

EUI Group Project

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Title: Asian Americans and Cultural Identity at the University of Illinois

About the Authors: Students from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign enrolled in Asian American Youth (AAS 346) during Fall 2009.

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Keywords: Asian American, identity, culture

Abstract: Our research consisted of determining how Asian American students at the University of Illinois identify themselves racially and culturally. We conducted observations of various Asian American student organizations, campus events, and individual interviews to gather data and information for our research. We found that Asian American students identify themselves differently according to their environment, their past experiences, and current experience here at the University. There is no specific way in which Asian American students identify themselves here at the University because it is constantly changing and evolving.

Initial Question: Which Asian ethnic group at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign is most/least assimilated to American culture, and how does the campus environment affect their

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racial identities?

Revised Question: How do Asian Americans of different ethnic groups at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign identify themselves? What factors do they use in forming their racial and cultural identities?

Plan: To investigate our research question, we will conduct numerous interviews with various members of the student body on campus, measure quantitative data with surveys, and observe RSO activities and meetings. We also plan to analyze our data with previous research of assimilation and racial identity.

Data (observations):

Ryan Young

After contacting a number of Asian American Greeks, I was able to observe at a sorority house on campus. The house that I visited is part of the Panhellenic Council and is a predominantly white organization. During my observations, I was able to speak to an Asian American member of the sorority as well as a number of white members of the organization. During my observations at the house, I found out that the recruitment chair is a Japanese American. By looking at the composite photo hanging on the wall, similar to a class photo, of all the members active in the sorority, there are 10 Asian Americans and about 4 questionable (mixed race) Asian Americans. There are about 50 active members in total. During my observations, I gathered that members are required to live in the sorority house for at least a year and on average there are about 5-7 Asian Americans in each pledge class. While I was observing at the house, there were about 20 female members present. It was later in the evening and many

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were working on homework or socializing. There were two Asian American members present at the house and one was studying and the other was socializing with other white members of the sorority. The interactions between the Asian Americans and the other members of the sorority were conventional interactions and no interactions seemed out of the ordinary. During my observations, I also observed that the Greek system at the University of Illinois focuses on being inclusive, which hinders programs or events to be held exclusively for ethnic or race specific groups. This may explain the interactions and the notions of Asian American ethnicity and race in the Greek system.

Mara Sonn

For my observations, I attended “Global Village 2009” which was hosted by AIESEC, a youth organization that specializes in international student exchange and internship programs. There were booths set up all around the room featuring various countries from all over the world. Students chose to display their booths in different ways with different techniques to lure in interests from visitors. I thought this would be a good observational opportunity since I figured that students would put highlight their country’s best features, therefore showing me how these students chose to represent their culture.

I mainly just took notes on Asian countries and a similarity that I gathered on these countries was the pictures used to represent the culture. They all featured either maps or flags of the specific country. Also, landscape photos were also very prominent in the displays. Maybe this was to show how “exotic” or unique these places were in relation to other countries. There were also pictures of native peoples dressed in the traditional clothing styles of that specific region. Again,

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this may be due to the students wanting to display their country's distinctiveness. Some pictures that stood out were photos of a country's flower, dance styles, and jewelry pieces. I found it interesting that the Korean booth had a section of their poster dedicated to "the faces of Korea" which other booths did not feature. However, the faces that were on the poster featured Korean people who all looked pretty Americanized dressed in only European clothes and they all had the "double eyelids". All of the booths also had artifacts to represent their culture. Several booths had sculptures. Several had jewelry pieces and head pieces. Some even had shoes such as the Chinese booth, and the Vietnamese booth had clothing articles. The Pakistani booth had spices. A good majority of the Asian booths also had food. There were several items to choose sample from, from juice, snack mixes, and coconut sweets at the Pakistani booth to pine nut crackers at the Korean booth. Furthermore, I also noticed that some booths featured videos which included slideshows of pictures their countries, some had music videos, while others actual footage of the specific country.

There were also different groups that performed different dances. PSA performed an intricate dance with candles and cloths while dressed in ethnic clothing.

Overall, it seemed that the different countries tried to highlight their uniqueness and distinctiveness mainly through photographs of the native land, food, and clothing styles. Different dance styles and music were also featured heavily.

Sunny Choi

I attended two workshops at the Philippine Student Association's FACT Conference to conduct research. The first workshop dealt with the Tagalog language and the second was an

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artists' panel. I chose to perform observation at this conference as opposed to a PSA meeting because it could offer me more insight into Filipino American assimilation.

