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Demystifying the Asian American Neo-Conservative: A Strange and New Political Animal?

Anthony S. Wang†

Asian American neo-conservatives are the product of the 1960s Asian American movement, yet they have diverged in principle from its modern-day progressive flag-bearers. This divergence, Mr. Wang observes, has led to the exclusion of neo-conservatives from the debate over the political direction of Asian Americans. Mr. Wang seeks to "de-mystify" Asian American neo-conservatives, using himself as an example, by laying out the origins and parameters of their values and beliefs. Arguing for recognition of the diversity of values within the Asian American community, Mr. Wang calls on progressive Asian Americans to engage in a constructive dialogue with their neo-conservative counterparts.

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Introducing an Asian American Neo-conservative

I am a strange and new political animal—I am an Asian American neo-conservative. I am a child of post-1965 immigrant parents who came from Taiwan to America. I am an intercultural baby who was born after the Civil Rights Movement. I am a child raised in Washington, D.C., during twelve years of Republican administrations, and a former Eisenhower intern at the Republican National Committee. I am a UC Berkeley graduate in economics, but also a student deeply interested in Asian American studies, East Asian studies, and in particular, Chinese language, culture and history. Today, I am a third-year law student at Georgetown University Law Center finally preparing to enter a big law firm and begin work for the first time in my life. Finally, though I have seen the effects of racism, oppression, and anti-Asian sentiment in America, I have generally been sheltered from its pernicious effects because of my parents' hard
B. Omatsu's Attempt to Define Asian American Neo-Conservatives

In his essay 'The Four Prisons' and the Movements of Liberation, Professor Glenn Omatsu characterizes Asian American neo-conservatives as “strange and new political animals,” and presents us as a new “challenge” to the issues affecting the Asian American community. We are seen as a “challenge” because of our disagreement with certain aspects of the ideology and progressive tenets of the Asian American movement. After briefly describing neo-conservative beliefs, Omatsu explains why


2. Professor Omatsu's perceptions about Asian American neo-conservative beliefs are as follows:
   (1) They are proud to be Asian American. But they denounce the Asian American movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s as destructive.
   (2) They speak out against racism against Asian Americans. But they believe that only by ending affirmative action programs and breaking with prevailing civil rights thinking of the past four decades can we end racism.
   (3) They express concern for Asian American community issues. But they contend that the agenda set by the ‘liberal Asian American establishment’ ignores community needs.
   (4) They vehemently oppose quotas blocking admissions of Asian Americans to colleges and universities. But they link anti-Asian quotas to affirmative action programs for ‘less qualified’ African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians.
   (5) They acknowledge the continuing discrimination against African Americans, Latinos, and American Indians in U.S. society. But they believe that the main barrier blocking the advancement of other people of color is 'cultural'—that unlike Asians, these groups supposedly come from cultures that do not sufficiently emphasize education, family cohesion, and traditional values.
   (6) The neo-conservatives acknowledge continuing discrimination in the U.S. society but deny the existence of institutional racism and structural inequality. For them, racism lies in the realm of attitudes and 'culture' and not institutions of power. Thus, they emphasize individual advancement as the way to overcome racism. They believe that people of color can rise through merit, which they contend can be measured objectively through tests, grades, and educational attainment.
   (7) The neo-conservatives ignore questions of wealth and privilege in American society. In their obsession with 'merit,' 'qualifications,' and 'objective' criteria, they lose sight of power and oppression in America. Their focus is on dismantling affirmative action programs and 'government entitlements' from the civil rights era. But poverty and racism existed long before the civil rights movement. They are embedded in the system of inequality that has long characterized U.S. society.
   (8) The neo-conservatives are essentially elitists who fear expansion of democracy at the grassroots level. They speak a language of individual advancement, not mass empowerment. They propose a strategy of alignment with existing centers of power and not the creation of new power bases among the disenfranchised sectors of society. Their message is directed to professionals, much like themselves. They have nothing to offer to immigrant workers in sweatshops, the homeless, Cambodian youth in street gangs, or community college youth.
   (9) As relative newcomers to Asian American issues, the neo-conservatives lack understanding of history, especially how concerns in the community have developed over time. Although they aggressively speak out about issues, they lack experience in organizing around these issues. The neo-conservatives function best in the realm of ideas; they have difficulty dealing with concrete situations.

Id. at 42-50.
neo-conservatism is misguided. Despite its rising acceptance, neo-conservatism is viewed as harmful to the interests of the Asian American community, and in particular, harmful to disenfranchised members of the community. Accordingly, Omatsu believes that progressive ideology is more appropriate for the needs of the Asian American community and also more representative of the true thinking of the greater community. Essentially, his characterization of Asian American neo-conservatives as "strange and new political animals" implicitly suggests a notion of "false consciousness."³

In his discussion, Omatsu provides a long list of reasons why neo-conservatives, who did not seem to exist 25 years ago, have materialized today. He correctly describes some of the social, economic, and political conditions that have contributed to our emergence and recognizes the increasing prominence and role that neo-conservatives play in confronting issues facing the Asian American community. Although he views us as a "new challenge" to the traditional, progressive approach of the Asian American movement, he rightfully acknowledges that Asian American neo-conservatives "bring a vibrancy to community issues by contributing a different viewpoint."

Omatsu intends to shed light on a group he believes to be an anomaly, a contradiction, and a challenge. In describing who Asian American neo-conservatives are, and how and why we allegedly think the way we do, he implicitly suggests why we are wrong. While Omatsu has presented an important discussion, it is incomplete at best, and at times, factually incorrect. We may be relatively new, but what makes us so strange? Are we, as Omatsu states, "essentially elitists" who "have nothing to offer" to disenfranchised members of the community? As I hope to show in my discussion, our neo-conservative thinking is not necessarily strange, but rather is based on what we interpret as being right—given our principles and personal experiences. Our disagreement with traditional civil rights ideology and emerging critical race theory results from a different reaction to and understanding of the events affecting the Asian American community, the greater minority community, and society at large. Like our intellectual

³ See Mari J. Matsuda, Pragmatism Modified and the False Consciousness Problem, 63 S. CAL. L. REV. 1763 (1990) for an interesting discussion on false consciousness. See also Anthony E. Cook, Beyond Critical Legal Studies: The Reconstructive Theology of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., 103 HARV. L. REV. 985 (1990). Cook states: [Y]et CLS [Critical Legal Studies] consistently deemphasizes the individual and institutional experiences of those who are subjugated. Thus CLS' theoretical deconstruction of liberalism fails to explain—or even ask—why subordinated individuals, those most disadvantaged by hierarchies of wealth and power, place such faith in the liberal state. There are at least three possible explanations for this faith of subordinated people. The first possibility is false consciousness—that the rhetoric of liberalism has duped those at the bottom of the social and economic hierarchy. Liberalism's protestations of equality, fairness, and neutrality have convinced them that their disadvantages are somehow just, perhaps because other results have advantaged them in the past or may do so in the future.

Id. at 992 (emphasis added).
counterparts from the Left, we share the same goal of creating a better and more just society for all people. However, distinguishing ourselves from Asian American progressives, we choose to critically question the future path of our increasingly complex and multiracial America from a fundamentally different set of beliefs.

C. My Intentions in Writing This Comment

Through this Comment, I hope to demystify the so-called Asian American neo-conservative experience, so as to clarify our position and contribute to the complex debate on issues confronting the Asian American community and America as a whole. First, I hope to show through personal experience how I have become a neo-conservative and briefly describe some beliefs that may distinguish my neo-conservative ideology from progressive ideology. Second, and more importantly, I hope to show that exploring the diversity of experiences and wide-ranging viewpoints on issues facing the Asian American community can be a source of strength, rather than the “challenge” that Professor Omatsu envisions. I believe that the Asian American community can have solidarity without agreeing on all issues, and that understanding and appreciating our ideological differences, as well as our shared experiences, is essential to the future of Asian Americans and society as a whole.

Section II of this Comment describes who I am, and implicitly, how and why I came to view myself as a neo-conservative. Section III briefly highlights some of my neo-conservative beliefs, though a detailed discussion of the various issues that I present in this section is beyond the scope of this Comment. Section IV explores the sentiment of the progressive Asian American movement towards neo-conservatism, and its stifling effect on debate surrounding complex race relations. I advocate an open debate within the framework of Asian American legal scholarship that includes all the different viewpoints existing in the Asian American community—including the neo-conservative viewpoint.

4. I realize that the adoption of the “neo-conservative” label is somewhat problematic, since the views expressed in this Comment are mine alone and may not represent the views and beliefs of other so-called Asian American “neo-conservatives.” Nevertheless, I consider myself an Asian American “neo-conservative” as described by Professor Omatsu and consequently, I respond as such.

See generally Stephen Carter, Reflections of an Affirmative Action Baby (1991). The traditional Civil Rights Establishment has labeled Professor Carter as a black neo-conservative because of his criticism of race-based affirmative action. However, he contends that he is not a neo-conservative, but an intellectual who chooses to think for himself. He prefers that no label apply to him, but he realizes that as a black dissenter, he is inevitably characterized, rightly or wrongly, as a black neo-conservative.

II.

A NEO-CONSERVATIVE IN THE MAKING

The purpose of this section is to describe how and why I am the person that I am today. Just as I am categorized as an Asian American neo-conservative, I am also categorized as the son of my parents—Chinese immigrants who are "strangers from a different shore." In this regard, who I am and how I feel about myself and my surroundings is inextricably linked to the lessons and experiences passed down from my parents and culture. While I am very fortunate to have lived a middle-class lifestyle in America, I cannot forget the difficult road traveled by my parents from poverty in Taiwan to present day suburbia. Thus, the context in which I consider myself an Asian American neo-conservative requires an understanding of not merely my own limited experiences, but perhaps just as importantly, the experience of my family. Although Professor Omatsu characterizes Asian American neo-conservatives as the young beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Movement, I would also include my father in the category of Asian American neo-conservatives who have significantly influenced my views. Below, then, I focus on my father's experience in America, as described in a recent interview. I then elaborate on my own experience growing up in America.

