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Young Asian Dutch constructing Asianness

Understanding the role of Asian popular culture

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

This doctoral thesis is about young Asian Dutch,¹ panethnic Asian identities and identifications,² and Asian/Asian Dutch popular culture.³ By definition, research projects concerning matters of identity and identification are highly personal and emotional. Not just for the people – or research subjects – under scrutiny, but often for the researchers as well. Even more so in the case of the present research project, as by virtue of my parents' Indonesian, Indo-Dutch,⁴ and Indian origin, I am Asian Dutch myself. I also identify as Asian and I identify with other people of Asian origin. Furthermore, I have consumed ample Asian and Asian Dutch popular culture and from time to time I still do so. However, I have not always identified as Asian, nor have I always consciously consumed Asian popular culture *as Asian* popular culture. I only became aware of, and sensitized to, notions of panethnic Asianness and Asian/Asian Dutch popular culture fairly recently, say about twenty years ago, in the 1990s. I believe starting my doctoral thesis with a short recapitulation of how I myself became an Asian Dutch subject, a recapitulation of my own 'Asian journey', is necessary and meaningful here, as it will shed light on the genesis as well as the nature and objectives of the present research project. Thus, I will begin by reflecting on my engagement with panethnic Asianness through the years, in hindsight.

Twenty-odd years ago, when I was a twentysomething, I identified as Indonesian through upbringing, and I also strongly identified as Dutch – albeit 'allochthonous' Dutch. At the time I was an ambitious journalist and I felt to be part of mainstream Dutch culture. Save for a few incidents, I had not encountered much explicit racism or social exclusion myself, at least not consciously. I felt integrated and accepted by Dutch society at large. In hindsight, I felt I was what some would call a 'model minority'. Life was good. Thus, I did not 'need' to identify with a new cultural 'groupness' to 'get by' in everyday life. And yet, at some point in the 1990s I started to identify as Asian (while also still identifying as Indonesian and Dutch), and I started to imagine Asian identities. This was situated in the context of the wider emergence of a sense of shared Asianness among young Asian Dutch of diverse Asian origin which started around late 1980s/early 1990s. I first encountered this notion of Asianness as a journalist in the early 1990s when I interviewed the organizers of so-called Asian parties, club nights aimed at Asian Dutch youths, which at the time constituted a small but growing phenomenon in the Dutch nightlife landscape. I remember that I was not very impressed with the quality of Asian parties, but most of all the idea of shared Asianness did not resonate with me and I did not identify as Asian. I left it at that. However, by the late 1990s Asianness crossed my path again. Together with business partners I was looking for potential niche markets to develop (online) media for. The Asian parties came to my mind, and we identified young Asian Dutch as a promising and underserved target audience. Subsequently, I got involved in what was vernacularly known as the 'Asian scene'; an Asian Dutch imagined community, to speak with Anderson (1983).

Under the name 'VeryAzN' my partners and I created an online social network for young Asian Dutch and we produced club nights, panel discussions (amongst others about

Asian identity in the Netherlands), film screenings and other cultural events. Established cultural institutions approached us for co-productions targeted at Asian Dutch, and I was asked to join the board of Asian Dutch film festival CinemAsia. Initially my engagement with Asianness and the Asian scene was purely concerned with creating high quality media and events that would appeal to young Asian Dutch and advertisers alike. But very quickly my engagement gained a personal dimension. I became friends with people of Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipino and other Asian origin, whereas up till then my friends were mainly White Dutch or of Surinamese, Indo-Dutch or Indonesian descent. I got socialized into the Asian scene, and felt at home. I felt a connection with characters in Asian films, the people at Asian parties, and just random people of Asian origin I encountered in the streets. I started to identify as Asian too. And I still do, especially now that I am married to a Chinese Dutch woman (whom I met through my involvement in the Asian scene) and I carry our new, combined last name Kartosen-Wong that articulates our shared Asianness. Moreover, we have a son, Sam-Ming Malique, who is inevitably going to be raised with notions of Asianness. Thus, my personal and emotional Asian journey continues.