The language workshop did not necessarily try to teach Tagalog to the audience, but more-so use the language as a gateway into Filipino culture. This says a lot about Filipino youth assimilation; if they already knew the language, which most of them did not, a workshop about Tagalog would not be necessary. It suggests that a large portion of the Filipino youth group has accepted the American way of life and left their native heritage behind. On the other hand, there is a good chance that students who are less assimilated chose a different workshop for that time slot because they already had a sufficient understanding of Tagalog. Another indicator of assimilation was an activity where the room was to sing a Filipino version of "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," and they group leaders asked if anyone in the audience beatboxed. Beatboxing is a musical art form born from Hip Hop culture and urban spaces. The room sang the song to the beat of two beatboxers on stage. Hip Hop is a culture born from American cities; so the merging of that and Tagalog song suggests some sort of assimilation or willingness to assimilate among Filipino American youth.

Another sight I noticed was that about half of the Filipino males in attendance dressed in fashions containing Hip Hop/urban American elements. Their choice of dress suggested an acceptance of dominant American youth culture, which is arguably Hip Hop/urban. Most of the others dressed in a more preppy or suburban look. It is hard to argue that because Filipino Americans dress urban or preppy, they are assimilated into U.S. culture. Anyone who has ever been clothes shopping in an American mall knows that it is difficult to find clothing that does not look "black" or "white." America's black/white dichotomy makes it difficult to judge

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assimilation based upon appearance of dress alone. Therefore, my data regarding Filipino American youth style of dress may not be valid; however, it is noteworthy.

Due to lack of data, my analysis is inconclusive. I will need to conduct more observations and interviews.

Sigmund Ku

I attended a national Filipino conference at UIUC called FACT, which stands for Filipino Americans Coming Together. This year's topic at hand was, "Our People's Power: Identity, Passion, Purpose." I attended two of the many workshops that they held there and also the Variety Show later that night. The first workshop I attended was called "The Challenges and Responsibilities of Being Balikbayan," and the second was called "Contentious Legacies: Mixed-Race Identity and Issues."

I got to the first workshop a bit late, so they were already well into their activity. There were around 75-80 people who were almost all Filipino/other Asian ethnicity, and there were also two white people. The activity asked what you would put in your Balikbayan Box (literally meaning "returning to one's homeland box") that you would bring to the Philippines. There were many items listed, such as outlet converters, food, medicine, clothes, electronics, toilet paper, and Burberry boots. The facilitators then made an interesting point that what most people listed were items that gave them the "comfort of home," though they were technically returning home. Just through this we can already see that Filipino Americans distinguish the differences between their two "homes". It was also pointed out that what you would typically bring is what you feel that the Philippines lacks because it's, as one individual stated, "a little bit dirty" and has a lower standard-of-living.

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The second workshop talked about mixed-race identity and issues. The facilitator gave a brief history about eugenics (mixed-race degeneracy vs. hybrid vigor) and anti-miscegenation laws, referencing *Loving vs. Virginia* (1967), and also the early fears of white women pairing with Asian immigrants. She then had everyone list some contemporary views on mixed race. This included views such as mixed race being a unique bridge, being portrayed as attractive by the media, having the “best of both worlds,” being a double-minority, and mistaken identity. She said that many of these views are used today to promote color-blindness since many in America like to say that we live in a “post-racist era.” However, it is clear that throughout the decades, there has been little change in the dialogue dealing with mixed race.

The Variety Show also provided insight to the balance of ethnic culture with American culture. It began with both the Filipino and U.S. national anthems being sung, making it clear from the beginning that this was about being Filipino and American. The emcees made several references to YouTube videos that specifically revealed American culture, such as the Saturday Night Live Digital Short, “I’m On a Boat.” The performances included many cultural acts (cultural dances, escrima demos, tinikling, and songs sung in Tagalog) and contemporary acts (“modern” musicians, spoken word, rapping, and modern dance groups). It was very interesting to see the dynamics between the two cultures and how they were able to blend them together.

I believe that many of the trends that I observed at this conference between ethnic and American culture can easily be expanded to include other Asian ethnicities. Many Asian Americans have the same experiences growing up. Obviously, this is not the complete data that was observed at FACT, but I wanted to include some main ideas that I found interesting.

Stephanie Kuo

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The meeting that I went to on Sunday was a board member meeting for the Chinese Undergraduate Student Association (CUSA). They are a small group of people who are all Chinese Americans. It seemed like a very exclusive group as an outsider. On that particular day they were all wearing fall casual clothes such as jeans. The meeting started at 3:00pm with four girls and three guys but as the meeting went on people started to trickle in; so by the end of the meeting at 3:30pm there were six girls and four guys. It was a very layback atmosphere where there were lots of laughing and joking around. It was not a serious get down to business meeting at all. The first topic discussed was fundraising for the organization.

Throughout the whole meeting the discussion was about food and food related topics; everything tied back to food and “Asian” food. Fundraising was about what type of food to buy or where they should buy it from. According to one member of the group what constitutes as an Asian food would be anything that came from an Asian grocery store. Is that really what 2nd or 1.5 generations think about Asian food? Have these generations lost their connections to what real Asian food is? Or is the group trying to appeal to the public and what appeals to is food? I would like to believe that that CUSA is trying to just appeal to the public.