A. My Father's Story

My parents' lives in America are similar to the lives of the thousands of other Asian immigrants. They started with limited financial resources, unsure of their future and faced with numerous obstacles, some seemingly insurmountable. However, they also came at a time when new doors of opportunities opened because of their academic abilities and the needs of the U.S. economy. The 1965 Immigration Act, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the entire Civil Rights Movement affected their lives, as opportunities previously denied to Asians in America became available. Certainly, the sacrifices of earlier immigrants, other minorities, and other Asian Americans made my parents' lives as struggling immigrants a little bit easier, but nonetheless, they endured significant personal struggles in their quest for the American Dream.

Life in America for my father began after sailing two months from Taiwan to New York City. My father waited on tables at a Chinese restaurant while his girlfriend (my mother) sold souvenirs in the China exhibit during the 1964 World's Fair. My parents worked countless hours and

6. RONALD TAKAKI, STRANGERS FROM A DIFFERENT SHORE: A HISTORY OF ASIAN AMERICANS (1989). Here, I borrow from Professor Takaki's title. His book describes the history and experiences of Asian immigrants who came to America over the past few centuries. It explores the systematic discrimination, prejudice, and alienation felt by Asian Americans.

7. Interview with Albert Wang, my father, in Washington D.C. (Mar. 8, 1997). In this section, I have italicized the statements directly quoted from my father.
eventually saved enough money for my father to enroll at Virginia Tech, where my father pursued his master’s degree in urban and regional planning. However, after his first year, he was forced to quit school when my parents’ first son—my older brother—was born with a cleft plate and harelip which prevented him from breathing properly. My father, who had no health insurance, had to find work to pay the medical bills for numerous operations.

My father applied for and received a day job⁸ at the City Planning Associates for the state of Maryland. His project at the City Planning Associates was a physical land use survey of Montgomery County, Maryland, in which he identified problem areas for possible redevelopment: “I was instrumental in saving Scotland on Seven Locks Road, a small black community, from total removal, mainly because I respected its history and believed diversity and integration of different races would strengthen the community rather than destroy it.” Indeed, the Scotland community is still a part of the region today, some 30 years later.

After returning to school and eventually graduating, my father began work at the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC). After only one year on the job for the MNCPPC, in 1970 my father became the principal planner in charge of the entire Model Cities planning project.⁹ Partially as a result of his planning recommendation, “U.S. Judge Hoffman issued the desegregation plan for the entire Prince George’s County school system, the 10th largest in the country in 1973.” Here, he took the initiative to reinforce the county’s commitment to racial equality, just as he did with the Scotland community initiative in Montgomery County in 1968:

Because I strongly believe that only quality in education can achieve true equality and social mobility, desegregation and integration into housing are effective ways to achieve that goal. I planned with the people, instead of planning for them. I built mutual trust within the different communities of the county before I made any specific recommendations. Even then, my plan was very controversial, but I got great grass-root[s] support from the people of the community. Within the Planning Department, I built a good reputation, tough but [patient], fair, and consistent.

For the past 28 years, my father has continued to work as an urban planner in Prince George’s County, Maryland, one of the more diverse counties in Maryland, with a majority of black residents. In addition, he serves as the editor-in-chief of the Washington China Post and on the Maryland Governor’s Asian Pacific American Advisory Committee, as

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⁸ In the evenings, my father would then work at the local movie theater—collecting tickets and cleaning the theater and bathrooms.
⁹ According to my father, the Model Cities area encompassed 12 square miles near the D.C./Prince George’s County line, and at the time contained half of the county’s black population—about 36,000 out of 73,000.
well as numerous other community organizations. In this regard, my father has dealt directly with the changing social, economic and political demographics of America, and his neo-conservative ideology comes not only from his experience as an immigrant, but also from his commitment and service to the needs of the greater multiracial community.

Clearly, his immigrant and minority background has contributed to his perspective on urban issues, and even affected his career path in our multiracial society. Recently, in a Washington Post article, he admitted that he had benefited from affirmative action back in 1969, but that in addition, he has seen negative consequences arise out of race-based preferences.10 While author Peter Kwong has talked of the suburban exodus of the “Uptown” Chinese professionals who forget about the plight of the lower-class,11 my father has continuously worked to remedy the problems of urban “Downtown” America. In our society, which so often ignores the reality of multiracial interaction, my father has worked closely with others to solve our region’s social and economic problems:

I have worked with blacks and whites all my life. . . . My personal relation with both whites and blacks have been very pleasant, straightforward, and up-front. I believe in a Confucius saying, ‘ji suo bu yu, wu shi yu ren,’ like in English, ‘treat others the same way you want others treat you.’ . . . That’s basically all there is to it.

My father acknowledges the merits of LBJ’s Great Society and the ideas of the progressive Left: “We Asians and blacks really owe him [LBJ] a lot for his legislative skill in getting that bill [the Civil Rights Act of 1964] passed.” Still, though, his “personal experience has always been closer to Republicans than Democrats. . . . I prefer Jack Kemp’s record and philosophy, a Republican one of free enterprise, investment, and more conservative forces to revitalize failing economic infrastructure.” My father’s vision for the future of Asian Americans is cautiously optimistic.

10. See D’Vera Cohn, Ambivalence in Maryland Echoes Across the Nation Series: Reality Check: Affirmative Action at Work, WASH. POST, Oct. 11, 1995, at A1. This article included an interview with my father about the affirmative action hiring program of the Maryland National Capital Park and Planning Commission (MNCPPC):

But minorities didn’t always see it that way. Albert Wang, who came to work in 1969 in another part of the Prince George’s planning office, has less pleasant memories. “When I first started my job, I could hardly talk to white people,” said Wang, who was born in Taiwan. “I felt very lonely, because people treated me like an alien. They never experienced anyone with a foreign accent. . . . I don’t feel the discrimination I did in the ’70s and ’60s. Now it’s much more open, and people are used to the minorities in the government service.”

Affirmative action helped create a more comfortable work environment for Wang, and now he has mixed feelings about it. It has made things better, but it also highlights troublesome racial divisions, he said. With only a small pool of black planners to draw from, recruiting is tough, and jobs often have to be kept open for months in hopes of drawing qualified minority applicants, he said. “We should recruit more blacks, but there are practical difficulties in getting competent black planners on the staff,” he said. “I’m all for [affirmative action], but it’s time to reevaluate it.”

Id.

He views participation in the political process as vital to our community’s well-being, particularly since we have developed an established middle-class. In earlier decades, the poorer Chinese immigrant’s life was about survival, but with increased economic opportunities have come concomitant political opportunities and responsibilities:

In the past, we were beneficiaries of the Civil Rights Movement without really contributing to it. In the future, no one is going to fight for our interests except ourselves. . . . If most Asian Americans don’t care and don’t vote, then the winner of the election won’t pay attention to you. That’s what counts . . . to survive . . . unite together and actively participate in the political process—whether you are Democrat or Republican.

Finally, my father is still a true believer in the American Dream, despite the obstacle of racism: “We, even as minorities, can achieve the American Dream by working hard and having positive attitudes without having to use militant revolutionary tactics. In early years, we might have needed that, okay. . . . But in the U.S. today, minority groups can still realize the dream through individual initiative.”

Certainly, the concept of the “American Dream” is vague at best and different for each individual, but without question, my parents have come far since their arrival in New York City in 1964. My parents’ life experiences have shaped many of my beliefs about America. My father, who has partly embraced the progressive vision of America from the 1960s and ’70s, but who has also developed his ideology from his own experiences over the past three decades, has especially contributed to my ideology. Below, I discuss some of my own experiences that have also affected my views on race in America.

B. My Story

Born and raised in the middle-class suburbs of Washington, D.C., I admit that I have not suffered very much in life. Unlike my parents, I did not have to endure the horrors of a civil war in China, nor did I grow up separated from my immediate family or without a father. Unlike my older brother, I did not have to overcome childhood birth defects—struggling to breathe, to function as a normal American baby. Nor did I grow up while my parents struggled merely to survive in this new land. Furthermore, I never faced the senseless physical violence that my brother faced, as he was hit in the eye with rocks thrown by other children—scarring him for life and causing permanent eye damage. Indeed, by all accounts, I have been very fortunate to grow up as the “spoiled baby” of my family—insulated from many of the harsh realities of the world that we live in.

My family’s experiences and hardships have certainly had an impact on my life and how I view my own experiences in relationship to this world. My parents’ struggle to reach the American Dream gives me a deep feeling of family pride and greater appreciation for hard work, pa-
tience, struggle, and hope. My brother’s victory over his medical conditions and over senseless violence provides me with a source of inspiration regarding the healing power of people, including the white doctors who cared for him. Indeed, I believe that the true greatness of this country lies in its people, its families, and its communities, rather than its government institutions.

I cannot deny that my personal experiences have guided me towards a belief that we can best overcome our racial, social, and economic problems not by large institutional reform, but by virtue and individual initiative. I believe these problems can be resolved not by mandating thought or action, but by employing incentives and market-based principles that foster and cultivate our good will, virtue, and human spirit. In particular, my views on race and society have grown out of the context of my life experiences—growing up in a Chinese immigrant family in Washington, D.C., attending college in Berkeley, California, and returning to D.C. for law school.

My participation in United States Air Force JROTC during my high school years, and in particular my participation in the summer training program, most influenced my early views on our multiracial society. It also gave me a deeper appreciation of this country, of our precious freedoms, and of the values that have made this country great, yet it did so without masking the real problems that this country faces. Instead, JROTC provided me valuable lessons to live by and forced me to think about possible solutions.

Through JROTC, I saw how a meritocracy could function effectively, even when it was really a combination of subjective and objective criteria. I realized that incentives and high standards were essential for both the individual and the unit to progress and succeed. Mediocrity was unacceptable, and in fact, punishable by pushups, marching, running, or other more abusive treatment. Questioning authority or making excuses was impermissible, and avoiding personal responsibility was grounds for even more severe punishment. It was under these conditions that I gained a greater appreciation for the ability to overcome adversity and the need to shed any lingering victim mentality if my fellow cadets and I were to succeed, not only in the military environment, but also in everyday life.