As Asianness has played and still plays such a central role in my personal life, it is perhaps unsurprising that when the opportunity to design my own PhD research presented itself, I tapped into my extensive experiences with, and observations of, Asianness and the Asian scene in the Netherlands. These observations and experiences, and, indeed, my own sense of Asianness, raised questions which I was unable to address or even formulate adequately during the time I was involved in the Asian scene as a cultural entrepreneur. But now that I was not actively involved in it anymore, I was able to look at the Asian scene from a relative distance. More so, as a (prospective) PhD researcher I was able to embed my experiences with, and observations of, Asianness in the Netherlands in a body of academic knowledge, and to formulate several pertinent research questions and objectives to be addressed in this research project. Most pressingly: why do young Asian Dutch, who were born and/or raised in the Netherlands, identify as Asian and construct Asian identities? What is the content or meaning of these Asian identities and identifications young Asian Dutch imagine? And how do these relate to young Asian Dutch' Dutch and homeland identities and identifications? What factors, or markers of Asianness, drive young Asian Dutch' identification with people of different Asian origin? How, if at all, do Asian parties and other forms of Asian popular culture facilitate the imagination of Asian identities and Asian identification? These and other questions will be addressed in this doctoral thesis, and their answers will eventually lead to the fulfilment of the main objective of this research project, namely to explore and gain an understanding of the role of local Asian Dutch and transnational Asian popular culture in young Asian Dutch' Asian cultural identification and their construction of Asian cultural identities.

First and foremost, this research project is an inquiry into the formation of panethnic 'groups' or 'communities' and identities, and processes of panethnic identification. Much

of the research on panethnicity hails from the US (Okamoto & Mora, 2014), and often Asian American panethnicity is theorized and analysed in terms of structural conditions and sociopolitical objectives. In this body of literature, external causes are foregrounded with regards to the genesis and maintenance of Asian American panethnicity. These range from non-Asian Americans who are unwilling to distinguish between Asian Americans of different origin and US government institutions who group Asian Americans of different origin together for official purposes (and who both thus assign or impose the categorical (and racial) Asian American identity on Asian Americans), to explicit and virulent racism, social exclusion and (symbolic) violence (e.g., Espiritu, 1992; Lopez & Espiritu, 1990; Lowe, 1991). Thus, in her seminal book *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities*, Yen Le Espiritu (1992) posits that the assumption that ethnicity is largely voluntary is flawed. Instead, Espiritu emphasizes the “coercively imposed nature of ethnicity”, which is all the more highlighted by panethnicity (pp. 5-6). However, Espiritu (1992) does acknowledge that panethnic identities are not only and always imposed on insiders (e.g., Asian Americans) by outsiders (e.g., non-Asian Americans). She endows Asian Americans (and members of other panethnic groups) with a degree of agency by arguing that they may eventually employ and assert panethnic identities as a political resource, and that panethnicity may eventually be (re) shaped by both external and internal forces and the interaction between them (p. 7). Whether imposed by outsiders or asserted by insiders, Espiritu and other scholars of Asian American panethnicity perceive Asian Americanness mainly as a reaction to, and a product of, social and political processes and conditions, rather than cultural ones (e.g., Lopez & Espiritu, 1990). Thus, even when the cultural aspects of panethnicity are acknowledged and it is stated that processes of ethnicity, and thus panethnicity, “are not only reactive, a response to pressures from the external environment, but also creative, a product of internally generated dynamics” (Espiritu, 1992, p. 176), it is emphasized that this can only come after the panethnic groups, boundaries and identities have been properly established – by political and social circumstances –, and not the other way around (p. 13).

The present research project will attempt to enhance our understanding of panethnicity in general and panethnic Asianness among young Asian Dutch in particular. As such, it responds to Okamoto’s and Mora’s (2014) call for more research on panethnicity outside the US context. The formation of panethnic Asian groups and identities in the Netherlands may put into question the aforementioned notions that panethnicity is generated by external forces, and that the internal forces that may sustain and further panethnicity are mainly political and social in nature, rather than cultural. Asian Dutch and Asian Americans differ from one another in terms of the social and political conditions they have (had) to face. Asian Americans have faced virulent acts of racism in the US, including hate crimes such as the murder of Vincent Chin in 1982 (see Espiritu, 1992), while Asian Dutch have faced relatively little virulent racism in the Netherlands. Also, unlike in the US, in the Netherlands there is no ‘Asian Dutch’ racial category for official government use. Thus, the structural and external factors that generated Asian American panethnicity are not present, or not as strongly present, in the Netherlands. Yet, Asian Dutch do, in

fact, form panethnic Asian groups and identities, and they identify as panethnic Asian. It appears that in the Netherlands, cultural – and more specifically, popular cultural – rather than sociopolitical factors are at the base of panethnic Asianness.

