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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates factors influencing the emergence of a new ethnic identity for Asian Americans, replete with academic achievement and professional success. While Asian Americans were once considered "unassimilable heathens," they have been transformed from "cruel, enemy aliens" to "industrious, quiet, law-abiding citizens." For years, the press has portrayed Asian Americans as a model minority. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Asian Americans were depicted as achieving the American dream through hard work, attributing the model minority success to strong family values, structure, and stability. Asians have emerged as an affluent cultural minority as the result of values inherent in their culture, beliefs, customs, and traditions. Researchers contend that this image change is attributable to professional attitudes and upward social mobility among college educated Asian Americans, coupled with the new arrival of highly educated Asian immigrants. To investigate this image, many scholars have examined Asian Americans' academic achievement, since they do well as a group. Reasons posited for their academic excellence include social values, the importance given to education, parental factors, economic factors, and school factors. Persistent problems include communication/language problems, refugee waves, residence, discrimination, and the affirmative action quota system. (Contains 61 references.) (SM)

Running head: From 'Yellow Peril' to 'Model Minority'

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**From 'Yellow Peril' to 'Model Minority':
The Transition of Asian Americans**

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From 'Yellow Peril' to 'Model Minority': The Transition of Asian Americans

Pluralistic in nature, the United States has traditionally been a multicultural society with numerous ethnic and racial minorities. This diversity has provided dynamism to higher education. In this diverse climate, the emergence of Asian Americans as an ethnic minority group in the U.S., especially in education, has been a phenomenal one. Researchers have been perplexed at the academic and professional success of the Asian Americans as compared to other ethnic minority groups. The term 'model minority' has been affixed to the group, mainly on the basis of their educational attainment, (Petersen, 1966), resulting in the overwhelming perception that they are educationally and vocationally successful. Yet, it is interesting to note that 150 years ago, Asian Americans were referred to as 'unassimilable heathens' (Hurh & Kim, 1989, p.516). Today, it is ironic indeed that the stereotyping has not changed; only the labels have changed. During the last few decades a popular image of the 'model minority' has taken shape, and a transformation from 'cruel, disloyal, enemy aliens' to 'industrious, quiet, law-abiding citizens' (p. 515), and from 'immigrants to ethnics' (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996). Although a number of scholars have investigated the reasons for this academic excellence and have posited various theories, there is a dearth of comprehensive literature that is indicative of the real reasons. This study is to determine those factors that have resulted in the emergence of a new ethnic identity of the Asian Americans, replete with academic achievement and professional success. It is hoped that it will sensitize researchers to the culture specific nature of the Asian American's approach to education.

Historical perspectives of Asian immigration to the United States

The first wave of Asian immigration to the U.S. began in the mid 1800's mainly for economic betterment and future prosperity. The first recorded Chinese immigration was as early as 1785 (Wong, 1998). The discovery of gold in California, coupled with the political and economic instability in China, resulted in a significant number of Chinese immigrants to the U.S. between 1848 and 1882. In 1882, the Chinese were prohibited from immigrating to the United States, by the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act by the U.S. Congress. During that time, Asian Americans were portrayed as 'dehumanizing stereotypes' (Jones, 1955). It was only after 1945 that the educated middle class Chinese families immigrated.

The Japanese came in 1868, and in 1924, (Kitano, 1980) a ban stopped the entry of Japanese in the U.S. The 1930 Census indicates only about 134,834 Japanese in the U.S. Despite this small number, the Chinese and Japanese immigrants were viewed as a danger to White America, introducing and reinforcing the image of 'yellow peril'. The Koreans came in 1903 to work in the sugar plantations (Patterson, 1988), the Asian Indians in 1907 (Segal, 1998) and Filipinos in 1908 (Hurh & Kim, 1989). The sporadic immigration however stopped when The 1924 Immigration Act, also known as the Oriental Exclusion Act was passed (Chan, 1991), barring the entry of Asians. World War II brought in a new spurt of Asian immigrants, and the Immigration Act of 1965 introduced a large number of immigrants, from other Asian countries too, mainly

on the basis of their professional skills and prowess. Between 1978 and 1995, Asia became the leading source of new immigrants (Kim, Atkinson, & Yang, 1999). Today, Asian Americans constitute one of the successful minority groups in the U.S., comprised mostly of a large number of comparatively new immigrants from Asia, and the descendents of earlier immigrants from diverse Asian countries.

With the arrival of the Asian Indians, a new diversity was added to Asian migration to America. Though they were, 'like their Asian brethren, "strangers from a different shore", they were Caucasians, as they are descended from the same branch of the human family as the Anglo-Saxons', wrote Takaki (1989, p.268), Besides many of them spoke English, and therefore, were feared as labor competitors and often victimized by white working class antagonism and violence. Congress enacted an immigration restriction law, which designated India as one of the Asian countries in the 'barred zone' and prohibited the entry of Asian Indians. In 1965, the Immigration and Naturalization Act was introduced, and national quotas were abolished, entry was based on profession and skills, introducing the maximum number of Asian Indian professionals.