My company was comprised of predominantly African American inner-city youths, with a few whites and Latinos, and even fewer Asians—four, I believe. While I valued my company’s diversity, I also understood that our race did not qualify us for special treatment in the cadet evaluation. Leadership skills as measured by the officers and drill sergeants, test scores and inspections, and physical training marks constituted the stan-

standards of evaluation. My hard work would pay off, and in the face of sometimes unbearable adversity, I would become a better person for my actions—not only in my own eyes, but in the eyes of my officers, drill sergeants, and fellow cadets who weeks earlier had never met a little "China boy" from the suburbs. At the end of the summer training camp, the unit selected me to carry the American flag during the "pass and review" ceremony.

My participation in JROTC, especially those few weeks of summer camp, greatly affected my views on society and race, and on the problems and solutions that our nation must address today and in the future. Indeed, for many of the inner-city cadets, JROTC provided discipline, leadership and positive role models that were lacking in their home environment. Moreover, while I am grateful to have lived in middle-class suburbia and attended school in a safe learning environment, neither my AP classes nor my daily interactions with other middle-class students taught me as much about the complexities of life in our multiracial society as high school JROTC.

Leaving the sheltered suburbs of our nation’s capital for college, I gained new insights about society at UC Berkeley. In the classroom, I learned about past and present racism and oppression of minorities, including Asian Americans, that was not taught to us in our high school history classes. Not surprisingly, I found myself embracing some of the progressive ideology of Berkeley's Asian American movement. More importantly, I developed an even greater commitment to volunteering and serving the disadvantaged members of the community. As a volunteer tutor in the Berkeley Unified School District, I worked with the poorer students who were bused from downtown to the Emerson Primary School, a public school in a predominantly upper middle-class residential neighborhood. Although the level of disparity between the students was significant, more depressing was the state of family affairs for many of these bused students. In particular, I remember David, a seven-year old boy with a volatile temper and low self-esteem. David was completely illiterate and held back in first grade once already. Most likely, he was going to be held back for a second straight year, and I was helpless to change that. Two hours a week with me was not going to be enough to help him catch up.

I remember the teacher telling me that his father was nowhere to be found, that his mother was a recovering crack addict, and that David lived on welfare and AFDC with his grandmother. It angered and saddened me, and five years later, I wonder where David is now. Has he been allowed to pass through the system without learning his ABCs? Did holding him back further diminish any remaining self-esteem, or did it eventually force him to learn? And what about his family? Did his mother recover, find work, and become a responsible parent, and did his father ever come back? I do not know the answers to these questions, and sometimes, I think I do
not want to know.

Working and volunteering in the community caused me to gradually challenge the progressive ideas of the classroom that goaded me to service in the first place. Eventually, despite my continued commitment to work with disenfranchised communities, my ideological shift to the Left would begin to ebb, as I became disillusioned by what I felt was a narrow strategy of the progressive Asian American movement. Besides redistribution of wealth, more laws and regulations, and increased spending on government programs and entitlements (e.g., welfare and affirmative action), what other solutions and ideas did the progressive Asian American movement embrace? Encouraging students at Berkeley to volunteer and fight for disadvantaged members of our community was important, but how else could we address the creation of new opportunities and fostering of success in our community? Rather than simply dispelling the model minority myth, could we look to proven models of success in not only the Asian American community, but also in other communities—whether white, black, Native American, or Latino? Without necessarily espousing notions of cultural superiority or inferiority, how could we admit that traditional values, the rule of law, morality and virtue mattered in creating a civil society for all citizens? Despite recognizing the institutional and racist barriers that continue to exist in America, could we still encourage individuals to believe in the American Dream, participate in the free market, seize opportunities, and climb the economic ladder, or should we foster a victim’s mentality that tells individual members of disenfranchised groups that they cannot dream or succeed because of systematic racism and oppression?

When I arrived in Berkeley, the terms “diversity” and the “Asian American movement” sounded great, but what good were they, when they were more cosmetic than real? How effective were racial and ethnic identity politics when they alienated not only the majority white community, but also certain members of the Asian American community? Uncomfortable with these questions in my head, I reverted back to my neo-conservative ways of thinking. After a four-year period of constant learning, questioning, and struggling, I walked away with my Berkeley diploma, but ideologically excluded from the Asian American movement.

Three years after Berkeley, and now graduating from law school, I still consider myself an Asian American neo-conservative. However, this is not to say that I am not active in the Asian American community. On

13. This is not to say that I endorse the model minority label. The perpetuation of the model minority myth—that all Asian Americans are smart and successful—not only stigmatizes other minorities but further masks and hides the significant problems facing many members of our own community. However, we ought not downplay the significant achievements of the many successful members of the Asian American community, whom we should celebrate, learn from, and take pride in. In this regard, without forgetting those less fortunate, I regard Asian Americans not as model minorities, but as model Americans—representing the finest of what America has to offer.
the contrary, here in our nation’s capital, I have been more active than ever. I have worked in Chinatown tutoring Chinese immigrant students and other inner-city students. I have participated in voter registration workshops and met with community leaders to address problems facing the Asian American community (immigration, the campaign finance scandal). I organized a NAPALSA Conference and served as NAPALSA President—hoping to not only address issues facing the Asian American community, but also to foster a more open discussion with varying political viewpoints. In my final semester of law school, I helped to create a legal referral service to serve the needs of Asian Pacific Americans in the D.C. area. It is in this context that I am the “strange and new political animal” that Professor Omatsu calls the Asian American neo-conservative.

III. WHAT DOES THIS ASIAN AMERICAN NEO-CONSERVATIVE BELIEVE?

The purpose of this section is not to provide answers to America’s race relation problems, since there are no simple answers. Rather, as Professor Omatsu noted, I hope to “bring a vibrancy to community issues by contributing a different viewpoint” and very briefly articulate a few issues and questions that I consider central to the discussion of multiracial America. In this context, I attempt to distinguish what I believe versus what my progressive Asian American counterparts believe. In a way, this section is a brief, albeit indirect, response to Professor Omatsu’s negative description of Asian American neo-conservatives. In its brevity, this section contains holes and gaps which may leave the reader unsatisfied. Indeed, I wish I could develop my arguments in greater detail, but to delve into a sufficiently thorough discussion of the issues is far beyond the scope of this Comment. There are no easy answers, but as I discuss in Section IV, all members of the Asian American community should work together to evaluate and resolve these issues, even as we disagree.

A. Racism Is Not Embedded In American Society

No doubt, racism in America still exists today. But given the tremendous progress that has been made in only the past three decades, can we

14. During the past three years, I have worked closely with the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium (NAPALC), the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA), and the National Asian Pacific American Law Students Association (NAPALSA) on issues confronting the community.

15. When many of my peers across the country discover my neo-conservative views, some have expressed shock, disbelief, and disappointment, but I can thankfully say that most have expressed support, not necessarily for my views, but for my goal of frank and open debate.

16. In particular, the progress of the Asian American community has been quite visible, as the statistical changes in many important socio-economic factors cannot be denied. For an in-depth look at the statistical data for the Asian American community, see Arthur Hu, Arthur Hu’s Index of Diversity (visited March 3, 1997) <http://www.leconsulting.com/arthurhu/index/asianam.htm>. This
honestly say that white America will always be racist towards Asian Americans and other people of color, or that people of color will forever be subordinated, oppressed, or otherwise excluded from mainstream America?\(^{17}\) Or is there a danger that a declaration of the permanence of racism in America represents a self-fulfilling prophecy? In his essay on Asian American Legal Scholarship, Professor Chang states:

Many people would like to think of the United States as a melting pot, that diverse groups enter the United States and evolve into unhyphenated Americans. But racial minorities understand this to be a lie. Justice Thurgood Marshall commented, “The dream of America as the great melting pot has not been realized for the Negro; because of his skin color he never made it into the pot.” Likewise, I know that my future children, and their children, will never be Americans. They will always be Asian Americans. I can bemoan their fate that they will never be plain Americans, or I can celebrate that they will be Asian Americans. The choice seems easy, but in order to do the latter, I must give them back their heritage.\(^ {18}\)

Since minorities will represent a majority of the population by the middle of the next century, what does the future really hold, and how will our definition of “plain American” change?\(^ {19}\) What roles do the death of the older generation,\(^ {20}\) racial mixing, and intermarriage have in the increasingly complex future of multiracial America?\(^ {21}\)
As a second generation Chinese American, I do not attempt to hide my cultural, racial or ethnic identity, and indeed, I am very proud of my Chinese heritage that dates back 5,000 years. Nonetheless, when I embrace both my Chinese American and Asian American identity, it is not at the expense of my “plain American” identity. Despite our nation’s ugly history of racism, unlike Professor Chang, I do not view the two concepts—“Asian American” and “American”—as being mutually exclusive.

Imagine that Professor Chang’s statement referred to Italian Americans—a group that has also faced overt discrimination during our nation’s history. Looking at my brother and sister-in-law’s family and considering Professor Chang’s statement, I wonder what the future holds for my unborn nephews or nieces, who will be ethnically one-half Chinese (3rd generation) and one-half Italian (5th generation). Will they really “never be plain Americans,” even as more and more of their peers look like them in the future? Will their one-half white blood prevent them from fully appreciating their Chinese heritage or the contribution of Asian Americans to America? Or, contrary to Professor Chang’s vision, can they represent an American society that is free of racism, celebrates diversity, and classifies Asian-Italian Americans as “plain Americans”?

My point in asking these questions is to emphasize that our country,


While the state of Hawaii is currently much different than the mainland, its multi-racial and ethnic composition can serve as a model for the rest of the country. As I watched Brook Lee (Miss USA from Hawaii) win the Ms. Universe competition on May 16, 1997, I realized that the blurring of racial and ethnic composition in America holds a bright and beautiful future. Ms. Lee is part Chinese, Korean, Hawaiian, Dutch, and various other ethnic groups.

22. Chang writes about “giving [his future children] back their heritage.” But what is that heritage, and is it limited to persons of Asian descent? I ask this question because of my troubled experience with the notion of culture and heritage. In this respect, why am I proud of my Chinese heritage? Is it simply because of my black hair and yellow skin or even the recent history of oppression in America? Or does it go deeper, into the 5,000 years of extraordinary history and civilization that has been passed down to me through my family, culture, and education? In this respect, I fear that a racial and ethnic pride that goes skin deep ignores and undermines the true value of multiculturalism and diversity, since biologically, there really is no difference between the races. See Don Podesta, When Language and Culture are More Telling than Race, WASH. POST, May 16, 1997, at E1.

