a hundred years ago, but nowadays, it's possible on a far greater scale, across many nations and boundaries, such that we could be seeing a “floating class” of highly educated, wealthy people who can go anywhere and yet don't really belong anywhere either. Their visibility belies the fact that they're a teeny tiny fraction of the population—there are hundreds of millions of poorer people in China and in India—people who will never have the privilege of travel or luxury. American immigration rules make them unlikely and invisible in the United States, and so Americans see only a steady trail of the highly skilled and the affluent, causing some of the more thoughtless among them to think that *all* Asians are like this. They are not: most Asians in Asia are very poor, quite impoverished in fact, and so those with wealth and capital are not at all representative of Asians in Asia. Because of our immigration rules, Americans tend to see a highly un-representative, highly privileged slice of people from Asia.

Their money moves, too. That movement of money, capital, and wealth—sheltered from taxes—that was another topic that didn't make it into this chapter, but I'm convinced that that topic could still easily encompass several dissertations, in part because the very definition of “money” and “currency” have changed. Wealth gets around these days, and in such a range of ways, by wire, transfers, from one account in one country to another account in a completely different jurisdiction. In the most popular destinations for money, policies really are “don't ask, don't tell,” such that no one must question whether the money comes from legitimate businesses, graft, illicit drug sales, and other shady dealings. Affluent people and corporations

move their money in such ways to avoid taxes, which impoverishes regions that will then not receive public funds to improve infrastructure and services, including education. These dynamics fuel migration: much of this class is about how poorer people have migrated despite rules designed to keep them out; and yet they are migrating precisely because the infrastructure, the services, and the opportunities are so bleak where they are. Local elites bear a great deal of responsibility for these circumstances, if only because they've been so willing to remove their wealth to other locations even when they stay in place. I very much regret having had to cut out much of the research on these topics, but I hope that some of my students will pursue these themes further.<sup>3</sup>

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People with money get around a lot easier than people who don't have any, and so to retain focus, and because of the sheer size of this group, I spent most of chapter 6 on the rich and educated folks from Asia. Again, I know that the "model minority myth" is misleading, inaccurate, and very likely "manufactured" by conservative scholars and commentators to blame (other) people of color for their own poverty and suffering. Yet at the same time, I think, by being inattentive to *why* there are so many Asian immigrants and Asian Americans who are in fact better off, we've missed just how powerfully public law—in this case, immigration law—has shaped social inequality.

Indeed, in the last five decades, American scholars have noted that the United States no longer promotes white supremacy in its public law as it once had, and yet our immigration rules over that same period have clearly favored the wealthy and the skilled. Education and wealth have replaced race-based criteria, even though it's not clear how these are more "fair" or "just" as criteria for selecting immigrants. Law continues to shape inequality—by migrating people with wealth, with an education, or in pursuit of an education, American immigration rules have enlarged opportunities for affluent and skilled people throughout the world to come to the United States. In addition, many Asian countries have had, or were building, significant educational infrastructures within their boundaries, thus creating the very large pool of people who would leave through such pathways. The flow of highly skilled and affluent people has not been just in one direction: it's more like a "circulation" of people now, such that moving back and forth from Asia to the United States has become increasingly common.<sup>4</sup>

In light of how many Asian immigrants and Asian Americans were better off, some scholars wondered aloud whether Asians were "passing into" whiteness, in the same way that other generations of white ethnics were passing as white. If highly skilled, highly motivated Asians kept coming to America, if they attended elite colleges and universities with equally nerdy white folks, and if they fell in love and got married to each other and/or with white folks, would they "whiten"? If they lose all memory of their native language, speak and read only in English, convert to Christianity, and became conservative, would they whiten *faster*? By 1990, persons of Asian ancestry already had high rates of "outmarriage," and among those who did not

marry Asians, they married white folks at rates that did not reflect a race-neutral pattern. To put it more bluntly, before 1990, when persons of Asian ancestry married someone who wasn't Asian, they weren't choosing as though they were "colorblind." Disproportionately, they'd picked white spouses. In the postwar period, a few prominent sociologists had insisted that marriages between white ethnics (an Irish person, say, marrying an Italian person) had made "whiteness" broader, and so the next generation of social scientists wondered whether marriage patterns between Asians and whites were now becoming part of that process.<sup>5</sup>

