

Model minority myth essay



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

All through the picket line, there are many like him. Wearing a leather jacket and a black beret, this protestor of the late 1960s clutches a banner in one hand and a 2×4 in the other, demanding self-determination and liberation from the white imperialist establishment. This time, however, the angry protestor is neither a member of the Black Panther Party nor a Brown Beret. The individual is an Asian American. Passers-by give a look of astonishment as they wonder why such a seemingly nice young man would want to stir up such a commotion. Even family members and elderly people from his community find themselves in dismay as they witness his acts to disturb the peace. Many will also be surprised to learn that this Asian American speaks in black English, addresses his peers by “ brother” and “ sister,” and salutes with clenched fist in the air. Some may wonder what happened to the quiet, peaceful “ Oriental” who lived by traditional values. Audiences of today might even ask, “ What happened to the model minority? ” While the term “ model minority” may not have been popularized until the early 1980s, the notion was not entirely unfamiliar to Americans of the late 1960s. Twenty years after the forced relocation and containment of Japanese Americans in internment camps, an article titled “ Success Story: Japanese American Style” appeared in the New York Times Magazine in January 1966, proclaiming Japanese Americans as hard-working and law-abiding model citizens. [1] Later that year, an article from U.

S. News & World Report, titled “ Success Story of One Minority Group in US,” praised Chinese Americans for the same qualities. [2] These reports, along with many other similar accounts that appeared later, served to distinguish Asian Americans from other American minorities. Moreover, most of these

articles elevated Asian Americans as an ethnic group whose discipline and values should be emulated, all the while reproaching every non-model minority during a volatile period of African American civil rights activism and militant revolt. Such articles, while noting that all ethnic minorities in America have had to face tremendous adversity in the history of the nation, argue that Asian Americans have been succeeding in the realms of education, business, and social standing, while fellow racial minority groups continue to falter in finding adequately paying jobs, do poorly in educational testing, and possess high crime rates among its members.

Hence, in the 1960s, Asian Americans were beginning to become associated with an image of the model minority who has risen above the rest to successfully assimilate to American society. The emergence of this model minority perception is rather surprising, however, if one is to consider the extent of the anti-Asian attitudes and the “yellow peril” belief that was prevalent among European Americans throughout the last half of the 1800s and the first half of the 1900s. Anti-Asian sentiment dates back as far as the earliest arrivals by Asians who hoped to make a living in America. Since the 1850s, early Chinese immigrants, most of whom left their problem-ridden country in hopes of finding gold in California, were branded as a depraved group and a threat to national identity. Entire Chinese communities became the targets of anti-Asian violence by the 1870s. [3] The notion of the “yellow peril,” a widespread belief that Asian immigrants threatened to undermine white American values and racial qualities (as well as the economy of the nation) through rapid population growth and miscegenation, began around the early 1880s and was first applied to Chinese immigrants.

[4] The initial Chinese Exclusion Act, which all but eliminated further Chinese immigration into America, was also passed during this time. As America started making its way into the twentieth century, however, the focus of the yellow peril notion began to shift toward Japanese citizens and immigrants, and manifestations of these anti-Japanese sentiments climaxed with the Japanese internment during World War II. Thus, Asian Americans did contend with a number of negative portrayals for much of their history in the United States prior to the 1960s. However, just as Asian Americans have faced considerable racial discrimination and mistreatment, they engaged in activism prior to the 1960s as well. In fact, there were many instances in which Asian Americans responded to injustices against them with social protest and political action.

One of the earliest and most notable examples of Asian protest in America occurred in 1867 when 2, 000 Chinese migrant railroad workers went on strike to demand more livable wages and improved working conditions. [5] Many similar instances of Asian activism occurred over the following several decades involving Japanese, Korean, and Filipino Americans as well. Even after World War II, Asian American social activism continued as Japanese Americans lobbied for the Evacuation Claims Act, which resulted in monetary compensation for the losses accrued by a certain number of Japanese Americans as a result of the internment. [6] In addition, they campaigned for the removal of California's alien land laws, which had dramatically hindered the rights of Japanese immigrants (along with other nonwhite immigrant groups) to own land in the past. [7] Asian American activism has thus been recurrent throughout the history of the nation. The late 1960s and early

1970s had been a particularly significant period for Asian American activism, however. Domestic unrest manifested itself in various forms such as the New Left movement, Women's Liberation movement, Black Power movement, and Chicano movement, which made for a volatile atmosphere within the country.

In the international arena, the nation was engaging in the Vietnam War, and Asian Americans were realizing that those who were being fought and killed by American troops did not appear all that different from themselves. As a result, Asian Americans united to form their own movement—the Asian American movement, as it is now called. [8] Sparked by the Third World strikes of San Francisco State University and the University of California, Berkeley, the movement signaled a unified struggle by Asian Americans for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment. Participants of this movement formed numerous community organizations, wrote a variety of publications, fought for Asian American related curricula on campuses, and presented an important voice in the nation-wide protests against the Vietnam War. Consequently, as with other movements, the energy of the movement gradually began to dissipate around the end of the Vietnam War. Past scholarship on the Asian American movement thus far, although limited, has provided a number of extensive investigations in the movement and various insightful means of understanding the nature of Asian American activism during this time. On the other hand, these studies have also given minimal attention to the influence which other racial minorities had on the Asian American movement as well as the extent of collaboration between Asian American activists and these groups.

