

The Fremont Frontier: A Modern Middle Ground?

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ABSTRACT

Fremont, California, a city with a 61.7% Asian majority population, has a unique cultural tapestry shaped by Asian immigration through and after the 1965 Hart-Celler Act and Silicon Valley's tech boom. This paper applies Richard White's middle ground theory, initially used to examine French-Algonquian relations in the Great Lakes region, to Asian American suburbanization in Fremont, California. The study analyzes three prerequisites of White's framework—balance of power, mutual dependence, and inability to enforce cultural change—by examining population and economic data patterns and cultural institutions in Fremont. It zeroes in on Fremont infrastructure, such as the 99 Ranch Market, a popular grocery store, as sites of cultural fusion. This paper also interrogates how misconceptions create new beliefs and practices. The findings show that Fremont fulfills the conditions for a modern middle ground, where socio-economic factors, a mutual desire for a suburban lifestyle, and resistance to cultural assimilation have created a unique social reality. The study introduces a novel framework for understanding cultural integration within contemporary American suburban life by applying White's theory to the suburbanization of Asian Americans. It suggests that Fremont's example could serve as a foundation for analyzing similar cultural patterns in other Bay Area communities.

Introduction

“I’m leaving to shàngxué (school)” — this phrase of broken “Chinglish” has become a staple between my parents and me. Every morning, I grab my lunch container filled with Yangzhou fried rice, and I race out, passing by red, white, and blue flags. The city of Fremont, where 61.7% of the population is Asian, thrives with a distinct cultural tapestry (American Community Survey, 2024). At first glance, nothing about this quaint suburban town seems out of place, yet it stands as a remarkable fusion of Asian immigration culture and the long-standing traditions of American suburbia.

In *Trespassers: Asian Americans and the Battle for Suburbia*, author Willow S. Lung-Amam discusses the historical reasons for Fremont’s predominantly Asian population and investigates how Asian families established roots within America’s suburbs. However, the book fails to address how Fremont blended Asian cultures with established American culture to form a new subculture. Suburbanization in Fremont did not result in an Asian-dominant culture but rather a fusion of American and Asian standards.

Bay Area suburbs did not always host the conditions to form a possible middle ground, instead hosting a majority white population up until the late twentieth century. Following the 1965 Hart-Celler Act, which prioritized immigration based on education and merit, Asian American suburbanization flourished (Kennedy, 1966). The act gave visas to immigrants with “high levels of socio-economic stratification” who came to either pursue economic opportunity or seek asylum in the U.S. (Nicolaidis, 2015). This created a situation in which immigrants were either studied scholars pursuing jobs in technology or laborers who took up manufacturing. In Bay Area suburbia, the former took the opportunity that the 1968 Fair Housing Act opened up through protecting home buyers’ rights to take root in America’s wealthiest neighborhoods (Massey, 2015).

Fremont, with its proximity to Silicon Valley and prominent Asian infrastructure, exists as one of the most densely Asian-populated cities. The city’s blend of history, dating back to the Spanish Inquisition, alongside the

traditions brought over from countries throughout Asia, creates an environment where culture fails to assimilate but rather amalgamates into something new. This paper explores the origins of this phenomenon through Richard White's theory of the middle ground.

The Middle Ground

Richard White's *The Middle Ground: Indians, Empires, and Republics in the Great Lakes Region, 1650-1815* has become a historical framework surrounded by rich academic discourse. Originally used as a model for exploring Indigenous relations in the Great Lakes region, the idea is grounded in the concept of cultural creation and discovers how new culture can form from the clash of two pre-existing groups.

According to White (1991), in a middle ground, a new culture is born through the collision of two cultures by combining the congruences, either "perceived or actual" (p. 52). In other words, both sides merge through a process of finding commonality, even when these commonalities may not be true, to form an entirely new culture that blends the two together effectively. During this process, "they often misinterpret and distort values and practices of those they deal with, but from those misunderstandings arise new meanings and through them new practices" (White, 1991, p. 52). This stems from an attempt by both sides to collaborate and find common ground, and though these attempts can end in misconceptions, those misconceptions take on meanings of their own. Though the process and prerequisites that may lead to the creation of a middle ground may seem common, the creation of an actual middle ground is much less so. White (2006) states that for a middle ground to emerge, an infrastructure that "could support and expand the process" is necessary (p. 10).

In his book, White describes the middle ground as both a concept and a place—specifically the *pays d'en haut* and the settlements around the Great Lakes. In the *pays d'en haut*, French settlers and Indigenous Algonquians were able to form a middle ground through strong cultural integration, vast networks, and language accommodation. Yet, though French settlers carried similar practices outside of the *pays d'en haut*, a lack of infrastructure in the form of a network of chiefs, missions, and rituals meant that a middle ground failed to form elsewhere.

Though the middle ground remains a largely historical framework for Indigenous relations, this paper aims to apply it in a more contemporary manner to analyze Asian American culture as seen in Bay Area suburbs, more specifically in Fremont. This paper will address the question: Are Bay Area suburbs such as Fremont examples of a modern middle ground? Using the key points of the development of a middle ground, this paper will identify how Asian suburbanization in Fremont is inherently the creation of a middle ground.

