



## CHAPTER I

# THE REALITY OF ASIAN AMERICAN OPPRESSION

I had a terrible, uneasy feeling in my stomach and I picked up the phone to hear panic in the voice on the other end of the line. “She jumped out the window. Farrah\* jumped out of the window.” What I thought were irrational fears from the night before had, in fact, become a reality. In late March of 2013, I could not fall asleep. Something was off, something was sitting in my gut and it felt as if I was living out a sociological statistic in real life. It was just before going to bed and I, Rosalind S. Chou, could not get ahold of my friend Farrah. She was not returning any of my phone calls or text messages. She had always been timely in responding in the past few years that we had been friends, and it seemed a little out of character. I had spoken to her a couple days earlier and she just did not seem like herself. I tried my best not to panic, but to explain my nervousness to my partner with whom I shared numerous studies about Asian American women and their high rates of suicide and depression. For some reason, my inability to get in touch with Farrah triggered all the “what if” scenarios.

I slept terribly, and the next morning, I reached out to other friends to see if they had heard from her. I was nervous and anxious for hours. And then I got the phone call. When I answered, I got the news. Farrah had jumped out of a window that morning and was in a nearby hospital. I was stunned. In academia, we scholars are often taught to distance ourselves from our research, but this hit home. This was not a lecture in class where I discuss health disparities and how there is growing evidence that racism plays a role in disparate outcomes. This was someone close to me, in my inner circle.

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\*Farrah is a pseudonym.

I often encourage my students to *feel* when we learn about inequality, because oppression works in a way so that we no longer feel empathy for target groups. My community of friends faced shock and confusion and in the first edition of the book, Joe and I argue that, while it is very difficult to measure how much racism affects Asian Americans and people of color in general, the mental health statistics show that Asian American women are overrepresented in rates of suicide and depression.

In the first edition, we argued that it is a dangerous assumption that Asian Americans are free from racism. Their relatively high levels of educational attainment and household income, and their overrepresentation in professional occupations, make it seem as if they are doing better than other racial minorities or even some whites. However, the white-constructed label of “model minority” awarded to Asian Americans does *not* protect them from prejudice and racism.

The incident with my friend Farrah was not the first one I had experienced with Asian American women I know. In the fall of 2001, R. W., a young Chinese American, bludgeoned and strangled her mother. While her mother lay dead on the floor, she covered her and called the police, confessing her crime. This school valedictorian was an accomplished musician who had begun her education at a prestigious Ivy League school and graduated with honors from her southern university. Her crime received little local notice. Only one full-length newspaper article was published, and after her indictment she was barely mentioned. This tragic incident hit home for the first author because she is acquainted with the family, which was one of the few Chinese families in her hometown. The incident sent shockwaves through the Asian American community of which they were part. R. W.’s failure to stay at her first college program, an elite institution, may well have contributed to her several suicide attempts and eventually to the homicide. She may now live out her years in a mental institution, and family and friends are left stressed and wondering “why?”<sup>1</sup>

On the outside, R. W. appeared to be a model student at her historically white educational institutions. Her demeanor was quiet, which likely suggested to white outsiders only a stereotyped Asian passivity. Thus, even with numerous warning signs of mental illness, she was never seen as a concern. The white-created “successful model minority” stereotype made it difficult for non-Asians around her to see her illness and encouraged silence among the Asian Americans who knew her.

The 2007 shootings of students and staff at Virginia Tech University by Cho Seung-Hui suggest somewhat similar issues. A Korean American student at a historically white institution, Cho was viewed by outsiders as unusually quiet, and although he demonstrated warning signs of mental illness, he was mostly ignored, especially by those with the most authority to take action. Not much has been revealed about his life growing up in a Virginia suburb except that he was

an “easy target” at school and endured substantial teasing from white children. When younger, he struggled to learn English, which made it difficult to adapt in his predominantly white environment. Cho seems to have lived as an outcast and in social isolation. Given his parents’ success in business and his sister’s success as a Princeton graduate, Cho and his family seem to outsiders like a proverbial model family that “lifted themselves up by their bootstraps” and thus are living the American dream.<sup>2</sup> Yet, these stereotyped images and Cho’s own struggle to achieve may have worked against his mental health. As the interviews in this book reveal, this young Asian American’s struggle to make it in a predominantly white world was not unique in being both very invisible and excruciatingly tormented.

Our argument here is *not* that Asian Americans are distinctively prone to serious mental illness or violence. Rather, we accent in this book the institutionally racist situations in which Asian Americans find themselves—those highly pressured situations that create much stress and deeply felt pain. One major societal problem is that Asian Americans are typically viewed and labeled as “model minorities” by outsiders, especially by whites with power over them. This highly stereotyped labeling creates great pressure to conform to the white-dominated culture, usually in a one-way direction.

In books titled *YELL-Oh Girls!* and *Asian American X*, several hundred young Asian Americans discuss their often difficult lives. These young people recount recurring experiences with coercive pressures to assimilate into the prestigious white end of the prevailing U.S. racial status continuum—to white ways of dress, speech, goal attainment, thinking, and physical being. Most are torn between the culture of immigrant parents or grandparents, with its substantial respect for Asianness, and the burdensome pressures of a white-controlled society. As one young Korean American who grew up in a white community puts it, the dominance of whites explains the “thoughtless ways white Americans often inhabit a sense of entitlement and egocentric normality.”<sup>3</sup> Like other Asian Americans, these young people report racialized mistreatment, ranging from subtle to covert to overt discrimination. The successful minority image does not protect them from the onslaughts of discriminatory whites.

