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Peer reviewed

Resource Paper

The Future of Asian America in 2040

Jonathan Ong, Paul Ong, and Elena Ong

Abstract

This resource paper analyzes the growth of the Asian American (AA) population over the next quarter century based on projections from the U.S. Census Bureau and supplementary estimates by the authors. The number of Asian Americans will increase from 20.5 million in 2015 to 35.7 million in 2040, making them the fastest-growing racial population in the nation. Like the nation as a whole, the AA population will age over the next quarter century, with youth declining from a quarter to a little more than a fifth of the AA population and the elderly increasing from a tenth to about a sixth. Immigrants will continue to be a majority of Asian Americans, but their share will decline from two-thirds to one half. After 2040, U.S.-born AAs (those who are Asian alone and from mixed-race backgrounds) will comprise a majority of the population. Another significant change will be the growth of multiracial Asian Americans, increasing from a tenth of the population 1990 to a sixth in 2040.

Introduction

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the number of Asian Americans will increase 74 percent, from 20.5 million in 2015 to 35.7 million in 2040, making Asian Americans the fastest-growing racial population in the nation. This demographic trajectory will have profound social, cultural, political, and economic implications when Asian Americans constitute nearly a tenth of the total U.S. population in 2040, at approximately the same time that America becomes majority minority in 2043.¹ This resource paper provides insights into the historical context and characteristics of the emerging population. Immigrants and single-race Asian Americans² will continue to comprise a majority of this population through most of the time period; nonetheless, there will a noticeable demographic recomposition. Two of the most important projected changes are the absolute and relative growth of U.S.-born Asian Ameri-

cans and of multiracial Asians Americans. Both transformations will be concentrated among children and young adults. This report details the magnitude of the growth and the changes in demographic composition, focusing on 2015 and 2040.

This report is also a part of a larger project that builds on the pioneering work that was jointly published in 1993, *The State of Asian Pacific America, Policy Issues to the Year 2020*, by LEAP (Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics) and the UCLA Asian American Studies Center. As with that edited volume, we believe that it is critical to understand key characteristics of the future population of Asian Americans, particularly by nativity and age. Doing so enables us to better understand Asian American concerns and priorities, gain potential insights into the nature of social relations among demographic subgroups of Asian Americans, and speculate on their political and economic contributions to the nation.

While others have made projections of the Asian American population, this project provides details not available elsewhere (Pew Research Center, 2012). Rather than using a simple linear extrapolation for all Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, collapsing Asian Americans with “others,” or reporting only for “Asians Alone,” this project utilizes demographic projection techniques that enhance the most recent 2014 National Population Projections by the U.S. Census Bureau.³ The project also takes into account differences in racial classifications over time⁴ and utilizes statistical models to project the absolute and relative size of the Asians who are American citizens through birth (U.S.-born or native-born).⁵

The resource paper is organized into five sections. The first section examines the historical rapid growth of the Asian American population in the latter half of the twentieth century, which has been shaped by the elimination of racially biased immigration restrictions. The second section presents the projected continuing growth, which will increase to approximately 10 percent of the total U.S. population in the mid-2040s. The third section examines the secular shift by nativity (U.S.-born vs. foreign-born). With renewed large-scale immigration, this U.S.-born segment went from being a large majority to a small minority of the Asian American population in the final three decades of the last century. However, this decline in relative share is projected to change in the next quarter of a century, with U.S.-born reaching parity with the foreign-born by the 2040s. Section four examines the distribution by age. Section five examines the growth of multiracial Asians. Interracial marriages have increased over the last quarter century, and that trend will continue into the future. One of the consequences is a higher growth rate in the num-

ber of those who are part Asian American, who will make up about a quarter of the net population increase between 2010 and 2040.

Historical Background

Immigration laws have been the single most important factor determining the size of the Asian American population.⁶ For more than a century following the latter part of the nineteenth century, Asian immigration was severely restricted due to anti-Asian policy. The Naturalization Act of 1870 excluded Asians from receiving citizenship, and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and subsequent renewals barred the entry of Chinese laborers. The next major wave of Asian immigration from Japan led to the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907, under which the Japanese government limited the emigration of its people to the United States. The Asiatic Barred Zone Act of 1917 prohibited all immigrations from additional regions in Asia, and the Immigration Act of 1924 included sections that completely exclude immigration from Asia. Racially motivated legislation, in effect, stemmed meaningful Asian immigration, keeping the Asian American population in the United States artificially low.