By directing attention to the cultural aspects of panethnic Asianness, and in particular young Asian Dutch' engagement with popular culture in everyday life, this research project attempts to broaden our understanding of processes of panethnicity and to add to the existing scholarship. This doctoral thesis diverges from the aforementioned body of literature on panethnic Asianness in its approach and content. It is a report of a collection of related studies that employ a variety of data collection and analysis methods, including a survey and focus group interviews. In these studies, the lived experiences of young Asian Dutch are foregrounded, and their accounts of these form the heart of this thesis. Furthermore, through these accounts of lived experiences the thesis illuminates how young Asian Dutch imagine and articulate their own, new, panethnic Asian culture, groupness and identities, and specifically how they do so facilitated by their consumption of popular culture and by employing popular culture as a cultural resource.

The subject matter of this research project and the methods employed – ones that at times require a certain closeness to the research subjects and the data – necessitate me to reflect on my role as a researcher. This, given my personal engagement with Asianness and my previous active involvement in the Asian scene in the Netherlands. First of all, my own Asian Dutch subject position, and the networks in and working knowledge about the Asian scene gained through it, enabled me to make key informed decisions concerning the sites and the people to be investigated, at an early stage in the research process. I had a good idea of where and what to look for. Furthermore, my personal and professional networks among young Asian Dutch and within the Asian scene have undoubtedly helped me to recruit participants for the different studies. Especially since Asian Dutch in general are relatively invisible and unvoiced in the public sphere and are hard to reach. Also, articulations of my own sense of Asianness and research participants' perceptions thereof, were conducive to my interaction with them prior to and during the interviews and focus group discussions. The perceived shared sense of Asianness contributed to build up rapport with the participants, and it facilitated open and candid interviews and focus group discussions. My Asian Dutch subject position provided clear advantages to the research project.

However, my Asian Dutch subject position also called for caution. I was not 'neutral', my perspective could and would at times be affected by my own sense of Asianness and my personal involvement in the Asian scene in the Netherlands. Thus, I had to constantly reflect on my own subjectivities during all stages of the research process. I had to maintain a proper distance to the participants, the data, the subject matter, in fact, to the research project at large, while at the same time remaining involved and benefitting from the knowledge flowing from my Asian Dutch subject position. This balancing act between taking position as an insider and an outsider, between being involved and being detached, needed constant attention, in particular during the analysis of data. In this process my supervisor Ed Tan played an important role. My supervisor is of Asian origin

as well, and he self-identifies as Indonesian Chinese (as well as Dutch). However, he had not engaged with the Asian scene and the sense of Asianness found among young Asian Dutch, prior to this research project. Furthermore, he had always felt a strong sense of belonging and inclusion in Dutch mainstream culture and society. As a proper outsider, my supervisor was able to show me different perspectives on the data, the analyses and the connection between them, and he helped me to reflect on them – up until our very last meeting before submitting the manuscript of this doctoral thesis. Thus, for instance, sometimes my supervisor would urge me to take another look at the data and my analyses thereof as I might have read too much into the data due to my own desires, hopes and wishes for Asianness in the Netherlands. While at other times I was asked to explain and elaborate on a particular analysis when I might have read too little in the data. For instance, when as a consequence of my familiarity with certain ‘Asian’ events and experiences, I might have taken these for granted when they occurred in the data. In the end, and with the help of my supervisor, I was able to take up and switch between two positions when necessary during the research process: the involved outsider or the researcher with inside knowledge, and the detached insider or the Asian Dutch with academic knowledge.

