Reconstructing Culture and Identity in the Academy: Asian Female Scholars Theorizing Their Experiences

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INTRODUCTION

RECONSTRUCTING CULTURE AND IDENTITY IN THE ACADEMY
Asian Female Scholars Theorizing Their Experiences

Guofang Li and Gulbahar H. Beckett

This book project began over a coffee break at the American Educational Research Association in Seattle several years ago when we shared our own experiences and excitement as new faculty members trying to establish ourselves in the familiar yet strange academy. The academy was familiar to us because we were the apprentices of the academy for many years and we had learned the once unfamiliar discourses. Both of us were happy with our academic positions and were fortunate to have very supportive colleagues. Yet both of us felt we were “strangers” at times. After all, as Asian, foreign-born, and female faculty members, we were “newcomers” to the Western academy—we were “the traditional outsiders moving into the positions of tenure and/or administrative power” (Lim & Herrera-Sobek, 2000, p. 1). We both were faced with unfamiliar challenges such as gaining credibility as nonnative Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) professionals and as female scholars, and dealing with relations with students of Asian backgrounds. Sharing our personal and professional stories was an empowering experience—we understood better who we were as minority women and the path we had chosen. We believed that we were not alone. Realizing the power of sharing, we decided to edit a volume of works by Asian female scholars as a forum for our collective voice.
We wanted the academy to get acquainted with the Asian female "strangers" and to learn about these scholars' struggles and triumphs in their professional and personal lives. We also wanted a book for existing and aspiring minority faculty as a resource for their research, teaching, mentoring, and healing.

As we saw a need for a focused volume, we invited Asian female faculty members (and/or their mentors) to contribute and form such a forum. Although they come from a wide array of disciplines and backgrounds, many, like us, were not only "foreigners of one sort or another" (Kingston-Mann & Sieber, 2001) but also "outsiders within the academy" (Collins, 1986). These scholars combine research and personal narratives to explore the intersecting layers of relationships—language, culture, academic discourses, gender, class, age, generation, and race. Our objective in this volume is to highlight and celebrate Asian female scholars' struggles and triumphs when they try to "make it" in the academic environments that may differ from those in their countries of origin. By exploring their academic and personal experiences and theorizing them, we hope to contribute to the Asian women scholar's emerging effort to claim visibility and voice in the academy (Hune, 1999), as well as to the ongoing discussion on issues pertinent to the status of minority female scholars in higher education.

The Need to Tell Our Personal and Professional Stories

We feel there is an urgent need to tell our stories as Asian women because we have been living the outworn definitions of who we are in North America. Traditionally, Asian American women have been stereotyped as submissive, nonconfrontational, and dependent on Asian men. Living in the myth of the pleasing "model minority" images and in the shadow of Asian men, Asian females were rendered invisible in North American history (Fong, 1997; Hune, 1997). This invisible group, however, has had many triumphs in the past several decades. Unlike their predecessors who worked as lower-paid or unpaid laborers, Asian women have significantly increased their presence in a wide range of white-collar professions in North America in high-tech companies, the private sector, and in public administration. There is also a significant increase in their education levels and many have ventured into higher education as faculty members.

Although Asian female faculty members have made their way into higher education in the United States, they are underrepresented in the academy. Asian female faculty generally occupy the junior ranks and have one of the lowest tenure rates in the academy (Hune, 1999). In addition, they are also
confronted with racial discrimination and stereotyping, as well as under­
attention and disrespect for their research, teaching, and leadership. Despite
these barriers, many Asian female faculty developed strategies to survive and
thrive.

Since we are relative “newcomers” to the traditionally male-dominated
academy, our trials and tribulations of surviving in the hierarchy remain un­
examined. Our experiences living through the challenges of Western aca­
demic discourses are largely unknown. We believe by sharing our stories, we
are able to reinvent “the bits and pieces of our experiences to create a coher­
ent sense of meaning spanning past, present, and future” for Asian female
scholars as a distinct cultural group in the Western academy (Florio-Ruane,
1997, p. 155). We hope that our stories are “educative” (McVee, in press) in
the sense that they serve to redefine “who we are” in the academy and help
negotiate better spaces for nurturing our new identities and growth in the
years to come.