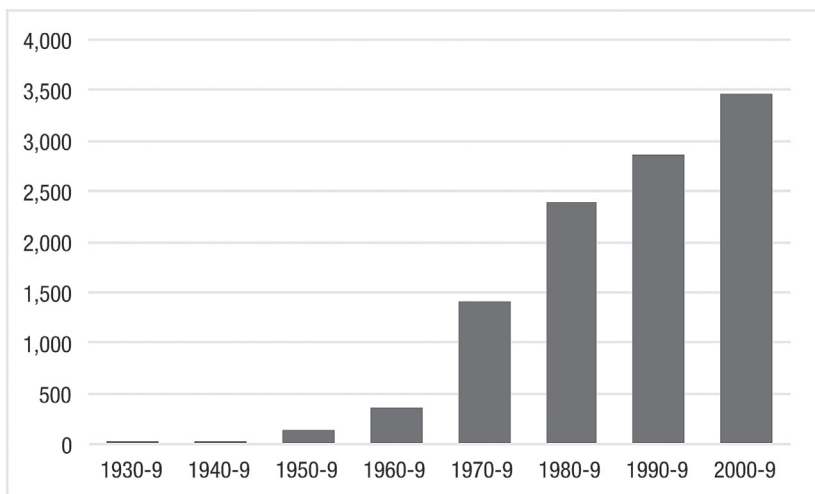
Ironically, the tide of restrictive immigration turned at the very same time that anti-Asian prejudices peaked. In 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt created the War Relocation Authority, which led to the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans (see U.S. Immigration Center, n.d.). Starting during World War II, the United States began relaxing restrictions, in part to its response to an alliance with China. In 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, a largely symbolic gesture because Chinese immigration was limited to 105 visas a year. The postwar period saw the enactment of the War Brides Act, which allowed many Chinese to bypass the visa quota, entering as spouses, natural children, and adopted children of U.S. military personnel. The 1952 Immigration and Nationality Act ended the Asian immigration exclusion and allowed Asians to naturalize. At the same time, the quotas for Asians remained disproportionately small.

Asians finally got on equal footing in the mid-1960s, with the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which was a product of both the domestic struggle for racial justice⁷ and the global struggle for cold war legitimacy with newly independent postcolonial third-world nations.⁸ In 1965, the United States adopted the Immigration and Naturalization Act, which abolished the discriminatory national origins quota system, and replaced it with a preference system that was based on skills and

family ties to U.S. citizens and permanent residents. It established an annual cap of 270,000 immigrants per year with no more than twenty thousand from any single country. In 1975, the United States adopted the Indochinese Migration and Refugee Assistance Act, allowing some two hundred thousand Cambodians and Vietnamese to enter the United States under a special parole status. The Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986 allowed undocumented persons who resided in the United States continuously since January 1, 1982, to apply for legal status. The Immigration Act of 1990 increased the annual visa cap to seven hundred thousand, nearly tripling it, for the next three years, and 675,000 for every year after (*ibid.*).

The elimination of racially biased restrictions, along with later political refugee policies for those displaced by the ending of the war in Southeast Asia, led to a renewal of significant immigration from Asia, which can be seen in Figure 1. Each decade has seen an increase in legal immigration (those who receive permanent resident status). Over the last few years, Asian immigration has surpassed that of Latino immigration (Pew Research Center, 2012). The U.S. Census Bureau projects a continuation of high levels of net migration for Asians (2015a).⁹

Figure 1. Legal Immigration from Asia (in thousands)