Consequently, I am wary of the exclusionary tendency of a skin-deep Asian American identity that not only fails to appreciate the vast history of Asian civilization, but moreover, condemns “outsiders” who attempt to appreciate it. In particular, I am reminded of various incidents in Berkeley in which unknown Asian American students harassed white professors of Asian Studies for their “patriarchal,” “Eurocentric,” and “oppressive” manner of teaching courses which they had no business teaching in the first place. Somehow, being white prevented these professors from being “authentic” or capable of teaching the materials.

23. When the drill instructors at summer camp selected me to carry the United States Flag during the “Pass and Review” ceremony on the last day, when the United States Air Force Association awarded me its highest JROTC award, or when my Congresswoman nominated me for the various military academies, did I not represent America? In each of these cases, I remember feeling proud of my achievements, not only as an individual, but also as an Asian American and a “plain American.”
despite its problems, is a united America with many common traits and shared values that do bring us together. While racism remains a significant problem in our society, it is not permanent, unless we choose to make it permanent. Of course, combating racism must come from all of us—both the majority white population and minority communities of color—but minority communities cannot constantly antagonize the majority in our forward-looking quest for equality. While we must remember the history of discrimination in this country and fight racism in all its forms, we should also recognize the significant progress that has been made in America. While we should celebrate and respect our differences, we should also embrace our common values and shared beliefs that make all of us "plain Americans."

B. The Free Market Works

Are capitalism, free markets, and competition implicitly racist and unduly oppressive or unfair? Two of the basic principles that I continuously attempt to reconcile are my faith in the free market and my belief in racial and social justice. In this respect, the study of economics has affected my perspective on the issue of racial justice in America. Some have argued that the economic goal of efficiency cannot comport with the goals of equity and fairness. Thus, a basic tenet of progressives is the need for government intervention and redistribution of wealth to ensure equitable results that the free markets fail to produce.

I do not believe that the goals of a laissez-faire economy, fiscal restraint and fiscal conservatism are antithetical to the goals of equity, social reform and racial justice. While inequalities of wealth remain a major concern for all Americans, including Asian Americans, our nation’s reliance on inefficient government programs and entitlements cannot be absolute. We can look to new, more effective, and more efficient market-based solutions to address our social inequities and racial injustices. As a recent commentary appearing in the *Washington Post* indicates:

The moral appeal of socialism and state intervention is clear and explicit: altruism, sympathy and solidarity with fellow human beings; dignity and social betterment; justice and fairness. The market system’s moral basis


25. In a way, my study of economics can also be tied to my Asian and Asian American identity. Indeed, my frugality and penchant to save comes from my Chinese parents who have taught me never to waste or spend more than I have. Moreover, I often look at the Japanese and Asia’s newly industrialized economies (i.e., Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and South Korea) shift towards capitalism over the past three decades and the present shifts of China, Vietnam, and the rest of Southeast Asia towards market-based economies.
is more subtle and indirect. The essential morality of the market is three-fold. The first is in the results it delivers, in what it makes possible for people and, cumulatively, for the betterment of society. The second lies in the conviction that a system based on property, contracts and initiative provides protection against the arbitrary power of the state. The third is the quality of the “rules of the game” that govern its workings.26

Certainly, the market is not perfect, and some market-based solutions will fail in solving our race and class-based problems, but to shy away from new alternatives outside of inefficient, bureaucratic government short-changes our communities. Professor Leroy Clark, a civil rights attorney, writes that he and other progressives were “surprised by the massive collapse of the economies of the major socialist countries. We must now educate ourselves through the economists and non-lawyers writing about the prospects for economic justice in a private property economy.”27 Thus, as Clark acknowledges, free market principles can comport with economic justice, and increased government redistribution and entitlements are not necessarily the best way to ensure equitable results. On the contrary, reliance on government redistribution and entitlements over business and capitalism may ensure continued inequity.28

When the government fails, it continues to operate, in its inappropriate and wasteful capacity. However, when a business fails, the market forces it to exit—allowing new competitors to enter. Consequently, I have faith that market-based solutions—through experimentation and failures, exit and entry—can indirectly influence social reform and equitable results.29

One particular example of the free market’s role in helping Asian Americans comes to mind when one considers the continued harmful effects of discrimination and glass ceilings on Asian Americans in the workplace.30 While discrimination in all forms is unacceptable, entry into the

27. See Leroy D. Clark, supra note 17, at 48 (emphasis added).
28. See Joel Kotkin, Los Angeles: Five Years Later; Rebuilding Blocks: A Boom in Latino and Asian Businesses Shapes the City, WASH. POST, Apr. 20, 1997, at C1. Clearly, the divide between conservatives and liberals and progressives on the effectiveness of government programs is large and beyond the scope of this Comment. However, within the African American community, a significant percentage (31.2%) across all classes has conservative beliefs with respect to the efficacy of government redistribution. See Robert C. Smith & Richard Seltzer, Race, Class, and Culture: A Study in Afro-American Mass Opinion (1992) (noting at page 68 that “it is the self-identified working class [in the black community] that is less likely to support government initiatives to redistribute income.”).
29. For example, one of the greatest crises facing our nation is the inadequate conditions of our public schools—particularly in the inner cities. I believe that the use of vouchers, school choice, and independent charter schools for inner-city students is one way that the marketplace can serve the equitable needs of the community by improving the quality of education.
free market has proved to be a formidable means of empowering frustrated members of the Asian American community—thereby achieving economic empowerment and social justice. Faith in free markets does not imply acceptance of a status quo that continues to discriminate against Asian Americans and other minorities. All forms of racism and discrimination must be condemned, but improving the livelihood and serving the needs of the community require more than race-related social policy and government redistribution.

At a time when the rest of the world moves towards more competitive market-based economies to solve its problems of scarcity and distribution, American communities of color cannot shy away from the competition, challenges, and opportunities that market-based solutions provide. As Yergin and Stanislaw recently observed:

We are leaving behind a remarkable half-century in which governments, communist and non-communist alike, sought to control the ‘commanding heights’ of the economy.... In the name of competition, deregulation and privatization, economies around the world are being reordered, in some cases, radically so.... The marketplace focus that seemed radical... has become the global consensus in a little more than two decades. This reversal is partly explained by the shift from a preoccupation with ‘market failure,’ which began in the Depression, to a focus on ‘government failure,’ on what governments do not do very well. There was the dawning realization that governments really could eat up too much of the gross domestic product, that heavy taxation, over-generous welfare bene-

603,439. Receipts generated by these businesses increased by 163% from $36.5 billion to $96 billion” (emphasis added). See THE ECONOMIC STATUS OF AMERICANS OF ASIAN DESCENT: AN EXPLORATORY INVESTIGATION (October 1988) (analyzing the findings on income disparity and discrimination that differ across ethnicities and between native and foreign-born persons). Professor Amado Cabezas, a former professor of Asian American studies at UC Berkeley, critically responds to the survey and its apparent shortcomings. See Duleep, supra note 16.


Times have changed. No longer can America exclude us from any industry because Asians are the backbones of its future industries—America’s best hope for hanging onto a thin lead against the countries that gave birth to the once-despised Asian immigrants. Indeed, the mocked Asian knack for squeezing maximal utility from minimal space and materials—the “chinky chinky chinaman trying to make a dollar out of 15 cents”—is giving birth to our collective future. No more elegant expression of the Asian less-is-more impulse can we hope to find than the semiconductor chip and the global miniaturization frenzy it has enabled.

Without the Asian contribution—we note with justifiable pride—America’s computer industry may never have gotten off the ground. Even the dim behemoths IBM managed to cobble together in the late ’50s were made possible by the magnetic core memory invented by An Wang. Half the engineers of Silicon Valley—which actually stretches from Seattle down to San Diego, then across Texas and the Sun Belt to Richmond, Virginia—are Asian.

Id. (emphasis added).

On an interesting side note, one of the top entrepreneurs listed in the survey is Charles Wang, founder of Computer Associates. A Chinese immigrant who came to America at age 8, after the Communist takeover, he started out working as a waiter with my father during the 1964 World’s Fair in New York City. Last year, he donated millions of dollars to establish the Asian American Studies Department at SUNY-Stonybrook.
fits and rigid employment rules do discourage job creation, economic growth and risk taking. 32

While the debate over the proper roles of government and the marketplace in governing the nation-state continues, many of the old negative assumptions about the free market have changed in the global academic community. As the authors above point out, the task of government has now become “setting the rules rather than playing the game—to ensure competition, opportunity and fairness.” 33

In conclusion, I endorse Professor Clark’s statement that we must consider “prospects for economic justice in a private property economy.” We should continue to combat inequalities of wealth through limited “safety nets,” and we should ensure fairness and opportunity through improved access to education and training and strict enforcement of antidiscrimination laws, but we must not overlook the significant benefits that a capitalist, free-market, competitive economy provides to communities in search of social, economic and racial justice.

C. The Role Of Merit And Standards

Does a minority acceptance of meritocracy constitute a surrender to racism and bias arising out of the acceptance of majoritarian standards? The Asian American community, as well as other disenfranchised communities, has throughout its history in America used standards and merit to overcome racism and oppression. Regardless of the alleged subjectivity and social construction of standards and merit, they have been a crucial means for Asian Americans and all minorities to achieve equality and overcome other more pernicious forms of racism in America. 35 While the

33. Id.
35. For example, in admissions into the elite universities, Asian Americans pushed for objective standards and merit-based criteria (grades, SAT scores) to overcome the subjective criteria of alumni preferences and lineage. See Linda Mathews, When Being Best Isn’t Good Enough, L.A. TIMES MAGAZINE, July 19, 1987, at 23. See also David A. Bell, America’s Greatest Success Story: The Triumph of Asian Americans, THE NEW REPUBLIC, July 15-22, 1985, at 26 (noting in 1985 that “only the top 12.5% of high school students qualify for admission to the uppermost tier of the state university system, but 39% of Asian American high school students do.”). Articles like Bell’s have been criticized for contributing to the Model Minority Myth that ignores the conditions of less successful Asian Americans and divides and ostracizes other minority communities. See Keith Osajima, Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press
use of misguided standards and improper criteria for merit has also un-
fairly denied opportunities in the past, the use of standards and merit have
increasingly served to overcome society’s irrational racism rather than
perpetuate it.\textsuperscript{35} To reject the idea of standards and merit because they
presently represent the white majority misses the point, since invariably,
any type of standards will be majoritarian—even within the minority
community.

