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Title

Asian Americans Rise Up: The Response to the Pew Report on The Rise of Asian Americans

Permalink

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Journal

AAPI Nexus: Policy, Practice and Community, 13(1-2)

ISSN

1545-0317

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Publication Date

2015

DOI

10.17953/1545-0317.13.1.321

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Practitioner's Essay

Asian Americans Rise Up

The Response to the Pew Report on *The Rise of Asian Americans*

Paul Y. Watanabe

Abstract

In 2012, the Pew Research Center issued a much-anticipated report: *The Rise of Asian Americans*. Census data and an original survey of Asian Americans were analyzed focusing on what Pew described as “milestones of economic success and social assimilation” (Pew Research Center, 2012b, 1). The mainstream media, taking their cues from Pew, generally accepted uncritically the portrait of success and assimilation—what a Pew executive vice president dubbed as the “good news” about Asian Americans. In contrast, with remarkable speed and unity, diverse sectors of the Asian American community—academics, activists, journalists, organizations, politicians, and so forth—rose up to an unprecedented extent to criticize aspects of the Pew report. Their objections centered to a modest degree on the substance and methodology of the report. The bulk of the criticism was on Pew’s framing of the data. In presenting the data, Pew employed a tiresome and discredited model minority characterization accompanied by a troubling comparison of immigrants from Asia with Latino immigrants. In effect, the former were identified as “good” immigrants and the later as “bad.” The Asian American response, however, was not limited to protest alone. In a constructive manner, several Asian Americans coupled their complaints with constructive ideas about improving the collection, analysis, and dissemination of much-needed data and research about Asian Americans. Included in these recommendations were calls for Asian Americans to be included in serious and meaningful ways in the research process from beginning to end.

Introduction

Productive efforts to address the status of Asian Americans on a host of critical economic dimensions, including income inequality, finan-

cial security, and wealth, should be informed by reliable data presented objectively. Unfortunately, dominant depictions of Asian Americans have often been simplistic and overly generalized, hiding the complexity and diversity that exists among Asian Americans. The persistence of the “model minority” frame disrupts efforts to address the real economic and social challenges confronting sectors of Asian America.

With this context as a backdrop, the Pew Research Center, the well-known, Washington, DC–based, think tank, released the 2012 report *The Rise of Asian Americans* (Pew Research Center, 2012b). The first paragraphs of the much-anticipated report offered clear indications of what was to come in the remaining 214 pages:

Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the United States. They are more satisfied than the general public with their lives, finances and the direction of the country, and they place more value than other Americans do on marriage, parenthood, hard work and career success. . . .

A century ago, most Asian Americans were low-skilled, low-wage laborers crowded into ethnic enclaves and targets of official discrimination. Today they are the most likely of any major racial or ethnic group in America to live in mixed neighborhoods and to marry across racial lines. When newly minted medical school graduate Priscilla Chan married Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg last month, she joined the 37% of all recent Asian-American brides who wed a non-Asian groom.

These milestones of economic success and social assimilation have come to a group that is still majority immigrant (Pew Research Center, 2012b, 1).

Almost immediately, the mainstream press, taking their cues from the Pew Research Center’s press release, repeated the “milestones of economic success and social assimilation” and added their own embellishments. “Asian-Americans More Satisfied with Life, Pew Report Finds” was the title of an article posted on msnbc.com (Eng, 2012). *Catholic Business Journal* titled its piece, “The Great American Success Story—the Rise of Asian Americans” (Munroe, 2013). A *Wall Street Journal* headline read, “America’s New Tiger Immigrants, Asians Have Arrived in Record Numbers in Recent Years and Are Transforming the Terms of the Debate” (Mead, 2012).

The “debate” referred to in the headline was a central focus of the Pew report. The debate is over immigration or what the Pew authors dubbed “this great American drama.”

Immigration is the engine that makes and remakes America. It is also a riveting personal and societal drama, one that unfolds in a complex interplay of social, economic, religious, political and cultural transformations—among the immigrants and their descendants, and within the nation as a whole.