What is more interesting is that their definition of “cultural” or making an event “cultural” is how to make the food or some folk story about the where the food came from. Furthermore, they source for the information was finding it out on Wikipedia or online anywhere. It was funny how the meeting went and continued about food. I remember one instant that the group got sidetracked about the food that the group members brought in to eat and the smell overwhelmed the groups; so they talked about “Craving” (a Chinese restaurant) and pumpkin pie for a couple of minutes.

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In conclusion, the meeting was extremely insightful because it was a broad meeting that represents the whole CUSA group. They are the people that keep the organization going from year to year. Now I am interested in how Asian American sees their own cultures. In addition, how much they know about their own cultures.

Data (interviews):

Ryan Young

The interview was conducted with an Asian American female student in the Greek system at the University of Illinois. She included background information about herself and the ways in which she identifies herself. She said, "I identify myself as Asian American, specifically Taiwanese American." She explained that when people ask her where she is from she says that her parents were born in Taiwan, but she was born in the United States. It seemed like she felt that making that distinction was important when speaking about her ethnicity with people. I asked her about factors that contributed to her decision to become a part of the Greek system at the University of Illinois. She said that she grew up in a predominantly white environment when she was growing up, but also says that she was exposed and comfortable in other environments. She also talked about her previous interactions with the Greek system before college. At her church, three sorority girls from the University of Illinois led her Bible study and she saw that being Greek and maintaining her faith was possible. Social interaction was also a factor for her in deciding to join a Greek organization. It did not seem as though her comfort with white people played a role in making her decision, but it was focused more on social aspects. During our interview we discussed the presence of Asian Americans in the Greek system at the University of Illinois. She said, "There are a handful of us. They are scattered in different houses on campus." A number scattered in different houses. She also expressed the difficulties that Asian Americans

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in the Greek system face regarding race and ethnicity. “I would yes. It’s hard for Asian Americans in the Greek system to have space to think about race and ethnicity when the norm is white.” There are no events for Asian American Greeks or Greeks, in general, to explore ethnicity and culture. She also explains that most Asian Americans in the Greek have a certain comfort with interacting in predominantly white environments because America is predominantly white and those in power are majority white. “My experience is that most people are racially colorblind, or they don’t feel comfortable talking about it,” she said. As far as direct racism, she shared two incidents she remembered. “One time I went to an exchange with my sorority to a fraternity house and when I was in the basement of the house some of the fraternity men made noises like ‘ching-chong’, which were sounds that were suppose to sound like my language. I was with a group of my sorority sisters and they were all white.” She felt like she couldn’t talk to them about the incident because she felt that they would not necessarily understand the situations. She also mentioned an incident when she found a stereotypical drawing of a “chinaman” in the kitchen of her sorority house and how she just threw it away and not talking about it with someone. In these situations, I think that her environment hindered her from speaking out against racism and the situation and social environment silenced her from speaking. She included that if there were more Asian Americans in leadership roles in the Greek system, she would probably feel more comfortable talking about racism. There is also a feeling of regret on her part when she was looking back at the situations and feeling like she should have done something.

Mara Sonn

V.C.

21 years old

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Junior majoring in Economics and International Studies, minoring in Anthropology

Officer in Chinese Undergraduate Student Association (CUSA)

When asked what she would identify her ethnicity as, V replied using the acronym “ABC” meaning American born Chinese. What sets her apart from other Asian identities is due to the fact that her parents are from China and she still speaks the language at home.

Furthermore, her family has a big influence on her forming her cultural identity otherwise she would describe herself as being “white-washed”.

V is originally from Hoffman Estates, IL, a predominantly Caucasian neighborhood, where most of her high school friends were Caucasian or Indian. Due to the low number of Asian Americans in her neighborhood, V also admitted that she didn’t have many Chinese friends at all. However, once she became a student at the university, V became friends with mostly Chinese students. She specifically stated that she didn’t purposely seek out Chinese friends, that she was pan ethnically friendly, but she met most of them through CUSA, classes, and other organizations. Also, the similarities in family background, culture, and overall interests were also factors in why she had mostly Chinese friends. V also mentioned how easily cliques form due to common interests and backgrounds. She said “some people try to explore other groups, but a lot do not” referring to some students who choose to specifically identify themselves with certain groups and restrict themselves from being associated with others.

The university also provided V with resources for her to connect to her culture not only through cultural clubs such as CUSA, but through language classes as well, which V has taken advantage of by enrolling herself in a Chinese language course. As for being a member of

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CUSA, V preferred this Chinese specific group due to the fact that it was more “intimate, tight knit, and easier to approach” than other groups such as AAA, which she felt was too broad with too many members. CUSA also allowed V to partake in Chinese activities and celebrations such as Moon Festival and Chinese New Year, as well as making and eating Asian food and watching Chinese films.