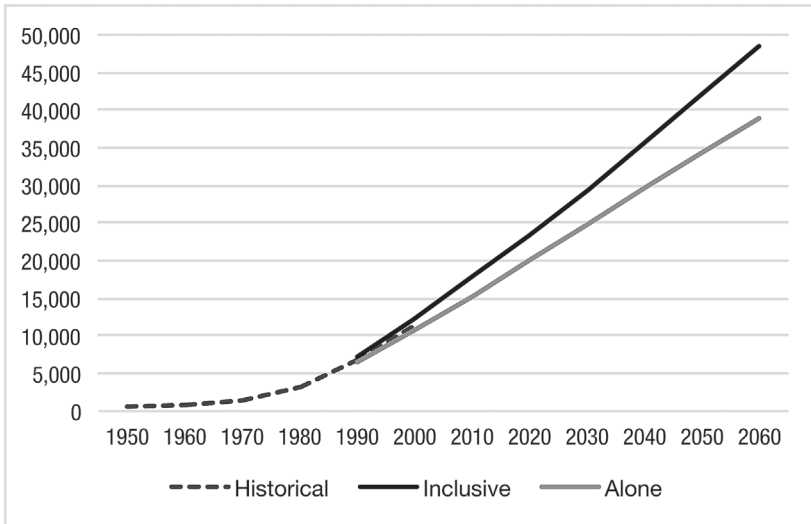
Source: Office of Immigration Statistics' 2013 Yearbook of Immigration Statistics

Asian American Population Projections

The macrolevel demographic impacts of a half century of immi-

gration under the 1965 act and its projected continuation can be seen in Figure 2. The historical trend line is based on the old census racial categories, which allowed an individual to report only one race, and the projected line is based on the new census categories, which allow individuals to report one or more races. The latter is able to capture those of multiracial background.¹⁰ The impact of the legal change is evident in the approximately tenfold increase in the Asian American population between 1970 and 2010, growing at nearly twenty times faster than the total U.S. population. The majority of the growth came both from the wave of immigrants and their U.S.-born children.

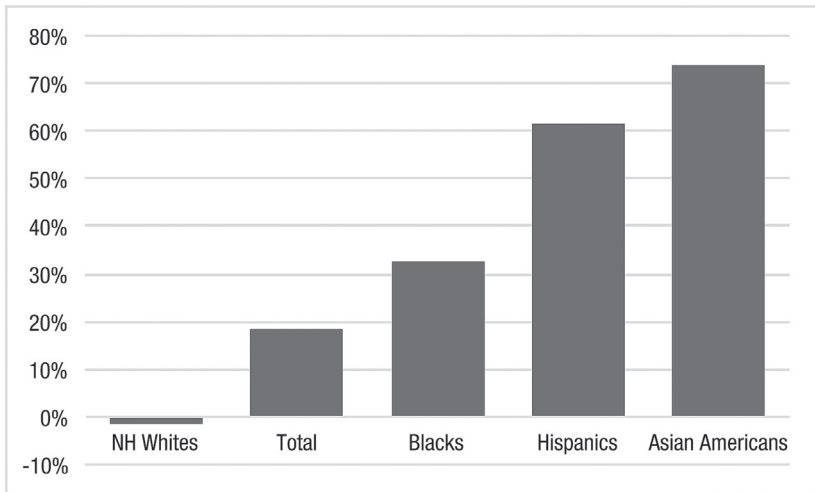
Figure 2. Growth of Asian Americans (in thousands)



Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

The Asian American population is projected to continue to grow rapidly, roughly doubling its numbers from 2010 to the early 2040s. The Asian American inclusive count includes both Asians alone and Asians in combination with another race. The Asian American population has been the fastest-growing racial group in America in recent years, and is projected to be the fastest-growing racial group over the next quarter century (see Figure 3; Pew Research Center, 2012). While the total U.S. population will increase by 18 percent, it will be superseded in growth rate by blacks at 33 percent, Hispanics at 61 percent, and Asian Americans at 74 percent.