I have found the criticism of uniform standards and merit to be pecu-
liar, given my personal background. Indeed, if there is such a thing as an
Asian American identity, much of it comes not only from our shared expe-
riences of oppression, but from what we have learned from our family and
culture. For example, the Confucian culture is widely known to support
the use of standards and merit to ensure equal opportunity. In ancient
China, the scholarly entrance exams open to all citizens were crucial to
gaining entry to the civil service system. In much of modern day Asia, the
use of standards and merit are still crucial to the learning process as young
children from all backgrounds prepare for entrance exams at each level of
schooling. The adoption of uniform standards has ensured equal opportu-
nity and leveled the playing fields for many Asians—both here and abroad.
For example, although my mother grew up in a poor, native Taiwanese
neighborhood, her ability to study hard and do well on tests and outper-
form her more privileged peers from the mainland allowed her access to
the best schools in Taiwan. Today, Asian Americans are overrepresented
in our nation’s universities because of merit and our ability to achieve ex-
ceedingly high standards of excellence.\textsuperscript{37}

\textit{Image in the 1960s and 1980s, in Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects
for Asian American Studies} 165 (Gary Y. Okihiro et al. eds., 1988); Eugene F. Wong, \textit{Asian
Studies 51 (1985). However, recognition of Asian American achievement does not mean to ignore
the circumstances of those who are disadvantaged or less successful, nor must it be viewed as divisive
or condescending towards other disenfranchised communities. As I previously stated, successful
Asian Americans are not necessarily model minorities, but model Americans for all people—whites,
blacks, Latinos, and other Asian Americans—to acknowledge and celebrate. \textit{See supra note 13.}

\textsuperscript{36} See Gerard Baker, \textit{Inequality’s Unfair Critics: Labour Patterns Suggest a Trend Towards
Meritocracy in the US}, Financial Times, January 12, 1998, at 13 (evaluating Professor Robert Lerman’s
report, “Meritocracy Without Rising Inequality”).

\textsuperscript{37} See Onishi, supra note 21. The author writes:

\textit{Colleges hold a special power in shaping Asian-Americans’ identities. Only 3 percent of the
country’s population, they represented 5.4 percent of the students in colleges and at univer-
sities nationwide in 1994, according to the United States Department of Education. It is the
only group whose percentage of students was above their proportion of the national popu-
lation… Asian American high school seniors have the highest grades and test scores of
any racial group.}

\textit{Id. (emphasis added).}

\textit{See also Pamela Burdman, Asians Benefit from Changes at UC; Backlash Feared as Other
Groups Fight for Fewer Spots, S.F. Chron., Oct. 31, 1997, at A1 (quoting Professor Claude Fischer,
“Survey data shows that a lot of these Asian kids put in more hours of schoolwork. What the Asians
have had as an advantage is coming from cultures that don’t believe that academic differences are
natural or immutable, but that they are totally the result of hard work”).}
Professor Omatsu claims that "in their obsession with merit, qualifications and objective criteria, [neo-conservatives] lose sight of power and oppression." In classroom discussions, my peers have criticized me for allegedly perpetuating the model minority myth by supporting the use of the majority white standards and internalizing their oppression. However, Asian Americans, who have suffered discrimination but who have maintained the highest standards of excellence, have used meritocracy to surpass the standards of white America. Reality dictates that our nation’s meritocracy, albeit imperfect, allows hard-working Asian Americans to overcome power and oppression rather than internalize it.

Without question, America is not yet a pure and colorblind meritocracy, but if that is our nation’s goal, we should embrace the belief that individuals be judged under one set of standards, even as we continue to refine and improve the proper measurement of standards. Certainly, we must strive for more objective and race-neutral standards; however, we ought not reject the existing notions of standards and merit simply because they seem to represent the white majority’s view. Adopting separate sets of standards for different groups and defining merit based on racial or ethnic background fosters inequality rather than equality. Thus, as we find ways to overcome racism and become a colorblind meritocracy, we cannot overlook the need for uniform standards to apply equally to all individuals.

D. The Role And Future Of Race-based Affirmative Action\textsuperscript{38}

Before we can discuss the issue of affirmative action, it is important to define the term, which can mean many things. If it is defined as increased recruitment efforts and outreach programs targeted toward minority or other disenfranchised communities, I am in full support of affirmative action. Likewise, if it means strict enforcement of anti-discrimination laws, I also have no problems. However, affirmative action does trouble me when it specifically adopts racial and ethnic group preferences—particularly in the public sector and in education. First, while I realize that our society is not yet color-blind, and in fact, may never be completely color-blind, I believe that the public sector must act in a color-blind fashion and adopt a race-neutral standard under the law. Second, because education is so crucial to success in society, I am troubled by the fact that individuals in the Asian American community are routinely held to higher standards of excellence, denied equal opportunity, and ultimately denied access simply because of their race or ethnicity.\textsuperscript{39}

\textsuperscript{38} Ultimately, we might have to wait until the Supreme Court is willing to rule on an affirmative action case to resolve this highly contentious matter. See Regents of the Univ. of Cal. v. Bakke, 438 U.S. 265 (1978); Adarand Constructors, Inc. v. Pena, 515 U.S. 200 (1995). See also Hopwood v. Texas, 78 F.3d 932 (5th Cir. 1996), cert. denied, 518 U.S. 1033 (1996).

\textsuperscript{39} This assertion does not mean that I am against improving the educational opportunities of other minority communities. Rather, I am troubled by the specifically race-conscious means of ac-
Opposing affirmative action in the form of racial group preferences does not automatically imply opposing diversity or minority interests. Rather, opposing specific racial preferences denotes a support for race neutrality, equal opportunity and genuine and naturally-occurring diversity. Affirmative action programs that pursue the goal of diversity by adopting racial and ethnic group preferences not only reinforce racial stereotyping, but are also zero-sum. For each individual beneficiary of a specific racial preference, there is another individual who is harmed by that group preference. In this respect, educational preferences that disadvantage or deny opportunities to Asian Americans—many of whom have faced discrimination, racism, and hardship—in favor of other groups (including whites) result in a zero-sum outcome for society as a whole.\(^{40}\)

Proponents of diversity-based affirmative action in education, including progressive members of the Asian American community, present the notion that race constitutes merit since the racial diversity of the campus adds to the learning experience of the students. Unfortunately, for Asian Americans, race constitutes a demerit, such that hard-working, over-achieving Asian American individuals are told that since their group is overrepresented (i.e., in magnet schools and higher education), it is permissible to hold Asian Americans to a higher and unequal standard from the rest of society. In this view, certain individuals in the Asian American community must suffer further discrimination for the “greater good,” as Chinese civil rights activist Henry Der suggests.\(^{41}\) For me, this argument rings hollow, and I am afraid that I cannot bring myself to tell these individuals that they should accept their unequal and unfair treatment.

In disagreeing with racial group preferences and diversity-based affirmative action, I do not discount or ignore the value of true diversity. Rather, I critique the means of achieving genuine diversity. Both UC Berkeley and Georgetown have allowed me to experience diversity, and I am thankful for that, but to use group preferences to achieve racial diversity troubles me because in a world of limited resources and scarcity, it leads to

\(^{40}\) See Nanette Asimov, Lowell Freshman Reflect Entry Rules But Chinese Americans and Black Leaders Still Unhappy, S.F. CHRON., Aug. 28, 1996, at A1. The article discusses the situation at San Francisco’s Lowell High School, where admission requires minimum test scores that vary with the ethnicity of the applicant. One result of the policy is that Chinese American students must score higher than any other group (including other Asian Americans) to win a place in the classroom. While the new admissions policy improves on the previous method, it still differentiates minimum admission scores between races. See also Elaine Woo, Caught on the Wrong Side of the Line? Chinese Americans Must Outscore All Other Groups to Enter Elite Lowell High in San Francisco, Sparking an Ugly Debate Over Diversity and the Image of a ‘Model Minority,’” L.A. TIMES, July 13, 1995, at A1 (quoting Lee Cheng: “I was beaten up as a kid, referred to as a chink, a Chinaman. But in school I was taught that the laws will treat everyone the same, that discrimination was being eliminated. Then my friends and I applied to public high school. We discovered that if you are Chinese, you have to do better than anyone else”).

\(^{41}\) See Woo, supra note 40.
the permanence of affirmative action, increased racial and ethnic division, number games, and even illegal quotas.

What is the so-called "principled" position that Asian Americans ought to take? In a speech given by Professor Frank Wu of Howard University last summer to students participating in the Conference on Asian Pacific American Leadership, he asked students to ignore their own self-interest and take a "principled" look at affirmative action. During last year's Harvard APALSA conference, keynote speaker Angelo Ancheta of the Asian Law Caucus also made the same request to students. I could not help but wonder what distinctions existed between this "principled" position and the impliedly self-interested counter-position.

If I am a beneficiary of affirmative action, as Asian Americans often are (outside of higher education), is my support of affirmative action based, at least partly, on self-interest? Does adopting the "principled" position mean that we take into consideration the interest of other more disenfranchised minorities, so as to support affirmative action even when it is against our own self-interest? If so, does the "principled" stance merely reflect the self-interest of the communities of color as a whole? What if I consider that my belief in race neutrality under the law is the so-called "principled" position or that any racial group preference—whether towards whites or minorities—is morally wrong? Am I wrong? In essence, to ask me to separate the "principled" position from the self-interested position presents a false dichotomy, since each of us have different principles and different interests. Moreover, the simple fact that Asian Americans

42. Whereas the compensatory or remedial rationale for group preferences suggests a temporary use of affirmative action programs, the diversity rationale suggests a need for more permanent group preferences that ensure that society's demographics are mirrored. In this scenario, even the so-called privileged white males can be given an explicit preference over a disadvantaged Asian American. Thus, diversity-based group preferences unwittingly undermine the goal of equal opportunity—replacing it with the goal of equal results.