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Already in delineating the research group, or, concretely, who belonged to the Asian scene or the Asian ‘community’ in the Netherlands, I employed my inside knowledge and personal experiences. I could readily tap into the demotic discourse of the young Asian Dutch I wanted to investigate, rather than having to rely on the conceptualizations of ‘Asian’ used for official statistics in the Netherlands or used by for instance academics and policy makers in countries such as the US. In the US for example, the racial category ‘Asian American’ that is used for the census and other official government purposes, entails people of South, East and Southeast Asian origin. In line with this, research on ‘Asian Americans’ entails studies on Americans of South, East and Southeast origin with an emphasis on the latter two (see for example volumes on Asian Americans such as Ono, 2005 and Vö & Bonus, 2002). Contrary to the US, in the Netherlands there is no official racial category ‘Asian Dutch’ in use for government purposes, although Statistics Netherlands, the Dutch central bureau of statistics, does provide the total number of people living in the Netherlands who have an Asian country of origin. Their definition of ‘Asia’ is rather broad, besides South, East and Southeast Asian countries it includes countries in the Middle East such as Saudi Arabia and Syria (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek [CBS], 2015).⁵ In everyday use in the Netherlands however, the term ‘Asian’ commonly denotes anyone of East, South and Southeast Asian origin. Still, for the purpose of the present research project, ‘Asian’ – or indeed ‘Asian Dutch’ – is conceptualized differently and entails Dutch of East and Southeast Asian descent only. This conceptualization is based on my observations of young Asian Dutch who label themselves and others of East and Southeast Asian origin as ‘Asian’. The concept of ‘Asian’ employed in this study is thus not based on an official category but on the conceptualization and uses by members of the group under research themselves, so as to acknowledge and connect to their demotic discourse (Baumann, 1996).

There is relatively little ‘outside’ knowledge available about people of East and Southeast Asian descent living in the Netherlands, whether public or academic. In this sense, Asian Dutch are rather invisible in the Netherlands, which will be further elaborated on later. Chow (2011) already observed this situation for Chinese Dutch, but the same applies to other East and Southeast Asian diasporas in the Netherlands. Only people of Indo-Dutch origin receive some notable attention in Dutch media, academic research, politics and policy from time to time (see for example De Vries, 2009). Together with people of amongst others Indonesian, Moluccan and Chinese Indonesian descent Indo-Dutch constitute the Indonesian diaspora in the Netherlands. Counting over 369,000 members, the Indonesian diaspora is the third largest diaspora in the Netherlands and the largest Asian diaspora. Just to compare, the two largest diasporas in the Netherlands count around 396,000 (Turkish Dutch) and nearly 381,000 (Moroccan Dutch) members. Other Asian diasporas include amongst others Dutch with origins in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan (87,405), Vietnam (20,987), the Philippines (19,341) and Thailand (19,004). In total, about 545,000 Dutch belong to an East or Southeast Asian diaspora, of which nearly 324,000 are second generation Asian Dutch (CBS, 2015).⁶ These numbers already warrant more academic attention for ethnic minorities of East and Southeast Asian origin in the Netherlands.

The individual East and Southeast Asian diasporas do not only differ from one another in size, but also in terms of migration histories, socioeconomic characteristics, cultural practices and so on. ‘Asian Dutch’ should thus not be understood as a homogenous, bounded and natural ‘group’ or ‘community’. Firstly, there is much ethnic, national and cultural diversity within this panethnic group as it includes amongst others people of Filipino, Thai and Chinese origin. The latter single ethnic and national groups are not homogenous either. Chinese Dutch for example have come from different countries including Indonesia, Surinam, China (mainland and Hong Kong), Vietnam and Malaysia. At the same time, migrants who have come from Indonesia may amongst others be of Indonesian, Indo-Dutch, Moluccan or Chinese origin. Secondly, Asian Dutch are not a natural, bounded group since Dutch of East or Southeast origin may or may not identify as Asian and feel a sense of belonging to this group. Indeed, they also may or may not identify as Chinese, Indonesian, Vietnamese and so forth, which underlines that these single ethnic-national groups are not natural and bounded either (Baumann, 1996). Thus, salient differences between, as well as within the diverse East and Southeast Asian diasporas should be acknowledged.

Notwithstanding the above, there are in fact many young Asian Dutch who do perceive ‘Asian Dutch’ as a natural, bounded and homogeneous group – at least at certain times and in certain social contexts and circumstances. They understand of ‘Asian Dutch’ as a broader ethnic group that is naturally constituted of the various single East and Southeast Asian ethnic groups that they perceive to be primordially connected. The observation that Asian Dutch are not empirically a naturally bounded group, yet young Asian Dutch think of them – and hence, themselves – as such and act upon it, is crucial to this research project. Especially given the observation that in general young Asian

