DIVERSITY AND TRANSFORMATION AMONG ASIANS IN HOUSTON

Findings from the Kinder Institute’s “Houston Area Asian Survey” (1995, 2002 & 2011)

CENTRAL CONCLUSIONS FROM THE REPORT
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Introduction. Supported by local foundations, corporations and individuals, and now with a permanent home in Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research, the annual “Houston Area Survey” has interviewed 31 successive representative samples of Harris County residents. In May 1982, just two months after the first Houston survey, the 80-year oil boom suddenly collapsed. The region recovered from the deep and prolonged recession of the mid 1980s to find itself squarely in the midst of a restructured economy and a truly remarkable demographic transformation.

After 1982, Harris County’s Anglo population stopped growing and then declined. The region’s rapid population growth during the past 30 years is due entirely to the influx of Asians, African Americans and Latinos. This historically bi-racial Southern city, dominated by white men, is now the most ethnically and culturally diverse large metropolitan region in the country, at the forefront of the new diversity that is refashioning the socio-political landscape across urban America.

Since 1994, the Houston Area Survey has been expanded to reach large representative samples, numbering about 500 each, from Harris County’s Anglo, African-American and Hispanic populations. In 1995, 2002 and 2011, generous additional contributions from the wider Houston community — especially the United Way and Houston Endowment Inc. — made it possible to include equally large representative samples of the region’s varied Asian communities, with one-fourth of the interviews being conducted in Vietnamese, Cantonese, Mandarin or Korean. The Kinder Institute’s Asian report, released on 7 February 2013, presents the central findings from this special research.

The demographic revolution. The 2010 U.S. Census counted 280,341 Asians in Harris County. The Vietnamese are the largest Asian community in the county, followed by the Indians, Chinese, Filipinos and Koreans. The distributions by country of origin in the Houston Asian surveys closely mirror the census data, strengthening confidence in the representativeness of the Asian samples.

Today’s seniors are disproportionately Anglo, and so are the 76 million baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, now aged 48 to 66. It was not until 1965 that for the first time in the twenti-
eth century non-Europeans were allowed in meaningful numbers to come to America. Thus the younger cohorts in Houston and America are disproportionately Asian, Latino and black.

Despite levels of education that are much higher on average than those of Anglos, Asians generally report lower household incomes. Part of this discrepancy may be due to being younger and having arrived as immigrants with educational credentials that may be difficult to transfer into a new society. Part of it may also reflect the impact of continuing discrimination (the so-called “glass ceiling”) that makes it more difficult for Asians to reach the top positions in the American economy. Not surprisingly, Latinos and Asians generally approve of the new immigration. Hispanics express the most concern about the treatment of “illegal” immigrants. African Americans are the most worried about the economic impact of immigration. Asians are more positive about relations with whites, less positive about relations with Hispanics, and more negative about relations with blacks. Despite such concerns, the surveys show clearly that area residents from all communities are growing more comfortable with their city’s burgeoning diversity.

**Religion and politics.** The Filipinos, overwhelmingly Catholic, are more likely than other Asians to be church attenders and to say that religion is very important in their lives. The Indians and Pakistanis are generally either Hindus or Moslems, the Vietnamese either Catholics or Buddhists. Immigrants from Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong are generally less religious than the other Asian communities.

In the 1995 survey, the Filipinos, Vietnamese and Chinese were more likely to be Republicans, whereas the Indians and Pakistanis were more likely to be Democrats. In the years since, support for the Republican Party has waned. Anti-communism is now less salient, while concerns about restrictive immigration policies, economic inequalities and perceived discrimination have increased.

Asians share with Latinos and blacks firm support for government initiatives designed to strengthen the safety net and moderate the economic inequalities. On all such issues, the three communities differ sharply from Anglos, and this may help to explain Anglos’ far stronger identification with the Republican Party. The ability of Republicans to broaden their appeal to Asians and Latinos and of Democrats to boost turnout among those same rapidly growing communities will shape the political positioning of Harris County and the state of Texas in the years ahead.

**The rise of second generation.** In 1995, just 10% of Harris County’s Asian adults were born in this country. The number of U.S.-born Asians grew to 15% in 2002 and to 31% in 2011. Compared to first-generation immigrants, second-generation Asians are more likely to be college-educated and to be earning higher incomes. They are also more likely to have close personal friends who are Anglo, Latino or black, and to have been in a romantic relationship with someone who was non-Asian.

Houston’s burgeoning diversity, with its young multi-lingual workforce, can be a tremendous asset for this major port city as it builds the bridges to the global economy. Yet if most area residents continue to live and work in largely segregated enclaves, reinforced by widening socioeconomic and educational disparities, the expanding diversity is likely instead to diminish Houston’s competitiveness and set the stage for a growing urban “underclass” and for serious social conflict.

Asian Americans are largely middle-class professionals, now moving rapidly into leadership positions. They are also people of color, with friendship networks spanning all ethnic communities, and more committed than Anglos to strengthening government initiatives to expand opportunities and
reduce the inequalities. They will be indispensable partners in the efforts to build a successful, inclusive, equitable and united multiethnic future for Houston and America in the years ahead.