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Images of "Model Minority" in Print Media and the Inclusion and Exclusion of Asian-Americans

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Abstract

This study examines the multifaceted images of Asian-Americans illustrated in popular print magazines, i.e., *Life*, *New York Times*, and *Saturday Evening Post* in 1945 to 1966. Specifically, the study asks, what were the characteristics of the "model minority" group that render them the "model" of other ethnic groups? Who created these images, from what sources, and for what purposes? More importantly, how can educators better understand issues facing Asian-American students, given a historicized concept of "model minority"? Through a detailed analysis of the traits, values, and beliefs of Chinese- and Japanese-Americans portrayed by popular print magazines, this study argues such traits serve the war of ideology between the United States and the Soviet block in postwar era. In other words, the model minority discourse includes Asian-Americans in the post war America citizenry landscape due to their apparent embrace of values such as democracy and freedom, while at the same time, excludes Asian-Americans through the emphasis on values associated with Asian cultures. As such, attributing the "model minority" image to Asian-Americans in contemporary America denies us critical lens through which to examine, analyze, and interpret the dilemmas and issues Asian-Americans face today. The study then concludes with suggestions for educators to demystify the "model minority" images in a globalized era.

Introduction

Stories of Asian-Americans are about inclusion and exclusion. On one hand, in contemporary America, Asian-Americans are deemed as entrepreneurial, perseverant, hardworking and extremely intelligent, to the extent that the Asians in America are portrayed as "model minorities," a minority group that serves as the model for other minorities and, even the "majorities." (e.g., Louie, 2004; Takiki, 1998; Wu, 2002) It is widely accepted that Asian-Americans have achieved unparalleled success, especially at schools (e.g., Fryer & Levitt, 2006; Ogbu, 1983; Reardon & Galindo, 2009), in the American society. On the other hand, however, the United States has a history of presenting Asian-Americans as foreigners and enemies and legally exploited and expelled many of them from the country during the first half of the 20th century. Some of these nativist and xenophobic attitudes continue to persist and has manifested in hate crimes against Asian-Americans in contemporary America (Lott, 1998; Lee, 2005; Shah, 2010; Louie, 2004; Wu, 2002). Since the first wave of Asian immigration to the U.S. in the 1900s, Asians in America have suffered from social segregation and have been associated with images such as the "starving masses, beasts of burden, depraved heathens, and opium addicts" (Chan, 1991, p. 45). Such images have been historically associated with the derogatory term "Yellow Perils" (Tamura, 2001; Chan, 1996, 1998).[i]

Despite the negative images of Asians presented in American media and popular culture during the first half of the twentieth

[i] The term has come up in multiple articles in newspaper magazines that are cited in this article.

century, the idea of Asians as a "model minority" emerged. Coined in 1966 by sociologist William Peterson, the term "model minority" was first articulated in an article entitled "Success Story: Japanese American Style" in the *New York Times* (Peterson, 1966). By 1966, it appears that the term "Yellow Perils" had been discarded by the public and Americans instead began to embrace Asians as an archetype of the ideal immigrant. *U.S. News and World Report* (1966) further validated this positive idea of the model minority in another article, "Success Story of One Minority in the U.S." Adding to the praise was the abandonment of "national origins" as the basis for establishing quotas for a hemispheric formula and preferences for certain classes of immigrants in 1965. Hence, it seems that since then, Asians living in America had finally shaken off the "Yellow Peril" images because they finally have become a group of "model minorities." But why? How did this drastic turn of narrative happen? More importantly, what were the characteristics of the "model minority" group that render them the "model" of other ethnic groups? Who created these images, from what sources, and for what purposes? Further, how can educators better understand issues facing Asian-American students given a historicized concept of "model minority"?

This study addresses these questions using materials in popular magazines, including *Saturday Evening Post*, *Life*, and *Newsweek* between 1945 and 1966. Given its critical role as both the reflection and the manufacturer of public consciousness (Anderson, 2006; Chun, 2000), print media's accounts of Asian-Americans partially speak to the images of this group that existed in the public's mind during these two decades. Chun (2000) also points out the significance of popular writers and Western sinologists on the invention of Chinese-American identity. Examining Asian-Americans' images documented by the print media in a particular historical era, hence, contextualizes the seemingly universalized and taken-for-granted image of Asian-Americans. Although cultural studies scholars and educational anthropologists have already addressed implications of model minority image on issues regarding American citizenship and cultural pluralism (Ho, 2004; Lee, 1999; Simpson, 2011; Wu, 2002) in contemporary society, seldom have historians examined the images of model minority using print media as the primary resource. To date, seldom has historians explored the origin of model minority image; one notable study by Ellen D. Wu (2014) emphasizes on the racialization of the Asian group through the "model minority" discourse in relation to the Black freedom movement.

