

Asian-American: A New Identity

Student sit-ins may signal a growing militancy

by Scott McConnell

This season's Columbia student protests — a sit-in at a dean's office, a two-week fast by demonstrators on College Walk and, finally, an invasion of the central university administration building — should set off alarm bells.

The purpose of the disruption was to compel Columbia to create an Ethnic Studies department for Latinos and — far more significantly — for Asian-Americans. (Similar demonstrations had been held earlier at Princeton.)

While it is easy to dismiss the events as yet another manifestation of the "spring is here, time to seize the administration building" syndrome, far weightier issues are at stake.

A lengthy article by Normitsu Onishi in *The New York Times* last week argued that the protests were one of several recent manifestations of a burgeoning new sense of *racial* identity among Asian Americans

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— a qualitatively new phenomenon, and one very much at odds with the patterns through which previous generations of both Asian and European immigrants adapted to life in the U.S.

What is new is certainly not that some members of the so

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called "model minority" put aside their calculators to storm a college administration building.

Twenty-four years ago, Columbia was host to a strident student strike and building seizure — the issue then was Richard Nixon's "re-escalation" of the Vietnam war. The leaders of that protest were a Chinese-American couple, committed to Maoism and the overthrow of capitalism and imperialism.

(To this day, I have a difficult time imagining that these two, whose every step and gesture conveyed asceticism and selfless dedication to the cause, would ever turn in their little red books for American Express

cards.)

What is without precedent, then, is not "activism" but the explicitly racial consciousness said to be driving it. Twenty years ago, the son or daughter of Asian immigrants might have felt torn between parental expectations of conformity to the style and habits of a traditional *national* culture — Chinese or Korean or Japanese — and assimilation into the wider American mainstream.

Now reports the Times, the "American" identity that an increasing number of second and third-generation Chinese and Koreans are adopting is a pan-Asian one, fermenting in student clubs organized on a racial basis.

On campus, these groups are inclined to demand not the opportunity to study the rich culture of China and Japan (which require the mastery of difficult languages) but chances to study an allegedly unique Asian experience in the United States.

The activist scholars who teach such programs often intend to create a generation of Asians who, as Onishi puts it, have "antagonistic attitudes towards white Americans" — and, where possible, to fuse this new pan-Asian current with blacks and Latinos into an anti-

white front.

It surely is too soon to say whether the Times is simply wrong — whether, in fact, Asians actually are following the same assimilationist patterns of other immigrants, characterized by a gradual loosening of ties to an ancestral homeland and the adoption of new American identity.

Weighing against the “racial identity” hypnosis is the fact that Asian-Americans intermarry with whites in substantial numbers, producing families that are at once faintly “multicultural” and mainstream American. Clearly, some rigorous sociological research is needed in order to determine the direction that Asian immigration actually is going.

But a few points can still be made now. It has long been true that the remarkable success of Asian immigrants — in small businesses that have revitalized urban areas, in technology and the sciences, in classical music — has been a strong argument of those who believe that massive, racially diverse immigration might actually be good for the United States.

There *are* some problems — the emergence of China-based organized crime is certainly worrying. But thus far the balance of Asian immigration has been unmistakably positive.

It is possible further to argue that the neo-Confucian culture of contemporary northeast Asia — its emphasis on family life and tendency towards modesty in individual comportment — complements American-style individualism

very well. Indeed, it could easily be maintained that the greater social discipline that seems to characterize most Asian societies is exactly what the U.S. needs to temper its own garish and libertine MTV culture.

Add the fact that Asian in general (unlike blacks and, so it is often claimed, Latinos) have no weighty historical grievances or scores to settle against the U.S. and one has a recipe for a successful immigration.

However, the unstated but necessary premise of this argument is that accelerating numbers of Asian immigrants will assimilate — that they will, after a generation or so, come to view themselves every bit as American mainstream as, say, Mario or Andrew Cuomo.

But what if this emphasis is false? If so, then the new emphasis on creating separatist Asian-American enclaves on campus sounds like a fire bell in

the night, warning of a very troubled future.

Instead of assimilation, what may be in store is what *Village Voice* writer Lawrence Chua stated in his review of *Alien Nation*, Peter Brimelow’s pause-in-immigration manifesto. Writes Chua of Brimelow: “His fear is justified. We will bury him.”

The bleak thought is that it can be no other: the present multiculturalist interlude is no more than a way-station along the route to a future of intensified communal competition and strife, in which the words “assimilation” and “mainstream” have lost all their meaning.

Give the U.S. another decade or so of high Third World immigration into a political culture in which every non-white group finds it rewarding to press its interests along explicitly racial lines.

See what the future holds. □

Views of Youth on Immigration

Recently, the Horatio Alger Association commissioned a study entitled “The Mood of American Youth,” which surveyed almost 1,000 students between age 13 and 17. Three questions related to immigration and population were:

1. “Our government should increase security along the Mexican border to keep illegal immigrants out of the country.” 54.7 percent strongly agree, and 83.5 percent of the total agree.
2. “Legal immigration to the United States should be reduced.” 37.7 percent strongly agree, and 67.3 percent of the total agree.
3. Overpopulation ranked as the fifth “most important current world problem.”

The study can be obtained through

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