At the end of the first decade of the 21st century, Asians have become the largest stream of new immigrants to the U.S.—and, thus, the latest leading actors in this great American drama. The fact that they are coming at a time when a rising Asia is flexing its economic and political muscles on the international stage only adds to the richness of their unique American journey (Pew Research Center, 2012b, preface).

More specifically, the “terms of the debate” referred to by the *Wall Street Journal* and emphasized throughout the Pew report were comparisons with Hispanic immigrants. The title of the Pew press release began, “Asians Overtake Hispanics . . .” and, in that approximately 250-word release, immigrants from Asia were compared directly with Hispanic immigrants on four measures (Pew Research Center, 2012a). Comparisons with immigrants that could be identified as non-Hispanic were not mentioned in the release.

While the responses in the mainstream press were generally compatible with the Pew report’s view and framing, the responses from many Asian Americans were decidedly more critical. Those responses were also remarkably swift and arose from an unusually broad range of sectors—academia, news and social media, politics, activists, advocacy and service organizations, and so forth. The Asian American Pacific Islander Policy Research Consortium (AAPIPRC), for example, in a statement on the report, asserted, “While there are merits to the Pew report, the selection of what information to present and highlight is highly biased, and the framing and interpretation of the analysis are incomplete and implicitly misleading and damaging for Asian American communities” (Asian American Pacific Islander Policy Research Consortium, 2012). “We find that the study’s tone, message and framing of its findings,” two New York City Asian Pacific American organizations stated, “are gravely misleading about the real challenges that Asian Pacific American communities face” (Coalition for Asian American Children and Families and the MinKwon Center for Community Action, 2012).

This article analyzes the divide between Pew’s characterization of its report as “a comprehensive portrait of Asian Americans” (Pew Research Center, 2012b, preface) and the claims of its detractors that it was “incomplete” and “misleading.” The analysis, therefore, focuses on

both the report and on the responses. The Pew authors clearly felt that they were simply addressing the rise of Asian Americans. Instead many Asian Americans rose up to criticize several components of the report. Chronicling those responses offers some insights into long-standing issues that many Asian Americans have had with the content and quality of information about them including economic data and with the production of that data and information. As part of those responses, this article identifies some of the ideas suggested to improve data quality and its utility, generation, and analysis.

The Report

The press release from the Pew Research Center accompanying the debut of *The Rise of Asian Americans* provided a straightforward description of the document:

The report is based on analysis of U.S. census and economic data, and on a new Pew Research survey . . . in English and seven Asian languages, among a nationally representative sample of 3,511 Asian Americans. The survey also includes representative samples of the six largest Asian-American country of origin groups—Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean, Filipino and Vietnamese—which comprise more than 80% of all Asian Americans (Pew Research Center, 2012b).

Later in the face of what was perceived by leaders at the Pew Research Center to be unwarranted criticism of aspects of the report, Paul Taylor, Pew's executive vice president, offered a strong statement asserting the importance of the report and the Pew Research Center's unshakeable endorsement of its own work:

We believe this is the most comprehensive, rigorous and representative survey of Asian Americans ever undertaken by a non-fully governmental research organization. . . . With apologies to Shakespeare and Sophocles, and with tongue slightly in cheek, I'm tempted to observe that you seem hell bent on killing the messenger who's brought the good news! That's a joke, but it raises a few serious points. The first is that we *are* messengers. This report isn't our opinion or our spin. It is our presentation of empirical data based on surveys—one taken by us, others by the U.S. government. And the source of that data is Asian Americans themselves. . . . We believe we have presented a faithful, complex and nuanced rendition of their story—the story of a high-achieving and highly heterogeneous population group. We stand by every number and word in the report (Taylor, 2012).

Chapter 1 of the report, "Portrait of Asian Americans," provided a demographic analysis of Asian Americans drawn chiefly from U.S. Census and other government sources. Data on the six largest Asian American ethnic groups were also included. Additionally, on some measures, comparisons with whites, Hispanics, and blacks were reported. Information on history, number, race and nativity, educational attainment, employment, income, wealth and poverty, family structure, and region of residence was offered. The data as far as it went was well presented and valuable. In many ways and not surprisingly, the quantitative data contained in this report closely paralleled data reported earlier or coincides with more recent numbers reported in other documents, including some from Asian American sources (Ahmad and Weller, 2014; Asian Americans Advancing Justice, 2013; Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center, 2011; and Lai and Arguelles, 2003).