Our research here attempts to give voice to numerous Asian Americans as they describe and assess their discriminatory and other life experiences. Using in-depth interviews, we collected accounts of Asian American experiences in everyday life, including incidents of racial hostility and discrimination, responses of assimilation and conformity, and ways that individuals, families, and communities cope with and resist white-imposed racism. Our interviews indicate that Asian Americans suffer from much discrimination, ranging from subtle to blatant, at the hands of whites. The interviews show that, even after Herculean efforts to conform to the dominant racial hierarchy and to the white framing of them—efforts seeking to

achieve the fabled American dream—Asian Americans frequently feel stressed, embattled, isolated, and inadequate. Many passively accept that they must hide or abandon their home culture, values, and identity to prevent future mistreatment. Significant educational and economic achievements do not effectively shield them. Some analysts have argued that Asian Americans are “lucky” that they do not face the negative imagery that African Americans experience.<sup>4</sup> This view of Asian Americans is incorrect. The Asian American experience with racial hostility and discrimination is also very negative and largely untold, and such an untold experience is indeed a very *harmful* invisibility.

## The Reality of Systemic Racism

Traditional analytical approaches to immigrants and immigration to the United States mostly emphasize various assimilation orientations and processes. Some assimilation analysts have argued that all incoming immigrant groups will eventually be fully integrated into U.S. society, including the more distinctive ethnic and racial groups. Many social science researchers view the adaptation of Asian immigrants and their children to U.S. society since the 1960s through an assimilation lens, one similar to that used for assessing the adaptations of past and present European immigrants. Numerous assimilation analysts have argued that Asian American groups are on their way to full integration into the “core society,” by which they mean white middle-class society. For example, Paul Spickard has argued that by the 1980s whites no longer viewed Japanese Americans “as very different from themselves, and that fact is remarkable.”<sup>5</sup> To make this case, these analysts usually focus on Asian American socioeconomic progress in areas such as educational and income achievements. However, this limited definition of success in adaptation in the United States is mostly white-generated and ignores other important areas of Asian American lives.

Indeed, the fact that Asian immigrants and their children are heavily pressured to conform to a white-imposed culture, racial frame, and racial hierarchy—and suffer from much racial hostility and discrimination—is usually left out of most assessments of Asian immigrants and their children and grandchildren. Here we go beyond the typical assimilation approach and accent a systemic racism perspective. Since at least the seventeenth century, European Americans have created a complex North American society with a foundation of racial oppression, one whose nooks and crannies are generally pervaded with racial discrimination and inequality. Near their beginning, the new European colonies in North America institutionalized white-on-Indian oppression (land theft and genocide) and white-on-black oppression (centuries of slavery), and by the mid-nineteenth century

the Mexicans and the Chinese were incorporated as dispossessed landholders or exploited workers into the racial hierarchy and political-economic institutions of a relatively new United States. Our systemic approach views racial oppression as a foundational and persisting underpinning of this society. From the beginning, powerful whites have designed and maintained the country's economic, political, and social institutions to benefit, disproportionately and substantially, their racial group. For centuries, *unjust* impoverishment of Americans of color has been linked to *unjust* enrichment of whites, thereby creating a central racial hierarchy and status continuum in which whites are generally the dominant and privileged group.<sup>6</sup>

Since the earliest period of colonization, moreover, European Americans have buttressed this hierarchical and entrenched system of unjust material enrichment and unjust material impoverishment with legal institutions and a strong white racial *framing* of this society. In the past and in the present, whites have combined within this pervasive white frame a good many racist stereotypes (the cognitive aspect), racist concepts (the deeper cognitive aspect), racist images (the visual aspect), racialized emotions (feelings), racist narratives (e.g., “manifest destiny”), and inclinations to take discriminatory action. This white racial frame is old, enduring, and oriented to assessing and relating to Americans of color in everyday situations. Operating with this racial frame firmly in mind, the dominant white group has used its power to place new non-European groups, such as Asian immigrants and their children, somewhere in the racial hierarchy whites firmly control—that is, on a white-to-black continuum of status and privilege with whites at the highly privileged end, blacks at the unprivileged end, and other racial groups typically placed by whites somewhere in between. This white racist framing of society is now a centuries-old rationalizing of the racism systemic in this society.

Our concept of *systemic* racism thus encompasses a broad range of racialized realities in this society: the all-encompassing white racial frame, extensive discriminatory habits and exploitative actions, and numerous racist institutions. This white-generated and white-maintained system entails much more than racial bigotry, for it has been from the beginning a material, structural, and ideological reality.

### *The Exploitation and Oppression of Asian Immigrants*

In the classroom, our non-Asian students, regardless of their backgrounds, are often shocked to hear about Asian American oppression. These students have never been taught Asian American history, or been privy to significant events that have shaped these communities in the United States. Students often ask us

why these things have been “left out” of their regular curriculum. Additionally, they start to make the important societal connections that Asian Americans do have with other groups—with African Americans, Native Americans, Latinos, working-class whites, and the list goes on. We encourage our students to relearn an accurate U.S. history—and to recognize that our common bonds may keep us from making the same mistakes of the past. Knowing our racial past is imperative to help us with our racial future.

