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## Little Asia on the Hill

By TIMOTHY EGAN



WHEN Jonathan Hu was going to high school in suburban Southern California, he rarely heard anyone speaking Chinese. But striding through campus on his way to class at the University of California, Berkeley, Mr. Hu hears Mandarin all the time, in plazas, cafeterias, classrooms, study halls, dorms and fast-food outlets. It is part of the soundtrack at this iconic university, along with Cantonese, English, Spanish and, of course, the perpetual jackhammers from the perpetual construction projects spurred by the perpetual fund drives.

“Here, many people speak Chinese as their primary language,” says Mr. Hu, a sophomore. “It’s nice. You really feel like you don’t stand out.”

Today, he is iPod-free, a rare condition on campus, taking in the early winter sun at the dour concrete plaza of the Free Speech Movement Cafe, named for the protests led by Mario Savio in 1964, when the administration tried to muzzle political activity. “Free speech marks us off from the stones and stars,” reads a Savio quote on the cafe wall, “just below the angels.”

There are now mostly small protests, against the new chain stores invading Telegraph Avenue, just outside the campus entrance, and to save the old oak trees scheduled for removal so the football stadium can be renovated. The biggest buzz on Telegraph one week was the grand opening of a chain restaurant — the new Chipotle’s, which drew a crowd of students eager to get in. The scent of patchouli oil and reefer is long gone; the street is posted as a drug-free zone.

And at least on this morning, there is very little speech of any kind inside the Free Speech Cafe; almost without exception, students are face-planted in their laptops, silently

downloading class notes, music, messages. It could be the library but for the line for lattes. On mornings like this, the public university beneath the towering campanile seems like a small, industrious city of über-students in flops.

I ask Mr. Hu what it's like to be on a campus that is overwhelmingly Asian — what it's like to be of the demographic moment. This fall and last, the number of Asian freshmen at Berkeley has been at a record high, about 46 percent. The overall undergraduate population is 41 percent Asian. On this golden campus, where a creek runs through a redwood grove, there are residence halls with Asian themes; good dim sum is never more than a five-minute walk away; heaping, spicy bowls of pho are served up in the Bear's Lair cafeteria; and numerous social clubs are linked by common ancestry to countries far across the Pacific.

Mr. Hu shrugs, saying there is a fair amount of “selective self-racial segregation,” which is not unusual at a university this size: about 24,000 undergraduates. “The different ethnic groups don't really interact that much,” he says. “There's definitely a sense of sticking with your community.” But, he quickly adds, “People of my generation don't look at race as that big of a deal. People here, the freshmen and sophomores, they're pretty much like your average American teenagers.”

Spend a few days at Berkeley, on the classically manicured slope overlooking San Francisco Bay and the distant Pacific, and soon enough the sound of foreign languages becomes less distinct. This is a global campus in a global age. And more than any time in its history, it looks toward the setting sun for its identity.

The revolution at Berkeley is a quiet one, a slow turning of the forces of immigration and demographics. What is troubling to some is that the big public school on the hill certainly does not look like the ethnic face of California, which is 12 percent Asian, more than twice the national average. But it is the new face of the state's vaunted public university system. Asians make up the largest single ethnic group, 37 percent, at its nine undergraduate campuses.

The oft-cited goal of a public university is to be a microcosm — in this case, of the nation's most populous, most demographically dynamic state — and to enrich the educational experience with a variety of cultures, economic backgrounds and viewpoints.

But 10 years after California passed Proposition 209, voting to eliminate racial preferences in the public sector, university administrators find such balance harder to attain. At the same time, affirmative action is being challenged on a number of new fronts, in court and at state ballot boxes. And elite colleges have recently come under attack for practicing it — specifically, for bypassing highly credentialed Asian applicants in favor of students of color with less stellar test scores and grades.

In California, the rise of the Asian campus, of the strict meritocracy, has come at the expense of historically underrepresented blacks and Hispanics. This year, in a class of 4809, there are only 100 black freshmen at the University of California at Los Angeles —

the lowest number in 33 years. At Berkeley, 3.6 percent of freshmen are black, barely half the statewide proportion. (In 1997, just before the full force of Proposition 209 went into effect, the proportion of black freshmen matched the state population, 7 percent.) The percentage of Hispanic freshmen at Berkeley (11 percent) is not even a third of the state proportion (35 percent). White freshmen (29 percent) are also below the state average (44 percent).

This is in part because getting into Berkeley — U.S. News & World Report’s top-ranked public university — has never been more daunting. There were 41,750 applicants for this year’s freshman class of 4,157. Nearly half had a weighted grade point average of 4.0 or better (weighted for advanced courses). There is even grumbling from “the old Blues” — older alumni named for the school color — “who complain because their kids can’t get in,” says Gregg Thomson, director of the Office of Student Research.