From 'Yellow peril' to 'Model Minority'

The stereotyping of Asians changed from 'yellow peril' to 'successful model minorities' within a span of 150 years. Since the 1960's, the popular press has portrayed Asian Americans as a 'model minority' (Osajima, 1988, Petersen, 1971). In the late 1960's and early 1970's, Asian Americans were depicted as achieving the American dream through hard work, attributing the model minority success to strong family values, structure and stability (Osajima, 1988). The image portrayed was that Asian Americans constitute a successful racial minority, and were 'assimilating into the American middle class, largely through their intelligence, patience, hard work and resourcefulness' (Endo, 1980, p.367). Yet it took several decades to recognize the fact that Asians have 'emerged as an affluent cultural minority' (Xenos, Barringer, Levin, 1980, p.1) as a result of the values inherent in their culture, beliefs, customs, and traditions. Varied reasons are posited as to the emergence of the Asian Americans as a minority group worth emulating. Scholars who have given socio-cultural interpretations (Sue & Kitano, 1973; Sue & Zane 1985; Osajima, 1988; Hurh & Kim, 1989; Suzuki 1989; Reglin & Adams 1990; Sue & Okazaki 1990; Toupin & Son, 1991) attribute the change not to any real characteristics of the group or stereotypical images, but to the emergence of a different ethos in the racial climate in America. The social relationship between the dominant and minority group did not change, the exemplary minority image was portrayed as such for the other minorities to emulate, to indicate the eventual success of meritocracy in the American society. Okihiro (1984) argues that the 'yellow peril' model is embedded in the 'model minority' stereotype. Support for the 'model minority' image of Asians is provided by Sowell (1981), who found that 'groups that arrived in America financially destitute have rapidly risen to affluence, when their cultures stressed the values and behavior required in an industrial and commercial economy' (p.284). Supporting the 'success' image are other researches (Petersen, 1971; Kitano & Sue, 1973; Sowell 1978).

Hurh and Kim (1989) also contend that this change of image could be attributed to the professional attitudes, and an upward social mobility of college educated Asian Americans, coupled with the new arrival of highly educated immigrants from Korea, Hong Kong and India. However, the 'model minority' image may have been a 'myth' on account of 'disguised underemployment and other social problems' (p. 533). The popular image of Asian Americans, as portrayed by the mass media, was used to 'discredit the protests and demands for social justice of other minority groups during the mid 1960's' (Suzuki, 1989). Endo (1980) criticizes the success image as this may have been used as lessons to other ethnic groups regarding the progress in American society.

The media too has done its fair share in the portrayal of the achievements of Asian Americans in higher education. In 1971, a Newsweek article explained the reasons for the academic excellence of Asian Americans as acculturation, adjustment, and assimilation factors associated with it. In 1982, Newsweek published an article 'Asian-Americans: A "Model Minority",' which depicted a positive image of this minority group, and attributed some desirable values like thrift, sacrifice for the children, and strong family ties to the Asian American group (Newsweek, 6 December, 1982 p.39). In 1984, another article investigated the importance of Asian American family in the drive to succeed, their attitudes towards education, predominance in technical fields, and finally arrived at some stereotypical images about this ethnic group. New York Times gave reasons why Asians are going to head the class (Butterfield, 1986) and reported the success story of the Japanese Americans (1966).

In the 1980's, the National Research Council (1982) reported (Hsia, 1988) that the number of Asian Americans with doctorates in the sciences is disproportionately high in proportion to the Asian population in the U.S. In recent years, university educators too have alluded to Asian Americans as a 'model minority', perpetuating the image of Asian American students as superlative academic achievers. Most studies have tried to interpret this myth, keen on examining the reality whether Asian Americans have readily attained the positive image portrayed regarding its educational and occupational attainments (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Overwhelming questions that arise are what factors contribute to the emergence of the phenomenal success of the Asian Americans. Are these factors external like adaptation to the new culture, school environment, or are they internal, stemming from the innate nature of these individuals. Have these attributes formed over a period of time, as the Asian Americans tried to assimilate and acculturate themselves to a climate fraught with discriminatory practices and evolved their ethnic identity, or are they due to the values deeply embedded in the psyche of people originating from Asian countries? These are some of the questions addressed by the study.

The challenge of ethnic diversity

The most critical of all issues facing educators today is the challenge posed by ethnic diversity. The trend is to view student diversity as an asset for building a more democratic society. Scholars like Monaghan

(1999) reported that there seemed to be a new spurt or momentum in Asian American studies evidenced in the literature on ethnic minorities. Lately there is an emergence of many study programs on Asian Americans in the college campuses, mainly due to the pressure of a high Asian American enrollment. Research on the educational achievement of Asian Americans has typically treated them as a homogenous group from Asia, signifying a 'racial minority group bound by common racial interests' (Kibria, 1998, p. 940), implying that their success is the resultant effect of the common characteristics that transcend their ethnic boundaries.