Historical Context

As Silicon Valley began to develop at the forefront of technological development in the 1970s, the Asian American population rapidly exploded, growing "six-fold, from 43,000 to 261,000" (Park, 2006, p. 162). Initially moving into "inner-ring suburbs" like Daly City, eventually Asian Americans were able to take root in cities closer to major job centers like San Jose, with Fremont catching the eye of many immigrants due to its proximity and school system (Lung-Amam, 2017, p. 31). Fremont is a city with "a long history of Chinese American, Japanese American, and Filipino American farmworkers," which attracted many immigrants due to social and familial ties they may have had to the city (Lung-Amam, 2017, p. 32). The city has a unique blend of American and Asian culture, one that likely arose from a middle ground.

In *Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings*, White (2006) states that a middle ground is born when specific conditions are met: "a rough balance of power, mutual need or a desire for what the other possesses, and an inability by either side to commandeer enough force to compel the other to change" (p. 10). The following section will analyze if and how these conditions were present in the interactions between Asian immigrants and other suburban residents.

Analysis of Prerequisites to Form a Middle Ground

In White's original analysis, the concept of the balance of power typically referred to the relatively equal manpower and military strength of French colonizers and Algonquians in the pays d'en haut between 1610 and 1763. In this domestic example, this paper will use economic advantages to dictate who stands on top of the social hierarchy. To achieve a situation in which a middle ground could form, the goal of many Asian American immigrants was to create a power dynamic through advancement in which certain groups could be economically equivalent to the middle-class majority.

The development of Silicon Valley placed Fremont in a position in which all citizens became economically advantaged. A report in 2012 states that Asian Americans "make up half of the Bay Area's technology workforce" (Nakaso, 2012). However, this balance of power isn't perfect but rather a "rough" equilibrium; in fact, Asian Americans are the least likely minority to break into leadership positions in tech companies (Chow, 2023). Despite now making 57% of the tech workforce, Asian Americans make up only 27% of leadership at Apple, 40% at Google, and 25% at Facebook (Chen, 2021). As a result, though Asian Americans are a majority in Silicon Valley, they're often underrepresented in leadership, leading to a situation where they don't remain the dominating cultural force within Bay Area communities.

The middle ground also relies on mutual dependence or desire for something that the other community possesses. For the French and the Algonquians, this dependence found itself in the form of the Iroquois conflict, as the Algonquians needed French aid to fend off Iroquois tribes and vice versa. At the same time, French settlers often relied on Algonquian knowledge to be able to settle in a foreign land. In the case of Asian American suburbanization, the desire was for life in Silicon Valley suburbs. At the same time, American society soon discovered that they also had a desire for the educated labor force that Asian American immigrants brought to companies. In particular, many Silicon Valley companies desired the networks and connections that new immigrant employees brought with them. With these connections, these companies could expand overseas (Saxenian, 2006).

On one hand, the rapid development of Silicon Valley was a driving force that compelled Asian Americans to move to Bay Area suburbs. Coupled with the calm lifestyle of suburban communities and good public schools, Asian Americans found themselves with a strong desire to pursue suburbanization. For pre-existing American communities in Bay Area suburbs, the Asian American workforce soon found itself as a useful asset for the development of not only Silicon Valley but American industry as a whole (Misra, 2017). The formation of the model minority myth only perpetuated this fact, as Asian Americans were portrayed as obedient, loyal, and hard-working ideal laborers (Park, 2006). This misunderstanding was misinterpreted by both sides, as many Asians view it as a standard that must be achieved, while other Americans view it as a factor that downplays anti-Asian sentiment. Though inherently harmful and misguided, the model minority mythos became a misunderstanding that determined how Asian Americans interacted with one another and with other communities. As a result, both sides found themselves in a mutually beneficial position in which Asian American labor in areas near Bay Area suburbs would improve the American technology industry.

Additionally, the lack of ability to commandeer enough force to compel the other group to change defines a key component of a middle ground. If each side was able to fully exert their influence over the other group, it would end in assimilation rather than cultural production. In the case of pays d'en haut, this delicate balance was achieved by both the French and Algonquians "[attempting] to apply its own cultural expectations in a new context" (White, 1991, p. 52). This push and pull created a new set of cultural practices, conventions, and rules that this unique society followed.

In suburbia, this process took a different form; Asian American immigrants attempted to exert their original cultural norms on the community yet failed to fully do so due to the generational roots that pre-existing families had on the land. In particular, they desired familiar infrastructure and social climate. Residents, often who have lived in the city for generations, had a vested interest in preserving at least some aspects of their way of life. As a result, they desired to push against the change that immigrants were advocating for. Though Asian immigrants erected shopping

centers, restaurants, and stores, the pushback from existing residents eventually changed immigrants' cultural expectations to an extent that it wasn't truly matching those of Asians across the Pacific Ocean. For example, the civic engagement and volunteer culture that remains an ever-present aspect in suburbia is more original to American than Asian culture. Community service is much more encouraged within the United States, an aspect that is starkly different from Asian countries such as China. However, volunteer centers have also adapted, instead involving Asian communities in a practice associated with American suburbs. Friends of Children with Special Needs (FCSN), stands out as a predominantly Asian-run nonprofit based in Fremont and surrounding Bay Area cities that retains the typical American volunteer-run model. The organization runs off the typical suburban values of benefitting one's own community and neighbors while incorporating Asian culture through events such as the Chinese New Year parades and festivals, thus demonstrating a successful combination of two cultures. Neither side was able to completely assimilate the other into its culture, creating a middle ground.