The remaining chapters of the report presented and commented upon the results of a national survey of Asian Americans conducted by the Pew Research Center from January through March 2012. A total of 3,511 interviews were conducted including 728 Chinese Americans, 504 Filipino Americans, 580 Indian Americans, 515 Japanese Americans, 504 Korean Americans, 504 Vietnamese Americans, and 176 other Asian Americans. The survey was conducted in English, Cantonese, Hindi, Japanese, Korean, Mandarin, Tagalog, and Vietnamese.

Data from the survey were discussed in chapters labeled "Life in America," "Intergroup Relations," "Immigration and Transnational Ties," "Family and Personal Values," and "Political and Civic Life." The data presented in these chapters was dense, wide-ranging, and impossible to summarize in a short space.

Finally, appendices were included that contained information on the survey methodology, a copy of the survey questionnaire, and short biographies of external, mainly Asian American, advisers.

In general the survey was conducted professionally, ably, and carefully. This was an especially important achievement given the fact that while surveys conducted in language, especially for Asian languages, are appropriate, they can be complicated and expensive to develop and administer. Furthermore the range of attitudes and behaviors covered in the survey was impressive. The disaggregated responses as far as they go were welcome and add to a complex portrait of Asian Americans attitudes and experiences.

Indeed, the Pew's framing of the report for many observers, including Asian Americans, had the lamentable effect of serving as a dis-

traction. The detailed, valuable, and complex insights that constituted the substantive heart of the Pew report were regrettably overshadowed by Pew's own failure to appreciate and communicate the richness, complexities, originality, and nuances of their own findings. Thus, on the face of it, the Pew report did not seem a likely candidate for scorn from any sector. With so much to admire in the Pew report, who then in the Asian American community found it objectionable? Why did so many in the Asian American community refuse to embrace the "good news" that Pew's Taylor referred to?

The Response

Within a few days and weeks after its unveiling, *The Rise of Asian Americans* generated loud and passionate outcries from several Asian American sectors. Although broad and diverse, the detractors were remarkably united in what they found objectionable. The Asian American responses were virtually unprecedented in their scope and speed at least in response to a study from a nationally recognized think tank.

The lineup of some of the organizations that came forward to comment publically on the report included:

Asian American community-based and nonprofit organizations:

- Asian American Federation
- Asian and Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund
- Coalition for Asian American Children and Families
- Japanese American Citizens League
- Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics
- MinKwon Center for Community Action
- National Council of Asian Pacific Americans
- Organization of Chinese Americans

Academic and research organizations:

- Asian American Pacific Islander Policy Research Consortium
- Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research

Elected officials:

- Congressional Asian Pacific American Caucus

Additionally, the Pew report was discussed in countless e-mail communications, blogs, and other venues by activists, journalists, aca-

demics, service providers, organizational representatives, and others. Frank Wu, for instance, chancellor and dean of the Hastings College of the Law, University of California, concluded his op-ed piece in the *New York Times* that marked the twentieth anniversary of Vincent Chin's slaying by commenting upon the Pew report. Wu (2012) noted that when the Pew study was released "Asian-American advocates for social justice winced. . . . When it comes to race, nuance matters."

In addition, some responses that would have been especially instructive for various reasons did not materialize formally. For example, some members of the Asian Pacific American Caucus of the American Political Science Association (APSA) were angling to have the caucus discuss and respond to the Pew report at the APSA Annual Meeting. In early September 2012 a severe storm warning was issued for New Orleans, the site of the meeting, which led to its cancellation.

The Criticism

Although most of the criticism leveled by Asian Americans was not about the specific substance of findings and data in the Pew report, critics did point out how the document was deceptive in its calculation and selection of some measures to highlight.¹ For example, in its response to the Pew report, the AAPIPRC leadership stated:

[W]e are deeply troubled by the emphasis that leaves the reader with a one-sided picture. A primary example revolves around the claim that "Asian Americans are the highest-income," an assertion that is the lead line in the press release and rests on median household income. Pew is accurate in reporting the most recently available numbers from the American Community Survey (\$66,000 for Asian Americans and \$54,000 for non-Hispanic whites), but fails to fully adjust for two critical factors: one, Asian Americans tend to have larger households, and two, they are heavily concentrated in high-cost metropolitan areas (Asian American Pacific Islander Policy Research Consortium, 2012).