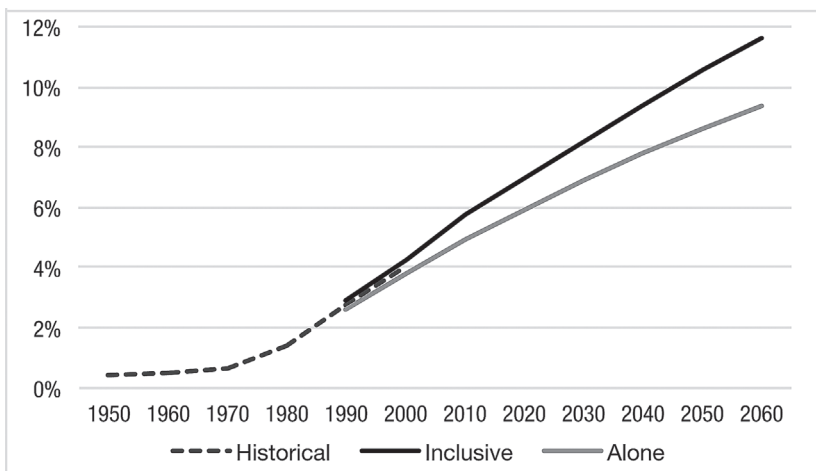
Figure 3. 2015–40 Increase



Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

The differential growth rate by race will make Asian Americans an increasing share of the total U.S. population. As shown in Figure 4, their share increased from about 0.5 percent in 1960 to 5 percent by 2010. By the mid-2040s, Asian Americans will comprise about a tenth of the total U.S. population.

Figure 4. Asian Americans as a Percent of Total

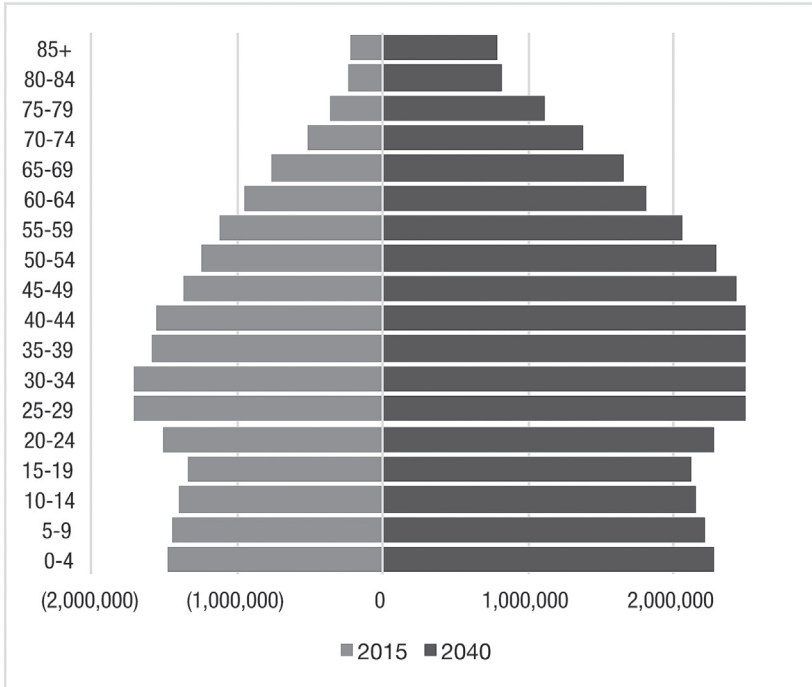


Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

Distribution by Age

Figure 5 depicts the distribution of the Asian American population in 2015 and 2040. There is a distinctive bulge among prime working age adults, noticeably among younger adults (25–34 years old) in 2015 and extending up to age forty-four in 2040.

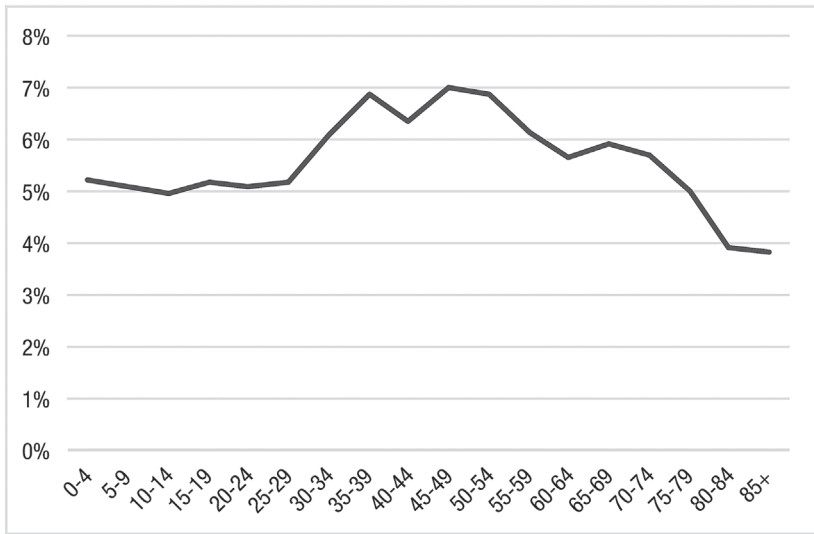
Figure 5. Asian American Age Distribution



Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

Like the nation as a whole, the Asian American population will age over time (Ortman, Velkoff, and Hogan, 2014), which will shape policy and other priorities. The median age of the Asian American population will increase from thirty-three years old in 2015 to thirty-seven years old in 2040. While all age groups will increase in absolute numbers, there are noticeable differences in the relative share. Youth (persons seventeen and younger) will decline from 25 percent to 22 percent, while elderly (persons sixty-five and older) will increase from 10 percent to 16 percent. Unlike the total population, there will be no aging “baby boom bulge” in 2040 among Asian Americans, due to their immigration history.

Figure 6. Share of 2015–40 Growth by Age



Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

Figure 6 provides the share of 2015–40 net absolute growth by age groups. This graph shows that working age adults will have larger than average share of net increase, while the elderly will have a lower share of the net increase.¹¹ However, because there are differences in the base population for each age group, the growth rates are different for each age group. While the growth over the next quarter century is 74 percent, the elderly segment will experience an extraordinarily higher rate (178 percent). This is due to two factors: the small absolute base of elderly in 2015 and the aging of Asian Americans.

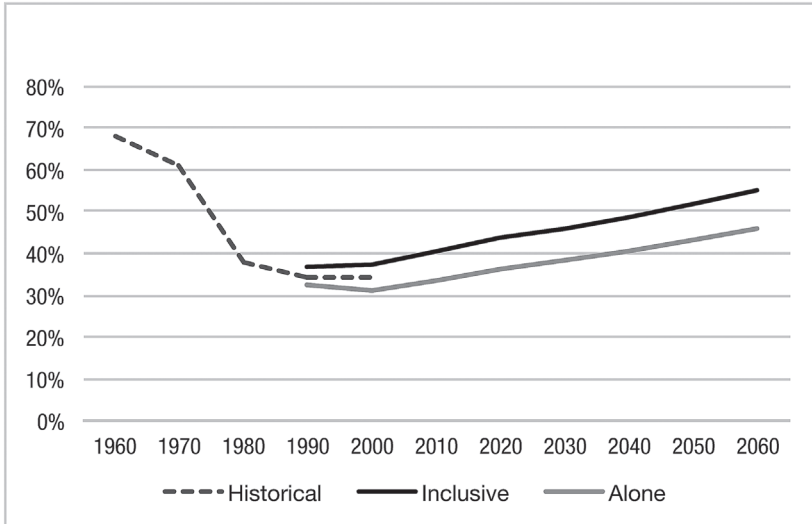
Asian Americans by Nativity

Immigration has had a dramatic effect on the absolute and relative size of the Asian American population, and has transformed the group's demographic composition (see Figure 7). Before the 1965, approximately two-thirds of Asian Americans were U.S.-born. After 1965 Immigration Act, the proportion flipped. By the end of the twentieth century, immigrants made up about two-thirds (69 percent of Asian Alone and 63 percent of Asian Inclusive).¹²

Since the start of the twenty-first century, there has been a reversal in the trend in the composition by nativity. The proportion that is U.S.-born is now increasing due to the fact that natural increase¹³ has

started to outweigh net migration minus immigrant deaths.¹⁴ This new emerging trend is projected to continue over the next quarter century, slowly pushing up the U.S.-born share of the Asian American population. By the early 2040s, the U.S.-born segment will reach numerical parity (50/50) with the immigrant segment.