Mr. Hu applied to a lot of colleges, but Berkeley felt right for him from the start. “It’s the intellectual atmosphere — this place is intense.”

Mr. Hu says he was pressured by a professor to go into something like medicine or engineering. “It’s a stereotype, but a lot of Asians who come here just study engineering and the sciences,” he says. “I was never interested in that.”

But as the only son of professionals born in China, Mr. Hu fits the profile of Asians at Berkeley in at least one way: they are predominantly first-generation American. About 95 percent of Asian freshmen come from a family in which one or both parents were born outside the United States.

He dashes off to class, and I wander through the serene setting of Memorial Glade, in the center of campus, and then loop over to Sproul Plaza, the beating heart of the university, where dozens of tables are set up by clubs representing every conceivable ethnic group. Out of nowhere, an a cappella group, mostly Asian men, appears and starts singing a Beach Boys song. Yes, tradition still matters in California.

ACROSS the United States, at elite private and public universities, Asian enrollment is near an all-time high. Asian-Americans make up less than 5 percent of the population but typically make up 10 to 30 percent of students at the nation’s best colleges: in 2005, the last year with across-the-board numbers, Asians made up 24 percent of the undergraduate population at Carnegie Mellon and at Stanford, 27 percent at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 14 percent at Yale and 13 percent at Princeton.

And according to advocates of race-neutral admissions policies, those numbers should be even higher.

Asians have become the “new Jews,” in the phrase of Daniel Golden, whose recent book, “The Price of Admission: How America’s Ruling Class Buys Its Way Into Elite Colleges — and Who Gets Left Outside the Gates,” is a polemic against university admissions policies. Mr. Golden, a reporter for The Wall Street Journal, is referring to evidence that,

in the first half of the 20th century, Ivy League schools limited the number of Jewish students despite their outstanding academic records to maintain the primacy of upper-class Protestants. Today, he writes, “Asian-Americans are the odd group out, lacking racial preferences enjoyed by other minorities and the advantages of wealth and lineage mostly accrued by upper-class whites. Asians are typecast in college admissions offices as quasi-robots programmed by their parents to ace math and science.”

As if to illustrate the point, a study released in October by the Center for Equal Opportunity, an advocacy group opposing race-conscious admissions, showed that in 2005 Asian-Americans were admitted to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, at a much lower rate (54 percent) than black applicants (71 percent) and Hispanic applicants (79 percent) — despite median SAT scores that were 140 points higher than Hispanics and 240 points higher than blacks.

To force the issue on a legal level, a freshman at Yale filed a complaint in the fall with the Department of Education’s Office of Civil Rights, contending he was denied admission to Princeton because he is Asian. The student, Jian Li, the son of Chinese immigrants in Livingston, N.J., had a perfect SAT score and near-perfect grades, including numerous Advanced Placement courses.

“This is just a very, very egregious system,” Mr. Li told me. “Asians are held to different standards simply because of their race.”

To back his claim, he cites a 2005 study by Thomas J. Espenshade and Chang Y. Chung, both of Princeton, which concludes that if elite universities were to disregard race, Asians would fill nearly four of five spots that now go to blacks or Hispanics. Affirmative action has a neutral effect on the number of whites admitted, Mr. Li is arguing, but it raises the bar for Asians. The way Princeton selects its entering class, Mr. Li wrote in his complaint, “seems to be a calculated move by a historically white institution to protect its racial identity while at the same time maintaining a facade of progressivism.”

Private institutions can commit to affirmative action, even with state bans, but federal money could be revoked if they are found to be discriminating. Mr. Li is seeking suspension of federal financial assistance to Princeton. “I’m not seeking anything personally,” he says. “I’m happy at Yale. But I grew up thinking that in America race should not matter.”

Admissions officials have long denied that they apply quotas. Nonetheless, race is important “to ensure a diverse student body,” says Cass Cliatt, a Princeton spokeswoman. But, she adds, “Looking at the merits of race is not the same as the opposite” — discrimination.

Elite colleges like Princeton review the “total package,” in her words, looking at special talents, extracurricular interests and socioeconomics — factors like whether the applicant is the first in the family to go to college or was raised by a single mother. “There’s no set formula or standard for how we evaluate students,” she says. High grades and test scores

would seem to be merely a baseline. “We turned away approximately half of applicants with maximum scores on the SAT, all three sections,” Ms. Cliatt says of the class Mr. Li would have joined.