43. For example, in furtherance of the goal to seek racial and ethnic diversity at UC Berkeley, Asian Americans who represent almost 40% of the student body are not considered candidates for affirmative action. According to Natalie Lising (Boalt Hall law student), a leader in the Pilipino student community, Pilipino Americans (who were taken off affirmative action in 1992 and represent the second largest group of Asian Americans in America) constituted less than 50 students in the entering class of 1996. Thus, many Pilipino American students have demanded that they be reinstated for consideration under affirmative action. See Leonel Sanchez, UC Turndown of Filipinos Labeled Unfair Ethnic Bias, SAN DIEGO TRIB., April 30, 1991, at B3. Similarly, other underrepresented Southeast Asians in the UC system who are grouped under the category of Asian Americans are punished. See Brad Hayward, A Lesson in Asian Disparity, SACRAMENTO BEE, May 9, 1993, at B1 (noting that "Southeast Asians and other immigrant groups . . . are still underrepresented in higher education, . . . but are not targeted for admission because they are seen as Asian Americans first").


45. For an interesting discussion on the internal divisions of the Asian American community, see Norimitsu Onishi, Affirmative Action: Choosing Sides, N.Y. TIMES, March 31, 1996, § 4A (Education Life Supplement), at 26; Annie Nakao, Asians Deeply Divided Over Affirmative Action; "It's
are sometimes beneficiaries of affirmative action, this should not prevent us from questioning the appropriateness of affirmative action as it is implemented today. White Americans have been the beneficiaries of racism and discrimination for centuries, yet that fact alone should certainly not prevent them from questioning the morality or propriety of continued racism and discrimination.

In conclusion, I believe that there is room for debate and compromise on the issue of affirmative action. Although I feel that racial group preferences are unacceptable, I realize that we must do more to ensure equal opportunity and greater access to quality education for all of our citizens. We must strictly enforce anti-discrimination laws, support and encourage greater recruitment and outreach programs, and most importantly, reform the primary and secondary public education system that has failed to properly prepare and educate many of our most disenfranchised youths to successfully compete in our knowledge-based world.

Quite frankly, my position on affirmative action is a combination of self-interest and principle. As an Asian American, I want to protect an important interest for individuals in our community—education. I cannot bring myself to tell others that they must somehow look beyond their own self-interest, compete under different, higher standards, and consequently face unjust denial of opportunities simply because of their race or ethnicity, as in the case of students applying to Lowell High School. Simultaneously, I believe in the principle of race neutrality under the law and equal opportunity, but not necessarily equal results. Thus, when Asian American students work hard, study hard, and do well, despite the discrimination many have faced, why should they be punished simply for their race or ethnicity? While Asian Americans may be beneficiaries of affirmative


46. For example, I am more willing to consider socio-economic affirmative action and other race-neutral measures that still seek to help out disadvantaged communities of color (i.e., geographically-based outreach to inner-city and rural communities). See Deborah C. Malamud, Symposium: The Changing Workplace: Class-Based Affirmative Action: Lesson and Caveats, 74 TEX. L. REV. 1847 (1996); Richard D. Kahlenberg, Affirmative Action by Class, WASH. POST, July 17, 1995, at A19.

Class-based affirmative action restores the focus to equal opportunity and provides preferences on the sensible premise that a disadvantaged student who has faced obstacles—not at all of her own making—may in fact have greater long-run potential than her SAT score suggests. The new program [class-based] would benefit poor students of all races, all of whom deserve a leg up. . . . The preferred students of color would themselves all be disadvantaged—the very subcategory most likely to suffer from the continuing legacy of past discrimination, though least likely to benefit from current programs. The moral underpinnings of the system would be restored, and a more genuine diversity, economic as well as racial, would naturally result.

Id.

47. See L. Ling-chi Wang, Meritocracy and Diversity in Higher Education: Discrimination Against Asian Americans, THE URBAN REV. 1988, at 189 (examining how the movement away from academic and meritocratic criteria in university admissions negatively impacts Asian American students—citing significantly higher academic qualifications and significantly lower rates of admis-
action in the workplace, I, like the parents of Chinese American students applying to Lowell, sincerely believe the costs to Asian Americans in education outweigh any benefits elsewhere. Therefore, in supporting the goals of affirmative action, I believe it is time to look at other race-neutral solutions (e.g., socio-economic or geography-based programs) to ensure genuine diversity and equal opportunities for all disenfranchised communities, particularly in the realm of education. But we must do so without adopting different standards for different racial and ethnic groups. Given our country’s past history of racism towards Asian Americans, any solution must not further discriminate against Asian Americans.

E. Summary of Beliefs

In the above section, I very briefly touched upon certain beliefs that represent my neo-conservative ideology. First, I believe that we have made significant progress in race relations, and I believe that there is an end to racism in our country’s future. While major racial problems continue to exist in America, we must be wary of declaring the permanence of white institutional racism and creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, we must be willing to celebrate not only our differences, but also the similarities that make us all Americans—regardless of our race or ethnicity. Second, given the many problems facing us today, I believe that a properly—not overly—regulated free-market provides valuable solutions to racial, social, and economic ills that cannot be addressed by political or governmental means. While increased government entitlements and direct efforts to redistribute wealth are noble in their goals, their failures over the past three decades suggest to me that we must try something new. The free market’s successes cannot be ignored—particularly as the rest of the world increasingly moves toward the laissez-faire economy. Third, I be-

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See also Bell, supra note 35 (noting that at Harvard during the early 1980s, 12.5% of Asian American applicants were admitted, versus 16% of applicants overall, and 27% of African American applicants); Mathews, supra note 35 (quoting East Los Angeles’ Roosevelt High School college advisor Karen Chang Eubanks). Eubanks states:

Of course, they’re upset when they work their heads off, finish first or second in the class and then are rejected by Berkeley or UCLA. I favor affirmative action, but I don’t know how the UC system can make a rational distinction between Asian kids and Hispanic kids at a school like ours. They all come out of the same neighborhood; they’re all equally disad-
vantaged.

48. See Mathews, supra note 35 (quoting Mandy Au, the mother of Yat-pang Au, who was the top student and a model citizen at San Jose’s Gunerson High School in 1987, yet was rejected by Berkeley while 10 of his peers were accepted. Mrs. Au states, “We’ve felt discrimination before, but I really hate to see it affecting education. Education is special.” (emphasis added)).

49. See id. (quoting John H. Bunzel, former President of San Jose State University and former member of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission). Bunzel states:

I buy the argument that universities should have diverse student bodies. The problem is that when race becomes a factor in admissions, too often it becomes the determining factor. What’s the real difference between a middle-class black student and a middle-class white student? Or a middle-class white student and a middle-class Asian? Perhaps it makes sense, for the sake of diversity, to make sure the poor and disadvantaged are represented. But we ought to move away from race-conscious admissions policies.
lieve in the role of uniform standards and merit, not because they are necessarily always objective, but because they provide individuals with incentives to compete and strive for excellence. Moreover, the use of common standards or merit in society fosters equality, while rejecting majoritarian standards and adopting different standards perpetuates inequality. Finally, while I oppose race-based group preferences, I believe that there is room for compromise on the issue of affirmative action, as we work to ensure fairer access to education and other opportunities for all disadvantaged people.50

What I have briefly described above is what I believe, given my limited experiences and critical reflections. Some of my views may change as time goes on, whether by persuasion or self-evaluation. Nevertheless, I have shown that even though I care deeply about our community, I do not necessarily agree with progressives on how to approach issues confronting our community and our country. It is within this framework that I consider the Asian American movement’s sentiment toward Asian American neo-conservatives.

IV.
THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT IN THE 1990s AND ITS SENTIMENT TOWARDS NEO-CONSERVATIVES

What I argue in this section is that the Asian American community can have solidarity yet disagree on fundamental issues. Professor Omatsu correctly points out that neo-conservatives “represent a legacy of civil rights struggles, especially the Asian American movement.”51 It is because of this seemingly contradictory origin that we feel that the Asian American movement cannot ignore us. In a sense, since the movement helped to create us, it should also be willing to listen to us, rather than ignore or ostracize us. Our ability to disagree and conduct an open and honest discourse is a tribute to our community’s strength and not a sign of weakness.

In analyzing the relationship between neo-conservatives and the Asian American movement, I separate the movement into two integrated but distinct parts—(1) a grassroots movement and (2) an academic and political identity movement. Indeed, the grassroots movement has not necessarily been closed off to neo-conservatives, as our belief in racial and social justice motivates us to work closely with our community, create new economic opportunities, and combat racial and ethnic discrimination

50. See William Julius Wilson, The Truly Disadvantaged: the Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy (1988) (arguing that the inner-city plight is more social and economic class-related than race-related). But see Russell, supra note 24 (arguing that focusing on strictly class-based alternatives “disadvantages all African Americans, some more than others”).
51. Omatsu, supra note 1, at 43.
through more conservative avenues. Consequently, the discussion below focuses on the academic and political agendas of the Asian American movement that purposefully exclude neo-conservative ideology, viewing it instead as a "challenge" or even a threat.

A. The Asian American Movement in the 1990s

As an Asian American neo-conservative, I do not mean to discount or ignore the progressive Asian American movement's contribution, nor do I deem it destructive, as Professor Omatsu incorrectly suggests. Indeed, prior to the movement, our history books and educational system failed to teach us about the role of Asian Americans in contributing to this nation's development and about our history of oppression. The Asian American movement that began in the 1960s raised our community's consciousness and forced us into the complex debate about the conditions of our multiracial—not bi-racial—society. Thus, not only do I not denounce the Asian American movement of the 1960s and 1970s, I commend it for exposing Asian Americans to the rest of America and "bringing us to the table" in discussing the future of an increasingly diverse America.

Nevertheless, significant changes have transpired since the birth of the movement. Such changes—political, social, demographic, and economic—are real and cannot be ignored. The early Asian American movement certainly helped to foster these changes by breaking down barriers and opening up many opportunities previously closed to Asian Americans, yet it is important that the academic and political debate within the Asian American movement remain dynamic, particularly in light of continuing changes in the community. Today, there is still a need to study, understand, and evaluate the progressive principles and the legacy of the initial Asian American movement. However, as we evaluate the present-day Asian American movement in the 1990s, there is an equal need to study, understand, and appreciate other principles and ideas embraced by various members of the Asian American community.

