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Message from the Editors

## Researching Asians Internationally and Comparatively:

Looking beyond Melting Pots  
and Ethnic Identity Politics

Shamit Saggar and Eric Fong

The experience of Asian Americans has been substantially studied by social scientists. Much is known about patterns of integration, demographic trends, involvement in labor, and housing markets, alongside changing conceptions of identity, solidarity, and feelings of belonging. It is a rich literature and has spawned many specialist subfields areas including the implications for policy makers and practitioners responsible for managing growing ethnic pluralism. Building on this, the current volume of *AAPI Nexus* is devoted to extending that knowledge base to a set of English-speaking countries—Canada, Australia, and the United Kingdom—that have experienced Asian migration and settlement on a similar scale, giving rise to many familiar intellectual and practical issues.

There are, of course, many good reasons for looking internationally and comparatively. The first and most pressing is that the Asian migrant or minority story in Western democracies has resonance with a larger story about postwar global migration. Over this seventy-year period, a number of Asian populations have been on the move, drawn to countries in the West that have sought workers and injections of fresh talent and energy. The four countries examined in this volume are prime examples of such receiving countries that feature important Asian minorities. We are really looking at a major chapter in modern global migration, allowing for the factors that put, say, Australia in this game are rather different from those that apply to the United Kingdom.

A second reason are the very distinctive perceptions about these four Western countries—they are what is termed as the English-speaking world. All four have a common set of traditions centered around their mature democratic political systems and bias toward liberal individualist values. In examining similarities and differences among Asians in these countries, we cannot neglect the importance of how these countries have developed as industrial democracies and, crucially, the stories that are told, and they tell themselves, about what they represent. For instance, racism and racial discrimination are now widely publicly repudiated throughout these countries while struggling to come to terms with histories of racial exclusion.

Third, in bringing together cross-national experiences of Asians in Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, it is apparent that the *Asian* label is unrealistically broad. Its breadth is very great and borders on making it meaningless when we see that *Asian* alludes to very different things in different countries. In the United States and Canada, Asian populations largely refer to those with origins in East and Southeast Asian countries such as China, Korea, Japan, Indian, and Pakistani. That country's South Asian population (Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, and Sri Lankan origin) is another matter, although one that is picked up in one of the articles in this volume. Meanwhile, *Asian* in the United Kingdom denotes South Asians, and is derived from nomenclature with distinctly colonial roots. In any case, Asian migrants and settled populations across these four countries come from very diverse backgrounds geographically as well as generationally, socially, and culturally. Indeed, gender, generation, and geography are among the biggest factors that internally differentiate Asian populations, and this feature is further reinforced when we look at Asians in four broadly similar Western societies.

Fourth, scholars of migration and ethnicity tend to focus on the integration question. Examining the position of Asians across our four selected countries allows us to frame and respond to this question in a number of ways. For instance, by looking at economic, political, and social patterns in comparable ways sheds light on which Asian groups have advanced and which have not, and points to the reasons attached to these variations. However, while many countries may have similar labor or housing markets, they are not the same, and particular Asian patterns of advancement

might reflect features of the integration landscape that are quite local. Furthermore, issues of race and racialization have taken different courses in each of these four countries—the United States’ distinctive racial scar, the English and French Canada, and Australia’s recent history of racial exclusion are bound to shape the patterns of integration shown through research evidence as well as the meaning given to these patterns. And the “model minorities” debate is the most sensitive aspect of integration for all Asians in all these countries. Our four-country volume should shed some light on the degree to which economic advancement in particular has been nested in a wider narrative that simplifies and stereotypes and, where this is the case, how far this obscures important distinctions and disparities among Asians. Averages can sometimes mislead, so scholarship on this question must also consider the reliability of the generalizations about Asians. A comparison can help us understand the complexity of group relations in different contexts.

### People, Places, and Scholarship

If the people that this volume is concerned with are far from homogeneous, then the places that are studied also represent considerable variation in settlement landscapes. These countries certainly draw on common traditions and understandings of migrants and minorities, and to a certain extent are homes to different Asian diaspora that boast strong day-to-day “street” knowledge comparing one place to the next. But they also tend toward accentuating the local, in part in response to the flattening tendency of global generalizations.