The scholars and commentators preoccupied with such themes did not, however, envision steady, on-going migration patterns from Asia to the United States. These patterns were robust, they *amplified* over time, through many more immigration rules in the 1990s, such that over the next two decades, Asian immigrants and Asian Americans were so numerous that they could concentrate in major cities and regions, into areas that became "ethnoburbs." In these areas, Asians were not "blending in" or assimilating into whiteness, blackness, or any other existing racial group: they were creating their own public spaces and neighborhoods, over giant areas of a city or across a region. Many of the local public schools simply became Asian: in American history, when a city or a neighborhood transitioned from all-white to non-white, property values fell, public services then eroded, and the region visibly declined as it became more impoverished. Asian ethnic communities after 1990 did not follow that pattern: when neighborhoods and regions transitioned from all-white to Asian, property values continued to rise, the schools got better, more businesses produced more commercial activity, and this in turn strengthened public finances and public services.<sup>6</sup>

To drive through Valley Boulevard in San Gabriel is to travel through the heart of a new Asian Americana, a place full of roast duck and boba as far as the eye can see, with multiple sites of commercial activity. Even in large and prestigious institutions that were once predominantly white—like the UC campuses—students of Asian descent were such a large part of the student body that intra-ethnic dating and marriage were *replacing* inter-racial patterns. When Asians were less than 2% of the United States population, as they were in 1975, scholars could consider whether persons of Asian ancestry could or would "melt" into the American mainstream; when persons of Asian ancestry were about 12% of California in 2005, however, Asian communities here seemed to be solidifying, not melting into anything. They were becoming, at least for people who weren't white supremacists, attractive in multiple ways, and they were challenging the very meaning of "assimilation" in American life.

When I was a younger person, a "banana" was an Asian person with white preferences and tastes, perhaps someone who coveted "whiteness." They were "yellow" on the outside, "white" on the inside, like a banana. Many bananas of my generation dated only white people, for example, and they had white friends and all-white social circles. In some parts of the country, bananas are still common, but nowadays, I've met many white and Latino students who've described themselves as "eggs," white or brown on the outside, and yet with deep and abiding affinities for all things Asian, including anime, pho, Pokémon, sushi, Siracha, char siu, Hello Kitty, and Korean BBQ. These non-Asians dated and befriended Asians, and sometimes

their social circles were quite Asian; some of my non-Asian students have said that they “feel” Asian, even though I’m not sure what that means. (It’s hard to do follow up questions when people say such things.) I do know that if the migration trends continue, if Asian American ethnoburbs grow larger and more powerful, then these places will be something new in American history—they were like giant, magnetic poles through which Americans of all variety would be drawn. They could become significant non-white spaces, even eclipsing the national obsession with whiteness itself.

This process may already be unfolding. From the vantage point of many progressive, nerdy Asian Americans, the thought of “blending” into white society or into a white racial identity seems undesirable, even silly. Perhaps our political polarization helps us see this in more obvious ways: a clear majority of white voters chose Donald Trump in the 2016 presidential election, for example, while less than one-third of Asian Americans and less than one-third of Latinos voted for him.<sup>7</sup> Politically, Asian Americans did not behave like the majority of whites in that last election, although perhaps more than a few bananas did vote for Trump. Since at least 2008, Asian Americans have been drifting left, and by 2016, voting patterns suggested a generational shift away from the Republican Party, especially among younger, college-educated Asian American voters. If, by 2018, the Republican Party was increasingly reflective of Donald Trump—some said it was, in fact, “Trump’s party now”—it wasn’t obvious that Asian Americans wanted to be in that Party.<sup>8</sup> (It’s not clear that they were invited or welcomed into the Party anyway.)

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But it also wasn’t obvious that Asian Americans would turn permanently left. Like “Whites” or “African Americans,” people in the “Asian American” category were quite diverse politically and otherwise. By 2018, persons of Asian ancestry were about eighteen million people in the United States, not including an estimated two million more people who had had some Asian ancestry, but didn’t necessarily identify as Asian. Also, as many as two million people of Asian descent were out of status. Still, despite sizeable numbers of people who were poor and vulnerable, a larger fraction of Asian Americans tended to have higher than average incomes, and to live in stable, well-resourced communities. They tended to skew the averages upward for the entire group, such that Asian Americans did not look like any other racial group in the United States in American history. As I’d mentioned in this chapter, American immigration rules will enhance that impression—that persons of Asian ancestry are affluent, educated, and generally better off than other racial groups.

