



Balancing Two Worlds: Asian American College Students Tell Their Life Stories.
Andrew G. Garrod & Robert Kilkenny, eds. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007.
270 pp.

Reviewed by: Melissa Kwon and Mary E. Brenner

Balancing Two Worlds: Asian American College Students Tell Their Life Stories provides readers with nuanced and very personal portraits of Asian American college students' identity formation. Through the fourteen self-narrated life stories contained in this book, the reader gains an understanding of how each individual navigated the intersection of multiple identities, including race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, sexuality, and generation. The essays were created through weekly writing and individual meetings with Andrew Garrod throughout an academic term. Once a cohesive essay was written, Robert Kilkenny, who did not know the students, provided editorial suggestions. The students were Dartmouth undergraduates aged 18 to 22 at the time that the essays were written. Authors of the essays are ethnically Burmese, Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Malaysian, Pakistani, South Korean, and Vietnamese.

The book is divided thematically into five sections. The first theme, "Generating New Identities," consists of three essays that focus on students' exploration of their Asian American identity as they were negotiating their "Asian" and their "American" cultures. These struggles were centered on conflicts with their parents as they explored and created their own ethnic identity. The second theme is "Challenging the 'Model Minority' Label" and consists of three essays by students who were trying to find their place both socially and in romantic relationships within their college campus. These students tried to define their identities through their social networks and the people with whom they chose to associate. The third theme, entitled "Origins and Ethnicities," explores students' connecting with their Asian cultures as well as their conflicts with their parents about perceptions of marriage and arranged marriages. The fourth theme, "What Are You?," explores the identities of mixed-race Asian Americans, including one half-Asian, half-Caucasian student and one half-Asian, half-African American student. "Emerging Diversities," the fifth and last theme, discusses students' struggles with their emerging sexuality and sexual orientation.

Although the themes were delineated by the editors, based upon the introduction by Russell Leong, intersectionality of identities was salient throughout all 14 essays. Assimilation, acculturation, being American, being Asian, and generational conflict were struggles that each of writers described in their narratives. These struggles became most apparent in their social interactions with others, namely their parents, siblings, friends, and significant others. For example, some students purposefully surrounded themselves with Caucasian friends to prove that they were not the model minority or to distance themselves from their family's culture. These struggles over ethnic identity cannot be viewed in isolation, but rather as intersecting with other identities. For instance, the two



students who were dealing with their sexuality and coming out wrote about how their sexuality was negotiated in the context of their Asian culture as well as, for one of them, his parents' religion. Gender was also coupled with ethnic identity for these students, especially the females. The women authors often wrote that their parents had different expectations for them since they were female, particularly regarding romance and marriage. One student indicated that her mother advised her at the beginning of college to focus on finding a husband because "all of the good ones go fast." In contrast, a number of other students' parents expected them to have an arranged marriage, as they themselves had experienced.

Balancing Two Worlds is a cohesive compilation of college students' personal narratives of their complex experiences as Asian Americans and how they navigated their multiple, intersecting identities. The open and honest tone that each of the student authors utilized throughout their life stories is engaging and relatable for the reader. This book provides a perspective on identity formation by Asian Americans that can only be captured through personal stories. This is important to the field of education because it provides educators with insight into the difficult identity formation process that Asian American students undergo, even when they are academically successful, as were the students in this book. The collection of essays is also helpful for researchers who are interested in researching Asian American students by providing an understanding of the identity conflicts that Asian American students face, conflicts that are too often ignored because of the model minority stereotype.

One way that the book could have been improved is if the editors had tied together the individual essays at the end of each thematic section, in addition to the connections that Russell Leong provides in his introduction. The introduction also links the themes of the narratives to some of the other work on Asian American identity, although the essays are rich enough for much more analysis of this sort. In his afterword, Vernon Takeshita addresses the issue of what can be learned from young authors who are just entering adulthood and finding their place in society. He contextualizes these contemporary experiences into the historical context of the struggle for racial equality in America and the Asian American experience.

Despite the lack of deeper analysis of the themes that structure the book's organization, this collection is a valuable resource for understanding Asian American identity formation. This book is not only an important contribution to the topic of Asian American college students, it is helpful to anyone who is interested in understanding ethnic identity formation. The book is well written, easy to read, and informative in providing insight into these young people's lives as college students and complex individuals defining themselves within contemporary society.

This review is cited and indexed in issue 39.4 of *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*.