The complaints about specific measures and data, for the most part, were relatively few in number compared to the torrent of criticism about the framing of the data. This framing of the report and its findings more than the numbers was found to be most problematic. Despite Paul Taylor's claim that "this report isn't our opinion or our spin," Pew representatives from members of the communications staff to researchers to senior officials to members of the governing board consistently spun the data, offered their interpretations, and were not content to let

the numbers, as one Pew spokesperson claimed, “speak for themselves” (quoted in Mak, 2012).

The words used to sell, explain, and defend the Pew report, therefore, more than the report alone, sparked criticism. In the face of this criticism, as Taylor boasted, Pew personnel stood by every word. In contrast, the Organization of Chinese Americans complained bluntly that, “*The Rise of Asian Americans* . . . perpetuates misleading stereotypes of APAs . . . the framing of the contextual data in the report is troublesome” (Organization of Chinese Americans, 2012).

The Monolithic “Model Minority”

The foremost criticism leveled at the Pew report was its apparent embrace of the tired and too familiar model minority frame. The Pew narrative shouted about how Asian Americans were the “fastest,” “highest,” “best,” and so forth, racial group in the United States on numerous dimensions. Any shortcomings, however, were whispered.

Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (2012) noted, “While their research on the community paints a rosy picture, the Asian American community is not monolithic . . . and many segments of the population . . . face a significantly more difficult climb.” In a similar vein, the Japanese American Citizens League (2012) wrote, “it [the report] sweeps Asian Americans in to one broad group and paints our community as exceptionally successful without challenges. This study perpetuates false stereotypes and the model minority.” In its statement sent to the Pew Research Center, the AAPIPRC (2012) spelled out the dominant critical perspective:

While there are merits to the Pew report, the selection of what information to present and highlight is highly biased, and the framing and interpretation of the analysis are incomplete and implicitly misleading and damaging for Asian American communities. We believe it is important to acknowledge the many accomplishments made by Asian Americans, but not at the expense of a fuller understanding of the diverse, complex and nuanced reality. The publication presents overly generalized descriptive and aggregate statistics, fails to critically explain the causes and limitations of observed outcomes, and falls short of examining tremendous and critical differences among Asian ethnic groups. We echo the comments by many Asian American scholars, advocates and lawmakers who point out how the study could lead policymakers, the media and the public to draw conclusions that reflect inaccurate stereotypes about Asian Americans being only a community with high levels of achievement and few challenges. There are many educational, economic, and health dispari-

ties, among others, facing our diverse communities. The selection of included populations leaves out some of the most distressed groups; consequently, the studied subjects are not representative.

“Good” Immigrants and “Bad” Immigrants

With respect to its potentially damaging impact on intergroup relations, especially between Latino and Asian American communities, the incessant comparisons between the two groups were regarded as highly problematic. In these comparisons, Hispanic immigrants were almost invariably presented as the “bad” immigrants and immigrants from Asia as the “good,” more desirable immigrants. In this regard, several commentators read the Pew report as a vehicle to use Asian immigrants to discipline and scold Latino immigrants. The Pew Research Center’s press release repeatedly framed the report along these lines, which elicited this complaint from Karthick Ramakrishnan (2012) writing in *Hyphen Magazine*: “What made this press release particularly troubling . . . were the invidious comparisons it seemed to invite, of a racial group that is overtaking Hispanics and other Americans in a metaphorical race for national supremacy.” The AAPIPRC observed, “While the report sheds light on significant U.S. immigration trends and policies as they relate to Asians, it does so in a way that can adversely affect Asian-Latino relations. . . . The ‘model minority’ framing can have a damaging impact on intergroup collaborations” (ibid.).

For its part, the Pew leadership did not accept the criticism. “Comparisons between them [Asian Americans and Hispanics] are inevitable, illuminating and newsworthy—especially since, as our report was the first to document, Asians recently surpassed Hispanics as the largest group of newly arrived immigrants. . . . We believe our report has helped to broaden, enlighten and update the national conversation about immigration policy” (Taylor, 2012).