Meanwhile, telling the story of Asian-Americans becoming "model minorities" necessitates two separate narratives: one about the Chinese, the other about the Japanese. This is because of the opposing paths that fates of Asian-Americans took during these two decades (Chan, 1991; Chun, 2000, p. 49). Okihiro (2001) offers a detailed discussion on different periodization of groups under the "Asian-American" category, pointing out the pivotal significance of World War II. According to scholars of Asian-American history (Takiki, 1998; Wang, 2004), World War II brought about not only huge geopolitical changes, but also, changes to the lives of people with different ancestries: lives of people whose ancestors came from countries that were U.S. allies, i.e., Chinese-Americans, improved, while those identified with the enemy, i.e., Japanese-Americans, were ripped asunder. The War rewarded those who had sworn their loyalty to the country, yet at the same time, forced the relocation of Japanese into containment camps. Chinese-Americans became the "good Americans" in the "good

war" (Chan, 1991). The split of fate could not be more vividly illustrated though a *Life* article entitled "How to Tell Japs from the Chinese: Angry Citizens Victimize Allies with Emotional Outburst at Enemy" (1941), in which the journal adduced a "rule-of-thumb" from the anthropometric con-formation s that distinguishes friendly Chinese from enemy alien Japs. Hence, narratives about the Chinese- and Japanese-Americans, although separate, are indeed necessary in tracing the formation of "model minority" discourse. Together, they unpack the various dimensions of Asian-American's success story. Commonalities and differences in these two stories further shed light on Asian-American's positionality on American citizenry landscape. Furthermore, historicizing the term "model minority" also problematizes the grouping of "Asian-American students" in the contemporary era. Narratives reconstructed in this study, thus, complicate issues Asian-American students face and help frame pedagogical approaches and curricula that aim to address diversity, equality, and equity.

This study thus seeks to provide greater understanding of the idea of the model minority as presented through a powerful form of information dissemination in U.S. society during the first half of the twentieth century American popular print media. The story of Asian-Americans' images on print media is not completely new; however, it is a story worthy of further exploration given the increasing diversity of the Asian population in the United States and the need for educators and the populace to have a more nuanced and realistic understanding of Asian students.

Methodology, Materials Selection, and Limitations of the Study

This study employs literary analysis as the primary methodological approach. According to historian Richard E. Beringer (1978), literary analysis, as a primary methodology in studies in intellectual history, "involves reading source material and drawing evidence from that material to be used in supporting a point of view of thesis" (p.17). Appropriate source materials include fictional as well as non-fictional accounts. Historians of intellectual history, as well as social scientists, agree that literary evidences should be taken seriously (for example, Alridge, 2006; Beringer, 1978; Hall, 1988; Lentz, 1990; Wu, 2014). Furthermore, according to Anderson (2006), such literary materials, especially texts composed by print media, encode and express a new consciousness. This new consciousness in turn gives rise to a new community that shares this new consciousness (p. 62). In the battle over contested meanings within a particular historical time, the role of media, then, is best seen as an active agent. A careful reading of texts produced by popular magazines hence sheds light on the origin of ideas behind model minority discourse.

Simply stated, literary analysis include four steps, 1) read the literature, 2) note the themes, 3) discuss the themes, and 4) support conclusion by example (Beringer, 1978, p. 20; also see Alridge, 2006). In this study, news coverage in popular print magazines serves as the source material. As the source of investigation is representations of two Asian-American groups: Chinese- and Japanese-Americans, the study focuses on these two groups as the subjects.

To explore how print magazines account for Chinese- and Japanese-Americans in relation to the image of "model minorities," this study examines representative popular newspaper and magazines in the postwar era, *Life*, *New York Times*, and *Saturday Evening Post*. Both *Life* and *Saturday Evening Post* are listed among the top circulated magazines in the U.S. from 1930s to 1960s. *Life* is one of the most read and widely

celebrated magazines, and could boast that it reached at least one in five Americans in the 1950s (Sumner, 2010, 90). *The New York Times*, on the other hand, as one of the three popular national newspapers, also represent in many ways of the intellectual mindset in America (for example, Finneman & Thomas, 2014; Poiklik, 2012). Collectively, these three magazines represent print media industry in the mid-twentieth century U.S.

In order to gather source materials relating to the research question, several key word searches were conducted in digital archives of the above print media venues provided by the library service of a four-year, public research university. Key words include China, Sino-, Chinese, Japan, Japanese, Chinese- and Japanese-American. Then, from the returning results, materials discussing issues in the U.S. are selected. For the purpose of this paper, news reports about events outside the U.S. are excluded.

The choice to limit this analysis of the American media to these materials—excluding, for instance, indigenous Chinese and Japanese newspapers and magazines, materials broadcasted in influential radio channels—is due to practical considerations. A thorough examination of these other sources would undoubtedly provide useful insights, but it is beyond the current means of this study. Furthermore, an emphasis on American, mainstream print media materials is justified by their popularity; hence, their ability to manufacture particular images for Asian-Americans.

This approach, however, runs the risk of objectifying Asian-American as the silent minority, rather than human beings who have agency and are willing to speak for themselves in the midst of social and political change. In fact, works of other historians have documented the rise of indigenous Chinese and Japanese media after the WWII (see Chen, 2002; Simpson, 2001; Lim, 2004; Wang, 2005; Zhao, 2002), media organizations that are still thriving in contemporary Asian-American communities. Thus, a limitation of this study lies in its insufficient attention paid to the role of indigenous media in the construction of model minority image.

Last, such a methodological approach necessitates a few words of caution. As the narratives below were pieced together using solely materials on print magazines, they should be read in a passive tense throughout. Furthermore, magazine materials below are seen as attempts to structure reality within the social transaction between periodical and reader (Lentz, 1990, p. x). Therefore, whatever the storylines are, the narrators are always news reporters, who documented events in Asian communities through their own particular lens.