Dutch' (grand)parents did not and do not think and act in a similar manner, as they were and still are very much oriented towards their smaller single ethnic-national groups, also in terms of media and (popular) cultural practices. For instance, so-called 'Indo parties' have been popular among first generation and older second generation Indo-Dutch for decades. And many older Chinese Dutch, for example, consume mainly Chinese media and popular culture. Like their parents, young Chinese Dutch may also consume Chinese media and popular culture (see also Chow, Zwier, & Van Zoonen, 2008) and young Indo-Dutch may indeed join their parents to an Indo party. Still, they appear less oriented towards their single ethnic-national groups and cultures (e.g., Chinese and Indo-Dutch) than their (grand)parents as they now also visit panethnic oriented Asian parties and consume media and popular culture from other Asian countries. Simultaneously, they imagine a bounded, panethnic Asian Dutch community. This research project is concerned with illuminating the (popular) cultural practices and identification processes of these young Asian Dutch in terms of their panethnic Asianness, and, importantly, in and through *their* terms and understandings. Thus, 'Asian Dutch' will be engaged with through young Asian Dutch' own notions of natural and bounded panethnic groupness and culture. In doing so, I understand 'communities', 'groups', 'cultures', 'ethnicities' and 'identities' as imagined and not 'real', yet with consequences and causes in the social world that are, in fact, very real (Brubaker, 2002; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Jenkins, 2002).

This research project investigates young Asian Dutch' imagination of panethnic Asianness through the lens of their engagement with Asian and Asian Dutch popular culture. To this end, several empirical studies have been conducted. These studies have been reported in three research articles published in, or submitted to academic journals. Chapters two, three and four of this thesis are based on these research articles. In the fifth and final chapter the findings and conclusions of the separate studies are summarized, synthesized, and reflected on. Ultimately, this will lead to answers to the research questions and a discussion of the wider academic and sociopolitical implications of the findings and conclusions. What follows below is an overview of chapters two, three and four.

Chapter two is concerned with the first key objective of this research project, namely to explore and map young Asian Dutch' hostland, homeland and Asian cultural identifications, as well as their consumption of different kinds of media and popular culture.⁷ To this end an online survey study was conducted among young Asian Dutch. This study adds to the existing research on cultural identifications of ethnic minorities by directing explicit attention to panethnic Asian identification. In doing so, the hostland-homeland dichotomy that is still prevalent in research on ethnic minorities and cultural identifications will be critiqued and expanded. This will enhance our understanding of the diverse cultural identification options and combinations thereof available to young Asian Dutch in particular and ethnic minorities in general. Also, while studies on Asian panethnicity do indeed exist (e.g., Espiritu, 1992), this study – and the research project

at large – contributes to the research on panethnic Asian identification in the West by specifically focusing on the consumption of media and popular culture. With regards to this, the study departs from the hostland-homeland dichotomy foregrounded in much of the literature on ethnic minorities' consumption of media and popular culture (e.g., D'Haenens, Van Summeren, Saeys, & Koeman, 2004; Peeters & D'Haenens, 2005). Chow et al. (2008) already questioned this dichotomy and showed that young Chinese Dutch do not only consume Chinese and Dutch (popular) media, but US (popular) media as well. Chapter two adds to this by specifically including young Asian Dutch' consumption of non-homeland Asian popular media and panethnic Asian Dutch popular culture.⁸ By exploring young Asian Dutch' patterns of cultural identifications and young Asian Dutch' patterns of consumption of media and popular culture, as well as the relationship between these, chapter two provides a sound base for the subsequent studies in this research project.

