

Getting It Right

Schools and the Asian-American Experience

Vivian Wu Wong

Winter 2011



As a history teacher and advocate for Asian

and American students, I am concerned about what appears to be waning interest in the study of multicultural education and racial politics. In particular, as our independent schools become more diverse, as our international Asian student populations continue to grow, and as we become increasingly invested in global education, independent school teachers need to be cautious about shifting away from more diverse surveys of American history in favor of more global perspectives. I understand the growing interest in globally focused education as our world continues to shrink through improved connectivity. Yet, at the same time, I also see how these new initiatives can provide a convenient “out” for our schools when it comes to diversity work within our own communities.

From my perspective, a diverse narrative of the American experience should take precedence over a broad global focus — since it can provide an important window through which all students can learn about the politics of race in this country while simultaneously helping Asian and Asian-American students form their own racial identities.

Although at the time of the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau the Asian-American population made up only about 4.3 percent of the total U.S. population, it continues to be the fastest growing racial group in the U.S., expected to triple in size by 2020, and increase fivefold by 2050. I offer these statistics to highlight the growth of the Asian-American population. At the same time, however, I hesitate to report such broad statistics because it is obviously problematic for the U.S. government to lump together over 60 different ethnic groups with distinct cultures, languages, religions, and political philosophies. Doing so not only denies individuals of their specific cultural heritage, but it also leads non-Asians to oversimplify their knowledge of the various Asian communities, make often erroneous assumptions about groups and individuals, and buy into damaging stereotypes. In independent schools, this can have serious consequences for our students of Asian origin, but it can also be damaging for our school communities and the nation at large.

The Long History of Damaging Stereotypes

The two most common stereotypes of Asians in America originated in the mid-1800s with the advent of Chinese immigration. At first, these early immigrants found plenty of work in places like Washington and California. Industries were growing, the economy was booming, and cheap labor was in high demand. White employers at the time hailed the Chinese as model employees who worked hard and did not complain. However, by the late 1870s, economic conditions worsened, the need for cheap labor started to



ILLUSTRATION: SUSY PILGRIM WATERS

wane, and anti-Chinese sentiment grew. Soon, the Chinese were accused of being a “yellow peril” rather than a “model minority” and, by 1882, were excluded from entering the country.

Not long thereafter, cheap labor was again in demand, and this time Japanese immigrants heeded the call. When the federal government sought to limit Japanese immigration in the early 1900s, Korean and then Filipino immigrants started to arrive in larger numbers. A pattern began to emerge for nearly all Asian immigrant groups. At first, they were welcomed as cheap laborers and then excluded as potential threats to American society and culture. Over time, the media bought into this dual vision of Asian immigrants, portraying them as either the model minority or a yellow peril, depending on the changing economic and political conditions of the day. As a result, these stereotypes became ingrained and persisted for generations — and continue to undermine race relations in the U.S. today.

As bad as the “yellow peril” label is, the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights points out that, today, the most damaging stereotype for Asian Americans continues to be that of the model minority: the image that all Asian Americans had succeeded despite racism and discrimination.

Shortly before I arrived at Stanford University as an undergraduate, reporters and photographers from *Newsweek* had come to campus to interview a number of students for their story about Asian-American success. In the mid-1980s, during the “Me” generation, it was not uncommon for the vast majority of Americans to think of Asian Americans as the model minority. *U.S. News and World Report*, *Fortune*, and *Time* had all published similar reports between 1984 and 1987 about how “strong families and hard work propel Asian-Americans to the top of the class.”¹ While some mention was made of the stereotypical nature of this image, the cover photo of four Stanford students beneath the headline, “Asian-Americans, The Drive to Excel,” served to further reinforce the notion that Asian Americans were a model minority. Some claimed that Asian Americans were even “out-whiting” the whites.

The impact of the *Newsweek* article on the Stanford campus was alarming. Most faculty and students seemed to accept the stereotype without question, while some Asian-American students even seemed eager to flaunt their newly defined sense of racial superiority. The image that Asian Americans were a model minority, though, was a dangerous one and had been used before to pit minority groups against one another, most recently in the mid-1960s when issues of racial discrimination continued to draw national attention. *U.S. News and World Report*, for instance, claimed that Chinese Americans were model citizens. “At a time when Americans are awash in worry over the plight of racial minorities — one such minority, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans, is winning wealth and respect by dint of its own hard work. In any Chinatown from San Francisco to New York, you discover youngsters at grips with their studies. Crime and delinquency are found to be further minor in scope. Still being taught in Chinatown is the old idea that people should depend on their own efforts — not a welfare check — in order to reach America’s ‘promised land.’” The implications were clear. If Chinese Americans have succeeded, then blacks and Latinos should be able to succeed as well. But just in case readers didn’t get it, the *U.S. News and World Report* article spelled it out: “Visit Chinatown U.S.A. and you find an important racial minority pulling itself up from hardship and discrimination to become a model of self-respect and achievement in today’s America. At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans are getting ahead on their own, with no help from anyone else.”²

This is a powerful message, one that has served a number of political agendas over the past 40 years and still persists today. As the argument goes, if Asian Americans can achieve the American Dream, then other racial minorities should be able to succeed as well. If Asian Americans can overcome racial discrimination, then the American system is inherently sound. The problem with this logic, of course, is that it is wrong. It is also divisive and harmful, not just to Asian Americans but to the entire nation, as it pits one minority group against another, causing tension between groups and shifting the responsibility for creating a just and equitable society away from policymakers while letting the dominant culture off the hook for any ownership of institutionalized repression through access to education, jobs, and housing.

