

The real reasons the U.S. became less racist toward Asian Americans

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November 29, 2016 at 10:24 a.m. EST

Between 1940 and 1970, something remarkable happened to Asian Americans. Not only did they surpass African Americans in average household earnings, but they also closed the wage gap with whites.

Many people credit this upward mobility to investments in education. But according to a recent study by Brown University economist Nathaniel Hilger, schooling rates among Asian Americans didn't change all that significantly during those three decades. Instead, Hilger's research suggests that Asian Americans started to earn more because their fellow Americans became less racist toward them.

How did that happen? About the same time that Asian Americans were climbing the socioeconomic ladder, they also experienced a major shift in their public image. At the outset of the 20th century, Asian Americans had often been portrayed as threatening, exotic and degenerate. But by the 1950s and 1960s, the idea of the model minority had begun to take root. Newspapers often glorified Asian Americans as industrious, law-abiding citizens who kept their heads down and never complained.

Some people think that racism toward Asians diminished because Asians "proved themselves" through their actions. But that is only a sliver of the truth. Then, as now, the stories of successful Asians were elevated, while the stories of less successful Asians were diminished. As historian Ellen Wu explains in her book, "[The Color of Success](#)," the model minority stereotype has a fascinating origin story, one that's tangled up in geopolitics, the Cold War and the civil rights movement.

To combat racism, minorities in the United States have often attempted to portray themselves as upstanding citizens capable of assimilating into mainstream culture. Asian Americans were no different, Wu writes. Some, like the Chinese, sought respectability by promoting stories about their obedient children and their traditional family values. The Japanese pointed to their wartime service as proof of their shared Americanness.

African Americans in the 1940s made very similar appeals. But in the postwar moment, Wu argues, it was only convenient for political leaders to hear the Asian voices.

The model minority narrative may have started with Asian Americans, but it was quickly co-opted by white politicians who saw it as a tool to win allies in the Cold War. Discrimination was not a good look on the international stage. Embracing Asian Americans “provided a powerful means for the United States to proclaim itself a racial democracy and thereby credentialed to assume the leadership of the free world,” Wu writes. Stories about Asian American success were turned into propaganda.

By the 1960s, anxieties about the civil right movement caused white Americans to further invest in positive portrayals of Asian Americans. The image of the hard-working Asian became an extremely convenient way to deny the demands of African Americans. As Wu describes in her book, both liberal and conservative politicians pumped up the image of Asian Americans as a way to shift the blame for black poverty. If Asians could find success within the system, politicians asked, why couldn’t African Americans?

“The insinuation was that hard work along with unwavering faith in the government and liberal democracy as opposed to political protest were the keys to overcoming racial barriers as well as achieving full citizenship,” she writes.

Recently, Wu and I chatted on the phone about her book and the model minority stereotype — how it was equal parts truth, propaganda and self-enforcing prophecy.

Can you tell us a little bit about the question that got you started on this book?

WU: America in general has had very limited ways of thinking about Asian Americans. There are very few ways in which we exist in the popular imagination. In the mid- to late-19th century, all the way through the late 1940s and 1950s, Asians were thought of as “brown hordes” or as the “yellow peril.” There was the sinister, weird, “Fu Manchu” stereotype.

Yet, by the middle of the 1960s, Asian Americans had undergone this really arresting racial makeover. Political leaders, journalists, social scientists — all these people in the public eye — seemed to suddenly be praising Asian Americans as so-called model minorities.

I thought that might be a very interesting question to try to unravel.

How did these earliest stereotypes — these very negative, nasty images — take root?

Asian Americans first started coming in significant numbers during the California Gold Rush. Chinese immigrants came to do mining, then they ended up working on the Transcontinental Railroad, and agriculture. When those jobs died down, a lot of them moved to the cities where they started working in manufacturing.

At that time, in the 1870s, the economy wasn't doing that well in California. White American workers were very anxious about keeping their jobs. They looked around and they saw these newcomers who seemed very different from them.

There already had been a long tradition in the Western world of portraying the "Orient" as unknowable and mysterious. American workers started attaching these ideas to the Chinese newcomers, who were an easy target for white American anxieties about the growth of industrial capitalism and the undermining of workers' autonomy and freedom. They believed that the Chinese threatened American independence and threatened American freedom.