Infrastructure and Misconceptions: Evidence of a Middle Ground

Asian suburbia is not another failed representation of middle ground but continues to exist as one due to the established infrastructure that Richard White highlights as vital to the continuance of middle ground civilizations. For Asian American suburbs, this infrastructure found itself in the form of Asian malls and shops. These institutions introduced Asian culture, in the form of food, music, and clothing, to the surrounding community.

In particular, Lung-Amam (2017) notes how with Fremont's Northgate Shopping Center, with its 99 Ranch Market, "only about 50% of its clientele are Chinese American" (p. 108). These facilities served as infrastructure that encouraged cultural development, and upon which Asian culture and existing American culture collided. Pacific Commons is one of the largest Asian shopping malls and the go-to hangout spot for many students at Mission San Jose High School and surrounding schools. Centered around many parents' favorite store, Costco, the center features numerous Asian restaurants, stores, and movie theaters. What stands out in particular is how stores such as 85° Bakery, which originated in Taiwan in 2004, represent the evolution of Asian American integration into Bay Area suburbs. Since arriving in Irvine in 2008, 85° Bakery has opened up 12 stores in California. The bakery particularly blends techniques from European and Asian origins, creating a fusion technique that "yields a moist and elastic dough that creates a chewier bread" (Alderton, 2015). 85° Bakery demonstrates the creation of a new cuisine, a staple in unique cultures.

Additionally, misconceptions through stereotypes eventually led to the birth of new culture that became unique towards Bay Area Asian suburbia civilizations. Richard White (1991) defines cultural production as a process where both parties actively search for common ground, creating misconceptions that take on their own meanings in the process. White emphasizes the importance of this process of misunderstanding by stating that "any congruence, no matter how tenuous, can be put to work and can take on a life of its own if it is accepted by both sides" (p. 52). In the case of the pays d'en haut, French settlers viewed the act of gift-giving as a purely transactional relationship, while natives viewed it as a relational obligation. This led to a culture of gift-giving unique to the area. In the case of Asian American suburbanization, this is particularly noticeable in school culture. At Mission San Jose High School, often academic success is considered the forefront of many families' focus, dictating every second of every student's life the moment they step into the school during freshman year (Lung-Amam, 2017, p. 62). The assumption that all Asians have high academic standards drove those similarly inclined to pursue education to Fremont, creating a new culture from a misunderstanding based upon a generalization of Asian standards. As a result, the idea of the high Asian standards perpetuated by the model minority mythos established itself in this school's ideology, effectively manifesting itself as a new semi-Asian suburban culture.

The existing infrastructure and evidence of congruence through misconceptions establishes some of the patterns found in middle ground societies. As a result of these foundations, Fremont was able to formulate its own unique culture through blending the experiences of pre-existing suburban residents and Asian American cultural standards.

Conclusion

As White (2006) notes in *Creative Misunderstandings and New Understandings*, the process of the middle ground is not unique to specific places, but “yet the construction of a historical space in which the process becomes the basis of relations between distinct peoples is probably less common” (p. 10). This paper affirms that the suburban residence of Fremont, California, and perhaps the Bay Area as a whole, is becoming a middle ground that will be the epicenter of Asian American relations for the foreseeable future.

This study is limited in its scope and research, such as the term “Asian American” study, which serves as a broad categorization of many cultures. Additionally, culture can vary between communities, with East Asian and South Asian culture differing greatly in particular, leading to the term “Asian American” being an overgeneralization of many different peoples. As a result, the middle ground framework, which was meant to compare the combination of two distinct cultures, is used rather broadly in conjunction with many different ethnic groups. This limitation can be reduced in future research by limiting the subject in question to a particular culture or group, such as Chinese American immigrants. In future studies, this framework can be applied to different geographical areas beyond the Bay Area suburbs or onto different ethnic groups to observe how their integration into American society may have formed a middle ground. This paper also acknowledges that in historical discourse, the term “middle ground” is typically used to discuss colonial relations, particularly relating to Indigenous peoples of America. The term used in this paper carries a different meaning, with different connotations, but still borrows from the context to create a similar contemporary framework.

This paper applies the middle ground framework from Richard White’s book to a modern application, demonstrating both the historical process and contemporary infrastructure that defines Bay Area suburbia as a middle ground, both culturally and spatially. Borrowing aspects of Fremont’s history through Lung-Amam’s *Trespassers?*, this paper shows that part of the reason for the success of Asian American suburbanization may be due to the middle ground formed and maintained through infrastructure and shared cultures. Through these findings, we can view Asian American suburbia from the different perspective of a middle ground between pre-existing American and Asian culture.

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