Thus, although V originally was born and raised in a predominantly Caucasian neighborhood, she still identifies herself as a Chinese American. In addition, V has shaped her Chinese identity through the influence of her family, who are originally from China, and through the various opportunities that the university has provided for her such as meeting other Chinese students who share similar interests and other Chinese based organizations, clubs, and classes. Although most of her current friends are Chinese, she doesn’t limit herself to only seeking out other Chinese students to associate with.

Sunny Choi

The person I interviewed was a 1.5 generation Filipino American male and a senior at the University of Illinois. Although he understood that he is classified as a Filipino American, he chooses not to label himself as such. He went to explain how he does not believe in labeling humans since they all face the same problems. He then explained why he identifies himself more so as Filipino American rather than just Filipino or panethnically Asian American. “Because of the colonial history of the Philippines, our history and our culture are extremely different from other Asian cultures. I say American because my mindset is still extremely different from other cultures, but it’s still closer to Filipino American than Filipino.” In referring

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to his native country's historical and cultural past as well as his own upbringings in America, this is one way he formed and rationalized his racial/ethnic identity.

Even after understanding the background and foundations to his identity, he still chooses to position himself away from a specific classification and lean towards a multicultural lifestyle. He said that he came to a fuller understanding of this stance of just being human during his freshman year in college. Because of his conscious decision to live in the PAR dorm on the side of town where most racial minorities stay and partake in a program offered by his dorm called Global Crossroads, I found that the university did have an influence on his identity formation. What Global Crossroads did was expose him to various kinds of people and cultures from around the globe, which influenced his identity formation. Instead of identifying himself with his racial or ethnic background, he took a different approach. With influence from Global Crossroads and certain classes freshman year (that were not culturally related), he "became more self-conscious of what it means to be an individual." This suggests that his identity formation was more of an individualized experience than anything in line with his cultural background.

Perhaps this is a trend among persons of Asian descent in America, Filipino descent, and/or 1.5 generation youth. On the other hand, maybe it is not; maybe this interviewee is just more introverted than most Filipino Americans. There are also plenty more possible reasons for his identity formation. Regardless, this person's multicultural influences have helped shape his individualized identity.

Sigmund Ku

For this assignment, I chose to interview 20-year old Korean male "Ron" (name changed for confidentiality). He is a junior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and is

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majoring in Molecular and Cellular Biology. Ron was born in Korea but moved to the United States when he was only 9 months old. He said when he was in junior high he didn't pay attention to race at all because it was all so diverse, but when he moved to a new city during high school that was predominately white, he really "paid attention to race" because the difference was obvious. Ron noted that mainly Asians and whites would segregate themselves willingly and that he found himself hanging out with Asians more even though he didn't have a problem with white people. When asked why, he said, "In my view, a lot of the white people there were ignorant or, like, really cocky. They only grew up in their own neighborhood and didn't get much exposure to other races so they were sort of discriminatory, not towards specific races but towards non-whites, so I tended to stick to Asians more."

After coming to UIUC, he said that it was like his old neighborhood in junior high where everything was very multicultural, except that he got major exposure to "Koreans who actually came from Korea." Because of this, he found himself having more Korean friends and having the desire to search for his Korean roots. He also became aware of RSOs such as KASA, KSA, and KCC that could also help him reconnect with his Korean culture, but he chose not to join them because he felt that they were "too cliquy." When I asked him how he would identify himself now, he said, "Right now I'm really into my Korean roots, so even though I am an American citizen and Korean and would technically be Korean-American, I would consider myself Korean because I just see America as a place that I am living in at the moment." He also stated that he prefers modern Korean culture as opposed to traditional because he loves breakdancing, Starcraft, and especially the music, and these mediums really help him feel connected to his homeland. Ron mentioned that he feels a lot of pride whenever he breakdances because "Koreans are known to be very dominant in the b-boy world, so I feel that there are

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higher expectations for me also as a Korean b-boy.” He is also a very active member and an officer of Floor Lovers Illinois, the breakdancing club on campus where the members are mostly Asian.

Ron’s life before college was a typical American one, and even though he mainly hung out with Asians in high school, they would usually participate in American activities. But after coming to UIUC, his view on his own identity was challenged because of the university’s cultural student organizations and the many international students from Korea that he met. This caused a very significant change in his lifestyle since he wanted to become more connected with his ethnic identity. Although there are some factors that affect a person’s identity more than others, it seems that people generally use their entire environment to form the way that they view themselves. UIUC surrounds its students with many cultural outlets and resources and they can’t help but become aware of them. I believe that this is a classic case for many Asian and Asian American youth who grew up in suburban neighborhoods and came to big universities.