These ideas were particularly popular among the white working class at the time. The momentum started to build in the American West. There was the Workingmen's Party in California — one of their platforms was "The Chinese must go." That's how they rallied people. And they were very successful at it.

By 1882, Congress passed the first of a series of Chinese Exclusion Acts, which was the first time a race- and class-based group — Chinese workers — were singled out by American immigration law. The Chinese Exclusion Acts restricted their entry into the United States and said they couldn't become naturalized citizens.

What's really striking is that in the 1890s, the federal government even mandated a Chinese registry. That sounds a lot like this issue of the Muslim registry today, right?

A lot of what you're describing sounds familiar today — the economic anxiety bleeding into racial anxiety, the targeting of outsiders ...

Absolutely. There are a lot of resonances. What's happening today didn't spring out of nowhere — it has a very long history in the United States.

Can you describe some of these old stereotypes? I think that most people have some idea from old Hollywood movies, but it's just such a contrast to how Asians Americans are portrayed today.

The ways in which Americans thought about these "Orientals" hinged a lot on moral differences and on issues of gender, sexuality and family.

Many great historians and scholars have done work on this. The major groups that came before World War II were the Chinese, Japanese, South Asians, Koreans and Filipinos. There were both similarities and differences in how the groups were viewed, but generally they were thought to be threatening — significantly different in a negative sense.

For the most part, a lot of Asian immigrants weren't Christian, so that was suspect. American Chinatowns had a thriving vice economy, so gambling, prostitution and drugs became popularly associated with Asians. (Of course, some of the same white Americans who were criticizing Asians were also the ones participating in these activities.)

There was this idea of moral depravity. At the time, the Chinese and Filipinos and South Asians in America were mostly single, able-bodied young men, so that also raised a lot of eyebrows. It looked like they were sexually wayward.

If you look at old stereotypical imagery of Asians in political cartoons, the way they tend to be depicted is that they are not aligned with white, middle-class notions of respectable masculinity. There's the long hair, the flowing clothing that didn't quite look masculine yet didn't quite look feminine — or maybe it was something in-between, as some scholars have argued.

The women were also thought of as morally suspect — as prostitutes, sexually promiscuous, that kind of thing.

An important argument in your book is that Asians were complicit in the creation of the model minority myth. The way we talk about this issue today, it's as if the white majority imposed this stereotype on Asian communities — but your research shows that's not the case. How did it really get started?

Absolutely. That is a critical point to understand. The model minority myth as we see it today was mainly an unintended outcome of earlier attempts by Asians Americans to be accepted and recognized as human beings. They wanted to be seen as American people who were worthy of respect and dignity.

A lot was at stake. At the time, Asians were living life under an exclusion regime that had many similarities to Jim Crow — not the same as Jim Crow, but certainly a cousin of Jim Crow. There was a whole matrix of laws and discriminatory practices.

By 1924, all immigration from Asia had been completely banned. Asians were considered under the law “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” There were all these racial restrictions to citizenship under the law — and the last of these didn't fall until 1952.

Asian Americans tended to be restricted to segregated neighborhoods, segregated schools. They often did not have the kind of job prospects that white people had. They would be barred from certain kinds of employment either by law or by custom.

In 1937, a young U.S.-born Japanese-American man lamented that even if you went to college, you could only end up being a “professional carrot-washer.” That was really true for a lot of people. They had very limited options for social mobility. And of course there was also violence — lynchings.

So for Asian Americans, one survival strategy was to portray themselves as “good Americans.”

As you argue in your book, it became increasingly expedient for mainstream Americans to acknowledge, and even amplify, Asian attempts to gain respectability. What changed?

Those claims really start to stick in the 1940s, when the nation was gearing up for global war. American leaders started to worry about the consequences of their domestic racial discrimination policies. They were concerned it would get in the way of forging alliances with other people abroad. That really motivated American leaders and the American people to work on race relations.

During World War II, lawmakers thought that Chinese exclusion made for bad diplomacy. So Congress decided to overturn Chinese exclusion as a goodwill gesture to China, who was America's Pacific ally.