While the Pew report’s tale of two immigrant groups was a flop among Asian Americans, important and influential media outlets embraced the Pew view. Walter Russell Mead’s (2012) article in the *Wall Street Journal* propagated the message:

The conventional picture is of an unstoppable wave of unskilled, mostly Spanish-speaking workers—many illegal—coming across the Mexican border. People who see immigration this way fear that, instead of America assimilating the immigrants, the immigrants will assimilate us. But this picture is both out of date and factually wrong. A report released this month by the Pew Research Center

shows just how much the face of immigration has changed in the past few years. . . . Arguably, in America's long history of immigration, the group that the new immigrants resemble most is the original cohort of Puritans who settled New England.

The Mead exercise in triangulation was to say the least inventive: Asian Americans and the Puritans aligned in opposition to "Spanish-speaking" immigrants.

The Pew leadership persisted in perpetuating the view that Asian Americans were markedly different from other immigrants. As Paul Taylor stated, "These aren't the tired, poor, huddled masses of Emma Lazarus's famous inscription on the Statue of Liberty. They are the highly skilled workforce of the 21st century" (quoted in Yen, 2012). The fact is that, by far, most Asian American immigrants arrive under family sponsored, immediate relatives of U.S. citizens, refugee, and asylee categories rather than skill or employment-based categories (Asian Pacific American Legal Center and Asian American Justice Center, 2011). While assuredly there are many Asian Americans who have come to the United States through coveted H1B visas, the tenfold increase in the size of the Asian American community in the last fifty years has been due in large part to immigrants who fit Lazarus's depiction of poor, huddled masses.

Lessons and Recommendations

When faced with criticism from Asian American sources, the Pew leadership responded by stating that "we vetted our questionnaire and a draft of our report with an advisory panel of 15 Asian American scholars. No one raised concerns about these findings" (Taylor, 2012). One of the members of that advisory body, Professor Karthick Ramakrishnan (2012), offered a decidedly different view of its role:

As one of 15 advisors to the project, I felt blindsided. . . . Words failed me as I read it for the first time, as we had not gotten a chance to review it. The dominant narrative in the release reinforced the frame of Asians as a model minority, stereotypes that the advisors had strongly objected to in the only meeting of the group. . . . What we contested in private then, and what others are challenging in public now, is a monolithic frame that often renders invisible the struggles of many who fall under the Asian American label.

The lesson here is that, while the establishment of Asian American advisory bodies is desirable, guidelines should be developed and mutually understood for formal consultation and advisory roles. Minimally these guidelines should contain assurances that on studies and research

projects the advisors should be included throughout the entirety of the project from conceptualization to conduct to analysis to dissemination. In short, there should be involvement from takeoff to landing.

An improvement upon relying primarily on advisory bodies would be to hire and utilize capable Asian American researchers. In a letter to the members of the Pew Research Center Governing Board, the leaders of the four entities that constitute the AAPIPRC called upon Pew to “hire senior Asian American researchers with deep knowledge of the community.” Additional “examples of actions that the Pew Research Center could take to improve its work with respect to research on Asian Americans” were for Pew to “ensure a more thorough peer review process on major reports” and to “pay more careful attention to framing” (Moy et al., 2012).

The experience with the Pew report strengthened the long-held belief of UCLA Professor Paul Ong and others that a national Asian American policy research think tank needs to be developed. While the creation of AAPIPRC along with other initiatives might be regarded as a step in the direction of facilitating policy-oriented research and data gathering on and by Asian Americans, the Pew episode further emphasized the need for a strong, nationally recognized entity along the lines, for example, of the Joint Center for Political and Economic Studies. While it is probably fair to conclude that the Asian American critics had little impact on moving the Pew Research Center in their desired direction, the controversy surrounding the Pew report did spark action from within the Asian American community. In April 2013, for example, AAPIPRC organized a conference, “Grounding the AAPI Policy Voice through Survey,” in Seattle for Asian American researchers that explicitly was aimed at improving data collection on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders. Five months after the release of the Pew report an impressive convening took place in Baltimore. Organized by the Applied Research Center (its name has been changed to Race Forward) and the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, a diverse group of activists, representatives of nonprofit and community-based organizations, and academics from around the United States gathered “to have a conversation around research and data collection that will serve the diverse experiences and concerns facing Asian Pacific Americans” (Applied Research Center and National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, 2012). One of the desired outcomes of the Baltimore meeting was to identify “best practices for conducting and framing research with and on our communities” (ibid.). Rather than wait for somebody else to discover or