Stephanie Kuo

In my second interview, I interviewed a junior girl and found some surprising information about identity. She is a student at the University of Illinois studying speech and hearing science. She said “---just the other day, I realized sitting in class that there are not a lot of Asian people in my major at all.” Her story was a bit different with some similarities with other interviews I have done. For her, she is first generation because she was not born in America but in China (close to the capital of Beijing). She has lived in America for 14 years of her life. However she moved to America when she was about seven years old. When asked about how she identifies herself as a person in an ethnic term, her answer was Asian American.

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This response got my attention and I questioned why and she continues on by continuing to say that she no longer feels “full Asian” anymore because she feels like it has been too long since she lived in China. She said that she feels separated from the culture in China because she has been in America for a long time now and when she goes back she no longer understands the slangs in the languages or what people are into these days in China even though her family web cam chats with her grandparents and other people. This was surprising to hear because she stills have relatives back in China like her grandparents which raised her for some time as her father went over-seas to America to get his doctorate. While her father was over there he sponsored her mother over to America and as a result left her behind for several years with her grandparents as they try to sponsor her overseas.

This type of story of immigration was different from what I have seen before. Indeed this type of immigration happened when family members sponsor each other to come to America. However, commonly people would sponsor their relatives and not immediate family members because the families usually come together as group. As she continued on explaining her story of immigration to America, she said her transition from China to America was a quick one because it took her only three months to learn the basic of English with a help of a Korean English tutor hired by the high school. For her, she assimilated well into the American life style fairly smoothly. Now, her family still plays an important role in her life because she still eats dinner with them in family style.

On the topic of making friends, she said her family and background kind of has an influenced her in making friends at the University because she was able to communicate with other Chinese people better. She further explained by saying that they share a common experience and background which makes is easier for her to identify with where they are coming

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from. She said when she was in high school there were not Asian people around where she lived. She had lots of friends from different backgrounds and ethnic groups. However, at the University she mainly has Asian friends because she made her friends through other Asian friends and ethnic organizations such as Chinese Undergrad Student Association (CUSA). She chooses CUSA over other organizations such as AAA or PSA because they were closer in size and more close-knit. She is pan-ethnically friends with other Asian groups too. When asked what type of activities do you do that forms your racial/cultural identity, she said she celebrates the Chinese holidays with family and friends and eat Chinese food. She loves Chinese food and eats with her family.

Analysis:

On the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, there are a significantly large number of Asians and Asian Americans that make up the already extensive and diverse student body. Though many of these individuals have similar backgrounds to each other, the way that they perceive and identify themselves on campus can contrast a great deal. Coming to UIUC, these individuals find that the university provides many resources and factors they can use to aid themselves in ascertaining their personal identities. After carrying out several interviews and participant-observations, these variations can be seen more clearly among the Asian and Asian American students at UIUC.

Having conducted observations and interviews with certain Asian Americans, the term distinctive best describes how these people wanted their culture to be portrayed. During Global Village 2009, booths featuring different countries were displayed around the room and in order to entice students to gain interest in their booths, the students had to choose what aspects of their country they wanted to highlight. Therefore, they had to decide what elements of their culture would set their country apart from others. Common things that people chose to use to represent their culture were ethnic foods and clothing styles. In relation to food, all of our Chinese

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interviewees claimed they loved Chinese food. In fact, during an observation of a CUSA (Chinese Undergraduate Student Association) board meeting, the topic of focus was on food, Chinese food in particular. The club focused on food because it was something that everyone from all different backgrounds can easily relate to. In truth, food for many cultural organizations is the most comfortable to introduce to the student bodies at the university because there are no political and racial tensions that can offend people when it comes to food and eating of food. Food has always brought people from all over the world together and has served as an icebreaker for people to start conversations. One interesting thought a member of CUSA pointed out was that it is fine to buy anything that looks Asian or buy things from an Asian market. Furthermore, to make the food events more cultural, the members would go ask their parents and Wikipedia the history of the food. This is a fascinating fact because many of these members are 1.5 or 2nd generation Asians and they are in the process of learning their own culture as they create these cultural events to educate others.

During an interview, distinctiveness was brought up when a female Chinese American student was questioned about her family's influence on her cultural identity. She claimed that if her family hadn't been a big influence on her, she would be "white-washed" or have a lack of an ethnic identity or pride. Therefore, the interviewee's distinctive culture, which to her consisted of the written and spoken language, food, celebrations, etc., made her feel like she was set apart from the dominant white culture, very much like the Asian American youths presented in Kwon's article "Autoexoticizing: Asian American Youth and the Import Car Scene". Those youths were associated with the import car scene because it too set them apart from the dominant white society since it had been so heavily dominated by Asian Americans and Asian influences such as the types of car that were driven, the names of the groups, and even the characters that were displayed on the imports. Thus, being distinctive was an integral part of how these youths in the article, the interviewee, as well as the students' presenting their booths, wanted to display their culture.