In the last two months, the nation has seen a number of new challenges to racial engineering in schools. In November, the United States Supreme Court heard a case questioning the legality of using race in assigning students to public schools in Seattle and Louisville, Ky. Voters are also sending a message, having thrown out racial preferences in Michigan in November, following a lead taken by California, Texas, Florida and Washington. Last month, Ward Connerly, the architect of Proposition 209, announced his next potential targets for a ballot initiative, including Arizona, Colorado, Missouri and Nebraska.

When I ask the chancellor at Berkeley, Robert J. Birgeneau, if there is a perfect demographic recipe on this campus that likes to think of itself as the world’s finest public university — Harvard on the Hill — he demurs.

“We are a meritocracy,” he says. And — by law, he adds — the campus is supposed to be that way. If Asians made up, say, 70 percent of the campus, he insists, there would still be no attempt to reduce their numbers.

Asian enrollment at his campus actually began to ramp up well before affirmative action was banned.

Historically, Asians have faced discrimination, with exclusion laws in the 1800s that kept them from voting, owning property or legally immigrating. Many were run out of West Coast towns by mobs. But by the 1970s and ’80s, with a change in immigration laws, a surge in Asian arrivals began to change the complexion of California, and it was soon reflected in an overrepresentation at its top universities.

In the late 1980s, administrators appeared to be limiting Asian-American admissions, prompting a federal investigation. The result was an apology by the chancellor at the time, and a vow that there would be no cap on Asian enrollment.

University administrators and teachers use anguished words to describe what has happened since.

“I’ve heard from Latinos and blacks that Asians should not be considered a minority at all,” says Elaine Kim, a professor of Asian-American studies at Berkeley. “What happened after they got rid of affirmative action has been a disaster — for blacks and Latinos. And for Asians it’s been a disaster because some people think the campus has become all-Asian.”

The diminishing number of African-Americans on campus is a consistent topic of discussion among black students. Some say they feel isolated, without a sense of community. “You really do feel like you stand out,” says Armilla Staley, a second-year

law student. In her freshman year, she was one of only nine African-Americans in a class of 265. “I’m almost always the only black person in my class,” says Ms. Staley, who favors a return to some form of affirmative action.

“Quite frankly, when you walk around campus, it’s overwhelmingly Asian,” she says. “I don’t feel any tension between Asians and blacks, but I don’t really identify with the Asian community as a minority either.”

Walter Robinson, the director of undergraduate admissions, who is African-American, has the same impression. “The problem is that because we’re so few, we get absorbed among the masses,” he says.

Chancellor Birgeneau says he finds the low proportion of blacks and Hispanics appalling, and two years into his tenure, he has not found a remedy. To broaden the pool, the U.C. system promises to admit the top 4 percent at each high school in the state and uses “comprehensive review” — considering an applicant’s less quantifiable attributes. But the net results for a campus like Berkeley are disappointing. His university, Dr. Birgeneau says, loses talented black applicants to private universities like Stanford, where African-American enrollment was 10 percent last year — nearly three times that at Berkeley.

“I just don’t believe that in a state with three million African-Americans there is not a single engineering student for the state’s premier public university,” says the chancellor, who has called for reinstating racial preferences.

One leading critic of bringing affirmative action back to Berkeley is David A. Hollinger, chairman of its history department and author of “Post-Ethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism.” He supported racial preferences before Proposition 209, but is no longer so sure. “You could argue that the campus is more diverse now,” because Asians comprise so many different cultures, says Dr. Hollinger. A little more than half of Asian freshmen at Berkeley are Chinese, the largest group, followed by Koreans, East-Indian/Pakistani, Filipino and Japanese.

He believes that Latinos are underrepresented because many come from poor agrarian families with little access to the good schools that could prepare them for the rigors of Berkeley. He points out that, on the other hand, many of the Korean students on campus are sons and daughters of parents with college degrees. In any event, he says, it is not the university’s job to fix the problems that California’s public schools produce.

Dr. Birgeneau agrees on at least one point: “I think we’re now at the point where the category of Asian is not very useful. Koreans are different from people from Sri Lanka and they’re different than Japanese. And many Chinese-Americans are a lot like Caucasians in some of their values and areas of interest.”

IF Berkeley is now a pure meritocracy, what does that say about the future of great American universities in the post-affirmative action age? Are we headed toward a day

when all elite colleges will look something like Berkeley: relatively wealthy whites (about 60 percent of white freshmen's families make \$100,000 or more) and a large Asian plurality and everyone else underrepresented? Is that the inevitable result of color-blind admissions?

Eric Liu, author of "The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker" and a domestic policy adviser to former President Bill Clinton, is troubled by the assertion that the high Asian makeup of elite campuses reflects a post-racial age where merit prevails.