Figure 7. Percent of U.S.-Born Asian Americans



Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

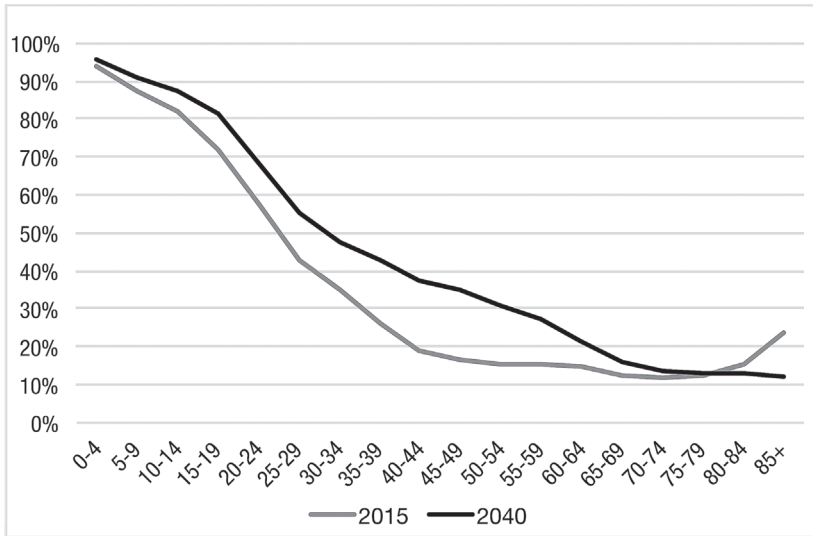
U.S.-Born Asian Americans

One of the unique characteristics of the U.S.-born segment is the heavy age concentration among the young, which can be seen in Figure 8. In 2015, U.S.-born comprised at least a majority of the age groups up to the twenty to twenty-four year category. A quarter century from now, they will be a majority of groups up to ages twenty-five to twenty-nine, with a larger supermajority among the younger categories; the elderly population will remain predominantly foreign-born, with an increase among the oldest segment.

There is also a recomposition of U.S.-born Asian Americans by generations. A second-generation person has two foreign-born parents, a 2.5-generation person has one foreign-born parent and one U.S.-born parent, and a 3-plus-generation person has two U.S.-born parents.¹⁵ The impact of renewed large-scale immigration after 1965 led to an increase in the relative number of second-generation persons. By 2015, they comprised a large majority (57%) of U.S.-born children and young adults (0-

24 years old). In subsequent years, the pattern will change because of a rapid growth of U.S.-born persons of child-bearing age. By 2040, a majority of U.S.-born children and young adults will be 2.5 and 3-plus generation Asian Americans.

Figure 8. Percent of U.S.-Born among Asian Americans



Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

Multiracial Asian Americans

The growth of the number of multiracial Asian Americans is rooted in an increase in interracial marriages. It has been sixty-six years since the October 1, 1948 California Supreme Court (*Perez v. Lippold*) ruling that antimiscegenation laws violated the Fourteenth Amendment, and forty-eight years since the U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous June 12, 1967 (*Loving v. Virginia*) decision that legalized interracial marriage throughout the United States.

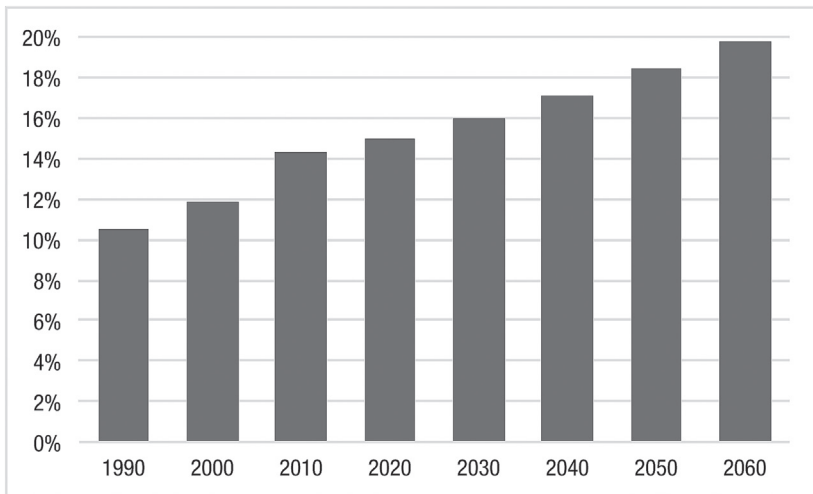
By 2000, 8 percent of marriages were comprised of couples of different races, and the rate increased to 10 percent by 2010. The most common type of interracial marriage was among multiracial/one-race couples (16 percent) and the next most common was non-Hispanic Asian/non-Hispanic white (14 percent). It is of interest to note that there is a gender differential. For example, in 2010, 22 percent of Asian American women intermarried, while only 9 percent of Asian American men intermarried (Kreider, 2012).