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During another interview, the interviewee said that she never noticed her ethnicity until she was in her lecture class of about 100 students and she was the only Asian in the class. For the interviewee, she does not consider herself as “full Asian” anymore even though she is a 1st generation but Asian American because she has lived in America for so long. In addition, she believed that being Asian American she can get the best from both worlds being exposed to different ideology and viewpoints, food, and people. According to the interviewee, the University of Illinois does provide recourses to connect with her culture and contribute to her cultural identity because there are cultural events such as Asiantation, Taste of Asia, AASHO (Asian American Student Housing Organization), CUSA, and AAA (Asian American Association).

However, Asian American students at UIUC choose to identify themselves in more than one fashion. For example, the Philippine Student Association presented their annual Filipino Americans Coming Together (FACT) Conference as a way to celebrate and educate about Filipino culture. This RSO is just one example of the many resources provided for Asians and Asian Americans who want to develop their identity at the university. Although most of the students in attendance were of Filipino descent, a sizeable portion of them were of other Asian nationalities. This lends to the belief that some Asian American youth identify themselves with a specific ethnicity, while others go the pan-ethnic route. Due to lack of quantitative/statistical data, proper and representative analysis is difficult.

In the above case, the university had some kind of influence in the identity formation of Asian American students. In another case as well, a Filipino American male – a senior – came to a fuller understanding of his identity after attending the school. He said that his first year dormitory experience in the living/learning community Global Crossroads, a program geared towards international students, greatly impacted his identity formation. He sees himself not as a Filipino American per se, but more so a human being with a Filipino American cultural

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background. This individual did not act colorblind as evidenced by his understanding of his cultural upbringing, but seemed as if he wanted to navigate. Although he clearly sees and understands race, he navigates with a sense of colorblindness in that he determines social relationships with those around him through common characteristics outside of race and color.

On the other hand, Asian Americans in the Greek system seem to experience their own race and ethnicity differently from those who are not involved in the Greek system at the University of Illinois. Through researching that system, there is a realization that in a predominantly white environment it is difficult for Asian Americans to explore their identity. In situations when Asian American Greeks are faced with race and ethnicity as reality, many decide to conform to the norm and act as though they do not have differences from those around them. When Asian Americans who are involved in the Greek system deal with conflict regarding their race or ethnicity, there does not seem to be a space where dialogue can begin. In the Greek system at the University of Illinois, inclusion is an important aspect to this community. There are no ethnic specific events or programs that cater exclusively to Asians in the predominantly white Greek system.

In contrast to the Greek system, a more common case for Asians and Asian Americans coming to college can partially be illustrated by a 20-year old Korean male who was interviewed. During his high school years, he was “very Americanized,” lived in a predominately white suburb, and was deep into American culture. However, after coming to UIUC where there are many international students who come directly from Asia solely to attend school here, he found his perspective changing. Not too long after, he found himself longing to “reconnect with his roots.” Now he considers himself simply as a Korean who is living in America. Many individuals experience an aspect of this, where they find themselves being drawn to befriending other Asians. This is also pointed out in Nazli Kibria’s article, “College and Notions of ‘Asian American,’” when some of her interviewees said that having lot/only Asian friends “wasn’t

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planned, it just happened.” A lot of Asians and Asian Americans find some sort of affinity towards other Asians. This is most likely because the similar background and culture is there and almost assumed when one Asian meets another.

Asian Americans at the University of Illinois are in a unique position when it comes to identifying themselves ethnically and racially. There is a space between being Asian and being American where Asian American youth must decide where to fall. According to Min Zhou’s article, “Coming of Age at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century”, “Perhaps most importantly, the culture and society in which today’s Asian American youth grow up are more open than ever before and certainly more tolerant of cultural diversity than a century ago.” Asian Americans are able to further explore their identities in numerous ways in the present day. Although there is a lack of resources and programs some specific groups of Asian Americans, the University, in itself, has still been a place where some Asian Americans have discovered who they are and further explored their identities.

Although there is a lack of resources and programs for Asian American Greeks regarding ethnic and racial identity, the University, in itself, has been a place where some Asian Americans have discovered who they are and further explored their identities. A big factor was merely the presence of other Asian Americans on campus who the students felt were more easily relatable and shared more common interests than other groups of people. A majority of our interviewees were from towns that were predominantly Caucasian, therefore the number of Asian American friends they had were limited, aside from a few exceptions. Other resources included multi-cultural organizations, ethnic clubs, and even foreign language classes which also helped to foster a cultural identity for students.

