



43<sup>rd</sup> ANNUAL SOROKIN LECTURE

*Asians in America: The Paradox of  
'The Model Minority' and  
'The Perpetual Foreigner'*

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## **ABSTRACT**

Within America's racial hierarchy, Asians seem to occupy an in-between status. They are considered "the model minority" for their extraordinary socioeconomic achievements while being simultaneously viewed as "the perpetual foreigner" for their physical characteristics and ancestral roots in Asia. In this year's Sorokin lecture, I will offer an in-depth look at the issue of racialization based my research on Asian America. I will first discuss how race is impacted by contemporary international migration, which in turn shapes varied patterns of immigration incorporation. Next, I will analyze how racial stereotypes emerge, serving to justify social inequality and stratification. I will also look into the future, speculating on the possibilities of racial change among Asian immigrants and their offspring.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## **Acknowledgement**

In memory of Sorokin for his ever-lasting contributions to Sociology.

I would like to extend my special thanks to Professor Peter Li and Professor Li Zong, and faculty and staff at the Department of Sociology and the University of Saskatchewan.

I am honored to have you all in the audience.

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My lecture today is about Asians in America. I organize my lecture into three themes:

1) International migration and demographic trends; 2) Racialization and racial stereotypes; and 3) Future possibilities of Asians in America. My analysis is based on the assumptions that Canadian and American societies are racialized societies and that people of Asian ancestry, as a racial minority group, are struggling to gain full membership in the Canadian or American nation. My focus is on Asian Americans.

## **International Migration and Demographic Trends**

### *Historical background*

Asians began to reach the Pacific shore of North America in the late 1840s when a large number of Chinese immigrants arrived from the Siyi region of Guangdong Province during the Gold Rush as contract laborers, miners, and later as railroad workers. Early Chinese immigrants to Canada were recruited to build the Canadian Pacific Railway. Japanese immigrants came next, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to become farmers, fishermen, and merchants on the U.S. Pacific Northwest and in British Columbia. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most immigrants from China were male sojourners who left their close relatives – parents, wives, and children – in the homelands and send remittances to support them.<sup>1</sup> A series of anti-Asian legislation following the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 denied the entry of immigrants from Asia while also restricting the migration of women and family members of those already here in the United States. The Asian American communities in urban areas, such as Chinatown and Little Tokyo, became bachelors' societies. In 1900, the sex ratio for Chinese was 1,385 males per 100 females and for Japanese was 487:100. Meanwhile, a small number of Indians and Koreans arrived as farm laborers.

By 1917, all Asian exclusion acts in the U.S., escalated to Immigration Act of 1917 (“Asiatic Barred Zone”), had been in place to restrict immigration from Asia. Legal restrictions

applied to the two earlier major Asian groups differently. The Chinese Exclusion Act was in effect from 1882 to 1943, which perpetuated the formation of bachelor's societies until World War II. In contrast, the Gentleman Agreement of 1907, an informal agreement between the U.S. and the Empire of Japan, allowed the immigration of wives, children and parents, which led to the formation of family communities.

In Canada, a head tax was levied on all Chinese immigrants in 1885 to discourage their stay in Canada after the completion of the Canadian Pacific Railway and restrict further immigration from China, and in 1923 the government passed the Chinese Immigration Act to stop Chinese immigration.<sup>2</sup>

After World War II, especially during the 1960s, both the U.S. and Canada implemented liberal reform of its immigration policy, which bore economic and humanitarian goals (the migration of needed labor, particularly highly skilled labor, and family reunification), as seen in the Hart-Celler Act of 1965 in the U.S. and the point system established in Canadian immigration policy. Policy change in the migrant-receiving states and geo-political changes in sending states, as well as wars, interactively led to a new era of mass migration that accelerated without much slowing down in the past four decades. In the U.S., only one percent of the immigrants admitted during the 1960s were Asian (359,000 out of 3.2 million), that proportion increased to 39% (2.4 million out of 6.2 million) in the 1980s. Even though the proportions dropped in the following two decades, the absolute numbers continued to surge: 2.9 million in the 1990s (out of 9.8 million) and 3.5 million in the 2000s (out of 10.3 million).

The racial mix of the foreign born population is quite different between the two receiving countries. As Figure 1 shows, immigrants from Asia made up 37% of the foreign born population in Canada (41% from Europe and 16% from Latin America) and 26% in the U.S. (54% from Latin America and only 16% from Europe).