While some Asian Americans today trace family histories back to nineteenth-century immigrants, most have a more recent immigration background. Older members of the families of R. W. and Cho are relatively recent immigrants, and thus these families are typical. Changes in U.S. immigration laws since 1965 have allowed a substantial increase in immigration from Asian and Pacific countries, and thus Asian/Pacific Islander Americans have become the fastest growing U.S. racial group. In 1940 they made up less than 1 percent of the population, but by 2012 their numbers had grown to more than 17.5 million, about 5.6 percent of the U.S. population. The largest Asian/Pacific Islander group is Chinese American. In numbers, Filipino Americans are not far behind, and Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese Americans constitute other large Asian-origin groups.

Much scholarship on Asians in North America has addressed Asian experiences with racial hostility and discrimination over a long history of immigration. Scholars have examined more than 150 years of Asian immigration and shown, to take one example, that Asian workers have regularly been pitted against white workers. The first major immigrant group was Chinese. Between the 1850s and 1880s, Chinese contract laborers migrated in large numbers to the West Coast to do low-wage work in construction and other economic sectors. The preference that white employers had for Chinese workers fueled tensions in the racial hierarchy, often pitting white workers against Asian workers. After whites’ racist agitation and exclusionary legislation stopped most Chinese immigration, Japanese immigrants were recruited by employers to fill the labor demand on white-run farms and construction projects. (By the late nineteenth century the Chinese were viewed by whites as the stereotyped “yellow peril.”) The racially motivated termination of Japanese immigration in 1907–1908 spurred white employers to recruit other Asians and Pacific Islanders (such as Filipinos) to fill labor needs on the U.S. mainland and in Hawaii. This employers’ strategy of using immigrant workers from Asia and the Pacific Islands to replace white and other native-born workers has continued in some U.S. workplaces to the present.<sup>7</sup>

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Asian and Pacific Islander immigrants and their children—mostly Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino—suffered extremely blatant and institutionalized racism. They were negatively positioned, and imaged, by whites as “black” or “near black” on the dominant socioracial

continuum. Powerful whites imposed a strong racial framing on these subordinated immigrants, with barbed racist stereotypes and images. Reviewing the history, Robert Lee has commented on white constructions of hated “Orientals”: “Six images—the pollutant, the coolie, the deviant, the yellow peril, the model minority, and the gook—portray the Oriental as an alien body and a threat to the American national family.”<sup>8</sup> For example, from the 1850s onward the first Asian Americans, the Chinese, were stereotyped by white officials and commentators as “alien,” “dangerous,” “docile,” and “dirty.” At that time, such negative images were not new to the white racist framing of Americans of color. They had precedents in earlier white views of African Americans and Native Americans.<sup>9</sup>

In 1896, even as he defended some rights for black Americans as the dissenter in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court decision upholding legal segregation, Justice John Marshall Harlan included this racial argument: “There is a race so different from our own that we do not permit those belonging to it to become citizens of the United States. Persons belonging to it are, with few exceptions, absolutely excluded from our country. I allude to the Chinese race.”<sup>10</sup> In the first decades of the 1900s, this negative view was applied to other Asian Americans as well. U.S. government agencies have played a central role in defining racial groups. Thus, in the important 1922 *Ozawa* case, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Asian immigrants were *not white* and thus could not become citizens. The “not white,” “alien race,” and related racist notions had been generated by elite whites in earlier centuries to stereotype and name Native Americans and African Americans as an early part of white racist framing for a “civilized” Eurocentric society. These ideas have persisted for four centuries, with at least 160 years now of application to Americans of Asian descent.<sup>11</sup>

### *Racist Framing and Large-Scale Discrimination*

New ways of circulating the racist framing of Americans of color were developed by innovative white entrepreneurs in the early decades of the twentieth century. These included a burgeoning advertising industry making use of many magazines and radio stations, as well as the developing movie industry. White advertisers, cartoonists, and moviemakers commonly portrayed Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian/Pacific Islanders as outsiders or villains, who were often crudely stereotyped as “inscrutable,” poor at English, criminal, and dangerous.

For example, between the early 1900s and the 1940s, hostile visual images and stereotypes of “buck-toothed Japs” were prominent in U.S. media, contributing to anti-Japanese and other anti-Asian hostility in the United States. With extensive media support and facilitation, white commentators and political leaders spoke of an alleged alien character and the immorality of Japanese

Americans, sometimes using vicious apelike images.<sup>12</sup> These very negative images and other white racist framing of the Japanese and Japanese Americans contributed greatly to the international tensions leading to World War II, especially the recurring conflicts between the growing U.S. empire and the expanding Japanese empire, both in and around the rim of the Pacific Ocean.<sup>13</sup> This racist framing of the Japanese also contributed to extreme discriminatory actions undertaken by the U.S. government: the imprisonment of Japanese Americans in U.S. concentration camps during World War II. The government's rationale for the camps was openly racist. In 1943 West Coast military commander General John DeWitt articulated what most whites then believed when he argued that "a Jap's a Jap. The Japanese race is an enemy race, and while many second- and third-generation Japanese born on U.S. soil, possessed of U.S. citizenship, have become 'Americanized,' the *racial strains* are undiluted."<sup>14</sup> With no evidence, mainstream commentators and leading politicians, all white, asserted there were enemy agents in this "alien" Asian population. Significantly, one main reason for the existence of this "alien" population was the discriminatory U.S. law prohibiting Asian immigrants from becoming citizens.