Chinatowns: Places Where the "Model Minorities" are Made

"On the surface, Chinatown was exotic, mysterious, and a little squalid. But underneath it was an orderly, well-functioning community of ex-GIs (veterans previously served in U.S. army), college students, wage earners and businessmen, one of some 13 such Chinatowns which house most of America's 90,000 Chinese." (America's Chinese, 1951) Chinatowns, as the clustering sites of Chinese-American people, are "miniatures of China," (McIntyre, 1957) and have been constantly under the gaze of news reporters. Attentions to these places were all the more heightened after the outburst of the Chinese civil war between the Nationalist and the Communist after 1945 (see Chun, 2000). Not surprisingly, due to the paradoxical existence of Chinese people on the imagined American landscape, existence of these ethnic enclaves was paradoxical as well: Chinatowns were "not East, not West." (p. 1946) As homes to a majority of Chinese in America, Chinatowns during wartime America

symbolized the values upheld by the Chinese people. Curious enough, the first and foremost values on this list were more fundamental to the U.S.: democracy and freedom.

America's Chinese, Oversea Chinese, and Chinese-Americans

In 1941, 10,000 Chinese and their sympathizers paraded proudly through Chinatown streets and the downtown financial district, in celebration of the fourth anniversary of the beginning of Japan's undeclared war. During the parade, Dr. Tsune-chi Yu, Chinese Consul at New York, expressed thanks that "both America and China are now at this very moment doing everything possible in defense of such ideals as truth, freedom, self-preservation, humane understanding, law, justice, and democracy" (A celebration for democracy, 1941). After the defeat of Japanese troops in WWII and the outburst of the Chinese civil war between the benign Nationalist and the rising Communist, Chinatown's residents' embrace of democracy and their fervent denial of a "red China" accumulated[ii]. For instance, in 1949, the *New York Times* reported debates caused by the display of Communist Red Flags in Chinatown, when the community celebrated the 38th anniversary of the Nationalist China (The communist flag over Chinatown, 1949). Dr. P. H. Chang, Chinese consul-general in New York City, has requested the removal of these flags on the ground that U.S. government has not recognized the new China, as he contended that the "hoisting of the new flag of the bogus regime in Chinatown will arouse the anger of patriotic elements among Chinese residents and will become a serious cause for local disturbances of peace and order." Despite the main purpose of this celebration—to celebrate the Republic's anniversary, Chinese people displayed their anti-Communist sentiments. According to *New York Times* reporters, the Chinese continued celebrating such an occasion during subsequent years as well. During the celebrations, Dr. Tsing, president of the Young China Party, expressed the community's anti-Communist sentiments, "... if the Communists should succeed in their wild ambitions, China will cease to be Chinese. China will be lost" (The communist flag over Chinatown, 1949). Apparently, through these parades and celebrations, Chinese residing in Chinatowns expressed their identifications with the good, old China thus distanced themselves from being the Communist Chinese citizens, or even affiliated with new and evil Red China. Chinese people's tie with China, their homeland, was "ambiguous", as "their [Chinese living in Chinatown] homeland, whose people have for so long been friendly with America, is virtually at war with the U.S." (America's Chinese, 1951).

The celebration of democracy and freedom continued after the complete victory of the Communist Party over in the Far East. Two years later, the *New York Times* recorded Manhattan's Chinese community's mass pledge of allegiance to the United States and chorus of patriotic songs on a celebratory occasion for the Year of Rabbit. The performance was recorded then wired to President Truman and General Douglas MacArthur as a "document of our faith" in the U.S. coupled with "our

[ii] In his chapter, "The Kuomintang in Chinese-American Communities before World War II," Him Mark Lai argues political activities in Chinatown mirrored the Nationalist Party's ideology in China, and supports for the Nationalist party embodied Chinatowns' hope of improving their own social status in the U.S. See Him Mark Lai, "The Kuomintang in Chinese-American Communities before World War II." In *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1882-1943*, ed. Sucheng Chan, (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 170–212.

[Chinese people's] complete repudiation of Communist China" (Chinatown less noisy, 1951). Local communities taught "Ancient Chinese culture," or the teaching of Confucius, to the next generation Chinese-Americans, for fear of being contaminated by the teaching of Marx in the Communist China (Culture of Old Cathay, 1951). During the same year, Chinatown settlements were concerned about how "millions were being extorted for ransom and avert death or torture of relatives," for the benefit of the Chinese Communist Government (Red put squeeze, 1951). Then, in 1954, five Chinese anti-Communists, former prisoners of war of the United Nations during Korean fighting, visited New York's Chinatown, with "Resist Communism – Resist Soviet Russia" printed inside the map on their jackets (Chinatown hails 5 anti-communists, 1954). Photograph accompanying this short story featured the welcoming crowd in Chinatown as well as the parade led by these five anti-Communist visitors, who proudly held in their hands a banner that read, "Delegation of Anti-Communist Soldiers from the Republic of China."

Indeed, on papers, the Chinese have embraced and appreciated values upheld by the American government. George Washington, the founding father of the United States, was crowned as the "freedom guide" for Chinatown: the sentiments for Washington's spirit of freedom "were voiced largely in Cantonese but the thesis was the same" at a rally arranged by Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association (Washington cited as freedom guide, 1953). [iii] Chinese Public School leaders prepared messages in praise of George Washington, which was later broadcasted by Radio Free to the Communist-dominated China. Those Chinese who lived in the Communist China were "tens of thousands of 'wild boys' of the road at large," (*Saturday Evening Post*, 1955). A few years later, *Saturday Evening Post* (1960) reported "the Free Chinese students could not even 'bear to leave the U.S.A!'" Chinese citizens living in the U.S. have not only embraced of values fundamental to America, but also, they have declared their allegiance and loyalty to the new land. They were different from those who had not set foot in the U.S. They have become the "oversea Chinese," a group of individuals that bore a Chinese cultural ancestry yet also embodied values fundamental to America.