The Asian American community is so diverse that no one position or viewpoint can accurately represent the entire community. The Asian

52. As I previously noted, my father, whom I consider to be a neo-conservative, remains active in grassroots organizing for both the Chinese American community and the greater minority community. One of the most prominent black neo-conservatives is also one of the African American community's most prominent grass-roots organizers. Dr. Robert Woodson of the National Center for Neighborhood Enterprise has worked extensively to revitalize the inner-cities and help the underclass rise out of their dire circumstances—emphasizing community involvement, spiritual and religious awakening, free enterprise, family, and conservative values.

53. Omatsu, supra note 2.

54. Similarly, the African American community is so diverse such that no single ideology can accurately represent it. Because there has not been much legal or mainstream scholarship written by or about Asian American neo-conservatives, a significant amount of my secondary research examined the views and treatment of neo-conservatives in the African American community. Indeed, many African American conservatives and neo-conservatives have faced harsh condemnation from tradition-
American community, collectively, does not consistently express a clear majority for any particular ideology or any political party. Indeed, Japanese Americans, Chinese Americans, and Vietnamese Americans all fall under the category of Asian American, yet they all tend to vote in different patterns.55 Furthermore, within each ethnic community, large ideological differences exist based upon immigration status, age, gender, education and class.56

The results from the recent presidential elections have reflected the internal diversity of political views in the Asian American community. In a recent poll given by Voter New Service of Asian American voters, 48% voted for Dole and 43% voted for Clinton.57 However, in multilingual polls conducted by affiliates of the National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium of over 4,500 Asian American voters in the largest cities, Clinton consistently beat out Dole.58 Yet only four years ago in New York, 52% voted for Bush while 41% voted for Clinton.59 Despite Dole’s defeat in the last presidential election, recent mayoral elections in Los Angeles and New York were both won by Republican mayors who garnered a strong majority of Asian American votes.60 Thus, given the wide political spectrum that Asian American citizens represent,61 I find it peculiar that


56. See HERBERT R. BARRINGER ET AL., ASIANS AND PACIFIC ISLANDERS IN THE UNITED STATES (1993) (examining various statistics about the Asian American community, including immigration, demography, fertility, mortality, geography, family, education, employment, and income).

57. See Marx, supra note 55.

58. See THE NAPALC REVIEW, Winter 1996/1997, at 1, 8 (The results in LA County, 61% Clinton, 32% Dole; New York City, 71% Clinton, 21% Dole; Oakland 84.5% Clinton, 7.2% Dole; San Francisco, 76.8% Clinton and 13.4% Dole).

59. See id. Ironically, that Presidential campaign probably alienated many Asian American Republicans because of the nativist rhetoric of the Republican Party during the national convention.

60. See William Schneider, Shattering an Urban Liberal Coalition, NAT'L J., Apr. 19, 1997 at 790 (noting that two-thirds of Asian Americans voted for Los Angeles Republican Mayor Riordan); Mae M. Cheng, Election 97, Asian Votes Were Rudy's, NEWSDAY, Nov. 6, 1997, at A64 (citing AALDEF's poll results showing that 67% of Asian Americans voted for New York Republican Mayor Giuliani in 1993 and 72% in 1997). See also E.J. Dionne Jr., Mayors Who Make Big Cities Work, WASH. POST, Apr. 11, 1997, at A27; Dan Balz, 2 GOP Mayors Find Success in Pragmatism; For Giuliani, Riordan, Change Isn't Radical, WASH. POST, Apr. 3, 1997, at A1.

61. See Sarah Jackson-Han, Fast-growing Asian Population Confounds Major Political Parties, AGENCE FRANCE PRESSE, Aug. 23, 1996, available in LEXIS, News Library, Curnews File; Shannon D. Murray, Maryland Asians Joining GOP; Power: Republicans with Roots in India, the Philippines
the Asian American movement’s intellectual discussion is defined so strictly by progressive politics that largely ignore and thereby exclude a significant percentage—sometimes even a majority—of the Asian American community that the movement seeks to represent.

Asian Americans have clearly benefited from the progressive Asian American movement’s fight for racial justice and equality. At the same time, Asian Americans have also benefited from conservative political efforts to increase competition, promote free markets and free trade, lower taxes and curtail inefficient big government. Moreover, given the rapidly changing face of the Asian American community, ideological shifts in the community ought not be considered strange. On the contrary, with the emergence of a strong and vibrant middle-class, ideological changes should be expected, and more importantly, critically evaluated and understood rather than dismissed or condemned. Today, two-thirds of Asian Americans are foreign-born; and with the exception of political refugees, most recent Asian immigrants are well-educated professionals who choose to leave their homelands, embrace capitalism, and search for better economic opportunity. Unfortunately, many Asian immigrants arrive in America only to face poverty and harsh conditions with low-class jobs and minimal opportunities.62 However, many other Asian immigrants and native-born Asian Americans have succeeded educationally and economically, despite the existence of racism and the continued harmful effects of discrimination in the labor market.63

The intellectual component of the Asian American movement has not sufficiently matured in light of the dynamic changes of the community it

62. See U.S. Census Bureau homepage (visited May 15, 1997) <http://www.census.gov/population/www/pophome/apipop.html> (reporting that “in 1995, Asian and Pacific Islander households had a median income of $40,614 . . . poverty rate for Asian and Pacific Islanders was 14.6%”). Despite the Asian and Pacific Islander households’ higher median income relative to whites, the poverty rate in Asian and Pacific Islander two-parent families is higher than the poverty rate of white families (12% to 5%), and 15% of Asians and Pacific Islanders were poor versus 10% of whites. Therefore, our community’s higher poverty rate and higher per capita income (relative to the national average) suggest that a significantly greater inequality of wealth distribution exists within the Asian American community, when compared to the greater American community).

63. See id. (reporting that “in 1994, nearly 9 in 10 Asian and Pacific Islander men aged 25 and over and 8 in 10 women had at least a high school diploma. Furthermore, 46% of men and 37% of women had earned at least a bachelor’s degree . . . among Asian groups, the percentage with at least a high school diploma ranged from 31% for Hmong to 88% for Japanese [and the percentage with] at least a bachelor’s degree varied from 6% or less for Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong to 58% for Asian Indians”). For a contrasting viewpoint, see Victor Nee & Jimy Sanders, The Road to Parity: Determinants of the Socioeconomic Achievements of Asian Americans, ETHNIC AND RACIAL STUDIES, August 1988, at 75; Amado Cabezas & Gary Kagawuchi, Industrial Sectorization in California In 1980: The Continuing Significance of Race/Ethnicity, Gender, and Nativity, in INCOME AND STATUS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN WHITE AND MINORITY AMERICANS 57 (Sucheng Chang ed., 1990).
purports to represent. Fighting racism, discrimination and subordination is a goal that all Asian Americans believe in, yet the way we explore solutions cannot ignore what the Asian American community has accomplished over the last few decades. For the Asian American movement to be truly effective in the 1990s, it must recognize the internal dynamism of the Asian American community as it seeks to re-define and re-establish itself.

Professor Mari Matsuda has passionately reminded me and my fellow Asian American law students that we must always “look to the bottom” and not become the racial bourgeois that divides the “haves” from the “have-nots.” I agree with that assertion, but even as we “look to the bottom” and work to help them, we should also “look to the top” of Asian America. Success in the Asian American community—in the face of continued discrimination and racism—does not imply acceptance of the model minority myth or the imperfect status quo, nor does it connote the internalization of the so-called white oppressor’s ideology. The rapidly increasing numbers of Asian Americans that enter the middle and upper-middle class do not indicate acceptance of the racial bourgeois status. Rather, the success of Asian Americans is attributable to both individual initiative and hard work and the important progressive struggles of those who have fought and continue to fight for our rights to participate as equal members of society. Thus, as we look to the future, the Asian American movement that has provided all Asian Americans new opportunities can continue to fight against racial, social, and economic inequality, but in a manner that recognizes and incorporates the changing dynamics and internal diversity of the Asian American community.

64. See Marx, supra note 55 (noting that in 1994, the Asian American median income was 25% greater than the average income for all families and 19% more than white families). See also Donald Lambro, Index of Progress in Race Relations, WASH. TIMES, August 21, 1997, at A16 (noting the drastic increase of suburban migration for all minorities and citing the 1990 U.S. Census report that 51% of Asian Americans live in the suburbs, as compared to 67% of whites, 43% of Hispanics, and 33% of blacks).

65. Another changing dynamic that the Asian American movement seems to ignore is the rapid economic development of the Pacific Rim. Many economists predict that the 21st century will be dominated by Asia, as capitalism and economic growth spread throughout the Pacific. Already, the effects are being felt by Asian American as international trade and finance between the U.S. and Asia continue to grow. See Aly Colson, Study Targets Immigrant Myth, SEATTLE TIMES, Apr. 12, 1996, at B4 (noting that in Silicon Valley, over $900 million of venture capital funds have come from Asia).
B. The Asian American Movement’s Sentiment Toward Neo-Conservatives

My belief in the human spirit rather than the power of redistribution has committed me to continuously volunteering and working in grassroots and community-based projects that strive to improve the livelihood of disadvantaged members of our communities. As previously stated, when I discuss the exclusion of neo-conservatives from the Asian American movement, I do not refer to our exclusion from grassroots empowerment efforts, even though that may be a goal of the movement.67 Rather, I refer to the progressive Asian American movement’s exclusion of neo-conservatives from participating in an honest, open, and intellectual academic discourse because of their predisposed political agenda. Viewed as a “threat and challenge” to the interests of the Asian American movement and Asian American community,68 labeled as “strange and new political animals,” neo-conservatives are mischaracterized, criticized, and discounted by the progressive academic and intellectual leaders of the Asian American movement, such as Professor Omatsu, without attempts to really listen to us. This type of negative sentiment is counter-productive not only to the interests of the Asian American community, but ultimately, to the

66. In examining the progressive Asian American movement’s sentiment toward neo-conservatives, I focus on the claims of Professor Omatsu but also draw from some personal experiences. Since I first wrote this piece, many of my progressive peers have expressed the view that my personal experiences fail to support the notion that neo-conservatives are generally excluded from the intellectual discourse within the Asian American movement. To a certain degree, they are correct as neo-conservatives (including myself) may choose to include or exclude themselves from the Asian American movement. Nevertheless, I include my own experiences in this section to provide context for my analysis of Professor Omatsu’s views towards the relationship between the progressive Asian American movement and neo-conservatives.