Later, when we discuss the emerging gaps between the poor and the affluent, and between poorer immigrants who have no status and the wealthier, educated classes who are hyper-privileged, we will discuss again how public law shapes and enhances inequality. As I was finishing this chapter, though, and I was coming to that conclusion about how persons of Asian ancestry may have been the biggest beneficiaries of the American Civil Rights Movement,

I did notice that there just wasn't a whole lot of research on highly affluent, stable, middle and upper-middle class Asian Americans.

Maybe it's because they are...boring? We do have scholarly research about Asian American professionals who suffer discrimination at work, or about Asian Americans who struggle through higher education, or about Asian Americans who face resistance in predominantly white suburbs.<sup>9</sup> We also have research and anecdotal accounts of how some Asian American professionals have suffered from racial profiling, even in high-status positions in higher education or in government service.<sup>10</sup> And in recent years, Asian American plaintiffs have sued elite colleges and universities for discriminating against Asian applicants.<sup>11</sup> All of these are serious issues, and they indicate how a privileged class status and higher levels of education may not "protect" Asian Americans from suffering invidious forms of discrimination.

But there just isn't a robust scholarly literature about Asian Americans who've gone to good colleges, have then gotten decent, high-paying jobs, married and had kids, bought homes, and then *weren't* suffering distress. Perhaps this was because they really were sort of, kind of boring, their lives rather uneventful. My academic field—Asian American Studies—arose from protests, historical injustices, and the political and social marginalization of Asian immigrants and Asian Americans. With so many of our subjects doing well, however, many scholars might be at a loss, as the most progressive ones just weren't trained to study people who shop at Costco, travel a lot, and don't report severe race-based problems. Sure, it might horrible to be rejected from an Ivy League university because the admissions people were scoring Asian applicants lower on subjective criteria, but if your biggest problem was not getting into a great university, and then having to attend another great university instead, this might not qualify as an earth-shattering injustice (even though I get why people might want to sue).

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As a professor, I've met more and more Asian immigrant and Asian American students from privileged backgrounds, and many of them don't strike me as lefty, progressive, or militant left-wing radicals. A lot of them have wanted to go into accounting or to pharmacy school. Even the students from China—it's still a communist country—look forward to a quiet, affluent professional life free of politics, and without any obvious or deep concern for inequality. My class is just a GE requirement for them; my class was where they've learned that things really were once hostile for persons of Asian descent in the United States, a long time ago. Their day-to-day lives might have "microaggressions" here and there, but if you're experiencing such "microaggressions" from a nice car, in a nice job, or in a decent neighborhood, it's not the end of the world. (I'm not endorsing "microaggressions," of course—I do believe that "microaggressions" are bad.)

Now, is it so awful, that so many highly privileged Asian American and Asian immigrant students want a settled, professional life, and to live in an affluent ethnoburb with good schools so that they can raise the next generation of nerdy, privileged Asian Americans? Is this not

“progress”? Maybe it is. Maybe a long stretch of normal is a wonderful thing for these groups of people once considered “aliens ineligible for citizenship” and “perpetually foreign” in American law and society.

I do wonder, though. It makes me think of that French phrase, “noblesse oblige,” translated as “the nobility obliges,” which captures the idea that the very privileged ought to behave as though they also have greater social responsibilities. Back in Europe, a long time ago, being noble meant that you had certain privileges—a better castle, a larger estate, and servants and serfs to tend all of it. But being noble also meant training constantly in the arts of war and diplomacy, such that when diplomacy failed, and when an invader came, *you* had to put on your armor, pick up your sword, and protect land and property, even at the risk of your own life. You had special responsibilities, not just special privileges. Many European nobles lived short, violent lives, and even when they survived, they were still expected to make sacrifices for the common good. The best nobles conceived themselves as “servants of the people.”

The idea carries forth into our popular culture: Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, and Spiderman have amazing superpowers, but they’re not using them to make tons of money, or to advance careers in investment banking or in corporate law. (Would we think less of them if they did?) They are risking their lives instead for the greater good, flying around and protecting the rest of us, because “with great power comes great responsibility,” according to Spiderman’s uncle. Vested with a set of privileges and abilities that other mortals do not have, they even sacrifice their personal lives to protect and to save the common good. They put off dating and marriage, because it’s hard to juggle a family and a career, especially one that involves saving people all day and all night. It’s risky, dangerous work.