Negative framing of Asian Americans during that era can be observed in a 1940s *Time* magazine article on "How to Tell Your Friends from the Japs." Here the white author offered a biologized and blatantly racist explanation of supposed differences between the Japanese and the Chinese—a task taken on because China and the United States had become allies against Japan in World War II:

Virtually all Japanese are short. Japanese are likely to be stockier and broader-hipped than short Chinese. Although both have the typical epicanthic fold on the upper eyelid, Japanese eyes are usually set closer together. The Chinese expression is likely to be more placid, kindly, open; the Japanese more positive, dogmatic, arrogant. Japanese are hesitant, nervous in conversation, laugh loudly at the wrong time. Japanese walk stiffly erect, hard heeled. Chinese, more relaxed, have an easy gait, sometimes shuffle.<sup>15</sup>

The *Time* editors who published this wildly stereotyped statement probably thought they were saying something positive about the Chinese. Yet, this is a clear example of the arrogant power of *group definition* that has long been part of the dominant white group's historical framing of Americans of color.

However, the white view of the Chinese and of Koreans became more negative with the new conflicts that developed after World War II. With the rise of state communism in China in the late 1940s, Cold War stereotyping again positioned the Chinese, and by implication Chinese Americans, as "dangerous Orientals" in many white minds. Moreover, the U.S. intervention in Korea in 1950 was



accompanied by emergency congressional legislation that gave the U.S. attorney general the authority to set up new concentration camps for Koreans, Chinese, and other Asians who might be perceived to be a domestic threat. The U.S. intervention in Korea, and later in Vietnam, further perpetuated an intensive racist stereotyping and framing of Asians and Asian Americans in the minds of many white and other non-Asian Americans.<sup>16</sup>

Even in this crude stereotyping we see a certain ambiguity in white views. Over the past century whites have sometimes positioned Asian Americans at the bottom end of the dominant racial hierarchy, while at other times they have positioned at least some Asian groups in a more intermediate status. From the late 1940s to the end of legal segregation in the 1960s, whites were sometimes perplexed as to where to place Asian Americans in the racial hierarchy, as we observe in this account from a Japanese American speaking about experiences during the legal segregation era:

I stopped at a McDonald's in Mississippi and there were two lines, one for whites and the other for blacks, well, "coloreds." I stood there confused about which line to join. I stood there and decided to go in the colored line because there was nobody in it and I could get my food faster. When I got up to the counter the guy told me "hey you can't use this line, get in that other line." The line for whites was long and I had gone about halfway up when this guy says, "Hey, you can't be in this line, get in the other line." I just stood there and thought, "Ah, what am I!?"<sup>17</sup>

This recollection indicates not only the stereotyping and subordination of Asian Americans but also a white confusion about Asian Americans' being closer to whiteness or blackness in the dominant racial hierarchy. This placement has become ever more problematic for white Americans with the dramatic growth in the Asian American population since the 1960s.

### *White Racial Framing: Anti-Asian Imagery Today*

Today whites and others still apply numerous elements of an old anti-Asian framing to Asian Americans. As we will see throughout this book, many whites hold inconsistent views of Asian Americans. They commonly view Asian Americans as high achievers and "model minorities," but will often discount the meaning of those achievements as being done by exotic "foreigners," "nerds," or social misfits. For example, some research studies show that Asian American students are often viewed positively by whites, but mainly in regard to educational or income achievements. A recent summary of research concludes that most stereotypes of

Asian American students “are negative, such as non-Asians’ notions that Asians ‘don’t speak English well,’ ‘have accents,’ and are ‘submissive,’ ‘sneaky,’ ‘stingy,’ ‘greedy,’ etc.”<sup>18</sup> To complicate matters, racial stereotyping is gendered and sexualized. Asian American men feel the brunt of emasculating white stereotypes that place them at the bottom of a U.S. masculinity hierarchy, while many Asian American women are exoticized as sexual objects.<sup>19</sup> Racism is often perpetuated through different systems of oppression in an intersectional way—thus, these differences in white-imposed constructions of Asian American men and women.

Subtle and blatant stereotyping of Asians and Asian Americans still predominates in many areas of U.S. society. Consider just a few recent examples. In November 2013, comedian and talk show host Jimmy Kimmel aired a skit on his late night show in which he led a roundtable discussion with children. The discussion topic in the roundtable was the U.S. debt to China and the punch line was delivered by one of the children suggesting that we “*kill* all the Chinese.” The broadcasting of the skit demonstrates how Kimmel, and the writers and producers of the show, consider mass genocide of the Chinese as acceptable comedic content. Moreover, in February 2013, Asian American basketball player Jeremy Lin burst onto the NBA scene with “surprising” athletic prowess for the New York Knicks team. During the months of “Linsanity” where media outlets dedicated extensive coverage to the exceptionalism of Lin’s play, he was also met with numerous racial taunts and slurs by fans and other athletes. Two ESPN cable channel writers used a racial slur in their headlines about Lin: a “Chink in the Armor” was used on their journalistic website. Floyd Mayweather insisted Lin was not worthy of this attention and was made a celebrity only because of his Asian heritage, not in spite of it.<sup>20</sup> In fall of 2013, a documentary on Jeremy Lin’s journey to the NBA was released, and in an interview in the film he noted that racism has played a part in his entire athletic career.

In spring of 2011, a UCLA student, Alexandra Wallace, created an anti-Asian YouTube video titled “Asians in the Library” that went viral.<sup>21</sup> In it, Wallace complains of “hordes of Asians” at UCLA, of their not having “American” manners, and about their parents for “not teaching their kids to fend for themselves.” She also makes a mockery of Asians who speak their native languages and minimizes the Fukushima nuclear tragedy in Japan. The university failed to address the racist rant, although Wallace did apologize and resign from the school for personal reasons.<sup>22</sup> She received some notoriety from the racist incident and was asked to appear on MTV. This is one of very few examples of institutional consequences for whites who engage in anti-Asian racism, and of the apparent acceptance of Wallace as a humorous figure in pop culture.