I should point out that my decision to use the personal narrative—both in Section II and here—did not come without struggle. Indeed, I worried that the use of the anecdotal narrative would diminish and weaken my arguments rather than strengthen them. Moreover, it is not my intent to use the narrative form as a shield from critique. Rather, by describing personal experiences and the conclusions that I have drawn from those experiences, I hope to open rather than close the dialogue.

67. See Omatsu, supra note 2. In this respect, I disagree vehemently with Omatsu’s contention that neo-conservatives have “nothing to offer” to disenfranchised members of the community.

68. See Perry S. Chen & Kenly Kiyu Kato, Recent Publication: The State of Asian America: Activism and Resistance in the 1990s, 30 HARV. C.R.-C.L. L. REV. 279 (1995). In their review of Professor Omatsu’s essay, the authors write:

Neo-conservatives are members of historically disenfranchised groups who have achieved successes in the status quo institutions. Instead of attributing their successes to the efforts of progressives within the disenfranchised group, they internalize the dialogue of oppressors, believing in the values of the status quo and condemning the activism of their group. . . . The neo-conservative’s narrow vision of success currently threatens to impose divisions within the Asian American community and among different ethnic groups. Emphasizing personal achievement and success as measured by the status quo, the Asian American neo-conservative fails to acknowledge the shared history of oppression that ties her individual success to the survival and liberation of all oppressed peoples. She remains steadfastly opposed to change, playing the role of divider in the divide-and-conquer paradigm. The neo-conservative is therefore, both a threat and challenge.

Id. at 282-83 & n.12 (emphasis added).
Asian American movement.  

A spin-off of the Civil Rights movement, the Asian American movement grew in conjunction with the African American, Native American, and Chicano/Latino student movements—highlighted by the grassroots students protests at San Francisco State and UC Berkeley during the 1960s.  

While previous debates on race simplistically focused on white and black communities, the birth of these various movements suggested a new era of much-needed and complex multiracial dialogue, given the diversity between and within the various communities of color. Unlike the old bifurcated model, a new model would be born—allowing more groups to express their different views on the future of the demographically changing and culturally pluralistic America.

In practice, the new model has merely re-defined the terminology—from “white vs. black” to “white vs. people of color”—without incorporating the real complexity of the debate. Under this framework, because all people of color are oppressed by white America, the multiracial coalition of color must respond in a simple and unified manner to overcome racism. Unfortunately, such a political strategy automatically seeks to exclude Asian American neo-conservatives from the multiracial dialogue, even if we represent a significant portion of the Asian American community. Consequently, the Asian American movement was not equipped to represent the interests or express the views of the general Asian American community, but only those members who endorsed the progressive agenda of the minority coalition.

Focusing itself around a narrow political agenda rather than a broad and dynamic intellectual debate, the Asian American movement has chosen to exclude certain viewpoints—ignoring certain voices of its own community in favor of a larger coalition of color. In doing so, it disregards the opportunity to substantively change the bipolar, bifurcated debate on

69. See id. at 286-88. The reviewers correctly recognize the dangers of a strategy that excludes Asian American neo-conservatives:

The essayists remain indignant towards Asian Americans of higher socioeconomic status. They darken the horizontal lines of the matrix, pointing to those in certain classes as troublesome and somehow vestigial to the 1990s movement. In addition, the essayists distrust and reject the institutions and avenues for change traditionally associated with such classes. Two examples of this exclusion are the essayists' treatment of Asian American neo-conservatives and the legal system. . . . How should the grassroots movement deal with them? The essayists' answer is to organize from the bottom up, to exclude neo-conservatives from the movement. The movement will have to address these neo-conservative voices directly in order to counteract the view that current institutions serve the needs of and are able to empower Asian Americans.  

Id. (emphasis added).

70. See WILLIAM WEI, THE ASIAN AMERICAN MOVEMENT (1993), for a thorough discussion of the social history of the movement.

71. See Chen & Kato, supra note 68, at 289 (“While class and class polarization remain focal concerns, the essays in The State of Asian America indicate that Asian American movements have yet to deal with class divisions within their own communities. The essayists prescribe a multi-racial and grassroots coalition, excluding 'harmful' classes and institutions.”).
race relations. Rather than advance a more complex discussion of many different and often competing interests in a multiracial America, the Asian American movement has chosen to adopt a strategy that merely perpetuates the outdated model of "black vs. white," under the more general term "people of color vs. white."  

I find it ironic that a major goal of the Asian American movement is to promote the diversity of the multiracial, multicultural America that we live in, yet within the Asian American movement, there is an attempt to downplay the diversity of our own community and to exclude the voices of so-called harmful classes and institutions. Neo-conservatives do not ignore our common experiences of discrimination and racism, and we can contribute to the debate with our different ideas and thereby represent important interests of our community. Nonetheless, the Asian American movement has sought to reduce the internal differences, so as to misrepresent a unified Asian American political agenda to the greater society. Unfortunately, by excluding non-progressive Asian American ideology, the movement may end up de-legitimizing its goal of representing our community's interests.

In making such a critique, I do not mean to suggest that a neo-conservative position is more real, or that the traditional, progressive position is not real. All ideas and viewpoints, no matter how divergent, are real and should not be ignored. Professor Omatsu admits that the Asian American movement gave rise to Asian American neo-conservatives. He further notes that neo-conservatives "function best in the realm of ideas," although he incorrectly observes that "neo-conservatives lack understanding of history, especially how concerns in the community have developed over time." If neo-conservatives do function best in the realm of ideas, then the Asian American movement—if it is to be a true movement—must be willing to critically evaluate those ideas rather than exclude or discount them. In this respect, the Asian American movement faces a choice—(1) remain devoted to a progressive political agenda that essentially excludes neo-conservative ideas or (2) embrace a broader intellectual approach that confronts important issues facing all Asian Americans but is open to all ideas and viewpoints.

72. It is not my belief that coalitions cannot work or have no place in the debate on race relations. However, in a complex society with complex issues, when Asian American interests are harmed not only by white American interests, but also other minority interests, we ought to be willing to disagree and confront these issues. However, to disagree with other minorities does not imply a blind acceptance of the "middleman minority" or "racial bourgeois" label. It simply means that Asian Americans should openly discuss their entire community's interests.

73. See Chen & Kato, supra notes 68-69 & 73.

74. See Omatsu, supra note 2.
V. CONCLUSION

I am an oxymoron, a paradox, an anomaly, or whatever you may wish to call me. As Professor Matsuda once told me, “I try to put you in a box, but then you surprise me.” For the purposes of this Comment, I accept the label of Asian American neo-conservative and indirectly respond to assertions made in Professor Omatsu’s essay. But at the same time, I note my ambivalence towards affixing such a label, and qualify my arguments by stating that they are mine alone, and not necessarily representative of other Asian American neo-conservatives.

I am an Asian American. But what is an Asian American? It is a product of social construction, since to many other Americans, Asian Americans—who are of different ethnicities and backgrounds—are all the same. Thus, the Asian American identity is a vehicle of empowerment that allows us to respond to those who have labeled us. As an Asian American, I take pride in the contributions that all Asian Americans have made to this country, as we have helped to build this country since the very beginning. Asian Americans also share a bond because we have historically been treated as second-class citizens. Our bond continues today as even now, many still consider us to be perpetual foreigners in our own country.

But what else does being Asian American mean? It goes beyond our experiences here in America, and goes back to our family, culture, roots, and heritage in our respective Asian homelands. While we have shared pasts and common experiences, we have individual and group differences, and accordingly, we will react to things differently—including racism, subordination and oppression. From my Chinese culture, I have learned the meaning and importance of ren—to bear, endure, and tolerate. Like the millions of overseas Chinese who have suffered racism, discrimination and oppression all across the world, thousands of Chinese Americans have also suffered in America. Ren teaches me not to accept subordination or ignore injustice. Instead, it teaches me one way to overcome it—through hard work and perseverance. Perhaps a Nisei Japanese, a Christian Korean, a Buddhist Indonesian, or even my own brother will react differently to circumstances than I will, but this is not unexpected or undesirable. We may all be a part of this socially-constructed group known as Asian Americans, but we are also individuals who think, act, and react differently.

The Asian American movement that originated 30 years ago played a tremendous role in forming the Asian American identity that exists today. Indeed, with the support and leadership of the Asian American movement, immigration restrictions have been relaxed and laws enacted to protect Asian Americans and Asian immigrants. Today, two-thirds of the Asians in America are foreign born, and the numbers keep rising. With more and
more Asian Americans, almost 10 million, it is quite natural for us to disagree on many issues. But we can all agree on one issue—we want what is best for the future of this country. What that means is not an easy question with easy answers, but there needs to be a real dialogue between all of our community’s members.

Professor Omatsu writes about these “strange and new” Asian American neo-conservatives who pose a “challenge” and constitute a “threat” to the Asian American movement’s agenda, but he also admits that we are an important force within our community. It is time for us to stop making claims about each other, and time to start talking to each other. Racism, discrimination, and xenophobia remain big problems facing the Asian American community, and we must work together to combat them. How we go about doing so remains a more difficult question, but Asian Americans neo-conservatives have a view that ought to be heard. Even though we may often disagree, our ability to disagree and conduct a mutually respectful dialogue should be celebrated, as it represents the very democratic principles that embody this nation.

Through the description of my personal experiences, beliefs and visions, I have attempted to demystify the Asian American neo-conservative. More importantly, I hope to begin an honest, open, and respectful discussion of issues involving all of the members of the Asian American community. Professor Omatsu correctly notes that neo-conservatives “bring a vibrancy to community issues by contributing a different viewpoint,” and Professor Chang identifies an emerging trend toward an Asian American legal scholarship. Hopefully, with this Comment, I have brought a vibrancy to community issues and opened the Asian American movement and the world of Asian American legal scholarship to the voice of the Asian American neo-conservative.