Our analysis of 2013 Public Use Microdata Sample (PUMS) data showed a similar pattern, with an Asian out-marriage rate between 16 and 17 percent, and 23 percent of Asian American women and 9 percent of Asian American men intermarrying. Of those who were recently married between 2009 and 2013, one-third (33 percent) of Asian American women and one-sixth (15 percent) of Asian American men intermarried.¹⁶ The out-marriage rate was more than twice as high for Asian American females than Asian American males.

The number of multiracial children has also grown with the increase in interracial couples. According to the 2000 Census, 6.8 million, or 2.4 percent of the U.S. population, marked that they were of “two or more” races. Of this group, one in four (24 percent) self-identified as part Asian (CensusScope, 2000).

As America becomes more racially diverse, and social taboos against interracial marriage and same-sex marriage fade, multiracial Americans have become the most rapidly growing population in America. Among Asian Americans, multiracial Americans are also the most rapidly growing subpopulation.

Figure 9. Percent of Multiracial Asian Americans



Source: Based on U.S. Census Bureau's 2014 National Population Projections and authors' projections

In 1990, one in ten Asian Americans were multiracial, but by 2060, nearly one in five will be multiracial. The trends and projections of multiracial Asians are displayed in Figure 9. Between 2015 and 2040, the

Asian American Alone population will increase 69 percent, but the multiracial Asian American population will increase by 104 percent, one and half times faster than Asian Americans Alone. In terms of share of net growth between 2015 and 2040, one in five of the net increase among Asian Americans will be from multiracial Asian Americans.

The rapid growth of multiracial Asian Americans will occur among children and young adults. By 2040, preschool children will predominantly be multiracial Asian Americans, and three in ten K–12 youth will be multiracial Asian Americans. Also, by 2040, nearly nine in ten multiracial Asian Americans will be U.S.-born.

Concluding Remarks

America is undergoing a dramatic demographic transformation. By 2043, America will become “majority minority” and reach a new historic social, economic, and political configuration. America will change because Asian Americans are and will be the fastest-growing racial population in America, and Asian America will comprise one of the most diverse segments of what will become America’s “multicultural majority.”

Asian Americans, who are socially and economically diverse, will contribute to economic growth, both as consumers and as workers. The Selig Center estimates that Asian American buying power equaled \$770 billion in 2014, up 180 percent from its 2000 value of \$275 billion (Weeks, 2015). Assuming that per capita income remains constant, we estimate that Asian American buying power will be more than \$1.25 trillion by 2040. Indeed, if Asian American populations comprised a separate nation, it would rank among the top twenty economies in the world. However, it is not only the size of the Asian American economy that will have an impact. Their contributions to production and consumption will be shaped by its increasingly multigenerational and multiracial composition. Despite this economic trajectory, there is a prospect that will be a significant number of Asian Americans trapped in poverty.

Asian Americans’ political importance will grow. In our earlier report, “Asian American Voters to Double by 2040,” we found that the electorate will grow from 5.9 million in 2015 to 12.2 million by 2040. Nearly 38 percent of Asian American voters are U.S.-born, but by 2040, nearly half (47 percent) will be (Ong and Ong, 2015). At 7 percent of the registered vote in 2040, political campaigns will want to court the Asian American vote. This will require addressing a diversity of concerns and interests. Many foreign-born Asian American voters could carryover some of the cultural values and concerns of their native countries, and

have greater need for “in-language” registration forms, town halls, election booklets, and ballots. In contrast, second- and third-generation Asian Americans are more attuned to mainstream American media, culture, and values, thus their political opinions and attitudes could be shaped by these factors.