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We might think of how college is a place where young, bright people can enhance their superpowers. Over four years, I’ve seen fantastic transformations—people who couldn’t write very well or do advanced mathematics come out of UCSB with some amazing abilities and skills, all honed over months of toil and concentration. Having read hundreds of pages, four classes a term, over three terms, for four years—people who’ve done this develop unusual intellectual muscles. To see them at graduation is always a wonderful thing: they appear as a privileged, educated nobility, among the best and brightest people in the world, totally dripping rich in higher education. For students who were the poorest among these graduates, the college degree will be even more invaluable—it’s almost like a weapon against poverty and despair, something that can lift their parents into a much better position, and something that can benefit the children and grandchildren that they’ve yet to have. Will all of those graduates behave, though, as if “with great power comes great responsibility”?

It’s not just a question for Asian American students, or for other students of color, or for students of privileged backgrounds—I think it has as much resonance for people who were once assigned to the bottom of the American social order as it does for others who’ve enjoyed nothing

but a good life. I suppose it's fine to pursue a private life, isolated as much as possible from the problems of the world, and there's nothing inherently wrong with high-paying work in accounting or in consulting firms, and yet would it be better to gird your loins, find a heinous social problem or two, and then use your super skills for the common good? Can you do both? Can you balance a family as well? Hard to say. It's more difficult than it looks. Now is a good time to consider these things.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For recent examples of this scholarship, see the books by Rosalind Chou and Joe Feagin, Guofang Li, Eunhyong Yook, Stacey Lee, and Angie Chung. Amy Chua's book about "tiger mothers" is not exactly a conventional academic work, but it's still interesting, and maybe influential in ways that bother more mainstream Asian Americanists.

<sup>2</sup> For scholarly works that examine these demographic characteristics, see the recent books by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou, especially *The Asian American Paradox* (2015), as well as Erika Lee's recent history of Asian Americans and Willow Lung-Amam's ethnographic study, *Trespassers?* (2017).

<sup>3</sup> For broad overviews of the flow of capital around the world, see: Dani Rodrik, *The Globalization Paradox* (2012); John Ravenhill, *Global Political Economy* (2017); and Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (2017).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Huiyao Wang and Yue Bao, *Reverse Migration in Contemporary China* (2014).

<sup>5</sup> For an older study, see Harry Kitano et al., *Asian American Inter-racial Marriage*, J. MARR. & FAM. (1984). For more recent works, see: Daniel Lichter et al., *Whom Do Immigrants Marry?* ANN. AMER. ACAD. POL. & SOC. SCI. (2015); Twila Perry, *Race, Marriage, Markets, Choice*, DUKE J. GEND. L. & POL'Y (2015); and Pratikshya Bohra-Mishra and Douglas Massey, *Intermarriage Among New Immigrants in the United States*, ETHNIC & RAC. STUD. (2014). For an interesting historical account, see Emma Teng, *Eurasian: Mixed Identities in the United States, China, and Hong Kong, 1842-1943* (2013).

<sup>6</sup> See, for example, Wei Li, *Ethnoburbs: The New Ethnic Community in Urban America* (2012), and Min Zhou, *Contemporary Chinese America* (2009).

<sup>7</sup> About 58% of white voters supported Donald Trump in the presidential elections in 2016, compared to 8% of African American voters, 29% of Latino voters, and 29% of Asian American voters.

<sup>8</sup> The leading scholars of Asian American politics include Don Nakanishi, Pei-te Lien, Janelle Wong, and Karthick Ramakrishnan. Of these scholars, Professor Ramakrishnan has published several scholarly and popular articles about the Trump administration and about Asian American politics.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example: Deborah Woo, *Glass Ceilings and Asian Americans* (2000); Roy Brooks, *The Racial Glass Ceiling* (2017); Vivian Louie, *Compelled to Excel: Immigration, Education, and Opportunity Among Chinese Americans* (2004); and Leland Saito, *Race and Politics: Asian Americans, Latinos, and Whites in a Los Angeles Suburb* (1998).

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Dan Stober and Ian Hoffman, *A Convenient Spy: Wen Ho Lee and the Politics of Nuclear Espionage* (2002);

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Anemona Hartocollis, *Asian Americans Suing Harvard Say Admissions Files Show Discrimination*, NY TIMES (Apr. 4, 2018), and Katie Benner and Erica Green, *U.S. Investigating Yale Over Complaints of Bias Against Asian-American Applicants* (Sep. 26, 2018).