### *Contemporary immigration*

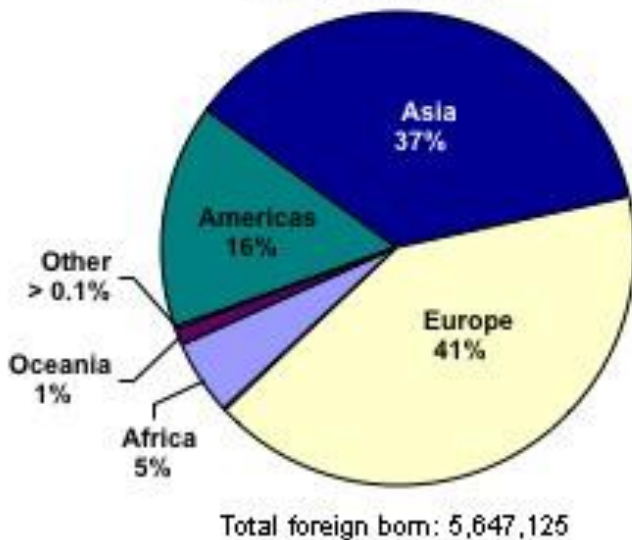
In the span of more than one and a half centuries, they have evolved into vastly diverse groups consisting of people whose ancestors, or who themselves, were born in more than 25 Asian countries. As shown in Table 1, the Asian-origin population in Canada grew to 3.65 million as of 2006. Comparatively, the ethnic population in the U.S. grew to 16.71 million in 2010, up from 1.4 million in 1970. This group's many-fold growth in the past forty years is

primarily due to international migration. Currently, Asian Americans comprised of less than 6% of the total U.S. population, about 15% of Asian Americans were mixed-race persons. About 60% (or 7.2 million) of the Asian American population are foreign born (the first generation), another 25% are native born with foreign born parentage (the second generation), and only 15% to are native born with native born parentage (the third generation), with the exception of Japanese Americans who are entering the fourth generation in America based on estimates of the U.S. Current Population Survey.

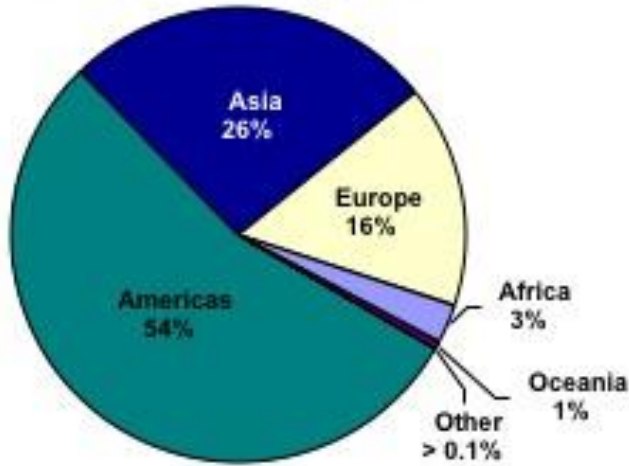
In the US, Asians are one of the smallest racial minority groups (the other one being native Americans). The Asian American identity is a self-identified, socially constructed racial identity. Of the Asian-ancestry Canadians, about 17% are mixed-race persons and 70% foreign-born. Asians in Canada also form the largest “visible minority.” The way they are racialized is quite different from their US peers. The *Asian Canadian* identity in Canada has not been as widely recognized as the *Asian American* identity in the US.

**Figure 1: Diverse Origins of the Foreign Born Population in Canada and the U.S.**

**Region of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population of Canada, 2001**



**Region of Birth for the Foreign-Born Population of the United States, 2000**



Total foreign born: 31,107,889

**Table 1: People of Asian Origin in Canada and the U.S.**

<b>Origin</b>	<b>Canada 2006</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>U.S. 2010</b>	<b>Rank</b>
Chinese	1,418,215	1	3,794,673	1
Indian	962,665	2	2,843,391	3
Other S. Asian	301,045			
Filipino	436,190	3	3,416,840	2
Vietnamese	180,125	4	1,737,433	4
Other S.E. Asian	88,835			
Korean	146,550	5	1,706,822	5
Japanese	98,900	6	1,304,286	6
<b>Total Asian</b>	<b>3,647,534</b>		<b>16,714,862</b>	



## **Racialization and Racial Stereotypes: The Case of Asian Americans**

### *Past stereotypes about Asian Americans*

In the United States, the racialization of Asians can be illustrated through stereotyping. Prior to World War II (WWII), Asians were viewed as “The sneaky Oriental,” “The yellow peril,” “indispensable enemy.” After WWII and before mass migration from Asia, they were marginalized as a “quiet” and invisible minority. Since the mid-1960s, they were conditionally accepted as the “model minority” while simultaneously perceived as “perpetual foreigners.”