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Research Narrative:

After interviewing several Asian Americans on the campus of the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, we found that there are a significantly large number of Asians and Asian Americans that make up the already extensive and diverse student body. Though many of these individuals have similar backgrounds to each other, the way that they perceive and identify themselves on campus can contrast a great deal. Coming to UIUC, these individuals find that the university provides many resources and factors they can use to aid themselves in ascertaining their personal identities. Throughout the course of the fall semester, our group investigated different Asian American ethnic groups and the situations and environments they are placed into at the University of Illinois. This initiated our interest in answering these following questions: How do Asian Americans of different ethnic groups at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign identify themselves? What factors do they use in their racial identity and cultural identity formation?

To investigate our research questions, we created a research plan to answer the questions we had developed. This plan included conducting numerous interviews with various members of the student body on campus, measuring quantitative data with surveys, and observing Registered Student Organization (RSO) activities and meetings. We also planned to analyze our data with previous research of racial identity formation and university resources. We decided to carry out our research observations at several events: Global Village, hosted by the Association Internationale d'Etudiants en Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (AIESEC); Filipino Americans Coming Together (FACT) Conference, hosted by the Philippine Student Association (PSA); a social event held by the Greek system; and a Chinese Undergraduate Student Association (CUSA) board meeting. After obtaining several interviews and participant-observation data, these variations can be seen more clearly among the Asian and Asian American students at UIUC.

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Having conducted observations and interviews with Asian Americans, the term “distinctive” best describes how they wanted their culture to be portrayed. During Global Village 2009, which was hosted by AIESEC, booths featuring different countries were displayed around the room for others to pass by and learn about. In order to entice the passing students to gain interest in their booths for international internships, the students at the booths had to choose what aspects of their country they wanted to highlight. Therefore, they had to decide what elements of their culture would set their country apart from others. Common things that students chose to use to represent their culture were ethnic foods and clothing styles. In relation to food, all of our Chinese interviewees claimed they loved Chinese food. In fact, during an observation of a CUSA board meeting, the topic of focus was on food, Chinese food in particular. The club focused on food because it was something that everyone from all different backgrounds can easily relate to. In truth, food for many cultural organizations is the most comfortable to introduce to the student bodies at the university because there are no political and racial tensions that can offend people when it comes to food and the eating of food. Food has always brought people from all over the world together and has served as an icebreaker for people to start conversations. One interesting thought a member of CUSA pointed out was that it is fine to buy anything that looks Asian or buy things from an Asian market for their events. Furthermore, to make the food events more cultural, the members would go ask their parents or check Wikipedia about the history of the food. This is a fascinating fact because many of these members are 1.5 or 2nd generation Asians and they are in the process of learning their own culture as they create these cultural events to educate others.

Additionally, during an interview, distinctiveness was brought up when a female Chinese American student was questioned about her family’s influence on her cultural identity. She claimed that if her family had not been a big influence on her, she would be “white-washed” or have a lack of an ethnic identity or pride. Therefore, the interviewee’s distinctive culture, which to her consisted of the written and spoken language, food, celebrations, etc., made her feel like

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she was set apart from the dominant white culture, very much like the Asian American youths presented in Kwon's article "Autoexoticizing: Asian American Youth and the Import Car Scene." Those youths were associated with the import car scene because it too set them apart from the dominant white society since it had been so heavily dominated by Asian Americans and Asian influences such as the types of cars that were driven, the names of the groups, and even the characters that were displayed on the imports. Thus, being distinctive was an integral part of how these youths in the article, the interviewee, as well as the students' presenting their booths, wanted to display their culture.

In a different interview, the interviewee said that she never noticed her ethnicity until she was in her lecture class of about 100 students and she was the only Asian in the class. For the interviewee, she does not consider herself as a "full Asian" anymore (even though she is a 1st generation) but now as an Asian American because she has lived in America for so long. In addition, she believed that being Asian American meant that she could get the best from both worlds by being exposed to different ideologies, viewpoints, food, and people. According to the interviewee, the University of Illinois does provide resources to connect with her culture and contribute to her cultural identity because there are cultural events and organizations such as Asiantation, Taste of Asia, the Asian American Cultural Center (AACC), the Asian American Student Housing Organization (AASHO), CUSA, and the Asian American Association (AAA).

However, Asian American students at UIUC choose to identify themselves in more than one fashion. For example, the PSA presented their annual FACT Conference as a way to celebrate and educate about Filipino culture. This RSO is just one example of the many resources provided for Asians and Asian Americans who want to develop their identity at the university. Although most of the students in attendance were of Filipino descent, a sizeable portion of them were of other Asian nationalities. This lends to the belief that some Asian American youth identify themselves with a specific ethnicity, while others go the pan-ethnic route. Due to lack of

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quantitative/statistical data, proper and representative analysis is difficult.