A good illustration of this is reflected in the article by Ho and Lee. The authors’ message revolves around the development of Asian Canadian Studies (ACS) as a field of academic inquiry and the attendant tensions this has driven in the boundaries of identity, experience, and interpretation. The starting point for this is not negligible: Asians are one in seven of Canadians today, a country that tops the league table of foreign born among very rich countries. Much of the background to this centers on migratory patterns across the Pacific Rim, making ACS “a dynamic critical vehicle to analyze and comprehend these movements in relationship to global migrations, transpacific flows, and neoliberalism (2).” This background informs how ACS might be differentiated from Asian American studies, and how the unique legacy of discrimination

and oppression felt by Asian Canadians sits alongside comparable legacies of racialized minorities within Canada and across North America. The extent to which modern Canada has embraced multiculturalism also colors how these questions are addressed, in which a conscious effort has been made to avoid a melting-pot frame and borrowing an ethnic identity politics platform.

The authors' conclusions remind us that appropriately placing a field of study requires us to think broadly and comparatively about the development of knowledge concerning migrants and minorities. The authors' contribution therefore reinforces an underlying purpose of this volume, namely, to expand coverage of Asians internationally as well as to stimulate critical thinking in international scholarship about Asians. Another conclusion they offer is to highlight the link between group-orientated scholarship and the study of wider structures of power and social disadvantage, and this is a theme picked up among several others whose work is featured in this volume.

#### Talent, Resources, and Identity

Migrants globally are seeking to improve their material lives and prospects, and Asian migrants and settled communities in the English-speaking West are examples of this immigrant story. South Asian countries have produced very large waves of settlers to the West over the past five decades, and the result is that their presence is a significant part of the ethnic and cultural change that has taken place in countries such as the United Kingdom. In this particular case, the twist of postwar decolonization has been pivotal in accounting for the United Kingdom as a destination of disproportionate appeal; this factor also accounts for former British colonies as favored sources of labor in the period of economic reconstruction after 1945. These South Asians brought few resources with them other than their basic labor.

Luthra and Platt's article drills into a subgroup—British Pakistanis—who have been the subject of considerable empirical study. That article describes a largely human capital-poor group that stemmed from a rural, agrarian background, steeped in deep-seated conservative cultural and religious traditions. By the standards of other postwar settlers, Pakistanis have been ill-equipped to the challenge of economic integration as the nature of the country's postwar economy shifted to a postindustrial future.

Throughout, the role of immigration policy was largely neutral in the way in which it affected selectivity in the choice of migrants to the United Kingdom.

The authors' article returns to test whether the prevailing picture of socioeconomic disadvantage among British Pakistanis remains accurate. In doing so, they have to allow for one of the main changes in U.K. immigration in recent years that has delivered a strong shift to greater selectivity. Newer Pakistani cohorts are unlike earlier ones. The former is skewed to those with high levels of education and skills, and there is an absence of a first-generation effect that has produced low levels of economic activity, language competency, and labor market participation among earlier cohorts (especially women). Beyond economic integration, their findings also report high levels of identification with Britain among both older and newer cohorts, alongside high levels of home country and religious identification. The authors are especially struck by the evidence of complementary British and Pakistani identity. They also note that the better educated and higher economic status of recent cohorts appears to align with cosmopolitanism—a consequence of seemingly weaker attachment to/feeling of belonging in Britain and fewer options to settle in comparison with earlier Pakistanis.

This article ultimately points to the importance of disaggregating single national groups. Analysis that lumps single groups as one is in danger of missing key internal variations and nuances. In this case, to be a young Pakistani in the United Kingdom obscures much: The second-generation offspring of past unskilled labor migrants collides with recent young Pakistanis who have entered the United Kingdom as ambitious students or with skills and know-how that are highly prized. The authors have carefully differentiated Pakistanis across economic, social, and cultural lines and sought to identify important discontinuities that have remained buried.