With the beginning of the Cold War, American policymakers became really attentive to putting their best image out into the world. They were very interested in winning hearts and minds in Asia.

Japan is a very good example. Japan lost the war and the United States took charge of reconstructing Japan in its own image as a rising democratic, capitalist country. And because Japan became such an important ally, that was the moment when Japanese exclusion laws could finally be overturned, which happened in 1952.

Again, people in Congress worried that if we left these laws on the books, it would endanger a billion hearts and minds in the Far East.

It wasn't just a geopolitical thing right? It seems that by the 1960s, there were other reasons for investing in this image of Asians as upstanding citizens, reasons that were closer to home.

Oh, absolutely. There were definitely domestic reasons for why the idea was appealing that Asians could be considered good American citizens capable of assimilating into American life.

In the 1950s, there were general concerns about maintaining the right kind of home life. There's this image of the perfect American family — a suburban household with a mom, a dad, two to three kids, a white picket fence. That was the ideal, but it wasn't always realized. There was a juvenile delinquency panic in the 1950s, a big scare over how the nation's youth were getting themselves into trouble.

The Chinatown leaders were really smart. They started to peddle stories about Chinese traditional family values and Confucian ethics. They claimed that Chinese children always listened to their elders, were unquestioningly obedient and never got into trouble because after school they would just go to Chinese school.

When I started digging, I found that this idea of this model Chinese family, with the perfect children who always just loved to study and who don't have time to get into trouble or date — started to circulate quite prominently in the 1950s. That speaks to America's anxieties about juvenile delinquency.

Also, since these stories were taking place in Chinatowns, it allowed Americans to claim that America had these remaining repositories of traditional Chinese values at a time when the Communist Chinese had completely dismantled them. So there's this other level where these stories are also anti-Communist — they are doing this other ideological work.

How true were these stories though? How much of this was racial propaganda, and how much of it was rooted in reality?

These are obviously very strategic stories. In 1956, the federal government started to crack down on illegal Chinese immigration, which was in part motivated by the Cold War. So partly, the conservative Chinatown leaders thought this model Chinese family story would do a lot to protect them. They thought this PR campaign would reorient the conversation away from "Communists are sneaking into our country" to "Hey, look at these squeaky-clean, well-behaved children."

From reading community newspapers in these Chinatowns, we know they also had a lot of concerns about juvenile delinquency. In fact, behind closed doors there were heated disagreements about what to do. One woman in particular — Rose Hum Lee, a sociologist with a PhD from the University of Chicago — wrote lots of books and papers about the problems in Chinatown, and accused leaders of sweeping these problems under the rug.

There were Asian Americans then, as today, at the end of the socioeconomic spectrum. And that segment of the population tends to go unnoticed in these kinds of narratives.

It's interesting to compare the efforts of the Chinatown leaders to the parallel efforts of leaders in the African American civil rights movement, who also emphasized respectability — who wore their Sunday best on these marches where they were hosed down and attacked by dogs. What's stunning to me is the contrast. One group's story is amplified, and the other's is, well, almost denied.

I think the Japanese American experience also highlights some of this contrast. At the same time in the 1950s, you hear these stories about how the Japanese Americans dramatically recovered from the internment camps, how they accepted their fate. "After internment, many families were scattered across the country, but they took it as an opportunity to assimilate," that sort of thing.

Japanese Americans aren't perceived to be doing any kind of direct action, they weren't perceived to be protesting. A bad thing happened to them, and they moved on, and they were doing okay.

These stories were ideologically useful. They became a model for political cooperation. The ideas solidify in the 1950s. Americans had recast Asians into these citizens capable of assimilating — even if they still saw Asians as somewhat different from whites. And by the 1960s, what becomes important is that these socially mobile, assimilating, politically nonthreatening people were also decidedly not black.

That's really the key to all this. The work of the African American freedom movements had made white liberals and white conservatives very uncomfortable. Liberals were questioning whether integration could solve some the deeper problems of economic inequality. And by the late 1960s, conservatives were calling for increased law and order.

Across the political spectrum, people looked to Asian Americans — in this case, Japanese and Chinese Americans — as an example of a solution, as a template for other minority groups to follow: "Look how they ended up! They're doing just fine. And they did it all without political protests."