Reconstructing Culture and Identity and Reclaiming Voice:
Outline of Chapters

The conceptual framework for this book consists of overarching themes that
are foundational for understanding Asian female scholars in the Western
academy. The chapters center on the personal, sociocultural, political, and
academic issues encountered by Asian female scholars in higher education in
cross-cultural contexts. First, like many women, Asian female scholars strugg­
gle with the double-edged sword of gender (the submissive who are eager to
please) and the “model minority” (the educated and successful) stereotypes.
In addition, they also experience barriers that are specific to their profession:
(i) systematic gender and racial discrimination and marginalization within
the hierarchy of higher education; (2) credibility issues as female and non­
native English-speaking professionals; (3) difficulty in gaining tenure and
promotion as minority faculty; (4) difficulty in building collegial relation­
ships with White and fellow ethnic colleagues and students; (5) challenges in
constructing positive cultural and professional identities; (6) complexity of
multiple roles (e.g., minority researcher, professor, daughter, mother, and/or
wife) that Asian female scholars must play within multiple value systems
(e.g., Confucian/collectivism vs. individualism); and (7) challenges in devel­
oping strategies to overcome linguistic, cultural, and academic differences
and thrive in the academy. These concerns permeate throughout the differ­
ent cultural and linguistic backgrounds and who were trained in different disciplines and fields.

We have organized the chapters around four sections that reflect the varied aspects of our lived experiences as Asian female scholars in Western academy. These four sections are: (1) “Asian Female Scholars in Context”; (2) “Teaching, Mentoring, Advising, and Securing Tenure”; (3) “Gaining Voice, Forming Identity”; and (4) “Building Bridges, Building the Future.” Together, the chapters within these themes portray the lived experiences, the trials and errors, and the struggles and triumphs of the Asian female scholars’ journeys to success in the academy.

Part 1, “Asian Female Scholars in Context,” comprises three chapters that contextualize and theorize Asian female scholars’ lived experiences in a broader social and political milieu. Shirley Hune opens chapter 1 by situating Asian female scholars within the contested space between those who seek to preserve their place and privileges and those who want to create opportunities for women and minorities to attain equity within higher education. She addresses two important questions: How have Asian Pacific American (APA) women and men fared in academe since the 1980s? Have APA women overcome racial and gender disparities? Drawing on quantitative data, Hune demonstrates that APA women have made great strides in degree attainment at all levels, but APA men dominate as faculty and in tenured positions. Few APAs, especially women, are university presidents. Her analysis of qualitative studies shows that APA women experience greater barriers than APA men. The gendered, racialized, and sexualized spaces of academe contribute to their marginalization and devaluation and restrict their advancement in every sector. APA women remain outsiders and are far from being a “model minority.” Hune argues that a cultural transformation of the climate, structure, and everyday practices of higher education is needed for APAs, but especially for APA women, to achieve their full potential.

Jaekyung Lee in chapter 2 draws upon national data from the 1993 Baccalaureate and Beyond Longitudinal Study and addresses two questions: Are Asian college male students different from their female counterparts in their academic and occupational paths after college education? If there is any gender gap in Asian American college students’ educational and occupational trajectories, is it different from the patterns shown by other racial groups? While there was very little difference between the percentage of Asian male and female college graduates who go to graduate school, Asian males’ representation in postsecondary faculty who specialize in science, mathematics, and engineering (SME) fields significantly increases, while Asian females’
representation rate drops at the same time. Lee speculates that gender discrimination in the academic job market might be the most plausible explanation for the underrepresentation of Asian female faculty in higher education.

In chapter 3, Lin, Kubota, Motha, Wang, and Wong make deeper sense of their lived experiences by understanding and theorizing about the special ideological and institutional conditions underlying their experiences of marginalization and discrimination. This theorizing is, however, not meant to be merely private academic work, but a dialogic, public, political practice. Through engaging in this collective, dialogic writing project, they draw attention to the situation of women faculty of color in the field and contribute to the building of a wider community of scholars and researchers (consisting of both women and men, and both women of color and non-color) in which issues of marginalization and discrimination and issues of social justice and togetherness-in-difference can be continuously engaged as part of their dialogic, critical practice and political intervention.

Part 2, "Teaching, Mentoring, Advising, and Securing Tenure," consists of four chapters, each of which addresses the divergent issues pertinent to the everyday job requirements of Asian female professors. In chapter 4, Xiaoping Liang presents three Chinese-speaking women's personal narratives of their lived experiences of struggle and empowerment as nonnative English-speaking female academics in an English-speaking, male-dominant West Coast American university. In their narratives, the three scholars share their stories of the obstacles they encountered and strategies they used when professing in a language that is not yet perceived as their own, dealing with credibility and authority issues with native and nonnative English-speaking students, and constructing a nonnative English-speaking faculty identity in an English-speaking Western higher institution of education. These narratives also describe the three women's privilege of being nonnative English-speaking faculty and the positive attributes that their unique backgrounds and experiences enable them to bring and contribute to their students, their colleagues, their institution, and their profession.