The upshot is that while the British Asian experience offers many familiar generalizations about skills and success, and their absence, it also contains contrasts at the level of national groups. By updating the familiar we can see where this begins to break down and point to where disadvantage is most concentrated. There is a wider message: “[T]he issue of increasing intragroup heterogeneity has already been flagged for researching Mexican-origin individuals in the United States and for immigrants residing in ‘superdiverse’

European capitals (46).” This is a key conclusion that has a bearing on studying Asians across Western democracies.

The resource article by Ho (concerning selective Asian immigration to the United Kingdom and Canada) echoes rather similar points. His overarching message is that there have been different epochs in Asian migration to North America over the past half century. The article argues that the stereotype of overachievement has been etched onto the popular portrayal of Asians in a way that masks internal differences in socioeconomic progress. Much of this unevenness is linked to the United States’ and Canada’s conscious decision to open up to skilled and aspirant non-Europeans in the 1960s, ending a long period that had aggressively shunned Asians in particular. Thereafter, the United States favored family ties over skills in setting the new regime whereas Canada adopted the reverse policy.

Ho’s focus is on the pitfalls of comparison, thus illuminating a central theme that runs through a great deal of migration research. He notes that two largely similar countries can and have followed different trajectories, not just in the policies for recruitment and integration of Asian immigrants but also in how particular choices have been made in the categorization and understanding of groups. There have been further twists and refinements in each country in the decades since, and these have shaped temporary worker, family reunification, and human programs (with the Ugandan Asian influx to Canada in 1972 and the Vietnamese Asians refugee settlement in the United States in the late 1970s diversifying the ethnic and socioeconomic profile of Asians). Ultimately, Ho concludes, the forces driving this diversification of once-homogeneous groups has to be considered in its totality. In particular, the pressure points caused by a lack of shared experience of social and economic exclusion are beginning to show through. The political alliances that are built of common experience and outlook are now coming under strain, and with this there is declining meaning to pan-Asian identity. The author regrets the emphasis now placed on human capital-richness in shaping contemporary immigration from Asian sources precisely because of the greater homogeneity based on “Asian American whiz kids” to which this leads.

The resource article by Kurien concerns itself with the case of Indian migration to the West Coast of the United States and Canada. The article is therefore typical of many of the challenges

of cross-national and cross-group comparison. Kurien particularly notes important compositional changes in Indian migration over twenty-five years starting in the early 1990s, and then incorporates these factors into a larger account that looks at the influence of policy (immigration visa regimes), economics (the rise of Silicon Valley), and social networks (Indians', delineated by religious-cultural identities, efforts to build a cooperative model of settlement that delivered gains to the group as a whole).

It is a fascinating story of the interaction between people and places that provides a rich texture to our understanding of how selective migration works in practice. The message here is that selectivity in the migration pool is crucial and can operate independently of any selectivity intentions or effects of immigration policy. Furthermore, the swirl of factors and circumstances that shape integration outcomes are also bound up in the story of how certain people gain traction in certain places at certain times. Who integrates, and who does not, can be traced back to how opportunity structures crystallize and are navigated by migrants, alongside the articulation of immigration and settlement narratives by groups, is central.

There are two senses in which these narratives matter greatly. The first is the prominence of cultural stereotypes in perceptions about group success. Asians at large and Indians specifically are prominent examples of groups that are widely described as having "made it" in America. Californian and British Columbian Indian success is a key chapter in this story. The importance attached to group culture is challenged through Kurien's article by showing that various external factors and processes contributed to their experience. The task for social scientists and social historians describes the proverbial "sweet spot" and explains how group- and nongroup-specific characteristics interact to produce particular outcomes.

The second aspect of the narrative is related and concerns the negative portrayal of successful groups. The author's article touches on this when she notes the role of anti-immigrant and anti-Asian sentiment in West Coast politics over more than a century. The period between the late nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries is the focus of Kurien's work when the role of Indian politics (namely overseas support for Indian Independence) was at its peak. Decades later, Asians continue to run into public criticisms of their success, decrying their overachievement and alleged crowding-out



effects in education, business, and high-reward professions. This is accompanied by warnings that their cultures remain at odds with American values. Steve Bannon's thoughts on the subject—focusing on Asian CEOs in Silicon Valley—is just the latest installment that prompts the question of whether the advancement made by Asians has been bittersweet. They face criticism both for having played by the rules of the American Dream and for playing by some other, unspecified rules. The scholarship featured in this volume shows this common pattern across several countries, and highlights the need to think about successful integration in a way that goes beyond socioeconomic progress.

