



The Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism

By Rosalind S. Chou & Joe R. Feagin

Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2010. 251 pps., \$21.52.

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Readers of *Critical Questions in Education* will learn a lot from Chou and Feagin's (2010) book, *The Myth of the Model Minority*. The book is a searing and scathing indictment of how "racial framing" impacts the lives of Asian Americans and how it leaves them vulnerable in myriad ways. The book invokes a mental map, an image of how Asian Americans truly feel and experience the world. This book helps us all to move forward; if we understand the role that "racial framing" plays in perpetuating the model minority stereotype—which serves to marginalize the experiences of Asian Americans—and the maintenance of white privilege, then surely disruption of racial framing is an appropriate way to dismantle the racism that Asian Americans face. This book, through its focus on racial framing, helps readers to better understand the duality of the model minority stereotype—successful opposed to unsuccessful—and how it causes pain and social misery for Asian Americans. Asian Americans have been virtually ignored by researchers, yet already, the public has begun to use this wonderfully written book (e.g. see Grasgreen, 2011). When Ms. Alexandra Wallace, a white undergraduate at UCLA, was captured on YouTube ranting and raving racialized stereotypes, Grasgreen (2011) referenced *The Myth of the Model Minority* in his column, pointing out that white racism directed toward Asian Americans is a form of racial framing.

The Myth of the Model Minority is stitched together by 6 chapters, sandwiched between the book's preface and reprise and conclusions, and is quickly becoming a primary source of information on Asian Americans' fight against racial framing and racism. The book is replete with relevant insights, and the chapters focus on specific issues concerning Asian Americans. For instance, chapter one discusses the reality of Asian American oppression, while Chapters two and three are concerned with the idea that racism is an everyday reality for Asian Americans in schools, society, and the workplace. Chapters four, five, and six have a common theme of racism, but approach it from different loci and perspectives. Chapter four addresses the costs of anti-Asian American discrimination on Asian Americans themselves, while chapter five discusses the white racial frame in more detail. Chapter six discusses the repertoires of resistance that Asian Americans call upon during their daily lives.

One of very few shortcomings of the book is its lack of adherence and its tacit deviation from using scholarly citations/sources. For instance, Chou and Feagin write the following in an endnote:

A recent search on *Google* for the phrase "honorary white" coupled with the word "Asian" found only 1,900 web pages. Most use the phrase 'honorary white' seems to be by scholars and some web commentators, not by ordinary whites. In contrast

a search for the phrase “model minority” and “Asian” found 153,000 web pages. (p. 233, *italics added*)

As a reader, I felt the book is not as scholarly as it could be. I have never read a scholarly book that used “Google.” However, what I am labeling a shortcoming may in fact be its main strength, its reader accessibility. I believe that *The Myth of the Model Minority* is a necessary read for people interested in disrupting the model minority and the nascent negative stereotypes that are concealed in this putative “positive” stereotype. Anyone who picks the book up to read will be amazed that s/he does not have to have an affinity or facility with the concepts contained in the book. The two authors do wonderful job writing in such a way that the messages are easy to follow and understand.

Notwithstanding, I was surprised that the authors never explored “racial battle fatigue” (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007), or Asian American identity (Palmer, 2011). These are extremely relevant topics to address, especially given that the thesis of the book is about “racial framing.” Who is framed and who gets to frame? This question and the bodies of literature on racial battle fatigue and Asian American identity elide in numerous ways, and would have enriched the observations that Chou and Feagin made when reviewing their qualitative interview transcripts for this book.

One thing is certain; we are witnessing an increased proliferation of anti-Asian hatred and animosity. I am not merely speaking about when Ms. Wallace’s YouTube video went viral. We have begun to see anti-Asian American remarks made by Tea-Party politicians and pundits. Mr. Rush Limbaugh mocked Asian Americans’ accents, while speaking recently on his radio show. The Asian American community was angry and anxious. They were angry because Mr. Limbaugh disparaged Chinese President Hu Jintao and the Chinese language in an extremely insensitive and hurtful way, and they were anxious because they did not know the most diplomatic way to respond to Mr. Limbaugh’s racism.

California State Senator Leland Yee stepped forward and responded immediately, calling out Mr. Limbaugh’s comments of “ching chong chang” while urging citizens and his constituents to sign an on-line petition to boycott the Limbaugh radio-talk show. I am glad I signed the petition. I was saddened to hear that Mr. Yee’s bravery, as a public and political figure was met with death threats and hostile talk on the public airwaves. Mr. Limbaugh did not apologize, rather, he did the opposite by pointing out Mr. Yee on several occasions. Mr. Yee also received nasty phone messages on his senate office’s voicemail.¹ Anti-Asian hatred is again rearing its ugly head and there is no way to hide it.

Chou and Feagin help readers to understand that anti-Asian racist remarks and rhetoric, like Ms. Wallace and Mr. Limbaugh’s stem from nativist orthodoxy and white racism. *The Myth of the Model Minority* shows that the “model minority” is reducible to the racial framing of Asian Americans in ways that make it appear as the world is not racist and that Asian Americans have been successful in the United States since they have pulled up their bootstraps. The model minority myth, thus, demonizes African Americans and Hispanics for not being successful in the land of “milk and honey.” This book helps readers understand racial framing and the “Occidentalized” nature of white racism and Asian American antagonisms.

¹ Reviewer’s note, the message is very vile and vulgar, but to listen to the graphic voice-recording: <http://thinkprogress.org/2011/01/27/yee-limbaugh-death-threat/>

References

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