Past stereotypes about Chinese Americans can be broadly applied to all Americans of Asian ancestry. I use the experience of Chinese Americans as an example because I believe that their contradictory images as both “model minority” and “perpetual foreigner” has significant implications for how we understand assimilation of non-white, non-European immigrants at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Chinese are the oldest and largest Asian-origin group in the United States that has sustained a long history dating back to the late 1840s. Early Chinese immigrants were mostly low-skilled and illiterate men. Most of them came to Hawaii and the U.S. mainland as contract labor, working at first in the plantation economy in Hawaii and in the mining industry on the West Coast and later on the transcontinental railroads west of the Rocky Mountains. These earlier immigrants were almost entirely from the Canton region of South China, often from the same villages. They intended to “sojourn” for only a short time and return home with “gold” and glory. But few had much luck in the gold mountain (referring to America); many found themselves with little gold but plenty of unjust treatment and exclusion.

During the mid-1870s when the economy went sour, a well-developed racist ideology along with well-organized native white workers stirred ethnic conflict. White workers’ frustration with economic distress, labor market uncertainty, and capitalist exploitation turned into anti-Chinese sentiment and racist attacks against the Chinese. Whites accused the Chinese of building “a filthy nest of iniquity and rottenness” in the midst of the American society and driving away white labor by “stealthy” competition. They called the Chinese the “sneaky Oriental,” the “yellow peril,” the “Chinese menace,” and the “indispensable enemy” and considered them an inferior race unassimilable to the American nation.<sup>3</sup> Rallying under the slogan – “The Chinese Must Go!” – the Workmen’s Party in California successfully launched an anti-Chinese campaign for laws to exclude the Chinese. In 1882, U.S. Congress passed the

Chinese Exclusion Act, renewed it in 1892, and extended it to exclude all Asian immigrants until World War II.

Legal exclusion, augmented by extralegal persecution and anti-Chinese violence, effectively drove the Chinese out of the mines, farms, woolen mills, and factories on the West Coast. As a result, many Chinese laborers already in the United States lost hope of ever fulfilling their dreams and returned permanently to China. Others, who could not afford the return journey (either because they had no money for the trip or because they felt ashamed to return home penniless), gravitated toward San Francisco's Chinatown for self-protection. Still others traveled eastward to look for alternative means of livelihood. Chinatowns in the Northeast, particularly New York, and the mid-West grew to absorb those fleeing the extreme persecution in California. Consequently, the number of new immigrants arriving in the United States from China dwindled from 123,000 in the 1870s to 14,800 in the 1890s, and then to a historically low number of 5,000 in the 1930s. This trend did not change significantly until Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943. The fact that Chinese clustered in Chinatown reinforced the stereotype about unassimilability.

The "yellow peril" image during the 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-Chinese movement may trace its root to the menace of Genghis Khan, who led the invasion of Mongolians, depicted as "a sea of Godless heathens", into Europe in mid-13<sup>th</sup> century. Later, other stereotypes about the Chinese emerged to portray the Chinese as some sort of "threat," such as Fu Manchu, a character in popular novels by Sax Rohmer as a symbol of Asian mastery of Western knowledge and technique in the late 1920s, and Emperor Ming, an evil, cruel, and merciless character in *Flash Gordon* films in the 1930s. Although anti-Chinese movement seemingly emerged from the anxiety and fear of economic competition, it had a clear political agenda to rethink immigration policy in the construction of a national community, it racialized the Chinese as the inferior and unassimilated "other" and excluded them from the nation as a means to reaffirm the American identity as Anglo-Saxon Protestant White (WASP). Indeed, the American identity has always been associated with whiteness. For example, in 1872, J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur from *Letters from an American Farmer* described an American as "either an European or the descendant of an European." In a 1908 play *The Melting Pot*, Israel Zangwill characterized an American as "an immaculate, well-dressed, accent-free Anglo."