The Adidas company was challenged by civil rights groups for making shoes that had a negative caricature of a buck-toothed, slant-eyed Asian as a logo. In

another case, a large pictorial cartoon concerning fund-raising investigations of Democratic Party leaders appeared on the cover of an issue of the prominent magazine *National Review*. The cover showed caricatures of then president Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary Clinton, as slant-eyed, buck-toothed Chinese in Mao suits and Chinese hats—images suggesting old stereotyped images of Asian Americans’ characteristics. Since the nineteenth century, white cartoonists, political leaders, and media commentators have portrayed Chinese and other Asian Americans in such stereotyped terms, often to express a fear of the “yellow peril.” When confronted, the *National Review*’s white editor admitted these were negative Asian caricatures but refused to apologize. Such reactions, and the fact that there was little public protest of the cover other than from Asian American groups, suggest that such crude images and other associated stereotypes remain significant in a dominant racial framing of people of Asian descent.<sup>23</sup>

In addition, a U.S. animation company made a cartoon (*Mr. Wong*) and placed at its center an extreme caricature of a Chinese “hunchbacked, yellow-skinned, squinty-eyed character who spoke with a thick accent and starred in an interactive music video titled *Saturday Night Yellow Fever*.”<sup>24</sup> Again Asian American and other civil rights groups protested this anti-Asian mocking, but many whites and a few Asian Americans inside and outside the entertainment industry defended such racist cartoons as “only good humor.” Similarly, the makers of a puppet movie, *Team America: World Police*, portrayed a Korean political leader speaking gibberish in a mock Asian accent. One Asian American commentator noted the movie was “an hour and a half of racial mockery with an ‘if you are offended, you obviously can’t take a joke’ tacked on at the end.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in an episode of the popular television series *Desperate Housewives* a main character, played by actor Teri Hatcher, visits a physician for a medical checkup. Shocked that the doctor suggests she may be going through menopause, she replies, “Okay, before we go any further, can I check these diplomas? Just to make sure they aren’t, like, from some med school in the Philippines.” This racialized stereotyping was protested by many in the Asian and Pacific Islander communities.

Although sometimes played out in supposedly humorous presentations, continuing media-reproduced stereotypes of Asians and Pacific Islanders include old white-framed notions of them as odd, foreign, un-American, relatively unasimilated, or culturally inferior. Noteworthy in these accounts is the connection of more recent anti-Asian stereotyping, mostly by whites, to the old anti-Asian stereotyping of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For the majority of non-Asian Americans, particularly those who control the media, certain negative images of Asians and of Asian Americans (especially Asian immigrants and their children) blend together in a common anti-Asian racial framing. The

strong protests of Asian American civil rights and other organizations to all such racialized stereotyping and mocking underscore this important point.

Anti-Asian stereotypes are still frequently encountered in everyday discourse. Asian Americans, including children, often note that they face mocking language and other racially hostile words, such as these: “Ching chong Chinaman sitting on a rail, along came a white man and snipped off his tail”; “Ah so. No tickee, no washee. So sorry, so sollee”; and “Chinke, Chink, Jap, Nip, zero, Dothead, Flip, Hindoo.”<sup>26</sup> A disc jockey at a Toledo, Ohio, radio station called Asian restaurants and made mock Asian commentaries, such as “ching, chong, chung” and “me speakee no English.” Similarly, a CBS talk show host mocked an Asian Excellence Awards ceremony by playing a fake excerpt with “Asian men” saying things like “Ching chong, ching chong, ching chong.” Comedian Rosie O’Donnell also used a repeated “ching chong” to mock Chinese speech on her ABC talk show. One striking reaction to the O’Donnell comment was hundreds of blogger entries on Internet websites that defended her comments and (erroneously) asserted the comments were *not* racist.<sup>27</sup>

To modern ears such language mocking and other Asian mocking may seem novel, but it is actually an old part of the white racist framing of Asian Americans. White English speakers on the West Coast developed this mocking in the mid- to late nineteenth century as their way of making fun of the English-Chinese speech of Chinese workers, as well as of racializing them. An early 1900s ragtime song goes, “Ching, Chong, Oh Mister Ching Chong, You are the king of Chinatown. Ching Chong, I love your sing-song.”<sup>28</sup>

Anthropologist Jane Hill has shown how in the United States such mocking of language links to systemic racism. In particular Hill has studied the extensive mocking of Spanish, such as the making up of fake Spanish words and phrases. Mock Spanish—common on birthday cards, on items in gift shops, and in commentaries from board rooms to the mass media—is mostly created by college-educated Americans, especially white Americans. Similar language mocking has long been directed at African Americans and Asian Americans. “Through this process, such people are endowed with gross sexual appetites, political corruption, laziness, disorders of language, and mental incapacity.”<sup>29</sup> Language mocking is not just lighthearted commentary of no social importance, because such mocking usually is linked to racial framing and societal discrimination against the racialized “others.” While native speakers of languages such as French or German do not face serious discrimination because of their accents when they speak English, Asian Americans, Latinos, and other Americans of color do often face such discrimination. As one scholar has underscored, “It is crucial to remember that it is not all foreign accents, but only accent linked to skin that isn’t white, or which signals a third-world homeland, evokes such negative reactions.”<sup>30</sup>