Through various first-hand documents and accounts from the portion of the Asian American movement that prevailed throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, I would argue that these factors were immensely important in shaping the goals and approaches of Asian American activists at the time and deserve attention if the essential nature of these activists is to be fully understood.[9] Historiography. For the most part, previous investigations into the Asian American movement have marked the inclusion of all Asian ethnicities as the defining characteristic of the movement, but such discussions on the inclusiveness of the movement invariably stopped short of discussing the interracial support and cooperation in which Asian American activists engaged with other minorities. On the other hand, prior studies of the movement often attribute the Black Power movement as one of the motivating factors for Asian American activism in the late 1960s. However, such claims are often briefly noted and lack supplementary evidence to deepen such discussions. While past investigations on the Asian American movement have produced important examinations of the motivating factors of the movement as well as the extent of multiethnic unity it involved, such investigations have lacked any deep analysis of the crucial role which other minority movements played in inspiring Asian American activists as well as how interracial support and collaboration have characterized the Asian American movement. Of all the original scholarship that has come out regarding the Asian American movement, William Wei's *The Asian American Movement* is by far the most extensive and in-depth analysis of the movement.

In his book, Wei touches on the range of motivating factors of the Asian American movement, and he acknowledges the movement as “ a common crusade for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment. ”[10] However, for Wei, the chief cause for the wave of activism among Asian Americans in the late 1960s and early 1970s was the Vietnam War. As Wei states, “[I]t was mainly the antiwar movement that brought [Asians] together psychologically and politically, making them aware of their ‘ Asianness,’ their membership in a pan-Asian community, and the need for an Asian American Movement. ”[11] According to Wei, the broad perception of Asians (with little distinction between differing ethnicities) as the enemy during the country’s involvement in the Vietnam War forced Asian Americans of all ethnicities to unite as a single community. Asian Americans realized they all faced the same racial oppression and discrimination in American society, and they set out to collectively make their voices heard and to classify themselves as Americans who deserved equal treatment, like everyone else in the nation.

Wei also acknowledges the influence which the Black Power movement had on Asian American activists as well as the interracial collaboration that took place in the Third World strikes in the late 1960s. Regarding the effect which the Black Power movement had on Asian American activists, Wei explains, “ The Black Power movement, which had cultural nationalism as one of its central features, was therefore a natural model to emulate. By emphasizing racial pride and African American culture, the Black Power movement inspired Asian Americans...to assert themselves as people of color.

"[12] As insightful as his observation is though, Wei does not give any extensive discussion on this topic. On the matter of interracial cooperation involving Asian Americans, Wei offers an investigation of the Third World Liberation strikes, which involved African Americans, Chicanos, and Asian Americans collectively fighting for ethnic studies at San Francisco State College and the University of California, Berkeley. [13] Nevertheless, with the exception of the Third World strikes, he does not offer any discussions about Asian American cooperation with other racial minority organizations, such as the Black Panthers, the Brown Berets, or the Young Lords Party. Wei's analysis of the Asian American movement, although thorough and indispensable, is nevertheless incomplete in the examination of the interracial influences and collaboration that helped to characterize the movement. Sucheng Chan's analysis of the Asian American movement in Asian Americans reflects a number of the same conclusions discussed in Wei's work. Regarding the main cause which led Asian Americans toward activism, Chan notes, "[T]he movement against U.

S. involvement in the war in Vietnam caught their attention in the late 1960s. [14] Like Wei, Chan claims that Asian Americans began feeling threatened for themselves as they saw people who looked like them being labeled as the enemy and killed halfway around the globe; as a result, they united to fight against the racist attitudes that prevailed throughout their country as well as for better conditions in their communities. Being perhaps the first analysis on the Asian American movement in a published book (as well as being an analysis based entirely on personal recollection), Chan's

two-page examination of the movement is brief compared to other accounts of the movement.

Thus, unlike Wei, Chan does not discuss how the Asian American movement was affected by the Black Power movement. Any instances of interracial collaboration involving Asian American activists are not mentioned either. While Chan's early examination of the Asian American movement provided a starting point for future analysis, it makes no mention of interracial influences or endeavors which helped characterize the movement. Glenn Omatsu's "The 'Four Prisons' and the Movement of Liberation" provides another analysis of the movement. In his essay, Omatsu explains how the Asian American movement was a struggle for self-determination and to take part in the historical forces that affect American society. Omatsu briefly notes how African American struggles have affected the Asian American movement: "[T]he Asian American movement coincided not with the initial campaign for civil rights but with the later demand for black liberation...the leading influence was not Martin Luther King, Jr. , but Malcolm X. [15] Although Omatsu denies that the peaceful civil rights movement had a major impact on the Asian American movement, he does claim that the more militant Black Power movement did produce such an effect on Asian American activists.

Hence, according to Omatsu, "[T]he movement was not centered on the aura of racial identity but embraced fundamental questions of oppression and power...the main thrust was not one of seeking legitimacy or representation within American society but the larger goal of liberation. "[16] This then becomes one of the main points of his analysis.