Of course, in reality, political attitudes in Chinatown were not as general. There were supporters of the Communist China, or at least those who called for a more balanced view of the political situation in China. For example, the *New York Times* documented the change of management of *Chung Sai Yat Po,* the second largest of five daily newspapers serving 30,000 Chinese in San Francisco. Buyers of the newspaper hoped to "scarp the newspaper's pro-Nationalist policy in favor of 'neutrality and progressiveness'" (Chinatown paper sold, 1949). Yet the majority of Chinese people were Nationalists, as "the Nationalists outnumber pro-Communists by nearly 99 to 1 and most of them are saving money for the day when a new 'third movement' will sweep the regime of Mao Tse-tung into obscurity" (America's Chinese, 1951). Moreover, the few Communists in New York Chinatown were "more interested in reorganizing the laundry men's union than in staging political demonstrations on Mott street," while the Nationalist Chinese were busy "showing devotions by contributing a couple of dollars a year to the Nationalist Party fund," besides chatting about the

[iii] Also, the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association played a key part in the production of the "ideal" Chinese-Americans. See Chapter 4 in Wu, *The Color of Success*, for a detailed discussion.

opening of new restaurants on the street corner (p. 1946; Perry, 1948). Aside for rallying against the Communist China, in Chinatown, "America's Chinese" were more interested in looking after their family members, conducting business, and educating the next generation of Chinese-Americans.

American's Chinese: Transitioning from the East to the West

The Chinatowns operated in a way that was neither East nor West. These were places where "one civilization is in transition and another is not as yet acquired." (p. 1946) Undoubtedly, people living on Chinatown have adopted some Western values, and perhaps, democracy and freedom were the pivotal ones. Spiritual transformations took place quietly, too. For instance, religious beliefs were altered in younger generations. In the Wong's family, Wong Hong, an emigrant from China in the 1900s, carried an "unwavering sense of duty, the distillate of Confucianism, and a profound belief in the Lord God Jehovah" (Perry, 1948). The Chinese communities had also founded Sunday schools, where children learned to sing Chinese hymns about Christianity with teachers. It was said that Chinese people have become Protestants or Christians and abandoned Buddhism and Confucianism, the religious belief inherited from their ancestors. To further the cause of Catholicism among Chinese people, delegates of the Chinese Catholic conference called upon parents to "meet Christian family obligations," while encouraged "the study of the Chinese culture and language" among those who were attending Catholic colleges (Chinese Catholics, 1959). The American-born Chinese have "adapt[ed] themselves to American ways … and [embrace] a decided preference for American customs over those of their ancestors" (Schumach, 1946). Furthermore, some material bearers of the Western culture, such as coffee shops, which were supposedly "alien to the Chinese," were found in Chinatowns, along with traditional noodle shops and *Dum Sum* places (Millstein, 1955). The transformation from an Eastern civilization to a Western one was thus on the way. Inevitably, this transformation adopted the master narrative of modernization and assumed a hierarchical relationship of the West over the East. Chinese people were marching on this trajectory, blending the cultures of the East and the West (America's Chinese, 1951). Gradually, the America's Chinese progressed: they are gradually becoming Americans.

Chinese-Americans: Still the Descendants of the Chinese Civilization

Meanwhile, characteristics of an Eastern civilization were apparent. In Chinatowns, "family means everything" (America's Chinese, 1951). In the Chinese fashion, not only does family include people who share the same bloodline, family also includes those who share the same ancestry or the same organizational associations. As such, 300 Americans of Chinese ancestry in military uniforms paid their respects to those who served in the first Chinese post of the American Legion in the East, lead a color parade through Chinatown (Legion dedicates Chinese post here, 1946). Activities such as visiting families, friends, and *gung saws* (associations) rendered the New York Chinatown and its adjacent areas the "most cohesive enclave" in the city on Sundays (Millstein, 1955; Small, 1947). Of pivotal concern in the Chinese's mind relate to their friends and families (Millstein, 1955; Small, 1947). When it comes to children, the Chinatown's way worked like this: parents would shoulder any criticisms on children, while the Chinese teenager was anxious to please his parents before he

pleases himself (Perry, 1948). No matter wealthy or poor, maintaining a strict, family-style home (Perry, 1948; *Saturday Evening Post*, 1955; McIntyre, 1957) and honoring ancestors was at the heart of Chinese faith (Lin, 1955). Chinese could not celebrate traditional Chinese holidays without the surrounding of family members (*Saturday Evening Post,* 1958). In Chinatowns, from everyday greetings to education, from leisure activities to business matters, family was the fundamental operating unit.

The value of filial piety and the responsibility toward greater families were blended into other aspects of Chinatowns. Perhaps just because of the emphasis Chinatown placed on such values, the "gaudy little oriental community" was as "insular and ingrown as… any of the old Caucasian footholds in China" (Perry, 1948). These ethnic enclaves were all the more insular due to the exclusionist immigration laws on the Chinese people. Thus, for some, being responsible for their social organizations was as important as being loyal to immediate and distant family members. Cooperation among members of a family is unquestioned and automatic," (McIntyre, 1957) resulting in the Chinese's ability of peacefully settling controversies in Chinatowns. For example, the *Tongs* (meaning clubs"), originally started as fraternal organizations, functioned as business and social organizations, which more or less regulated their lives and behaviors of their family members. Members of different *tongs* were able to handle disputes amongst themselves because they spared no efforts to "save face" for their respective organizations when facing wars (Small, 1947).