The cultural impact will also be profound, although more difficult to chart precisely. Nonetheless, one can extend nascent developments. Asian Americans will continue to serve as a conduit for the advancement of Asian American visual and performing arts in the United States. The absolute and relative growth of second- and subsequent-generation Asian Americans will shift tastes and interests, including ones at the intersection of diverse cultures. The emergence of new individual and collective identities from the increasing number of multiracial Asian Americans will influence the ways Asian Americans are depicted in mass media.

In light of the emerging opportunities and challenges driven by the demographic trajectory, it is critical that we proactively plan for the future.

Acknowledgements

We are indebted to David Armstrong and Jennifer Ortman of the U.S. Census Bureau for their technical review and expertise; and to Chhandara Pech and Silvia Jimenez at UCLA’s Center for Neighborhood Knowledge for their technical assistance.

Notes

1. Although the projections treat Asian Americans as a single racial group, it is important to note that it is a very diverse population in terms of ethnicity. E.g., the U.S. Census Bureau reported information for more than two dozen Asian American ethnic groups from the 2010 enumeration.
2. Where both parents are of the same race.
3. The bureau reports projections by nativity only for Asian Americans alone. We supplement those projections with our own estimates for multiracial Asian Americans to produce counts for an inclusive count of both Asian Americans alone and Asian Americans in combination with another race.
4. The project also accounts for the differences in the racial/ethnic categories used for the bureau’s population projection models and the categories used for other bureau data sources, such as the decennial census and the American Community Survey. The projections’ categories are consistent with those used by the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics. For a discussion on the differences, see National Center for Health Statistics (2015).
5. This also includes a small number who were born in the U.S. territories

or abroad to American citizens. We use microlevel data from the 2010 and 2012 November voter supplement file of the Current Population Survey to estimate the distribution of U.S.-born by generation. For description of that data see U.S. Census Bureau (2015b).

6. There have been three great waves of immigration to the United States, a Northern Europe Wave (1840–89), a Southern/Eastern Europe Wave (1890–1919), and a Modern Era Wave (1965 to present). Immigrants from Latin America comprised 1 percent of the first great wave, 3 percent of the second great wave, and 50 percent of the current great wave. In contrast, immigrants from Asia comprised 2 percent of the first great wave, 2 percent of the second great wave, and 27 percent of the current great wave. For discussion on Asian immigration during the latter period, see Ong, Bonacich, and Cheng (1994).
7. Not coincidentally, that was also the year that saw the enactment of the 1965 Voting Rights Act.
8. The United States was accused of being hypercritical in its effort to promote American-style democracy in developing countries because the United States was not able to ensure equal treatment of its own minority groups. This added pressure, along with that from the civil rights movement, to “put its own house in order.”
9. The assumption is that the net Asian migration rate (in migration minus out migration) will increase from 367,000 in 2020 to 400,000 in 2040.
10. We develop a 1990 bridge between the old and new racial classification by estimating an inclusive and alone count based on the 5 percent PUMS. The Asian Alone category includes Asians with only Asian ancestry. The multiracial Asian category includes those who are Asian by race with non-Asian ancestry and those who are not Asian by race with Asian ancestry. We estimate the number of Asians in 2000 as the average of the number of Asian Alone and Asian in Combination with some other race. This estimate is roughly consistent with the ratios of the 1990 estimates and with estimates reported in Ingram et al. (2003).
11. If each of the age categories had the same share, then each would have about 5.6 percent of the net increase.
12. While many of the native-born were second generation, with immigrant parents, there was an emergence of a third generation, with U.S.-born parents. While the number of native-born Asian Americans continue to grow in subsequent decades, the number of new immigrants grew even faster.
13. Natural increase is births minus deaths. U.S.-born have a disproportionately smaller share of natural increase.
14. See “Asian American Voters to Double by 2040” for a method in estimating the nativity of multiracial Asian Americans.
15. The recent distribution by generation is estimated from 2010 and 2012 Current Population Survey. The distribution for 2040 is projected by aging

the 2015 population and projecting the size of the zero to twenty-four-year-old segment by generation. The latter is done by applying a crude fertility rate to child-bearing age adults, with a modest decrease in the rate for U.S.-born individuals.

16. This is similar to the newlywed rate of 31 percent among Asian Americans reported by Passel, Wang, and Taylor (2010).

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