The forced removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans during WWII (two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens by birth) is another historical case in point on racialization. The Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed in 1943 when China allied with the U.S. in World War II. At the same time, however, another ethnic group with similar physical look was legally and socially excluded. The bombing of Pearl Harbor during World War II turned Japanese immigrants and their US-born offspring into enemies. Japanese Americans were forcibly exiled from their homes and put into internment camps. The federal government, under provision of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, justified these actions as a "military necessity" vital to the national defense of the United States, despite the fact of evidence confirming the loyalty of Japanese Americans. In contrast, no such categorical treatments were imposed on German Americans and Italian Americans.

Although largely repudiated in the post-World War II period, the past stereotype of the "yellow peril" has repeatedly resurfaced throughout American history, especially in situations when the United States is at odds with immigrants' ancestral homelands in Asia.

#### *Current positionality of Asian Americans*

Where in the racial hierarchy are Asian Americans positioned today? To answer this question, I'd present one profile, like to tell two stories, and make 3 points.

One profile: Table 2 offers select socioeconomic characteristics of Americans by race, a glimpse into racialization, reported in the 2009 American Community Survey (ACS). As shown, Asian Americans are an immigrant group; about 60% were foreign born, which was 22 percentage points higher than Hispanics, a group also known for its high proportion of contemporary immigrants. Nearly half of the adult Asian Americans (25 years or older) attained four or more years of college education, compared to 13 percent of Hispanics and 31 percent of non-Hispanic whites, reflecting the pattern of immigrant selectivity. Indeed, immigrants from India and Taiwan displayed the highest levels of educational attainment with, respectively, completing at least four years of college. Professional occupations were also more common among Asian American workers aged 16 years or older (48%) than any racial group including non-Hispanic white workers (40%). The annual median family incomes for Asian Americans were \$78,000 in 2008 dollars, compared to \$70,000 for non-Hispanic whites; however, per capital incomes for Asian Americans were lower than non-Hispanic whites (\$28,000 v. \$31,000).

While major socioeconomic indicators were above the national average and above those of non-Hispanic whites, the poverty rate for Asian Americans was higher (9%), compared to seven percent for non-Hispanic whites. Taken education, occupation, and income as objective measures for socioeconomic status (SES), however, Asian Americans appear very well assimilated.

**Table 2: Select Characteristics of the U.S. Population by Race, 2009**

<b>2009 American Community Survey (ACS)</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Hispanic</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>White</b>
% Foreign born	8	38	60	6
% Having no high school diplomas	19	38	14	10
% Having college degrees or more	18	13	49	31
% Holding professional occupations	28	19	48	40
Median family income (\$)	41,000	42,000	78,000	70,000
Per capita income (\$)	18,000	15,000	28,000	31,000
% Families in poverty	22	21	9	7

Two stories: Mr. Leung, 73, worked as a cook in various restaurants in New York’s Chinatown for thirty-some years after arriving penniless from Hong Kong in the early 1960s. Now retired, Mr. Leung is reaping the benefits of his lifelong hard work and sacrifices – all five of his children have degrees from Ivy League colleges, hold professional jobs, own their own homes in middle-class suburbs, are happily married with children, and, most importantly, contribute cash support on a monthly basis for his (and his wife’s) retirement. Now he and his wife live with one of his children in a New Jersey suburb, and he travels by train daily to Chinatown to play mahjong in his family association building. Mr. Leung still cannot speak English, but he knows his way around and feels comfortable and settled. He says that America is home and his children are his social security.<sup>4</sup>

Drs. Li and Xia arrived in the United States to attend graduate school in the mid-1980s. Now Li is a senior scientist at a federal government research institute, while Xia runs her consulting firm in Washington, D.C. The couple lives in a beautiful suburban home with two school-age children. They speak flawless English, albeit with a slight accent, and do the “American thing” in their leisure time – hanging out with friends at bars or restaurants after work, going to the theater, movies, or ballgames, bicycling and river-rafting in the summer, and skiing in the winter. They vote in local and national elections and volunteer their time for their children’s school’s parent-teacher association (PTA) and neighborhood events. One way in which they differ from their suburban neighbors is that they helped establish a suburban Chinese-language school and actively participate in it. Xia says [in Chinese], “Saturday [when the Chinese school is in session] is the day I very much look forward to. That’s when I can speak Chinese, crack some Chinese jokes, and share some nostalgic feelings about the good old days, or bad old days, rather. It’s sort of like going to church.”<sup>5</sup>

These two stories raise important questions about the varied nature of assimilation in American life. Is Leung assimilated? Arguably not. He still cannot speak English after several decades of living in the United States, and his social life has continued to be confined to Chinatown, even after he has retired into a white middle-class suburb. However, he has raised his five children to be quintessential Americans who are also practicing the longstanding Chinese tradition of supporting their elderly parents. Are Li and Xia assimilated? Arguably yes. But after they have made it by all observable measures – English proficiency, college education, professional occupation, suburban residence, Western lifestyle, and civic participation – they find themselves taking the initiative to return to the ethnic community.

