From 'Yellow Peril' to 'Model Minority': Asian Americans in the 20th century

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'Brainiac', 'maths whiz', 'over-achiever': these are some of the stereotypes we have of the children of Asian immigrants. Asian Australian students dominate selective schools and feature prominently in annual honour rolls of high school leavers. Asian American students outperform others in test after test, year after year. Asian immigrants work hard, study hard, pay their taxes and don't ask for welfare. That is how Asians are seen in the popular imagination in immigrant countries across the Western world. In short, they are the 'model minority'. Unlike some other minority groups, Asians don't cause trouble and are not a drain on the public purse. Their success is viewed as a testament to their own entrepreneurialism, and of course, the opportunity-rich, meritocratic societies they choose to call home.

It hasn't always been this way. Ellen Wu's book, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*, traces the history of how Chinese and Japanese Americans, the two largest Asian immigrant groups, came to be seen as the 'model minority'. Prior to World War Two, Asian Americans were at the other end of the immigrant hierarchy. They were seen as unassimilable aliens, unfit for citizenship: the despised 'pig-tailed coolie', the 'yellow peril'. Their cultures were viewed as so absolutely foreign to American culture as to be unsalvageably incompatible.
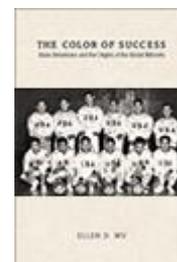
As Wu explains (p. 2), in the United States, a regime of 'Asiatic Exclusion' systematically shut Asian immigrants out of civic participation, through such measures as bars to naturalisation and property ownership, occupational discrimination, and residential segregation. Even the American-born children of Asian immigrants had to attend segregated schools, and their employment options were limited to the 'same peripheral economic niches into which their parents were funneled: truck farming, gardening, domestic labor, restaurants and laundries' (p. 2). Trapped in ghettoes like Little Tokyo or Chinatown, Asian Americans resigned themselves to their lot as 'professional carrot washers', as one second-generation Japanese American put it (p. 2). However, the Second World War changed all that, and by the mid-1960s, Asian Americans were a 'model minority', lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, and politically non-threatening (p. 2).

Wu's book traces the history of this transformation, focusing alternate chapters on the experiences of Chinese and Japanese Americans. Remarkably, given the very different

experiences of these two groups during the Second World War, they ultimately came to share the same journey of acceptance by mainstream America. But before this, the entry of the United States into the Second World War meant that different Asian groups could no longer be lumped together as 'Orientals'. In fact, in the wake of the Pearl Harbor bombing, US magazines published guides on 'How to tell your friends from the Japs'. Wu recounts:

According to *Time*, Japanese were 'hesitant, nervous in conversation, laugh loudly at the wrong time', whereas Chinese were 'more relaxed' with an 'easy gait'. *Life* explicated that 'enemy Japs'… 'show[ed] humorless intensity of ruthless mystics', compared to 'friendly Chinese' who wore the 'rational calm of tolerant realists' (p. 11).

World War Two saw the US government incarcerate 120,000 Pacific Coast *Nikkei* (individuals of Japanese descent), effectively classifying all ethnic Japanese in the United States as enemy aliens (p. 12). Towards the end of the war they were coercively dispersed across the United States, in an attempt to prevent the formation of ethnic enclaves. In the postwar period, the rehabilitation of Japanese Americans was a gradual and painful process, as questions of loyalty and citizenship continued to plague both internal community relations as well as relations with the broader society. Some Japanese community leaders had promoted cooperation with the federal government during the war, and in its aftermath, were determined to paint a portrait of *Nikkei* as unquestioningly patriotic (p. 72).

In contrast, the status of Chinese Americans was dramatically boosted by the war, because of the US partnership with China in the Pacific War. Wu argues that global geo-politics played a crucial role in the transformation of Chinese Americans into the model minority. Immigration restrictions made for 'bad diplomacy' at a time when the United States so urgently required the support of China for an allied offensive in Asia (p. 43). More generally, in an era marked by Hitler's abhorrent racial ideologies, the United States acknowledged that its anti-Asian immigration policy would hamper its aspirations to world leadership. Wu explains, 'The United States' battles against fascism and then Communism meant that Asiatic Exclusion, like Jim Crow, was no longer tenable' (p. 4). Racial democracy was a prerequisite for the United States to assume leadership of the free world.

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Subsequently, the geo-politics of the Cold War bolstered the inclusion of Asian Americans into the national fold. Japan's crucial role in the fight against communism enabled Japanese Americans to be seen in a new light. At the same time, Chinese community leaders were keen to display their anti-Communist credentials and therefore patriotic commitment to the United States and the political values of the free world (p. 113).