Moreover, the Chinese peoples' desires to retain values and cultures inherited from ancestors were fervent. Children learn about ancient Chinese culture, including the teaching of Confucius as well as the traditional Chinese calligraphies, in Chinese schools in New York City; the demand for "exotic" Chinese groceries and authentic Chinese restaurants kept business areas in Chinatown flourishing; art pieces, performances, and movies exhibited and staged in theatres, movie houses, and galleries in Chinatowns all gave American scenes "a lively oriental flavor" (America's Chinese, 1951; Hard work at Hip Wo, 1955; Millstein, 1955; Sun sung theater, 1950).

Perhaps, precisely because of the blend of Confucian culture and the American values, Chinese-American delinquents were rare.[iv] In New York City, San Francisco and Chicago, where there were a "large colony of Chinese-Americans," polices always reported "excellent" behavior on the part of Chinese-American youngsters (Why no Chinese-American delinquents, 1955). As the final repositories of the venerable Chinese family tradition, Chinatowns educated the American children of Chinese ancestry to learn to cooperate, to respect the elders and the authorities, and to be responsible towards members of their families (Millstein, 1955; Ehrlich, 1963). Parents punish the offenders, not violently, but through the use of solitary and forced silence. Harsh living environment in Chinatowns, along with the hard work they had to go through when learning traditional Chinese calligraphies while at the same time, to become "thoroughly American-ized," trained these children to work hard and to overcome difficulties without complaints (America's Chinese, 1951; Millstein, 1955). The Chinese discipline, which "began in infancy" (Ehrlich, 1963), rendered the generation of Chinese-Americans live their lives in a pattern that

[iv] Note that hardly did this generalization reflect the reality of Chinatowns. Chapter 3 in Chun, *Of orphans and warriors* and Chapter 6 in Wu, *The Color of Success,* refute such a rosy picture using evidence collected from Chinese print media venues.

served as an example for those who were facing problems with juvenile delinquencies. Chinatowns passed on values such as patience, discipline, and dislike towards violence to the next generation of Americans, while the harsh living environment [v] in which they grew up influenced them to learn to work hard at school and participate in after school activities. "Chinatown offered a lesson," because "their way of life deserves to be known, applauded, and emulated," including "respect for parents and teachers" as well as "stable and loving home life" (McIntyre, 1957). A paragraph in *New York Times'* editorial published in 1957 summarizes the lives of this people well.

> The family structure remains surprisingly intact in spite of the fact that many local Chinese families have been in New York three generations. There has been an inevitable "Americanization" of the young people, but it has chiefly been a surface change of costume and mannerisms. They remain *fundamentally Chinese* [italic added], and segregation in the case is not a problem. In fact, one wonders who is excluding whom. A sentiment Chinese repeat with gratitude is: "We are let alone in America." (McIntyre, 1957)

Hence, print media's master narratives depicted Chinese-Americans in postwar period as a minority group that have recognized the importance of democracy and freedom that did not exist in their home country, the communist China, have adopted on some Western cultural values during their stay in America while preserving other cultural heritages from the East. In order to develop healthy societies in a foreign land and maintain their peaceful existences, Chinese-Americans took advantages of the precious opportunities America offered. They were self-reliant, entrepreneurial, able to profit from small food and clothing businesses established on their own. At the same time, they disciplined and educated their children well through the emphasis of traditional Confucian values. Just as one of the *Life* magazine's photo depicted, the Chinese-Americans represented America with an exotic, oriental flavor.


Little Jon, in striped sweater, is in the front row at Sunday school. The children are singing a Chinese hymn under leadership of one of their two teachers.

Figure. 1. A group of Chinese-American children attending a Christian lesson in a Chinese Sunday school in the Wong's neighborhood. Characters on the blackboard read "Jesus loves me." – "Your Neighbors: The Wongs" (Your Neighbors, 1948).

The Hate that Failed: The Amazing Nisei

The story of Japanese in America, however, takes on a different fate. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which allowed local military commanders to designate "military areas" as "exclusion zones," from which any or all persons may

[v] Depictions on Chinatowns in materials cited in this project all relate Chinatowns as dilapidated and in need of housing construction. See, for example, "America's Chinese," *Life*, McIntyre, "Chinatown Offers us a Lesson," Millstein, "On a Sunday in Chinatown."

be excluded." This order, as a response to Imperial Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor, was used to declare that all people of Japanese ancestry were excluded from the entire Pacific coast. As such, Japanese in America were segregated from the outside. These "trouble makers" (Tule Lake, 1944) were quiet and undemonstrative. They spoke a language "perfect for hiding facts or saying what you [they] don't mean" (Wickware, 1942). These people, however, were able to found a happy society of their own during their internment. Inside the cramped camps, the Japanese enjoyed lives: the careless leisure of children, the stores that model middle class industry and domestic consumerism, the factories that echo the industrialized mode of production—virtually everything needed for happiness in the American society could be located in the camps. Except for "the one thing they want most—liberty" (Wickware, 1942).