### *Model Minority Imagery: An Apparent Contradiction?*

Today, frequent anti-Asian mocking and caricaturing signal the continuing presence of a strong racist framing of Asians and Americans of Asian descent. Some people, especially whites, may play down the significance of such racist framing and instead argue that a strong positive image of Asian Americans has often been asserted by whites. They note that whites, especially in the mainstream media and in politics, regularly broadcast positive reports on achievements of Asian Americans in schools and workplaces. From this point of view, one should note, an Asian American group has “succeeded” in U.S. society when its attainments on a limited number of quantitative indicators of occupation, education, and income are at least comparable to those of white Americans. A superficial reading of these indicators leads many to view virtually all Asian Americans as successful and thus as not facing significant racial barriers in this society. Such analyses may be correct in regard to a certain type of success measured by particular socioeconomic indicators for Asian American groups as a whole, but not in regard to the socioeconomic problems faced by large segments within these groups or in regard to the various forms of racial discrimination that most Asian Americans still face in their daily lives.

Take Japanese Americans, for example. Recent data indicate that Japanese Americans are more likely to hold managerial or professional jobs than their white counterparts, and their unemployment rate is less than that for whites. Median income for their families is more than for white families nationally, and a smaller percentage falls below the federal poverty line than for whites. However, Japanese American workers mostly live in the West, where there is a relatively high cost of living. We should note too that in California the difference in median incomes between Japanese American families and white families is reversed. Per capita income for Asian American groups is also generally lower than that for whites, who average smaller families. In addition, many Asian immigrants and their children, especially those from Southeast Asia and rural backgrounds, have experienced much poverty and other serious economic difficulties over the past few decades.<sup>31</sup>

Moreover, although Japanese Americans and certain other Asian American groups have achieved significant socioeconomic success, they still face a substantial array of subtle and overt acts of discrimination, as we demonstrate fully in later chapters. Research studies reveal some of this picture. For example, when researchers have examined Japanese and other Asian American workers in comparison with white workers with similar jobs, educational credentials, and years of job experience, the Asian American workers are found to be paid less on average and are less likely to be promoted to managerial positions.<sup>32</sup> In addition, Asian

American workers often face exclusion from numerous positions in business, entertainment, political, and civil service areas, regardless of their qualifications and abilities. Japanese and other Asian Americans periodically report a “glass ceiling” in corporations or exclusion from business networks. About 5 percent of the population, Asian Americans are far less than 1 percent of the members of the boards of Fortune 500 firms; one tabulation revealed that just *one* Asian American headed up a Fortune 500 firm not founded by an Asian American. White executives periodically assert that in their firms Asian Americans are best as technical workers and not as executives. Given this stereotyped view, Asian Americans are often hired as engineers, computer experts, and technicians, but no matter what their qualifications are they are rarely considered for top management positions. Moreover, given this discrimination, many younger Asian Americans have pursued scientific and technical educations and rejected the fine arts, humanities, and social sciences, areas they might have preferred. Career choices are thus influenced by both past and present discrimination. In addition, many business opportunities in corporate America remain limited by persisting anti-Asian sentiment.<sup>33</sup>

The “great recession” of 2008–2009 disproportionately affected Asian Americans, further challenging the “model minority” myth. According to the National Coalition for Asian-Pacific American Community Development, Asian Americans have seen a 38 percent increase in their poverty population while the general poverty population grew by 27 percent during the same time period, with the African American poverty population growing by 20 percent.<sup>34</sup> This poverty rate is not just affecting the newer immigrant population, for 60 percent of the net increase in Asian American/Pacific Islander poverty was in the native-born segment of that population.<sup>35</sup> In 2010, compared to whites, blacks, and Latinos, Asian American workers had the highest share of unemployed workers who were unemployed long term (more than half a year). Additionally, when compared to their similarly educated white counterparts, highly educated Asian Americans suffer from disproportionately higher unemployment rates. Asian Americans with bachelor’s degrees are more likely to be unemployed than whites. This is especially significant because 57 percent of the Asian American labor force is in this category.<sup>36</sup> Oftentimes, education is seen as the “great equalizer,” but we see that Asian Americans obtaining advanced degrees still face economic disadvantages. In spite of much data contradicting their commonplace view, numerous social scientists and media commentators have regularly cited the educational and economic “success” of a particular Asian American group, one typically described as the “model minority,” as an indication that whites no longer create significant racial barriers for them.<sup>37</sup> For example, a 2012 research report of the prestigious Pew Research Center cites this socioeconomic success and asks unreflectively,

“Are Asian Americans a ‘Model Minority’?” The report also compares, again uncritically, the supposedly successful achievements of Asian Americans with the lesser achievements of Hispanic Americans.<sup>38</sup>

This continuing use of a white-named and white-framed perspective on Asian Americans is highly problematical. We can pinpoint when this model myth was likely first constructed. In the mid-1960s, largely in response to African American and Latino (especially Mexican American) protests against discrimination, white scholars, political leaders, and journalists developed the model minority myth in order to allege that all Americans of color could achieve the American dream—and not by protesting discrimination in the stores and streets as African Americans and Mexican Americans were doing, but by working as “hard and quietly” as Japanese and Chinese Americans supposedly did. This model image was created *not* by Asian Americans but by influential whites for their public ideological use.<sup>39</sup> One example is a 1960s *U.S. News & World Report* article entitled “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” This major media article praised the hard work and morality of Chinese Americans, and its analysis strongly implied that if black Americans possessed such virtues, it would not be necessary to spend “hundreds of billions to uplift” them.<sup>40</sup>