Keiko Samimy takes a somewhat different slant in chapter 5 by describing how three non-Asian female faculty mentors, who became her role models at critical points in her early career, have helped her navigate as a university faculty at a major research university. She posits that these mentors were particularly instrumental not only in providing her with specific strategies and advice but also in helping her cope with the numerous linguistic, cultural, and academic challenges she encountered. As she further traveled the road of her career, however, she realized that she had to develop and
nurture her own identity as an Asian female faculty that is quite different from that of her mentors. The challenges and pressures of playing multiple roles (e.g., mother and wife) equally well are also discussed in her story.

In chapter 6, Guofang Li reflects on the challenges of supervising and teaching fellow Asian students as a young female faculty member. While other minority scholars reflect on their interactions and struggles with the majority culture, in this chapter, Li focuses on within-race-and-gender interactions. She attempts to explore the interactions and relations between faculty and students of similar cultural backgrounds by reflecting on her own experience as a young Asian female scholar working with Asian female students in a North American university. Li's experiences illustrate the complex relationships of gender, race, ethnicity, and the inherited power relations that perpetuate the positioning of minority female faculty and students in academia.

Chalsa Loo and Hsiu-Zu Ho address the important issue of tenure and promotion for Asian female faculty in chapter 7. The chapter highlights two cases of Chinese American female faculty members in institutions of higher education who in the 1980s and early 1990s successfully overturned denials of promotion or tenure. It examines two Asian American women who independently coped with the stress of being denied tenure or a promotion partly by using some form(s) of sociopolitical mobilization. These included obtaining the support of organizations dedicated to the pursuit of equity and justice for Chinese Americans and/or women in higher education. In terms of active problem solving, the authors of this chapter describe specific methods of defense that were effective in overturning cases of denied advancement or retention that appeared bias-based. Through addressing issues of gender and racial identity, psychological stress, and sociopolitical mobilization, Loo and Ho provide Asian female faculty in institutions of higher education with strategies that may become critical to their retention in academia.

Part 3, "Gaining Voice, Forming Identity," looks at the positionality of Asian female faculty members either within the academy in general or in their specific fields of study. Nina Asher in her personal narrative interrogates the challenges and possibilities that she encountered as a South Asian, lesbian academic, who identifies herself as a postcolonialist, feminist scholar, in the U.S. academy. She traces her journey from the early days as a new, international graduate student in New York City to her current situatedness as an assistant professor of education working toward tenure at a Research 1 university in the Deep South, where race relations are construed mainly in terms of Black and White. In so doing, she discusses the intersecting issues of race-
class-gender-culture-and-location as they relate to her identity and her research and teaching. Asher argues for personal and professional agency in terms of collaborating, seeking alliances, and arriving at a viable “third space” (citing Bhabha, 1994) from/in which to grow, teach, write, be. She maintains that the interstitial locations between different cultures and identities are useful and, indeed, critical in identifying new possibilities for personal and social transformation.

In chapter 9, Eunai Shrake presents her own personal and professional struggles with converging racial (“model minority”) and gender (“lotus blossom”) stereotypes throughout seven years of teaching at various college campuses. She was constrained to assume a mask (disguise) that corresponded to those simplified, stereotypical images and was unable to assert herself as a unique individual. Shrake views her masking as a form of subordination (colonization), while her efforts to unmask were an act of insubordination (decolonization). Her masking-unmasking experience encourages minority female professionals within and outside academia to actively and continuously engage in a decolonization process by resisting forces that attempt to marginalize and silence them.

Piya Pangsapa took a different route in chapter 10 by talking about her own experiences as a foreign Asian female scholar situated within a marginal but “legitimate” space of “women’s studies” in a Western academic institution, and the implications such a positioning may have for the status, voice, and visibility of Asian female scholars in higher education in general. She raises an important question regarding the place and space of development for Asian female scholars: Are female Asian scholars better able to prosper, become enriched, and grow if they are situated in certain “safe” niches within the academy (such as in an interdisciplinary program like “women’s studies”)? Her experiences seem to suggest that being situated in a women’s studies department and being in the company of other minority female scholars, without the presence of men, has provided a safe haven for her to freely pursue, explore, and share her research interests and to be able to “circumvent” the usual gender barriers.

In chapter 11, Yan Guo explores her autobiographical self by reflecting on her personal experience of learning to write in English for academic purposes. The chapter examines the process of how she, a successful and confident writer in China, became an incompetent writer at the beginning of graduate school in Canada, how she struggled to “appropriate voices” and eventually regained her confidence in writing in English. Guo demonstrates her struggles with the “self” that is an individual who tries to resolve the
cultural, linguistic, and ideological conflicts between China and Canada, and with the "self" who celebrates the fluidity and hybridity of between-the-worlds identities.