Those Loyal Heroes

What cost "the Japs" liberty was their disloyalty towards America. Although 70 percent of the interns were born in the U.S., they were "fanatically loyal to Japan" [vi] (Wickware, 1942; Hill, 1956). Their disloyalty was best exemplified through the story of "Tokyo Rose," a Nisei (meaning "second generation Japanese") woman whose real name was Iva Toguri D'Aquino. D'Aquino visited Japan before the outburst of Pearl Harbor and committed the crime of treason (Walz, 1948) because of her role in the Japanese propaganda, which targeted at "satisfying any GI's dream" through the voice and language of an American-born Japanese girl ("Tokyo Rose", 1945). The conviction of Tokyo Rose, despite the ambiguity and obscurity of this entire case (Simpson, 2001), alerted that loyalty to America was a pivotal value that a good American citizen should possess. The importance of loyalty was also highlighted through the tragic incidence of Yoshinao Omiya, a 24-year-old nisei, also, an "American hero" (Blind Nisei, 1944). Serving as a U.S. machine gun squad in Italy, Omiya carried the tripod when the leader of his column tripped over a trap wire. In 1953, Sergeant Hiroshi H. Miyamura, another Nisei sergeant, was rewarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the highest honor, because of his efforts in keeping secret from the Chinese in Korean War (Alden, 1953).

Playing America's Game

After Japan's unconditional surrender to the U.S., Nisei returned to the coast. Due to their war record and a diminution in the economic competition threatened by those of Japanese descent, social acceptance towards those Nisei surprisingly improved (Bess, 1955; Davies, 1946). In fact, the "unexpected results of evacuation" were largely beneficial. One of the primary benefits resulting from the internment related to the scattering of Nisei and people of Japanese ancestry over the country as they never had been before (Davies, 1948). No longer did they reside in "Little Tokyo," their ethnic enclaves; rather, they were able to socially integrate into the mainstream society.

The social integration of the Japanese was seen first on the part of Nisei women. They continued striving for happiness, as what they did during internment. The Nisei women had gained places in the white-collar occupations, which they had not had; the public school system in San Francisco has a woman teacher of Japanese descent (Davies,

[vi] However, in fact, lives inside the camps were not as ideal as the picture illustrated. Caroline Chung Simpson discussed downplay of hardships in camp's life as a deliberate attempt to disturb the reader's confidence in the process and outcome of the internment. See Chapter 2 in Simpson, *An Absent Presence*.

1946, 1948). Moreover, an article in *Life* reported that the marriage between a Chicago GI and a Japanese lady, who later moved to the U.S., had proven that the joint efforts of "the pursuit of happiness" (Michener, 1955) had surmounted barriers of language and intolerance. In the same year, author of this article, James A. Michener, enacted his own "plot" and married a nisei girl (Author enacts own plot, 1955). Despite the injustice and intolerance that they might have encountered, the nisei, who returned from the harsh camps, embraced liberty and took full advantages of this most precious gift they could have received in the U.S. society.

Hate against Nisei were sometimes rampant. Even after their return, hate signs such as "we don't want any Japs back here… EVER!" could be seen on the streets on the Pacific Coast [vii]. Yet by the mid 1950s, most Nisei had proven that this hate "had failed," as they endured this hatred with "courage and understanding," (Hill, 1956) both before detention and after being released. Instead of resistance, Nisei responded to such intolerance, hatred, and xenophobia with forbearance, patience, and even appreciation. An example of the Nisei is Judge J. Aiso, a Japanese-American who witnessed the full swing of Americans' attitude towards the Japanese, did not submitted to the humiliation and financial loss of evacuation and confinement, and served his country with distinction from the outbreak of the Pacific war. The Japanese-American community considered their fate similar to "the people whose town has been wrecked by cyclone," and evacuation may have been the primary factor that prompted an opportunity to upset the preconceived ideas of Japanese-Americans (Bess, 1955). They waited for the passage of legal measures to uplift their citizenship status, and appreciated the Congress' measures of offsetting the financial hardships they encountered after the return (Davies, 1948). Nisei took full advantages of the new occupational opportunities after their return, and have secured a wide range of jobs from the race track to research laboratories, from architecture to law. They had proven that the intolerance and hate against Japanese Americans during wartime had "failed," and assimilation to the American culture was possible for all.

Meanwhile, another factor contributed to Nisei's amazing return relates to an American principle, the principle of fair play, which "demand an equal chance for all Americans regardless of race," ethnicity, and national origins (Wu, 2013, p. 159). The success story of Nisei, despite the hardships and adversities, proved yet again that equality and democracy is pivotal to the rise of a postwar America and is fundamental to the realization of the American Dream.

Nisei: Descendants of the Menji Japan

Nisei's success could be attributed to the age-old virtue they inherited from the Menji Japan. The remarkable traditional Japanese cultural values, such as patience and perseverance, enormous fatalism, and a willingness to accommodate to the larger society, exemplified through Nisei's stories above, rendered their recoveries from the internments inevitable. Added to these values were the emphasis Nisei's placed on family and education. For instance, sociologist William Peterson suggested that the Issei (meaning "first generation Japanese American") had imported a Japanese version of the Protestant work ethic. Passed down through the immigrant generation via family and religion, this cultural code emphasized group membership and honor, fear of shame,

[vii] A photo of this sign was found in a *Saturday Evening Post* article. See William L. Worden, "The Hate that Failed," *Saturday Evening Post*, May 4, 1946, 22–138.

and respect for authority (Peterson, 1966). Despite that Peterson (1966) further contended that labeling these characters as "Nisei's 'national character' or the 'Japanese subculture' signifies to our [the Americans'] ignorance," he argued that isolated factors in Japanese Americans' success should be linked together and considered as a persistent cultural pattern. The remarkable strength in the midst of adversity has prompted Japanese Americans to achieve "full first-class citizenship" in America—they have become American citizens.