Of course, we could easily pick another set of vignettes that tell different stories. For example, an immigrant worker has worked hard all his life, but is unable to move his family out of the inner city enclave and out of poverty. Or a teenage immigrant drops out of high school, joins a youth gang, and ends up in jail because his parents are too busy working to provide needed supervision. Or an immigrant with a college degree, a high-paid professional job, and a suburban home shows no interest in fitting in with his American colleagues or neighbors, getting involved in community activities, or participating in politics. But the fact is, whether assimilation is defined objectively or subjectively and whether it faces enthusiastic endorsement or vehement

resistance, immigrants and their offspring are becoming more like average Americans – one way or another, sooner or later.

Three points: The socioeconomic profile of Asian Americans in Table 2 and the two stories above seem to suggest that Asian Americans are fare as well as, and even better, than average Americans. Their socioeconomic profile entails three important points. First, Asian Americans have the same dreams and share the same aspirations as other Americans. Second, Asian Americans are not only surpassing the SES of the older generation but also gaining parity in SES with white Americans. Third, Asian Americans are eager to assimilate into mainstream America, but they are still affected by dual stereotypes of the “forever foreigner” and the “model minority.”

In practice or discourse, assimilation is an enduring phenomenon. Only in the past few decades has it become controversial and unpopular. As the sociologist Nathan Glazer keenly notes, the immigrants subjected to the force of assimilation are now allowed more voice and agency.<sup>6</sup> Here I am not questioning the political correctness, or incorrectness, of the term “assimilation,” nor am I attempting to offer a more concise conceptualization or an alternative model with stronger predictive power. Instead, I aim to focus on how images about an ethnic group are formed and how these images become stereotypes to affect the group incorporation into American society.

### *The rise of the “model minority”*

The “model minority” image emerged during World War II as Chinese Americans worked hard to prove their loyalty to their adopted homeland, while their Asian American brothers and sisters of Japanese descent were considered suspects and disloyal Americans and hence interned in concentration camps and became “model” internees there. However, it was not crystallized until the mid-1960s. At the peak of the civil rights and ethnic consciousness movements but *before* the rising waves of immigration and the refugee influx from Asia, Asian Americans suddenly found themselves in a different stereotype – the “model minority.” Two influential articles appeared in mainstream popular magazines in 1966: the sociologist William Petersen published “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” in the *New York Times Magazine* in January 1966 and the *U.S. News & World Report* staff wrote “Success of One Minority Group in U.S.” in its December issue. The publication marked a significant departure from the

traditional depiction of Asian immigrants and their descendants in the media. Both articles extolled Japanese and Chinese Americans for their persistence in overcoming extreme hardships and discrimination (the Chinese Exclusion Act and the Executive Order 9066) to achieve a level of success unmatched even by U.S.-born whites, through “their own almost totally unaided effort” and with “no help from anyone else,” winning wealth and respect in American society through hard work, family solidarity, discipline, delayed gratification, nonconfrontation, and eschewing welfare.

The construction of the model minority at the height of the civil rights movement had its hidden political agenda. Who were the model minority? The depictions in the mainstream media were quite explicit: He/she is “always a hard worker”, “[F]or the most part, [they] end up . . . working too hard to bother about their image”; he/she “values and excels at education”, is “genetically superior”, “lacks delinquency”, is “good at math and science”, “never complains”, “Just relies on each other and works harder”, has “a strong family structure”, “in which both parents are stern but wise and caring.”