dictate these best practices, an incredibly dedicated working group was formed to define and disseminate those practices. After several months of hard work and utilizing a productive collaborative approach, a document, *Best Practices: Researching Asian Americans, Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders*, was launched in July 2013 (Applied Research Center and National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, 2013).

The purposes identified by the authors of the best practices document directly addressed some of the issues raised in the Pew report experience.

To prevent the dissemination of data and research that oversimplifies the ethnically and socioeconomically diverse AA & NHPI community and perpetuates the “model minority” myth;

To ensure that researchers use detailed data that accurately reflects the difference between the diverse AA & NHPI populations;

To encourage researchers to ground their work in the research contributions of community-based organizations, and whenever possible, engage in a Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) model (Applied Research Center and National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, 2013).

The document includes sections on “101 fundamentals,” “who are Asian Americans (AAs) and Native Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (NHPIs)?”, “research needs, methodology, common pitfalls,” and “five basic tips for conducting AA and NHPI research responsibly.”

Conclusion

This article commenced with a discussion of the importance of accurate and nuanced data presentations when applied to Asian Americans. First in describing the economic status of diverse sectors of Asian America and then formulating appropriate responses complexities must be acknowledged and overly generalized assertions and overwrought comparisons with other racial and ethnic groups avoided. The controversies surrounding the introduction of the Pew report clearly exposed the enormous stake that Asian Americans as individuals and organizations have in information and analysis produced about them including their economic status. This is not a position of strength but of vulnerability. In the long run, therefore, the most productive outcomes of the Asian American responses to the Pew document are that so many rose up at all to protest and to do more. Through documents such as that produced by Applied Research Center and National Council of

Asian Pacific Americans, national and local convenings, and in suggesting recommendations and a path ahead, many Asian Americans moved beyond criticism to action.

Donald Kimelman, board chair of the Pew Research Center, ended his letter to the heads of AAPIPRC by stating, “In the end we believe strongly that this research—and the coverage and commentary it has provoked—have increased understanding of a growing population that is an ever-more-important part of the American mosaic” (Kimelman, 2012). While not likely in the way that Kimelman implied, there is a strong possibility ironically that, through the efforts of many Asian Americans who rose up in response to the Pew study, “in the end” general understanding of Asian Americans may indeed be “increased” and improved. That would be a positive and welcome legacy of the turbulent Pew report experience.

Note

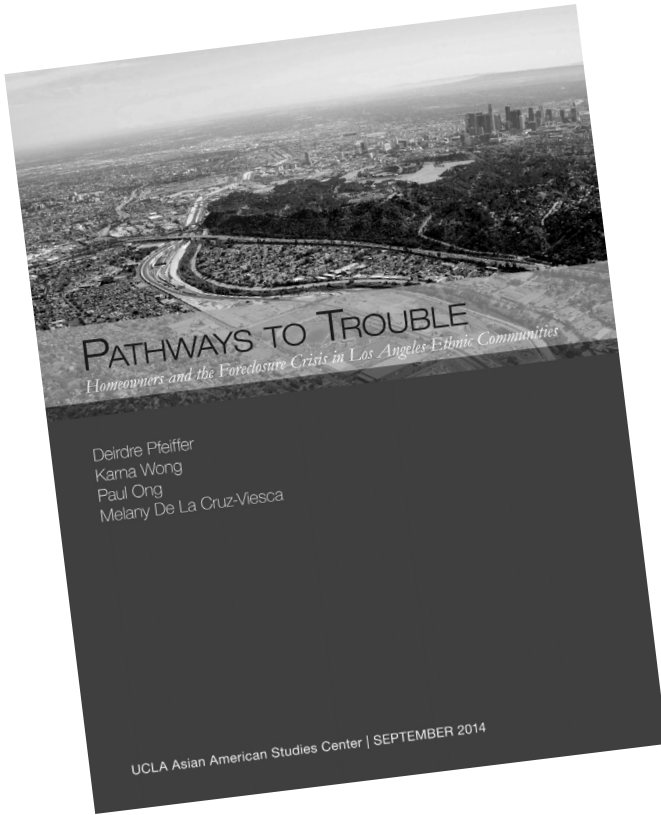
An example of an inappropriate conclusion based on an inconsistent measure can be found in the Pew report’s analysis of Asian Americans’ experience with discrimination. In the report the authors claim that: “The pattern of results across these measures—both perceptions of and personal experience with discrimination—suggests that discrimination is not a major concern among Asian Americans. . . . Pew Research surveys with other racial and ethnic minorities show greater concerns about group discrimination” (Pew Research Center, 2012b). The question asked of Asian Americans in the Pew survey was: “In the past twelve months, have you personally experienced discrimination or been treated unfairly because you are Asian American, or not?” The data for comparison purposes from Hispanics was based on a 2010 Pew Hispanic Center survey that asked whether “they, a family member or a close friend experienced discrimination over the previous five years because of their ethnic background.” In several critical ways, the questions asked of Asian Americans and Hispanics are not comparable and, consequently, call in to question the conclusion arrived at by Pew.