In a nutshell, the Nisei had climbed over the highest barriers that America has set for any minority group in the history of this country, in part "because of their [Nisei's] meaningful links with an alien culture" (Wu, 2013, p. 159). Coming back from the Camps, the Japanese-Americans proved that America is a democratic nation that enables success for all its citizens. Indeed, according to a reader of *Saturday Evening Post* (1956), America is "not 'assorted' cultural groups!" Rather, America has its own national values that were embraced the once-hated Japanese, who served as an example for all.

Discussion: "Model Minorities" in Contemporary America

With the publication of "Japanese American: A Success Story," the famous article in which the term "model minority" first appeared to the public (Peterson, 1956), transformation of images imposed on Asian-Americans was finally complete. No longer were Asians in America the "Yellow Perils," rather, they had become the model in minority groups. Yet news reporters' narratives on Asian-Americans from the 1940s to 1950s, as shown above, uncover two distinct yet similar story lines about Chinese-Americans and Japanese-Americans after WWII that speak much more than Asians' success story itself. Their stories, though with different paths, shed light on the role of these images as part of cultural diplomatic strategies in postwar America. Chinese- and Japanese-Americans alike have supposedly embraced the quintessential values of America. Framing the Chinese-Americans as a group that opposed communism and embrace democracy and freedom epitomized the stance of America against the Communist China, while narrating the recovery of Japanese-Americans from the adversities signaled to the world that Japan was no longer an enemy of the U.S.

However, the fundamental reason that contributed to these people's success relates more to the distinct cultural values carried from their not-so-recent immigration journeys (Wu, 2002).[viii] As such, although the American citizenry landscape had legally and rhetorically incorporated Asian-Americans, acknowledging them as models for American people, Asians in America were still simultaneously excluded from U.S. society though the same images. In other words, Chinese- and Japanese-Americans were the perpetual foreigners. Though these images of model minority were highly idealized and did not speak to the reality, they were popularized to help enact the political ideology U.S. upheld and to shape the public consciousness about the geopolitical situations in postwar America. In other words, such images of Asian-Americans served to contain the "red menace of communism," (Lee, 1999) which had just begun to swallow the other half of the world.

[viii] See further discussion about model minority discourse's implication on American citizenship, albeit from a literary perspective, in David Leiwei Li, introduction to *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1–17.

The Perils of "Model Minorities" Images on Asian-American Students

As the narratives situate the formation of the "model minority" image situates in the particular context of WWII and the ensuing Cold War, this term itself is a product of negotiation and selection. It was popular for print magazines that selected and highlighted those few who fit into the meta-narrative, while consciously, if not deliberately, ignored the others who did not serve their purposes. Hence, values and traits behind this particular portrayal are historically contingent and do not speak to the Chinese- and Japanese-Americans as a whole. It is naïve to assume all Chinese- and Japanese-American students being hardworking, disciplined, silent, and entrepreneurial, traits that "contribute" to their high schooling achievements. To better understand these achievements, the "black box" of schooling achievements must be further unpacked, rather than be left intact.

Moreover, emphasis on values inherited from foreign ancestors portrays Chinese- and Japanese-Americans as "exotic", whose "foreignness" can never be removed. Thus, they are always "different" from the "mainstream." As such, while invoking the "model minority" images aims at praising and further motivating certain students, ironically, educators might unconsciously highlight the "differences." Under the current pressure of the *No Child Left Behind Act*, such labeling all the more works against the "model minorities" because it impedes access to educational opportunities (Wong and Halgin, 2006) and results in anti-Asian sentiment between the majority and other minority groups (Chang, 2003).

The ensuing demographic change in Asian-American communities in the 1970s, such as the arrival of refugees and immigrants from Southeast Asian countries (i.e., Vietnam, Cambodia, and India), all the more cautions that this particular understanding of Asian-Americans is not applicable to all with an "Asian" background in contemporary America. Simply applying such an image to students may result in silenced voices and neglected needs among this racially diverse group (Lee, 1994; Lee & Kumashiro, 2005). This label overlooks the variation in the needs for educational sources ranging from underachieving refugees from Southeast Asia (Chhuon and Hudley, 2010; Li, 2013).

Implications on Inclusive Education

Educators and teachers shoulder the responsibilities of addressing the perils resulted from such a popularized, albeit ahistorical and decontextualized, "model minority" images. To begin with, this research calls for a rethink of multicultural and inclusive education framework. Currently, the multicultural education framework is formulated according to different cultural (primarily racial) groups (Li, Lin & Wang, 2014). It seeks to validate and celebrate students' cultural origin (for example, Banks and Banks, 2010). Ironically, however, when it comes to Chinese- and Japanese-American students, asking students to highlight the ancestral origin and the embedded "cultural traits" unconsciously invoke and impose the "model minority" label on those students of Chinese and Japanese background. Doing so further highlight their differences and "foreignness," thus, excluding them from schooling communities. On the other hand, voices and perspectives of other students who are grouped under the Asian-American umbrella are all the more marginalized, as they do not fit into the model minority stereotypical account. In this sense, multicultural education, despite of its original inclusive purposes, only retreats to a discourse that excludes the Other and marginalizes the Other within the "Other."

Hence, the story of the origin of the "model minority" label calls for an alternative conceptualization of multi-cultural education. Activities that unpack the varieties within the seemingly homogenous racial group, including Asian-Americans, African Americans, Hispanic/Latino, should be designed and implemented. Educators could also use historical materials (for example, print magazines used in the current study) as the foundation of their curriculum so as to help students decontextualize stereotypical account. In this way, multicultural education could better accomplish its goal of social inclusion and equality.