For decades now, prominent commentators and politicians have cited the educational or economic success of Asian Americans as proof that they are fully melded into the U.S. “melting pot,” with many “ascending above exclusion” by “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps.”<sup>41</sup> Today, variations of this model stereotype remain pervasive, and leading politicians, judges, journalists, and corporate executives assert them regularly.<sup>42</sup> Even other Americans of color have sometimes been conned by this model minority view and declared it to be so true that governments do not need to be concerned with the discrimination against Asian Americans. For example, black Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, at his Senate confirmation hearings, asserted that Asian Americans have “transcended the ravages caused even by harsh legal and social discrimination” and should not be the beneficiaries of affirmative action because they are “over-represented in key institutions.”<sup>43</sup>

One of the contemporary ironies of such uninformed views is that private and government reports in recent years have shown that today educational success varies among the Asian American groups and, indeed, that many Asian Americans in numerous groups still face significant obstacles to academic success, in some cases more than in the past.<sup>44</sup> For example, one savvy higher education journalist noted that numerous articles in college newspapers have used Asian Americans as a point of humor, but their portrayals usually feed the “model minority” myth. Asian American students are still often seen as an “invasion” and their demeanors as “inscrutable.” On these college campuses lies a “continued



pattern of Asian American students being (a) the butt of such jokes, basically the punch line; (b) that the jokes are heavily laden with racial stereotypes; and (c) that these . . . essays reveal volumes about racial relationships, tensions, and perceptions of Asian American students as all being, in some way, the same—foreigners, math and science nerds, and all around different from the regular average college student.”<sup>45</sup>

### *Assimilation and the “Model Minority” Imagery*

Several researchers—mostly Asian American—have challenged the rosy view of Asian American success in the complex assimilation process forced on them in the United States. These researchers have shown that Asian immigrants and their children have long faced discrimination and other serious difficulties in adapting to U.S. society. Some have also explored how the societal conditions of Asian Americans are racialized.<sup>46</sup>

Several social scientists have focused on Asian American adaptation to the dominant culture and society using traditional assimilation theories. For example, drawing on interviews with young Asian American professionals, Pyong Gap Min and Rose Kim report that these young professionals have highly assimilated socially and culturally, and have significant friendship ties to middle-class whites and significant assimilation to white folkways. They found that these Asian American professionals are bicultural, with strong assimilation to “American culture,” but express a strong national-origin or pan-Asian identity as well. An earlier study of Korean immigrants by Won Moo Hurh and Kwang Chung Kim reported similar findings, in that their respondents demonstrated what they term “additive” or “adhesive” adaptation—that is, assimilating substantially to the new economy and society, yet maintaining a strong sense of their ethnic and racial identities. While both research studies discuss difficult identity choices of their respondents, like most contemporary researchers looking at immigrant assimilation, they do not examine in depth the harsh racial realities surrounding these choices. In this still-racist society, personal or group identity “choices” by Asian immigrants and their children are severely limited by the racial identity typically *imposed* on them by white outsiders.<sup>47</sup>

In a study of second-generation Chinese and Korean Americans, social scientist Nazli Kibria has also explored the formation of identities. Assessing the adaptation of Asian immigrants and their children, she distinguishes between an “ethnic American” model and a “racial minority” model of assimilation. The old ethnic assimilation model, asserted by scholars and others, has set the framework for Asian assimilation into the core society, yet creates significant problems because it assumes that an ethnic immigrant group is white. In Kibria’s view, as



Asian immigrants and their children accent a new umbrella identity of “Asian American,” they are updating the old ethnic assimilation model to include their racial minority experience. While Kibria recognizes that her respondents are set apart, discriminated against, and stereotyped as foreigners or model minorities, she keeps her analysis of the perpetrators of this stereotyping and discrimination rather vague and provides no in-depth analysis of the systemic racism context in which these Asian Americans are forced to adapt. Her Chinese and Korean respondents report on some “lessons about race,” “race socialization,” and not being accepted “by others,” yet in her analysis Kibria does not assess the central role of white discriminators or the white-imposed framing and hierarchy in forcing such hard lessons.<sup>48</sup>

One of the few analysts of Asian Americans to explicitly name white discriminators as central is sociologist Mia Tuan. Interviewing nearly 100 third- and later-generation Chinese and Japanese Americans, she found that although most were well assimilated into the dominant culture, most also had a strong sense of a racialized identity because whites constantly imposed the identity of “Asian foreigner” on them. They reported being caught between feeling perpetually outside, as “forever foreigners,” and sometimes being given greater privileges by whites than other people of color. They spoke too of the difficulty they had in viewing themselves in terms of their national origin when they were constantly being defined in “generically racial terms” as “Asian Americans” or as “Orientals.” Though offering a probing analysis that assesses well racial-ethnic identity struggles and recognizes whites as having a privileged status, Tuan also does not, in our view, provide enough in-depth analysis of the anti-Asian racism that surrounds, and imposes oppressive predicaments on, Asian Americans.<sup>49</sup>