If we look at the objective measures of success, Asian Americans seem to have done remarkably well as a group. Their extraordinary educational achievement is a case in point. Research on the new second generation has repeatedly shown that high school students of Asian ancestry outperform non-Hispanic white students, who in turn outperform black and Hispanic students by a significant margin. This is true even for Asian American students from relatively modest socioeconomic backgrounds, such as Vietnamese and the Hmong. For example, a research of New York City’s immigrant children found that the children of Chinese restaurant workers or seamstresses outperformed the children of middle-class whites in school.<sup>7</sup> Asian Americans also score higher than other groups on a series of belief and behavioral measures – conviction that schooling pays off, attributional style, and peer group association – that are considered important determinants of school success.<sup>8</sup> And they attend college at a rate significantly higher than that of whites and other racial minority groups.<sup>9</sup> At the dawn of the twenty-first century, Asian Americans are dramatically overrepresented at the most prestigious campuses of public universities such as UC Berkeley and UCLA, as well as the most prestigious private colleges such as Harvard, MIT, Caltech, and Stanford. So the model minority seems to point to a fact and recognizes Asian Americans’ extraordinary achievements in American society.

However, Asian Americans, especially those born and raised in America, have viewed it as a “myth” and attempted to dispel it.

### *The effects of stereotyping on Asian Americans*

“What’s wrong with being a model minority?” asked a black student in a class I taught on race. “I’d rather be in the model minority everybody looks up to than in the downtrodden minority that everybody looks down upon.” I pondered at the question and then answered, “Neither.” Why would one want to be singled out as “different”? Let me point to two problems Asian Americans have with the model minority.

First, whether people are in a model minority or a downtrodden minority, they are judged by a *different* standard. The model-minority stereotype holds Asian Americans to higher standards than average Americans. And it places particular expectations on members of the group so labeled, channeling them into specific avenues of success, such as science and engineering, and unintentionally reinforcing barriers for Asian Americans pursuing careers outside these designated fields. Falling into this trap, a Chinese immigrant father might be upset if his son told him that he had decided to change his major from engineering to English. Disregarding his son’s passion and talent for creative writing, the father would rationalize his concern: “You have a 90 percent chance of getting a decent job with an engineering degree, but what chance would you have of earning income as a writer?” This rationale reflects more than the simple parental concern over career choices typical of middle-class families; it constitutes the self-fulfilling prophecy of a stereotype. The truth of the matter is that the larger-than-average size of the middle and upper-middle class in some Asian-origin groups, such as the Chinese, Indians, and Koreans, paves the way for the immigrants and their offspring to regain their middle-class status in the new homeland. The financial resources that immigrants bring with them to this country also help build viable ethnic economies and institutions, such as private afterschool programs, that help the less fortunate members of the group to move ahead in society much faster than they would without these ethnic resources.

Second-generation Asian Americans are more conscious of the disadvantages associated with being nonwhite than their parents, who as immigrants tend to be optimistic about overcoming disadvantages. A second-generation Chinese American in her sixties succinctly described the situation in these words: “The truth is, no matter how American you think you are



or try to be, you do not look *American*. If you have almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion, you are a foreigner by default. People will ask where you come from but won't be satisfied until they hear you name a foreign country, and they will naturally compliment your perfect English. So you can certainly be as good as or even better than whites, but you will never become accepted as white." The words of a Chinese American in her early 20's echoed the same sentiment, "[W]e ABC [American-born Chinese] were ridiculed by the old immigrants as "Bamboo Stick" for not being able to speak Chinese and not being accepted as "white people." We are not here. We are not there . . . We are different. Most of us are proud of the Chinese cultural heritage, but due to the pressure to assimilate and the lack of opportunity, we don't know much about the Chinese way." These remarks indicate a common frustration among second-generation Chinese and other Asian Americans, who lament being treated as immigrants or foreigners. Speaking perfect English, effortlessly adopting mainstream cultural values, and even marrying members of the dominant group may help reduce this "otherness" at the individual level, but it has little effect on the group as a whole. New stereotypes can emerge and un-Americanized Chinese Americans anytime and anywhere, no matter how "successful" and "assimilated" they have become. Congressman David Wu's story, quoted at the beginning of my talk, is illustrative.