Listening to the voices of Asian-American students becomes important. As this study shows, the formation of the "model minority" label is largely a product of manipulation and exclusion. Applying the label to the group of students, then, erases the agency of Asian-American students, thus, ignoring the multifaceted factors at work in their real lives (Li, 2003).

Implications for Educational Research

Educational researchers can learn from this study. Specifically, we must elaborate and explicate meanings behind "Asian-American" students. It is productive to begin with a rethink about the term Asian-American itself. Since the 1970s, Asian-Americans have included immigrants from Southeast and South Asia, Pacific Islands, etc, and their descendants. The label, Asian-Americans, hence, the "model minorities," become overly inclusive: it groups all the Other who are different from those cultural origin can be easily identified, such as African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Americans. However, as Espirtu (1992) has argued, the "Asian" ethnicity is best seen as a "panethnicity," achieved by different Asian subgroups cooperating with each other in fighting the racism they all faced through the development of Asian-American Studies programs, social services, legal action groups, and other alliances and affiliations. Lee (2005) and Wu (2014) also demonstrated that the Asian ethnicity is always ideologically colored as either white or black, without being seen as part of any community. Perhaps, educators could understand the Asian and the "model minority" label as marginalized students' collective resistance *against* the imposed master narrative and embedded racist and exclusionary messages.

In this sense, labels such as "Asian-Americans" and "model minority" signify a static cultural barrier, a legacy inherited from the Enlightenment colonial past, in which the colonialists arbitrarily divide people according to superficial, noticeable "differences" (Bashkow, 2004). Fitting individuals into such "conventional" images also invokes an outdated "culture and personality" theory propounded by American anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead, who produced extra-ordinarily telling yet ahistorical analysis of certain groups of "exotic" people (Starn, 1986). Educators, then, should collectively challenge the colonial legacy by finding out how Asian-Americans differ from these labels and how complex the life of Asian-American students are formed. In other words, educators need to find out how the model minority label, "if flowed into actual experiences for only a moment, are quickly left behind" (Said, 1993). As illustrated above, the label and discourse of Asian-Americans as "model minority" could not capture students' educational experiences and should not be used to predict schooling achievements. Values and traits embedded behind this label, if useful at all, are only the *departure* from which student experiences are best understood. For instance, rather than concluding that "this Asian student works hard in class and completes assignments at

school," it may be better to ask, "what makes this student work hard? Does he/she have other responsibilities to fulfill at home/in their communities?" Rather than saying "this Asian student lives in an Asian neighborhood," it would be productive to explore "what attracts the family lives in this neighborhood, and why?" In this way, educational researchers are able to unpack Asian students' schooling lives, thus, further understand why and how the schooling experiences impact achievements. For example, researchers have powerfully demonstrated that socioeconomic status and political power may better explain schooling achievements of certain Asian groups (Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Indian) (Louie, 2004; Li, 2013). Hence, this research calls for a rethink of schooling achievements, to seek alternative explanations other than students' "cultural origin."

Moreover, this study calls for researchers to move away from solely defining students' cultural origin based on bodily forms or even, the body itself. Doing so implies the tacit acceptance of the correlation between biological difference and cultural traits, an idea against which anthropologists (for example, Boas, 1961; Bashkow, 2006) have argued over and over again. Quickly jumping to the claim that a group of persons as "Asians" implies the assumptions that such a category, based on students' physical appearances, is a scientific way (albeit a false one) to classify persons or groups of persons. Overly haste emphasis on bodily forms in defining students further compartmentalizes the whole person, thus, further confines students in their cultural enclave that should be opened up in the first place. Hence, as the formation of model minority discourse and the category Asian-American is a product of postwar era diplomatic strategy, moving away from such pre-existing categories can constitute a productive alternative through which schooling achievements of Asian-Americans are better explained. Indeed, not only are these categories culturally constructed, but also, historically constructed. Only after educators and researchers fully grasp and appreciate this contingency can they *unthink* images of "model minority" and its association with the "Asian" origin.

Towards Unmaking the "Model Minority" Image

To conclude, this study provides a nuanced understanding of the taken-for-granted public consciousness on Asian-Americans as a minority group from a historical perspective, and situates this understanding in a larger international geopolitical context. Such an understanding renders the "model minority" image contingent and revocable.

This study also problematizes Asian-American students as a category, highlights the implicit colonial nature of the "model minority" label, and calls for a reconceptualization of terms such as "culture, identity, and race" in current the framework of schooling and education. Narratives of this study also caution contemporary educators that blindly expecting Asian-Americans as the "model minorities" run the risk of excluding them from the American citizenry landscape. On the contrary, educators could problematize this term and the racial category itself. Listening to the voices and paying attentions to the diverse needs of Asian-American students in classrooms is a place to start. Doing so, educators are able to resist the stereotypical images imposed by the "model minority" discourse, so that efforts are made to genuinely include and welcome Asian-Americans in the schooling community and beyond.

Echoing Foucault, the task of this study is to find out how a human being, in this case, Asian-Americans, was envisaged in a particular period and the social practices that

constituted the human being. Hence, the study shows the current assumptions about “who” are Asian-Americans from a particular lens, for the purpose of “unmaking solidarity and inevitability” (Ball, 2013, p. 35). This study challenges ways in which statements about a human being are made, authorized, and described (Said, 1978, p. 3) and uncovers the historical contingency of the formation the “model minority” images. More importantly, findings of the study make possible nuanced and realistic understandings of Asian students in the contemporary era.

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