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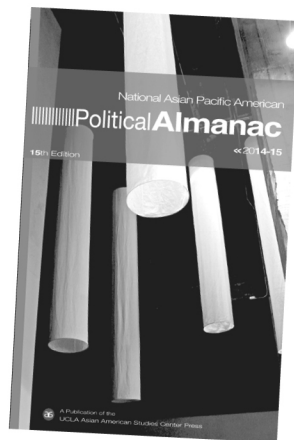
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by Don T. Nakanishi (UCLA) &
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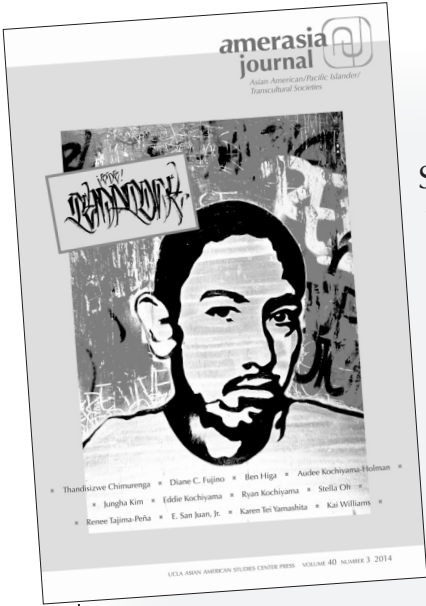
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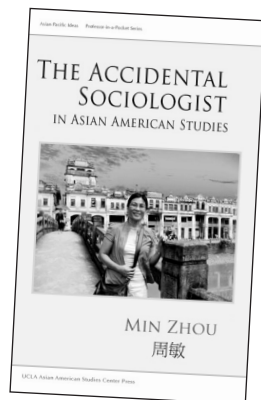
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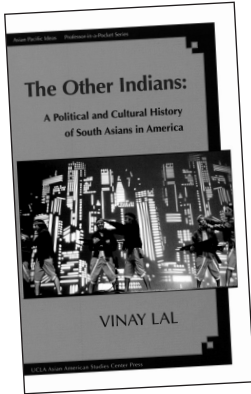
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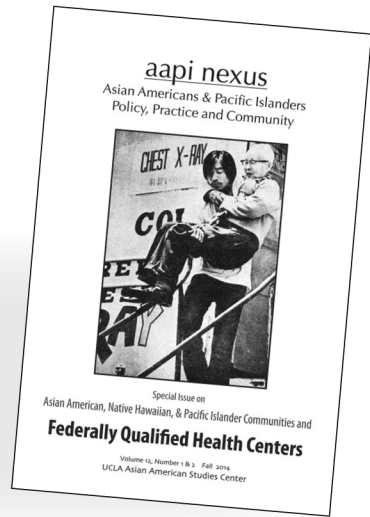
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