That isn't really true, by the way. Asian Americans did get political, but sometimes their efforts didn't get seen or recognized.

These stereotypes about Asian Americans being patriotic, having an orderly family, not having delinquency or crime — they became seen as the opposite of what "blackness" represented to many Americans at the time.

I would say it also costs the majority less to allow Asian Americans, who were still a very small part of the population, to let them play out this saga of upward mobility, rather than recognizing the rights and claims of African Americans during that same time.

I'm not saying somebody sat down and did a cost-benefit analysis. But in some ways, there seemed to be a big payoff for little risk. Even with the overturning of the exclusion laws, it's not like large numbers of Asians were coming into the United States at the time. Asian Americans at that time were still a pretty marginal part of the population.

As harmful as Asian exclusion was, I would agree that those structures were not as deep or pervasive as anti-black racism. It wouldn't do as much to change the overall social picture by allowing these small numbers of Asian Americans to move forward. It was easier to do, in some ways, because those exclusion structures were not as pervasive, and the consequences had not been as long-lasting as they had been for African Americans.

A really fascinating part of your book describes how these new Asian stereotypes shaped the Moynihan Report, which infamously blamed the plight of African Americans on “ghetto culture.” I think that is a great example of how this model minority stereotype started to get used against others in the 1960s.

Daniel Moynihan, the author of that report, was a liberal trying to figure out how to solve this huge problem — the status of African Americans in American life.

If you look in the report, there’s not really any mention of Asian Americans. But just a few months before the Moynihan Report came out in the summer of 1965, Moynihan was at a gathering with all these intellectuals and policymakers. They’re talking about how Japanese and Chinese Americans were “rather astonishing” because they had thrown off this racial stigma. Moynihan points out that 25 years ago, Asians had been “colored.” Then Moynihan says, “Am I wrong that they have ceased to be colored?”

That was a very striking and powerful moment to me.

I think a lot of people believe that the model minority stereotype came out of the huge surge of highly educated Asians who started coming to the United States after 1965. But as your book shows, I think, the causality actually runs the other way.

It’s mutually reinforcing. At the time that the United States did this major immigration law overhaul in 1965, policymakers decided that the nation should select its immigrants based on how they could contribute to the economy (and also to reunify families). So what we start to see is people coming to the United States with these credentials and backgrounds and training, and they seem to confirm some of the ideas that are already there — that Asian Americans are model minorities.

My book stops in the late 1960s, but what I think has happened since then is that the model minority stereotype story has really shifted away from the original ideas of patriotism and anti-communism. We now fixate more on education. There’s the image of the tiger mom focused on getting her kid into Harvard. That emphasis also speaks to a shift in the American economy, how upward mobility really depends on having a certain kind of educational training.

And the anxieties about Asians have never really gone away. Now they’re portrayed as our global competitors. So underlying the praise there’s also this fear.

Sometimes in America, it feels like there are only so many racial buckets that people can fall into. With increased immigration from South Asia and Southeast Asia, for instance, it seemed like lot of the newcomers were swept up into this model minority narrative.

What happened in 1965 is that we opened up the gates to large-scale immigration from places like Latin America, the Caribbean and Asia. From Asia, you get large numbers of people coming from South Asia, the Philippines, Korea. Then by the 1970s, the United States is fighting a war in Southeast Asia, so you get this refugee migrant stream. And you’re right, they’re stepping into this predetermined racial landscape, these preconceived notions about how Asians are.

But as a historian, as someone who thinks about race in American life for a living, I also think that the “model minority” category has only a limited usefulness now in terms of our analysis. We talk about it as a common stereotype, but it doesn’t explain the whole scope of Asian American life today — especially since 9/11, when you have communities of South Asians who are Muslims or Sikhs now being racially targeted or labeled as terrorists. So that has become another stereotype of Asians these days.

I think that underscores maybe the meta-narrative of your book — how we in America have always viewed ethnic and racial minorities through the lens of politics and geopolitics, right? In terms of international relations, in terms of what kind of image we want to project to the world, and in terms of what our national anxieties about other countries are.

Absolutely, that’s the link. The model minority stereotype and the terrorist stereotype are related, I agree, in how they speak to the geopolitical anxieties of their times.