Several researchers have specifically targeted the model minority stereotype. One early analysis was that of the innovative legal scholar Mari Matsuda, who suggested that Asian Americans might be positioned as a “racial bourgeoisie,” a racial middle status between whites and other people of color. This protects the white position at the top by diffusing hostility toward them and sets up Asian Americans to be a “scapegoat during times of crisis.”<sup>50</sup> In a more recent analysis, Vijay Prashad has shown how Asian Americans are termed model minorities and thus come “to be the perpetual solution to what is seen as the crisis of black America.” Prashad does not specifically identify and assess the white agents who have created this crisis for black America. He does note a certain “Orientalism” among white Americans—the view that many have of Asia as being “static and unfree” in contrast to a “dynamic and free” Western civilization. Holding to this framing, whites frequently stereotype Asian Americans negatively as alien, exotic, barbaric, or primitive. Prashad adds that for Asian Americans “it is easier to be seen as a solution than as a problem. We don’t suffer genocidal poverty

and incarceration rates in the United States, nor do we walk in fear and a fog of invisibility.”<sup>51</sup> Ironically, he here evokes part of the model minority stereotype yet does not note that this hoary stereotype often creates an invisibility cloak hiding severe problems of racism faced regularly by Asian Americans.

The pioneering legal scholar Frank Wu has done much to dispel model minority stereotyping. In his work he has explained the benefits that whites enjoy because of that labeling. Reviewing the long history of anti-Asian discrimination, he notes that “non-Asian Americans can discriminate against Asian Americans by turning us into noncitizens, either officially by prohibiting even legal long-term residents from naturalizing or informally by casting doubt on our status. The alien land laws, passed to drive Japanese immigrants out of farming, are the prime example.” While he accents well the many decades of anti-Asian discrimination, Wu regularly uses vague terms such as “non-Asian Americans” and thereby skirts around using the word “whites” for those doing such intense discriminating. While in many of his analyses Wu recognizes how anti-Asian racism is institutionalized, at times he seems to play down certain aspects of white racism: “Other than among a few idealists, as a nation we accept discrimination on the basis of citizenship as necessary. But except among a few extremists, as a society we reject discrimination on the basis of race as immoral.”<sup>52</sup> Wu here seems to neglect the societal reality that *many* whites still do find it acceptable to engage in racial discrimination against Americans of color, yet may find it no longer fashionable to discriminate openly or assert racist views publicly.

Clearly, these often-pioneering Asian American scholars have moved social science analysis of the adaptive barriers faced by Asian Americans in very important directions. Still, some of them tend to avoid explicitly naming and analyzing fully the role of whites (especially elite whites) as central protagonists in creating anti-Asian racism today—often preferring instead to name vague social agents such as “non-Asians,” “the law,” “the government,” or “the larger society” as generators of contemporary racism. Such analytical practices can be found as well among many scholars researching the racialized situations of other Americans of color. They too are often reluctant to name whites *specifically* as the key actors in past or present dramas of U.S. racism.<sup>53</sup>

One of the few researchers to examine in critical detail the contemporary impact of *systemic racism* on Asian American communities is sociologist Claire Jean Kim. Examining periodic conflicts between Korean American merchants and African American patrons in a few cities, Kim shows that these conflicts should be understood in the context of whites’ long-term discriminatory actions against both groups. She illustrates how Asian immigrants have come to be positioned, mainly by *white* actions, between white urbanites and black urbanites, and how these Asian Americans are given a negative evaluation by whites on both the

axis of superior/inferior racial groups and the axis of insiders/foreigners. Such intergroup conflict involves more than just stereotyping by African Americans or Korean Americans of the other group, but instead reflects the white-imposed racial hierarchy and its effects on both racially subordinated groups. Like other Americans of color, Asian Americans serve as pawns in the racially oppressive system maintained at the top by whites.<sup>54</sup> White Americans may prize Asian Americans relative to African Americans in certain limited ways so as to ensure white dominance over both. Whites may sometimes place or consider Asians “nearer to whites,” a relative valorization, because of Asian American achievements in certain educational and economic areas. Yet this middling status is possible only because other Americans of color, such as African Americans or Mexican Americans, have been allowed fewer opportunities by whites. Whites’ use of Asian Americans as a measuring stick for other Americans of color is highly divisive, for it pits groups of color against each other, as well as isolates Asian Americans from white Americans.

Kim underscores well the price paid for becoming the white-proclaimed model of a successful minority: “By lumping all Asian descent groups together and attributing certain distinctively ‘Asian’ cultural values to them (including, importantly, political passivity or docility), the model minority myth sets Asian Americans apart as a distinct racial-cultural ‘other.’ Asian Americans are making it, the myth tells us, but they remain exotically different from Whites. Beneath the veneer of praise, the model minority myth subtly ostracizes Asian Americans.”<sup>55</sup> In this process of exoticizing and of civic ostracism, whites treat Asian Americans as foreigners not fully assimilable to white culture and society. Exoticized and celebrated for docility, Asian Americans have relatively little political clout and as yet are less involved in the U.S. political process. As Kim’s data demonstrate, this lack of political involvement at the local level is often *not* a voluntary choice but results from active discrimination and exclusion in the political realm by whites.

Discrimination persists in many institutional areas. The astute scholar Gary Okihiro sums up the contemporary Asian American situation this way: Whites have “upheld Asians as ‘near-whites’ or ‘whiter than whites’ in the model minority stereotype, and yet Asians have experienced and continue to face white racism ‘like blacks’ in educational and occupational barriers and ceilings and in anti-Asian abuse and physical violence. This marginalization of Asians, in fact, within a black and white racial formation, ‘disciplines’ both Africans and Asians and constitutes the essential site of Asian American oppression.”<sup>56</sup>