The Color of Success shows in great detail the public relations efforts of Asian American community leaders. During the Second World War and beyond, they strategically typecast themselves as naturally qualified to facilitate American diplomacy with the increasingly significant Asian Pacific region. Asian American leaders stereotyped their community members as model citizens, because of their predisposition to harmony and accommodation, their reverence for family and

education, and unflagging industriousness (p. 5). They had demonstrated their low rates of crime, juvenile delinquency and unemployment, and their tendency not to seek welfare, even during the Depression years (p. 49). This was largely explained by the depiction of the Chinese family, for example, as a 'hierarchical, gendered system of obligation that rewarded compliance with order and security' (p. 190). This imagery aligned perfectly with the cultural conservatism of mainstream America in the middle of the 20th century.

By the 1940s and 50s, immigration exclusions against Asian groups had been lifted, racial liberalism had become ascendant, and Asian Americans began a new era of integration into American public life. Wu documents these transformations, as manifested, for example, in the rise of the ethnic community media, and particularly English language periodicals, and in Asian Americans' enthusiastic participation in all manner of mainstream American institutions, from patriotic parades to enlisting in the military.

By the 1960s, Chinese and Japanese Americans were achieving middle class status, as measured by profession, education and income, in stark contrast to African Americans (p. 148). This distinction was at the heart of the idea of the model minority. The success of Asian Americans has been regularly used to indict other ethnic minority groups, particularly African and Hispanic Americans, blaming their 'deficient' cultures for their social and economic failings.
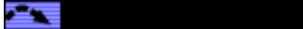
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The Color of Success provides an insightful account of not just race relations, but race *making*—'the incessant work of creating racial categories, living with and within them, altering them, and even obliterating them when they no longer have social or political utility' (p. 7). The idea of the model minority dramatically illustrates the social constructedness of racial categories. As Wu shows, it is impossible to understand popular perceptions of an ethnic group without examining the wider social context in which it is located and the global geo-politics of the era in question.

While the book briefly touches on the implications of the model minority stereotype for other ethnic groups, overall, it does not explore in any detail the ongoing social consequences of the stereotype for Asian Americans. Largely this is because the book is dedicated to providing a historical account, and the history of Chinese and Japanese Americans' experiences in the 20th century is painstakingly detailed. But this means that the book does not attempt to engage, for example, with the expansive literature on the contemporary politics of the model minority stereotype. This scholarship often takes a more critical approach, showing for example, the challenges the stereotype poses for immigrant youth, who often face enormous pressures to succeed (Qin, Way & Mukherjee 2008), or examining how the stereotype masks ongoing racism and discrimination (Chou & Feagin 2008). Other critiques have focused primarily on the implications of the stereotype for other minority groups, including making invisible the structural disadvantages they may face. Still others have analysed how the concept of the model minority supports the politics of neo-liberalism, as economic success becomes the 'yardstick for measuring various degrees of assimilation among racial minorities' (Chou 2008, p. 223), while simultaneously vindicating the 'neutrality' of American capitalism (Palumbo-Liu 1999, p. 190).

Nevertheless, Wu's historical account does provide insights into the idea of 'race making', or the social construction of racial categories. For me, Wu's documentation of the complex realities behind the model minority PR pushed by ethnic community leaders is some of the most interesting content in the book. For example, Wu shows that despite the proclamations of US Chinatowns, there was support for Communist China from within Chinese-America, and the Chinese-American Left mobilised to challenge the hegemony of the conservative merchant elite which dominated Chinese community organisations, and attempted to foster democratic reforms within the community, while supporting China's war effort against Japan (p. 120).

Her account of how Chinese American progressives were politically shut down by the community elites is an evocative reminder of the need to challenge the notion that migrant communities are unified entities. Rather, all migrant communities, including in Australia, are riven by class divisions as well as political and other differences. It is difficult to talk of a single 'Chinese community' in a country like Australia, where members of this community are sharply divided by birthplace, class, language and ideology. Immigrants from China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, for example, often harbour such deep-seated antipathies towards each other as to make the notion of a 'Chinese community' meaningless. And even different generations of immigrants from China have been shown to hold dramatically different political beliefs and values (Feng 2011).

However, in most immigrant-receiving nations, immigrants are pigeonholed by a narrow concept of ethnicity, whether this is via official classifications of government policy, or through practices of the media and popular culture that over-emphasise an individual's ethnicity (the use of the term 'of Middle Eastern appearance' in Australian crime reporting, for example).

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Ethnic community leaders and organisations have also been responsible for this self-pigeonholing, not least because their own claims to leadership and representation require a notion of a cohesive ethnic community.

In Australia, these practices have been at the very core of multiculturalism, which has arguably exacerbated the tendency towards the essentialisation of identity, preventing the adoption of more complex, multi-layered and fluid notions of subjectivity. In fact, examination of the history of any migrant 'community' will uncover these complexities. Ethnic identity is not a naturally occurring phenomenon, but something that is actively made and re-made. Ethnic 'communities' are often creations of entrepreneurial migrants who adopt self-appointed positions of leadership. When others, including governments, accept their claims to represent a group of people, the 'community' is institutionalised, and cultural stereotypes are applied to individuals.

The Color of Success details how this process unfolded for Chinese and Japanese immigrants in 20th century America. It is a remarkable illustration of how ethnic stereotypes have less to do with any innate racial or biological reality, and everything to do with the political dynamics of the societies in which we live.

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