In the above case, we can see an example of the influence the university has in the identity formation of Asian American students by providing the measures to allow such a large conference of ethnic and cultural displays to take place on campus. In another case as well, a Filipino American male, a senior at UIUC, came to a fuller understanding of his identity after attending the school. He said that his first year dormitory experience in the living/learning community Global Crossroads, a program geared towards international students, greatly impacted his identity formation. He sees himself not as a Filipino American per se, but more so a human being with a Filipino American cultural background. This individual did not act colorblind as evidenced by his understanding of his cultural upbringing, but seemed as if he wanted to navigate. Although he clearly sees and understands race, he navigates with a sense of colorblindness in that he determines social relationships with those around him through common characteristics outside of race and color.

On the other hand, Asian Americans in the Greek system seem to experience their own race and ethnicity differently from those who are not involved in the Greek system at the University of Illinois. Through researching that system, there is a realization that in a predominantly white environment it is difficult for Asian Americans to explore their identity. In situations when Asian American Greeks are faced with race and ethnicity as reality, many decide to conform to the norm and act as though they do not have differences from those around them. When Asian Americans who are involved in the Greek system deal with conflict regarding their race or ethnicity, there does not seem to be a space where dialogue can begin or develop. In the Greek system at the University of Illinois, inclusion is an important aspect to this community. There are no ethnic-specific events or programs that cater exclusively to Asians in the predominantly white Greek system.

In contrast to the Greek system, a more common case for Asians and Asian Americans

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coming to college can partially be illustrated by a 20-year old Korean male student who was interviewed. During his high school years, he was “very Americanized,” lived in a predominately white suburb, and was deep into American culture. However, after coming to UIUC where there are many international students who come directly from Asia solely to attend school here, he found his perspective changing. Not too long after, he found himself longing to “reconnect with his roots.” Now he considers himself simply as “a Korean who is living in America.” Many individuals experience an aspect of this, where they find themselves being drawn to befriending other Asians. This is also pointed out in Nazli Kibria’s article, “College and Notions of ‘Asian American,’” when some of her interviewees said that having a lot of or only Asian friends “wasn’t planned, it just happened” (1991, 37). A lot of Asians and Asian Americans find some sort of affinity towards other Asians. This is most likely because the similar background and culture is there and almost assumed when one Asian meets another. The aspect of a changing perspective when coming to college is supported by an article from the EUI Archives by Ellen Picklesimer entitled, “Self Identity: Comparing Asian American Adoptees and Second-Generation Asian Americans.” In this article, the author mentions how a Korean-American adoptee was raised in an all-Caucasian neighborhood and actually had negative views towards Asians and Asian Americans before college. After attending college and being exposed to more Asians and Asian Americans, she became more relaxed and associates herself more with 2nd generation Asian Americans. This is further evidence of the university’s affect on an individual’s perspective.

As was mentioned, a big factor is merely the presence of other Asian Americans on campus who the students felt were more easily relatable and shared more common interests than other groups of people. A majority of our interviewees were from towns that were predominantly Caucasian, therefore the number of Asian American friends they had were limited, aside from a few exceptions. Other resources provided by UIUC included multi-cultural organizations, ethnic and cultural clubs, and even foreign language classes which also help to foster a cultural identity

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for students. Another resource that may be of value to Asian Americans provided by the University is the Asian American Cultural Center. As stated in a previous EUI project entitled “The Asian American Cultural Center: Its Role and Purpose at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign,” the researcher Prevezer concluded that “it aims to promote pan-Asian American identity and unity through educational, social, and cultural programs as well as providing a sense of community and improving inter-group relationships among students at the University of Illinois” (2007, 6). Therefore, it is a setting where Asian American students can gather together in order to learn more about their own historical backgrounds, as well as the other diverse Asian histories.

Asian Americans at the University of Illinois are in a unique position when it comes to identifying themselves ethnically and racially. There is a space between being Asian and being American where Asian American youth must decide where to fall. According to Min Zhou’s article, “Coming of Age at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century”, it states, “Perhaps most importantly, the culture and society in which today’s Asian American youth grow up are more open than ever before and certainly more tolerant of cultural diversity than a century ago” (2004, 31). Asian Americans are able to further explore their identities in numerous ways in the present day. Although there is a lack of resources and programs for some specific groups of Asian Americans and for Asian American Greeks regarding ethnic and racial identity, the University, in itself, has still been a place where some Asian Americans have discovered who they are and further explored their identities.

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Recommendations:

After looking over our research for this project and analyzing our findings, we think that the most immediate change the University can provide is a resource for some Asian American Greeks who feel like there are no opportunities for them to simultaneously remain in the Greek system and also remain proud and knowledgeable of their own ethnic culture. There are currently a large number of organizations that we listed that allow other Asians and Asian Americans to reconnect and learn more about their racial and cultural identities. One or two of these organizations could hold events specifically for Asian American Greeks every semester to encourage and support those who feel outnumbered in a predominately white Greek system. As for other Asians and Asian Americans, we have already stated that there are many organizations for them. The next step would be to increase exposure of the clubs so that the student body is aware that these resources are available for them to partake in.