### Political Integration Special Cases

There are many reasons why a study of Asians in one of the four countries featured in this volume may lead to a special case. This might be because of the unique circumstances or features of certain Asian groups or the uniqueness of a particular policy. In the case of the research article by Kwok and Pietsch, a detailed analysis is presented of the long-term political integration of Asian Australian visible minorities. Their stark characterization is that such integration is absent, and this is based on the outcomes of descriptive political representation for Asians—these groups appear to lag far behind what is increasingly a norm of Asian political advancement in similar countries.

The question is why, and the authors note that there has been a significant expansion of this population in Australia (more than a quarter of the migrant and ethnic minority population and more than a tenth of the country's population). Alongside demography, Asians have also progressed substantially in terms of language, education, and employment, thus reinforcing the resources that are often linked with effective political participation and representation. The authors are mindful that their research points to the continuing influence of discrimination against visible minorities generally and Asians in particular (the latter were thirty times more likely to report discrimination than white, British-origin Australians in 2016).

The country has since the early to mid-1970s been in a hurry to turn its back on its own white Australia immigration legacy. The Australian ethnic character has been massively transformed as a result, with groups of Chinese and Indians standing out numerically among a whole range of Asian settled populations. Not sur-

prisingly, a small handful of parliamentary seats now have significant Asian voter clusters, most notably in the suburbs of Sydney and Melbourne.

But this research contains a key finding that can be generalized to all the four countries featured in this volume—namely the long-term alignment of visible minority voters with parties of the left or center-left. It has been the Australian Labor Party that has enjoyed the benefits of this alignment for many years (as has the United Kingdom’s Labour Party, the Canadian Liberal Party, and the U.S. Democratic Party). In all these cases, there is evidence of this alignment waning, and the reasons are partly related to the upward social mobility of second-generation minorities and partly to the fruits of more active engagement by parties of the right and center-right.

Kwok and Pietsch conclude that the group resources model of political integration fails to explain adequately the poor progress of Asian Australians. Instead, the emphasis is placed on political institutions and on political parties in particular: “[P]olitical parties are more likely to recruit candidates that are ethnically more homogenous than the general population.... In recruiting candidates with electoral appeal, political parties also strategically consider public attitudes toward minority groups,” they report (123). And in Australia, the bigger story is that of immense factionalism within parties, and there is evidence to suggest that Asian Australian politicians have become casualties in party in-fighting. The result is that Asians’ political longevity has suffered as they have struggled to gain and retain safe seats. The authors underline their conclusions with the argument that the reputational costs of a lack of ethnic diversity have not carried much weight in Australia, somewhat in contrast to how these debates have shifted in the United Kingdom and Canada. Together, these factors account for Australia’s outlier status in the political integration of ethnic minorities among these four countries.

### Social Science Inquiry

This volume adds to the comparative literature on Asian minorities in advanced industrial democracies. These minorities increasingly form part of a general picture of Asian advancement although, as these articles show, there are many exceptions to this and the explanations are often fairly specific.

Part of the purpose of this volume is to address how social researchers have responded to the type and scale of demographic change in these countries. The research, resource, and practitioner articles presented here look at important aspects of social change, drawing lines from time to time that connect these cases. Social research also has to keep pace with these distinctive features of ethnic change and whether (or how far) existing frames of analysis adequately explain the patterns that we see. This is a constant challenge for social researchers and has implications for how studies of Asians and Asian migration influence established academic disciplines and inform new ones. We hope that the articles make for interesting and valuable contributions to that end.

Finally, we would like to remember Don T. Nakanishi, our colleague and friend, and a pioneer in Asian American studies. Don passed away on May 23, 2016. He was a member of the original editorial team. His work inspired comparative study of Asians across countries. He would be pleased to see the impressive flourishing of study of Asians in different continents and the publication of this edited volume.

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