Another problem with the model minority stereotype is that it buttresses the myth that the United States is devoid of racism and accords equal opportunity to all, so that those who lag behind do so because of their own poor choices and inferior culture. Celebrating this model minority can help thwart other racial minorities' demands for social justice, pitting minority groups against each other. It can also pit Asian Americans against whites. By placing Asian Americans above whites, it sets them apart from other Americans, white or nonwhite, in the public mind. The stereotype of the model minority goes hand in hand with that of the perpetual foreigner. At this point in time, Asian Americans are in an ambivalent position as nonwhite and nonblack. Globalization and U.S.-China relations, combined with continually high rates of immigration, affect how Chinese Americans are perceived in American society and how they evaluate themselves in relation to members of other racial and ethnic minorities, as well as their coethnics in China and the Chinese Diaspora. Most of the historical stereotypes, such as the "yellow peril" and "Fu Manchu," have found their way into contemporary American life. Consider the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American mistaken for Japanese and beaten to

death by a disgruntled white auto worker in the 1980s; the trial of Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear scientist suspected of spying for the Chinese government in the mid-1990s; the 1996 presidential campaign finance scandal, which implicated Asian Americans in funneling foreign contributions to the Clinton campaign; and, in 2001, the Abercrombie & Fitch tee-shirts that depicted Chinese cartoon characters in stereotypically negative ways – with slanted eyes, thick glasses, and the *Qing* queue (a long pigtail at the back of the head). The ambivalent, conditional nature of white acceptance of Asian Americans prompts them to organize pan-ethnically to fight back – which consequently heightens their racial distinctiveness.

### **Future Possibilities of Asians in America**

So what is the future of Asians in America? Are they becoming white, or people of color, or hyphenated Americans and hyphenated Canadians?

In the United States, many people consider Asian Americans honorary white. Are they white or becoming white? For many public officials, the answer to this question must be positive, because they classify Asians – especially the subgroups of Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Indians – with European-origin Americans for equal-opportunity programs; neither group is underrepresented, as blacks, Latinos, and American Indians are. But this answer is premature and based on false premises. Although Asian Americans as a group have attained the level of career and financial success equated with being white, and although many have moved near to or even married whites, they remain culturally distinct and suspect in a white society. Becoming white may be beside the point, since Asian Americans still constantly have to prove that they are truly loyal Americans, especially in situations where U.S.-China, U.S.-Japan, or U.S.-Asia relations are in the spotlight. Are they becoming the people of color? The answer not straightforward either. To be the people of color requires a constant fight against the model minority myth and concerted effort in coalition building among racial minority communities. To adopt the pan-Asian ethnicity seems to reflect what Asians in America are at the present moment. In order to reach the goal in the race for social mobility, Asians in America must find their own strategies and own path, and the ethnic way in the banner of a pan-Asian identity can be politically empowering.

In Canada, a country that has institutionalized multiculturalism, patterns of inter-racial dynamics and discourses are quite different. Are the people of Asian ancestry accepted as full

members of the multicultural nation? I think it still remains an important question and a daunting challenge for the state and the nation.

The truth of the matter is, whether you are Chinese, Korean, or Japanese, you look the same to other Americans and Canadians. Ignorant and stupid bigots may still shout hysterically at Asian-looking immigrants and their offspring to “go back to China [or an Asian country],” but they cannot stop these “foreign-looking” groups from making equal claims on this land they call home. As the migrant-receiving state becomes increasingly multiethnic, and as ethnic communities and ethnic members become integral components of the state, the time will come, sooner or later, when foreign-looking outsiders would be accepted as quintessentially citizens of their adopted nation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Sucheng Chan, *Asian Americans: An Interpretive History* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991).

<sup>2</sup> Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper gave a formal apology on June 22, 2006 to the Chinese Canadian community for the use of a head tax and the exclusion of Chinese immigrants to Canada. The Prime Minister said "we fully accept the moral responsibility to acknowledge these shameful policies of our past." <http://canadaonline.about.com/b/2006/06/25/canada-gives-formal-apology-for-chinese-head-tax.htm>, access on May 10, 2012.

<sup>3</sup> Chan, *Asian Americans*; Alexander Saxton, *The Indispensable Enemy Labor and the Anti-Chinese Movement in California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Personal interview by myself, January 1988.

<sup>5</sup> Personal interview with Dr. Xia in a Washington, D.C., suburb, February 2001 (translation from the Chinese language by myself).

<sup>6</sup> Nathan Glazer, "Is Assimilation Dead?" *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 530 (1993):122-136.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Kasinitz, John Mollenkopf, and Mary Waters, Jennifer Holdaway. *Inheriting the City: The Children of Immigrants Come of Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Laurence Steinberg, *Beyond the Classroom: Why School Reform Has Failed and What Parents Need to Do*. (New York: Touchstone, 1996).

<sup>9</sup> Min Zhou and Yoshinori Kamo, "An Analysis of Earnings Patterns for Chinese, Japanese and Non-Hispanic Whites in the United States," *The Sociological Quarterly* 35 (4, 1994): 581-602.