In chapter 12, Beckett and Zhang address the identity politics of a natural science faculty of Asian origin. Because there is little that explores the issues encountered by minority female natural science faculty of Asian origin, this chapter bridges this gap through excerpts from a Chinese American medical professor's narrative of her journey from being a student in China to a Chinese American professor in the United States. The focal issues discussed in the chapter include how the Confucian theorem of modesty and moderation was useful in preparing Mei to be an extremely successful student and person in China, but became a hindrance for quick success in American society. The chapter discusses how Mei aced it all in China, entered a top university at age fifteen, and came to the United States as one of the few chosen elite, but her Confucian upbringing that socialized her to be modest and moderate hindered her from being able to passionately pursue her studies and career criticality.

Part 4, "Building Bridges, Building the Future" highlights how Asian female scholars transcend the cultural differences and barriers and develop transformative practices in their teaching-learning experiences. In chapter 13, Guichun Zong explores how her lived experiences have shaped her teaching pedagogy today and how she has reconciled her duality and marginality and used them as assets to advance teaching from a global perspective. Through discussing the impact of her border-crossing experiences on how she perceives herself, her identity, and how she teaches (her pedagogy), Zong highlights the inner strength that she has gained through the unique experiences of crossing cultural borders and teaching against the grain, and how they have helped empower some of her students in their pursuit of transformative pedagogy. Zong's experiences demonstrate that practicing global pedagogy in American universities required constant identity adjustments, border crossings, and cultural negotiations both on a personal and on a professional level.

In chapter 14, Xue Lan Rong and Judith Preissle present a unique, dynamic, reciprocal cross-cultural mentor-mentee relationship model through their creative collaborative autobiographical and autoethnographic narratives. Such a cross-cultural mentorship was developed through their three relationships—immigrant-host, student-teacher, and demographer-ethnographer. Based on their success stories, they argue that, without a strong desire to know about each other and to take risks to build a trusting and trusted
relationship between two academics with different cultural backgrounds and history, no mentor relationship would have emerged. In order for the relationships to grow into long-term professional alliances, the collaboration must also be mutually beneficial and enrich the research experiences of both. Their productive experiences suggest that cross-cultural mentorship is necessary because most minority students still find themselves in situations where there are few, if any, faculty who are of the same culture or ethnicity in widely recognized graduate programs in major research universities.

In the last chapter, 15, Jing Lin reflects on how she consciously and unconsciously carved a life path that is underpinned by the pursuit of human equality and social justice. Catching the international wave of globalized economy, communication, and consciousness, Lin explores how she expands herself, dedicating herself to working for peace, environmental protection, and building cultural understanding and respect. She argues that it is essential to break down the notion of "deficit" and see her own unique background and experience as assets. Lin concludes that as Asian female scholars, we should not allow others, but ourselves, to define our identity.

**Personal Experience as Research, and Research as Personal Experience**

These chapters tell our stories in a "new" form of narrative that combines personal and professional experiences—"new stories of self" that reinvent culture, identity, and education (Florio-Ruane, 1997). Our lived experiences as minority women are seen and used as "a resource for apprehending social reality" within the larger political and ideological contexts of our lives (Vargas, 2002, p. 4). Our reflective, narrative writing about our lived experiences teaches us what we know and in what ways we know what we know (van Manen, 1990). In this sense, by writing about our lived experiences, our personal stories become multilayered texts for research. The contributing authors' reflections on their backgrounds; their stories of growing up in different cultures; their border-crossing experiences; and their multiple roles as mothers, wives, daughters, and professors are lived experiences that tell us who we were, who we are, and who we are becoming in the ever-changing social contexts of our lives. Through these multifaceted identity constructions, we negotiate our positionality and space within the academy as women and minorities, and we contribute to the diversity of the academy with our own personal meanings and ways of knowing.

In addition to looking at personal experiences as research texts, we also
look at research as personal experiences. Neumann and Peterson (1997) posit that educational research is personal endeavors and experiences within and expressions of a researcher’s life. They view research “as much a part of a researcher’s life history as it is a part of her curriculum vitae” (p. 1). In line with their view of research as a personal and social phenomenon—an experience within a researcher’s life, we asked the authors of this book to focus on the autobiographical antecedents of their work as female scholars—their growth as students, teachers, and pedagogues; their relationships with colleagues, mentors, and students; and their struggles and success as academics. These autobiographical accounts of their professional lives, together with their personal stories of self and the multiple theoretical frameworks applied to interpret these stories will no doubt shed light on how these Asian female scholars’ personally derived intellectual endeavors have contributed to the reconstruction of scholarship and diversity in the academy. We hope readers find this insightful and enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed editing it.

References