The image that Asian Americans are a model minority has become an ahistorical concept and has become increasingly compelling for those who know little about the experiences of Asians in America.

While at Stanford, I wondered why Asian-American students were buying into this myth. After all, I did not have to look far to find evidence to the contrary. According to the 1980 U.S. Census, females headed more Asian-American than white American households; more Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese Americans were living below the poverty level than white Americans, and the numbers of unemployed Asian Americans also ran high — in

some cases, significantly higher. Yes, some Asian Americans were doing well in school, and yes, an increasing number of Asian-American students were being admitted to top colleges and universities like Stanford, but the average Asian-American family was clearly not better off than the average white American family.

At Stanford, my friends and I who were active in the Asian-American Students Association worked hard to dispel the myth that Asian Americans were a model minority, seeing the harm that it caused, especially for students of Asian descent whose needs, we felt, were going unmet. We lobbied the university administration, for instance, for an Asian-American dean, an Asian-American counselor, more Asian-American studies courses, and a new space for the Asian-American Activities Center, which had been located in an old dilapidated firehouse. We also worked with leaders of the black, Chicano, and Native American student organizations to demonstrate our commitment to larger issues of justice and equality. Joining multiracial efforts to have Stanford divest from South Africa, change its Western culture requirement, and support the United Farm Workers grape boycott helped us to build relationships across racial lines that eventually spilled off-campus into statewide efforts for educational reform.

Combating the model minority myth was a constant part of our work. Asian-American students were always asking us, “Why should we care about this issue?” Non-Asian students were always assuming that Asian Americans would not care about issues of social justice. No matter how many workshops we conducted about Asian-American history and stereotypes, we continued to confront students who had bought into the myth.

Not until I started teaching Asian-American and racial and ethnic studies courses at Stanford University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and University of Massachusetts/Boston did I realize how powerfully ingrained the myth had become and why young people, in particular, were unaware of its political implications. As presented through the mainstream media, the image that Asian Americans are a model minority has become an ahistorical concept and has become increasingly compelling for those who know little about the experiences of Asians in America.

Even though Asian-American studies programs have been in existence for over 30 years and continue to thrive on a number of college and university campuses across the country, U.S. history textbooks still include surprisingly little about the history of Asians in America. Conventional attention is paid to Chinese-American railroad workers and Japanese-American internment camps, but those stories still seem like anomalies unattached to a larger story. An integrated narrative that

(1) offers a more complete outline of the Asian experience in America, and (2) identifies moments of ethnic and racial intersection would provide a more historically accurate and culturally significant history.

In particular, those moments of intersection, when Asian Americans worked individually as well as collectively to fight for their rights as American citizens, can show how they have helped to shape and

See the sidebar to this article: "[Significant Moments in Asian-American History](#)".

define many key American concepts, such as integration and inclusion.

If we fail to account for the role that Asian Americans have played in the struggle for justice and equality in the U.S., stereotypes like that of the model minority myth will continue to exacerbate our efforts to educate and empower an increasingly diverse student population.

How We Teach U.S. History Matters

In traditional American history survey courses, we still tend to see Asian Americans either as victims of past racial discrimination or examples of unusual success. Most American history textbook editors are still having a difficult time incorporating Asian-American stories. As a result, independent school teachers have turned to Asian-American scholars — like Ronald Takaki, whose *Strangers from a Different Shore* provides perhaps the single most accessible narrative of early Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, and Filipino immigrant history. For Takaki, Asian Americans have been and continue to be historical actors who have made choices and waged political battles. As immigrants and refugees, they have been pushed and pulled into a new country. As merchants and cheap labor, they have settled for and challenged the status quo. As men, women, and children, they have resisted and assimilated into the mainstream of America. Whether they were struggling to survive, questioning their identity, demonstrating their loyalty, preserving their past, or fighting for their future, Asian Americans have been playing an integral part in the culture, history, and politics of American society for over 200 years.

Teachers can incorporate the teaching of Asian-American history in a variety of ways, at a number of different levels. In my department, we teach about Japanese-American internment and the struggle for redress and reparations in our eighth grade World Cultures course as part of our study of American civics. In our upper school U.S. History courses, we make good use of Takaki's *A Different Mirror*, which helps us to expand our knowledge base and incorporate more multicultural voices. The model minority myth, yellow power, and the history of Boston's Chinatown are topics that we cover in one of our advanced topics course, "History of the Civil Rights Movement," and at one point, I was able to offer Asian-American History as a senior elective. In each case, our teachers took the opportunity to explore the historically complex nature of race relations in the U.S.