In chapter three attention will be directed to the aforementioned Asian parties. Asian parties are an essential research site as they have been instrumental for the imagination and emergence of a sense of panethnic Asianness among young Asian Dutch since the 1990s and they remain to be among the most prolific public articulations of panethnic Asianness in the Netherlands. De Bruin (2011) already investigated Asian parties in the Netherlands for her PhD research project and shed more light on this relatively recent phenomenon (see also Boogaarts, 2009). While she did discuss the strategies employed by Asian party producers to attract clubbers, her focus was very much on the consumers and consumption of Asian parties. The study reported on in chapter three complements this by specifically examining the producers and the production of Asian parties. To this end, in depth interviews with a number of the most influential organizers, promoters, DJs and others involved in the production of Asian parties have been conducted, as well as participatory observations at several Asian parties. By focusing on the producers, chapter three offers a more comprehensive perspective on Asian parties. First of all, because to a great extent the producers' decisions and actions determine the eventual (and typical) characteristics of Asian parties in terms of amongst others music policy, audience composition and 'Asian' markers. Consequently, this affects what kind of Asianness is foregrounded and facilitated by and at Asian Parties, and how. Furthermore, most producers are Asian Dutch who may identify as Asian and who have themselves consumed Asian parties before becoming involved in the production thereof. At the same time, the Asian party producers are also cultural entrepreneurs and act as such. Thus, this study will offer insights into both consumption and production practices, and both personal and professional aspects. In particular, the chapter will illuminate the dialectic between Asian parties producers' identification as cultural entrepreneur and as Asian, or, more concretely, the dialectic between their economic objectives and motives on the one hand and their moral or 'Asian' objectives and motives on the other. This will enhance our understanding of why, how and what kind of Asian parties and Asianness are produced in Dutch nightlife and beyond.

Chapter four further explores the role of non-homeland Asian popular media in young Asian Dutch' everyday lives. The survey study reported in chapter two is amongst others concerned with establishing young Asian Dutch' patterns of consumption of non-homeland Asian popular media. The study in chapter four complements these findings by researching in depth, by means of focus group interviews, how young Asian Dutch actually make sense of non-homeland Asian popular media in their daily lives, especially in relation to their Asian identities and identifications. The focus is on Japanese and South Korean popular film and television as these are particularly popular among young Asian Dutch. The accounts of the research participants, all young Asian Dutch consumers of Japanese and South Korean film and television, will provide insights into why they find these films and television programs appealing and enjoyable and why and how these may evoke a sense of Asian identification among them. Like chapter two, chapter four adds to the literature on ethnic minorities and the consumption of media and popular culture by explicitly diverging from the traditional hostland-homeland dichotomy foregrounded in much of the research (e.g., D'Haenens et al., 2004; Peeters & D'Haenens, 2005). Essentially, this concerns the consumption of popular media texts representing countries and peoples that differ from young Asian Dutch' hostland and homelands in terms of for instance language, religion and cultural traditions. This chapter, then, explores how young Asian Dutch relate to these 'distant' media texts, and it does so through the lens of the concept of cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991, 2003), specifically in Iwabuchi's (2006, 2011) understanding of it as contingent and fluid rather than an essential quality. Ultimately, chapter four will illuminate how the consumption of Japanese and South Korean film and television facilitates, structures and contributes to young Asian Dutch' Asian identification and their imagination of Asian identities.

In addition to contributing to the existing body of academic research as discussed above, this research project is also an attempt to intervene in, and contribute to, public and political debates concerning amongst others multiculturalism, integration, cultural identification and cultural citizenship. Furthermore, this research project is also an explicit effort to let Asian Dutch' voices be heard. To start with the latter, as mentioned earlier, Chow (2011) observed that Chinese Dutch are rather invisible in Dutch political discourse, media and popular culture. This applies to other Asian Dutch diaspora as well. More than seven years ago, I addressed the underrepresentation as well as the stereotypical representation of Asian Dutch in Dutch mainstream film and television in a short piece for CinemAsia Film Festival's program booklet (Kartosen, 2008). Since then, the situation has not changed much, despite efforts by CinemAsia and individual Asian Dutch working in film and television. Asian Dutch remain invisible and their voices – their *actual* voices – unheard in Dutch media and popular culture, as well as in public and political discourse. This research project is an attempt to address this problematic state of affairs, not by 'simply' counting or classifying Asian Dutch, but by trying to listen closely to young Asian Dutch' narratives of everyday life and to represent these in this doctoral thesis and related research articles. This then, is my contribution to improving the visibility and representation of 'real' Asian Dutch in Dutch society at large.

In that sense, this research project is also a natural consequence of, and follow-up to, my personal and professional engagement with Asianness and the Asian scene in the Netherlands. Indeed, rather than 'just' giving way to *their* voices, this research project is getting *our* voices heard.