"I really challenge this idea of a pure meritocracy," says Mr. Liu, who runs mentoring programs that grew out of his book "Guiding Lights: How to Mentor and Find Life's Purpose." Until all students — from rural outposts to impoverished urban settings — are given equal access to the Advanced Placement classes that have proved to be a ticket to the best colleges, then the idea of pure meritocracy is bunk, he says. "They're measuring in a fair way the results of an unfair system."

He also says Asian-Americans are tired of having to live up to — or defend — "that tired old warhorse of the model minority."

"We shouldn't be calling these studying habits that help so many kids get into good schools 'Asian values,' " says Mr. Liu, himself a product of Yale College and Harvard Law School. "These are values that used to be called Jewish values or Anglo-Saxon work-ethic values. The bottom line message from the family is the same: work hard, defer gratification, share sacrifice and focus on the big goal."

Hazel R. Markus lectures on this very subject as a professor of psychology at Stanford and co-director of its Research Institute for Comparative Studies in Race and Ethnicity. Her studies have found that Asian students do approach academics differently. Whether educated in the United States or abroad, she says, they see professors as authority figures to be listened to, not challenged in the back-and-forth Socratic tradition. "You hear some teachers say that the Asian kids get great grades but just sit there and don't participate," she says. "Talking and thinking are not the same thing. Being a student to some Asians means that it's not your place to question, and that flapping your gums all day is not the best thing."

One study at the institute looked at Asian-American students in lab courses, and found they did better solving problems alone and without conversations with other students. "This can make for some big problems," she says, like misunderstandings between classmates. "But people are afraid to talk about these differences. And one of the fantastic opportunities of going to a Stanford or Berkeley is to learn something about other cultures, so we should be talking about it."

As for the rise in Asian enrollment, the reason "isn't a mystery," Dr. Markus says. "This needs to come out and we shouldn't hide it," she says. "In Asian families, the No. 1 job of a child is to be a student. Being educated — that's the most honorable thing you can do."

BERKELEY is “Asian heaven,” as one student puts it. “When I went back East my Asian friends were like, ‘Wow, you go to Berkeley — that must be great,’ ” says Tera Nakata, who just graduated and now works in the residence halls.

You need only go to colleges in, say, the Midwest to appreciate the Asian feel of this campus. But Berkeley is freighted with the baggage of stereotypes — that it is boring socially, full of science nerds, a hard place to make friends.

“About half the students at this school spend their entire career in the library,” one person wrote in a posting on vault.com, a popular job and college search Web site.

Another wrote: “Everyone who is white joins the Greek system and everyone who isn’t joins a ‘theme house’ or is a member of a club related to race.”

There is some truth to the image, students acknowledge, but it does not do justice to the bigger experience at Berkeley. “You have the ability to stay with people who are like you and not get out of your comfort zone,” says Ms. Nakata. “But I learned a lot by mixing it up. I lived in a dorm with a lot of different races, and we would have these deep conversations all the time about race and our feelings of where we belong and where we came from.” But she also says that the “celebrate diversity aspect” of Berkeley doesn’t go deep. “We want to respect everyone’s differences, but we don’t mix socially.”

Near the end of my stay at Berkeley I met a senior, Jonathan Lee, the son of a Taiwanese father and a mother from Hong Kong. He grew up well east of Los Angeles, in the New America sprawl of fast-growing Riverside County, where his father owned a restaurant. He went to a high school where he was a minority.

“When I was in high school,” he says, “there was this notion that you’re Chinese, you must be really good in math.” But now Mr. Lee is likely to become a schoolteacher, much to the chagrin of his parents, “who don’t think it will be very lucrative.”

The story of Jon Lee’s journey at Berkeley is compelling. As president of the Asian-American Association, he has tried to dispel stereotypes of “the Dragon Lady seductress or the idea that everybody plays the piano.” His closest friends are in the club. It may seem that he has become more insular, that he has found his tribe. But Mr. Lee says he has been trying to lead other Asian students out of the university bubble. Once a week, they go into a mostly black and Hispanic middle school in the Bay Area to mentor students.

For the last five semesters, Mr. Lee has worked with one student. “I take him out for dim sum, or to Chinatown, or just talk about college and what it’s like at Cal,” he says. “We talk about race and we talk about everything. And he’s taught me a lot.”

The mentoring program came about not because of prodding by well-meaning advisers, teachers or student groups. It came about because Mr. Lee looked around at the new

America and found that it looked very different from Berkeley. And much as he loves Berkeley, he knew that if he wanted to learn enough to teach, he needed to get off campus.

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