The Politics of Race

An area of particular interest to me is the study of racial politics, especially with regard to Chinese Americans who at times have had to redefine their racial identity and make some complicated choices about their place in American society.

A pivotal story takes place in Rosedale, Mississippi, in 1924. Mr. and Mrs. Gong Lum, residents and small business owners in Rosedale, refused to send their American-born daughter, Martha, to a black school and petitioned the state to allow their daughter to attend the all-white high school. The petition stated that the Board of Trustees and the State Superintendent of Education in Mississippi excluded their daughter from attending the all-white school solely on the basis of her Chinese heritage, that Gong Lum as a taxpayer helped to support and maintain the high school, that Martha was entitled to attend the Rosedale high school, and that this was the only school in the district for her. The Lums also argued that Martha was not "a member of the colored race" nor "of mixed blood," that there was no school in the Rosedale district for the children of Chinese descent, and that the Board of Trustees and State Superintendent discriminated against Martha Lum and denied her access to the Rosedale high school without authority of law.

The Lum's petition was denied on the ground that Martha was "a member of the Mongolian or yellow race, and therefore not entitled to attend the schools provided by law in the state of Mississippi for children of the white or Caucasian race." The trial court later overturned this ruling and ordered the Board of Trustees and State Superintendent to desist from discriminating against Martha on account of her race, but the defendants appealed to the Supreme Court of Mississippi, which held that "Martha Lum, of the Mongolian or yellow race, could not insist on being classed with the whites."

When the U.S. Supreme Court heard *Lum v. Rice* in 1927, it found for the Board of Trustees and the State Superintendent of Education in Mississippi and affirmed the judgment of the Supreme Court of Mississippi to exclude Martha from white schools on the grounds that it was "within the discretion of the state in

regulating its public schools, and [did] not conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment.”³ As the Lums realized, they were caught up in the tensions of the black-white paradigm that dominated American race relations.

Legally, at least in Mississippi at the time, if you were not white, you were essentially black. The social and political system did not accommodate anyone “in-between.” What the Chinese in Mississippi realized was that, in order to get the sort of education they desired, as well as other social benefits, they had to essentially become white. They had to find a way to assimilate with whites and change the image that whites had of the Chinese. In an attempt to do this, the Chinese started to “eradicate the Chinese-Negro minority” within their community and began eliminating all Chinese ties to blacks by pressuring Chinese-American men into ending their relationships with African-American women and by forcing these families to leave their community.⁴ Their intense desire for acceptance by whites forced the Chinese in Mississippi to avoid any social interaction with the black community. As a result, the image that white Mississippians held of Chinese Americans slowly changed. By the 1940s, as China-U.S. relations improved and as white Americans started viewing the Chinese differently, Chinese-American children started attending white schools legally. Instead of being associated with blacks and perceived as threatening to white society, Chinese children were lauded as model students. According to School Board President Henry Sterling, “children of native Chinese strain [were] pupils of high scholastic and character standards.”

I’m sure it comes as no surprise to the reader that this image soon became the stereotype or that it contributed to the continued oppression of blacks. The refusal on the part of white Mississippians to allow blacks into their social system was rationalized by their acceptance of the Chinese and their allegedly extraordinary abilities. The apparent choice that the Chinese in Mississippi made in the 1930s and 1940s to be associated with the whites rather than the blacks in their community had profound implications. In the end, the Chinese found that it was to their benefit to reject the black community in order to be accepted, however marginally, by the white community — but at what cost? The Chinese who sought to “pass” as white perhaps sacrificed ties to their African-American family members, or perhaps they found themselves colluding with whites to maintain a racist status quo. Learning about the choices, however difficult and painful, that Chinese and other Asian Americans have had to make in their struggle complicates and deepens our understanding of the American struggle for justice and equality.

Asian Americans, of course, have also been at the forefront of the struggle for civil rights in the U.S., especially during the 1970s and beyond. On college and university campuses across the country, Asian-American students were active in the Third World student strikes, the women’s movement, and the anti-Vietnam war movement, and called for increased minority admissions, affirmative action programs, student support services, and ethnic studies. At the community level, Asian Americans have stood up for workers’ rights, affordable housing, bilingual education, social services, bilingual ballots, and political representation, and they have continued to fight against stereotypes, anti-Asian violence, and English-only initiatives.

As we continue to move forward as a society and as we continue to prioritize our efforts to diversify our independent schools, including a more nuanced and accurate history of Asian Americans in the U.S. should remain a priority.

Vivian Wu Wong is the chair of the history and social studies department at Milton Academy (Massachusetts).

Notes

1. “The Drive to Excel,” *Newsweek on Campus*, April 1984.
2. “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.,” *US News and World Report*, January 1966.
3. *Gong Lum v. Rice*, 275 US 78 — Supreme Court 1927.
4. James C. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, Oxford University Press, 1971.