As mentioned, Asian Dutch are invisible in Dutch public and political discourse concerning issues to do with multiculturalism, migration, cultural and social integration of ethnic minorities and so on. These issues are continuously addressed by Dutch media, authorities, politicians and the public. In general, these debates mostly foreground negative aspects associated with migration and ethnic minorities, such as crime and unemployment. Thus, the focus of these debates is on ethnic minorities perceived to be 'problematic', in particular people of Moroccan, Turkish or Antillean origin, Muslims, and, more recently, refugees, asylum seekers and undocumented migrants (who are quite tellingly called 'illegals' or 'illegal migrants' by Dutch media, authorities, politicians and the general public alike). Asian Dutch are generally ignored in these debates because they are perceived as 'silent', 'unproblematic', 'well-integrated' minorities, so-called 'model minorities' (see also Chow, 2011; Chow et al., 2008). This effectively leads to the construction of a problematic social hierarchy with White Dutch ('real' Dutch) on top, undesired 'bad' ethnic groups on the bottom and desired 'good' ethnic groups in the middle. The 'good' ethnic groups constitute White immigrants and non-White 'model minorities' such as Asian Dutch who are often not even perceived as 'real' ethnic minorities. This is succinctly underlined by the rather arbitrary definition of 'Western immigrants' used for official purposes, which includes people of Japanese and Indonesian origin based on their perceived socioeconomic and sociocultural position in Dutch society (CBS, 2015).

However misconstrued and problematic the notion of Asian Dutch as 'model minorities' or 'good' minorities may be, it does offer an opportunity to lay bare the contradictions and inconsistencies in Dutch mainstream public and political discourse on migration, ethnic minorities and sociocultural integration. In mainstream discourse it is emphasized that ethnic minorities who are 'integrated' are welcome in the Netherlands, thereby foregrounding the traditional idea of the Netherlands as an egalitarian and inclusive society that is welcoming and tolerant towards 'non-Dutch' cultures and people. Inclusivity, tolerance towards 'difference', and multiculturalism as societal ideal and government policy, have indeed prevailed in mainstream discourse in the past. Not so anymore, as right wing populist ideas concerning multiculturalism and ethnic minorities have become mainstream in the Netherlands. Dutch media, politicians and the general public have declared Dutch multicultural society 'failed', and calls for a focus on, and 'recovery' of, 'Dutch identity' abound. It is suggested that ethnic minorities must prioritize Dutch cultural identity and identification over other cultural identities and identifications in order to properly integrate into Dutch society (e.g., Awad & Roth, 2011; Slegers, 2007; Wetenschappelijke Raad voor het Regeringsbeleid [WRR], 2007). However, Dutch national identity is a 'thick' identity, an exclusive rather than inclusive

and open identity (Ghorashi, 2003).⁹ Thus, in the end, what is generally conceived of as ‘Dutch identity’, is essentially White Dutch identity.

While Asian Dutch are perceived as ‘integrated’, at the same time they also engender non-Dutch identities and identifications, including Asian ones, and thus they do not completely adhere to this ‘thick’, White Dutch imagination of Dutch identity. In this sense, Asian Dutch are essentially no different from other, ‘undesired’ ethnic minorities. This observation in itself already suggests that the egalitarian promise of Dutch mainstream society, the promise that ethnic minorities are tolerated or even accepted if and when they are ‘integrated’, is false rhetoric. Asian Dutch are actually perceived as ‘good’ minorities and favoured over other ethnic minorities because they are silent and invisible in Dutch society. Furthermore, like other ethnic minorities, Asian Dutch are, in fact, confronted with social and symbolic exclusion and racism in the Netherlands; they too are not perceived as ‘real’ Dutch as a consequence of their non-White Dutchness. This is underlined by a few recent public cases of racialized notions and acts affecting Asian Dutch, including several drugstores and supermarkets refusing to sell baby milk powder to people of Chinese, and by extension Asian, origin on suspicion of reselling the milk powder in China, and Dutch celebrity Gordon making racist ‘jokes’ directed at a Chinese contestant in a talent show on national television. When Asian Dutch stood up and complained about this, they were often confronted with even more stigmatizing and racist comments including remarks that they “did not understand Dutch jokes and culture”, thus suggesting that they were not integrated after all – simply because for once, Asian Dutch broke the silence and did not behave as ‘obedient’ minorities.¹⁰