Academic Achievement of Asian Americans

To investigate the 'model minority' image of Asian Americans, many scholars have investigated the academic achievements of Asian Americans. It has now been established that Asian Americans do well academically (Suzuki, 1980), and that Asian Americans, as a group, have attained more education than other minorities (Hirschman, & Wong 1986; Barringer, Takeuchi, & Xenos, 1990). Sue and Okazaki (1990), raises a poignant question whether it is possible to find a simple or parsimonious explanation for the achievement levels of Asian Americans. This is a critical compilation of studies conducted on Asian American's academic achievements.

The reasons posited for the academic excellence are

- Hereditary differences and test scores
- Values and the cultural interpretation theory
- Importance given to education (Sanchirico, 1991)
- Parental factors
- The home influence theory (Mordokowitz & Ginsburg, 1987)
- Parenting practices & family variables: Family structure; family values and socialization
- Student factors (Wright, 1988)
- Perception of children (Schneider & Lee, 1990), (Stevenson, Lee, & Stigler, 1992)
- Economic reasons: Financial capital theory (Endo, 1980)
- Relative functionalism (Sue & Okazaki, 1990)
- Economic survival reasons (Petersen, 1971), (Endo, 1980)
- The overachievement model
- Social capital
- Voluntary minorities
- Generational perspective (Chen, 1996)

- Effort or ability
- The bicultural competence model
- Accommodation
- Racial/Ethnic identity model
- Socio-economic status and ethnicity
- Ethnic economy & ethnic / cultural support in the U.S.
- School factors: Choice of school subjects & environment.

Persistent problems

- Communication and language problems for some groups
- Refugee waves (Story, 1999)
- The emergence of an identity (Sue & Sue, 1971), which may differ from generation to generation (Chen, 1996)
- Residence (sometimes in ethnic enclaves, like Chinatown)
- The use of English as the medium of instruction in schools (Hsia, 1988)
- Family economic status, and family structure, which affect children's educational experience and occupation prospects (Zhou, 1999)
- Academic achievement differs greatly if they are first or second generation learners, as they lack fluent verbal skills, while excelling in math.
- The 'glass ceiling' effects, which postulates that for Asian Americans, returns from education remain consistently lower than Whites, in spite of higher education (Fernandez & Liu, 1986)
- The prevalence of discriminatory prejudices against non-white foreigners that stem from cultural traditions of racism, more so in the case of women (Yamanaka & McClelland, 1994).
- The quota system and 'affirmative action': Scholars mention that Asians get an unfair deal, as they are prevented from admissions to prestigious universities, precisely because there numbers in higher education are many.

So, ironically, for this historically silent group, the 'model minority' image precludes it from other minority benefits. The very act that would have promoted their assimilation and acculturation goes against them, by way of precluding them from obtaining admission. Besides, stereotypical images for some groups still persist. Thus there are complexities beyond the Asian American 'model minority' stereotype. Whilst retaining certain desirable values like family ties and respect for learning, acculturation by way of adapting multicultural competence is to be promoted. At the same time, discriminatory tactics like 'affirmative action' and the 'glass ceiling' phenomenon should be addressed too.

Discussion

Findings indicate that there is no single reason, but a multiplicity of factors that contribute to the excellent educational performance of this minority group. Social values like achieving high educational status in society cannot be isolated from existing family values which promote it, which in turn are ingrained in parental expectations, aspirations, involvement, encouragement, role modeling, and facilitation of resources. Thus, social, human, financial and cultural capital of any one culture or country or ethnic minority are intricately woven together, and to extricate or isolate one factor and hold it responsible for the academic achievement of the entire Asian American minority ethnic group, would not be validated. Earlier studies (Sue & Kitano, 1973; Kitano & Sue, 1973) refer to the academic achievement as a 'myth', later in the late 1980's and 1990's, it was attributed to a change in the racial climate and ethos, as the promotion of diversity issues was important in society, the expectations being that other minority groups would emulate this (Osajima, 1988). After a lapse of decades, at the beginning of the new millennium, it is acknowledged that Asians have acquired an upwardly mobile ethnic identity. Drastic societal changes in terms of plurality, multiculturalism, and changes in the technical and informational front has ushered in new paradigms. The positive trend towards economic returns of education is recognized and reflected in the Asian American society (Mare, 1995). In the last few decades, a paradigm shift has occurred in the concept of American society from the 'melting pot' to the 'mosaic pattern', emphasizing ethnic identity and ethnic pride. In an emerging society where diversity forms the norms, if one group like the Asian American has succeeded in providing the lead in academic performance and occupational achievement, it may act as a role model for the other minority groups to emulate. Thus the concept of Asian American as a model minority is not a myth, but a reality, well grounded in theoretical and empirical research. Viewed from the socio-cultural and economic advantage perspectives, an analysis of the reasons that attribute to the exceptional academic achievement of Asian Americans may contribute to the school success of other ethnic minority groups in this pluralistic society. While ensuring equal intellectual opportunity, the focus should be on ethos of achievement for the American society. Future research should be geared to this end.

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