This research project, then, offers a fresh perspective to current Dutch dominant discourse on multiculturalism, migration and ethnic minorities. It does so by reporting on young Asian Dutch, a ‘group’ of ethnic minorities who are integrated and generally perceived to be so by mainstream society, yet who also engender non-Dutch identities and identifications, are not seen as ‘proper’ Dutch, and who also face social exclusion and racial discrimination. As said, this will illuminate the inconsistencies and contradictions in Dutch mainstream discourse and expose it as racialized false rhetoric. Furthermore, unlike other ethnic minorities, investigating Asian Dutch ‘model minorities’ does not ‘necessitate’ to address ‘problems’ ethnic minorities are perceived to cause in Dutch society. Instead, it opens up space to directly address questions of identification, belonging and citizenship rather than ‘integration’.¹¹ More specifically, it opens up space to explore how novel Asian identities and identifications are conceived by young Asian Dutch and may offer them a new ‘way out’ of choosing between assimilating into and resisting against any (dominant) culture, and of choosing between identifying with either hostland or homeland cultures. Essentially, through representing the voices of young Asian Dutch, this research project enhances our understanding of ethnic minorities’ everyday life in Dutch multicultural society, and of the workings of Dutch multicultural society at large. It describes how, under the conditions discussed above, young Asian Dutch still manage to feel a sense of belonging in the Netherlands. Faced with symbolic exclusion from Dutch

mainstream culture, young Asian Dutch appear to have taken matters into their own hands by constructing Asian identities, engendering Asian identifications, and producing and consuming Asian and Asian Dutch popular culture; Asianness may thus be young Asian Dutch' self-created 'solution'. By making this visible, this research project is an attempt to make Dutch mainstream society actually see young Asian Dutch as they are: as active and fully fledged Dutch citizens who, despite exclusion from Dutch mainstream culture, are more than capable of navigating and coping in Dutch multicultural society on their own, and on their own terms.

NOTES

¹ In this research project 'Asian Dutch' refers to Dutch citizens/nationals of East and Southeast Asian origin. This excludes for example exchange students and expatriates from Asia who temporarily live in the Netherlands. Furthermore, as a noun 'Asian Dutch' is employed as a 'simple' classifying term to indicate the Asian origin of particular individuals and groups, and it does not imply that these individuals and groups necessarily also identify as Asian Dutch.

² When in this doctoral thesis Asian (Dutch) identities, identifications, subject positions, subjectivities and cultures are discussed, *panethnic* Asian (Dutch) is implied. Thus, rather than a generalizing term standing in for Chinese, Indonesian and so forth, Asian (Dutch) then stands for a sense of shared Asianness transcending the particular Chinese, Indonesian and so forth. When required for matters of clarity or emphasis, 'panethnic' is added to 'Asian (Dutch)' and 'Asianness'.

³ 'Asian popular culture' denotes popular culture originating from Asian countries, while 'Asian Dutch popular culture' refers to popular culture produced by Asian Dutch in the Netherlands.

⁴ Indo-Dutch are people of mixed Indonesian and Dutch/European heritage who were born in former Netherlands East Indies before it became Indonesia, or who are descendants of Indo-Dutch who were born in Netherlands East Indies.

⁵ However, oddly enough, people with origins in Japan and Indonesia are registered as 'Western immigrants' rather than 'non-Western immigrants' like other people of Asian origin. This is based on their 'socioeconomic and sociocultural position in Dutch society' (see CBS, 2015).

⁶ Third and younger generations of Asian Dutch and ethnic minorities in general, are registered as Dutch only.

⁷ In this research project 'hostland' refers to the country of residence of ethnic minorities, i.e., the Netherlands. 'Homeland' refers to the country of origin of ethnic minorities and/or their (grand)parents.

⁸ ‘Non-homeland Asian popular culture’ entails popular culture originating from Asian countries other than young Asian Dutch individuals’ Asian homeland country.

⁹ See Ghorashi (2003) for an insightful comparison between ‘thick’ Dutch and ‘thin’ American national identity.

¹⁰ This prompted me to write an op-ed for Dutch daily *De Volkskrant*, in which I argued that the very fact that young Asian Dutch finally protested against racism directed at them – something their parents had never done – is an articulation of their integration and assertion of Dutch citizenship (Kartosen-Wong, 2013).

¹¹ Moreover, this research project may suggest that the general focus on ‘integration’, in fact, the very notion of ‘integration’, in Dutch mainstream discourse is limiting and flawed. Notwithstanding this, the study reported in chapter two will address and attempt to capture the degree of ‘integration’ of young Asian Dutch.