

From Middleman to Model Minority: Japanese Americans Facing Barriers

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Abstract

Today's Japanese Americans are perceived as a rather successful minority group in the U.S. They are lauded for their acculturation speed, higher educational attainment, upward mobility into the mainstream society. It is true that Japanese Americans are better off than other Asian Americans, it does not follow they are free from prejudice. When Japanese Americans were treated as the "middleman minority," which has negative connotations and refers to intermediary positions between Whites and Blacks, discrimination was rather manifest and discernible. Today, on the other hand, barriers placed on Japanese Americans as the "model minority" are subtler but hard to reveal. Even if they successfully make inroads into White-dominant environments, they often meet obstacles such as admission ceilings in higher education and glass ceilings at work. The aim of this paper is to uncover such actual barriers Japanese Americans have been facing and to examine changes the way they have been treated both in the past and the present.

1. Introduction

In the literature of Asian American studies, today's Japanese Americans are perceived as a rather successful minority group. They are lauded for their acculturation speed, higher educational attainment, and upward mobility into the mainstream society. Given such a rosy picture, it seems that Japanese Americans are as well off as Whites and are free from prejudice. Have they really been becoming accepted into the White-dominant society? Although Japanese Americans are better off compared with other Asian Americans, does it mean that they face no bias in school and at work? Through literature review, I have become aware of barriers on Asian Americans such as admission ceilings in higher education and glass ceilings at work. Such barriers are highly likely to obstruct Japanese Americans' educational and occupational upward mobility.

The "model minority" theory (Kobayashi, 1999; Lee, 1996; Woo, 2000) is problematic in that it obscures not only the hardships Japanese Americans have encountered historically but also prejudice they are facing today. Historically, Japanese Americans have experienced discrimination such as Yellow Peril and internment during World War II. Also, they have faced prejudice and have long been treated as the "middleman minority" (Wong, 1985; Woo, 2000), or "second-class aliens" (Chin et al., 1996). The model minority theory is effective both in diverting criticism against such past discrimination and in suppressing protests against existing prejudice and racism toward Japanese Americans.

In this paper, I discuss barriers and racism that Japanese Americans have been facing in historical and contemporary contexts. I focus on those who came to the U.S. before the 1965 Immigration Act took effect, and their descendants, namely, Sansei and Yonsei. Due to the scarcity of resources in studies on Japanese Americans in some areas, I also refer to studies on Chinese Americans and other Asian American populations. Although data on Japanese Americans before and during the war era is available, specific data on Japanese Americans in the postwar era is less available than the aggregate data of Asian Americans. In using such aggregate data, I carefully examine their applicability to Japanese Americans.

2. Middleman minority theory

This section mainly discusses the status of Japanese Americans in the pre-World War II era considering the “middleman minority” theory. The middleman minority refers to positions between elites and masses in a highly hierarchical society (Woo, 2000). In the case of the U.S., the middleman minority status has been applied to Chinese and Japanese Americans as intermediates between Whites and Blacks. Only recently have Korean Americans entered this category (Wong, 1985). Chinese and Japanese Americans, as the middleman minority, have been considered *petit bourgeois*, who monopolize economic sectors and gain wealth. They have played a role in bridging Whites and Blacks as go-betweens in the economic sector by contacting both parts, which do not dare to interface with each other.

The middleman minority theory first dealt with the overseas Chinese in Southeast Asia. Under the dominance of European colonizers, the Chinese in Southeast Asia acted as intermediates between Europeans and local Southeast Asians. Europeans exploited the Chinese to have indirect contacts with Southeast Asians. Although the Chinese had few face-to-face contacts with Europeans, Southeast Asians thought that these two groups were in alliance with each other and deemed the Chinese as “opportunists” (Wong, 1985, p.59), who exploited the local economy. Even long after Southeast Asians liberated themselves from colonizers, discrimination against the Chinese persistently exists and people ban the Chinese from political and military spheres including governmental positions.

Just as the origin indicates, the middleman minority often includes negative connotations. Chinese and Japanese Americans are dubbed as “the Jews of Orient” (Wong, 1985) and are considered as social menace. Historically, middleman minority groups have also been regarded as inassimilable sojourners (Wong, 1985). People in the host country dislike sojourners, for they think these sojourners come to their country to exploit the wealth and send it back to foreign countries instead of investing in the host country. In fact, first immigrants to the U.S. from China intended not to stay there long but to return home after accumulating fortunes (Wong, 1995a). When Chinese Americans gained power in the economic sector and became competitors for other Americans, they met fierce opposition from American labor, which also led to Yellow Peril in the early 1900s. In the meantime, a series of actions were taken to drive and keep the Chinese as well as the Japanese in second-class positions. Such actions include the 1892 Chinese Exclusion Law, which suspended Chinese immigration; the 1913 Alien Land Law, which restricted the owning and leasing of farmland of Asians; and the 1924 National Origin Act, which prohibited immigration from Asia. Moreover, not until the passage of the 1952 McCarran-Walter Act were Chinese and Japanese immigrants allowed American citizenships (Nishi, 1995; Wong, 1995a).

As for Japanese Americans, first immigrants left for Hawaii in 1868 to fulfill the labor shortage in plantations after the Chinese immigration was restricted (Tamura, 1994). The 1898 annexation of Hawaii caused an influx of Japanese immigration to the mainland, for the most part, to the West Coast of the U.S. As with the Chinese, restriction on Japanese immigrants was imposed when the presence of Japanese Americans became ominous to White workers. The 1907 Gentleman’s Agreement between the U.S. and Japan prohibited Japan from issuing passports to laborers bound for the U.S. Also a series of alien land laws were enacted to keep Japanese Americans out of farming. Japanese farmers tended to form agricultural organizations to increase productivity, which brought up resentment on the part of White farmers (Fugita & O’Brien, 1991).

Let us consider the middleman minority theory in relation to the educational experience of Japanese Americans: Did education successfully perform as pipelines for upward mobility from the middleman minority status? Many Japanese Americans regarded education as a means for upward class and occupational mobility (Tamura, 2000). Issei parents sent their children to public school as well as language school in the hope that Nisei children would be better off after graduation. Some Nisei even went on to university. According to Kojiro Onoura’s 1938 study, however, only 25 percent of 161 Japanese American graduates of the University of California got occupations relevant to their training and education

(as cited in Yoo, 2000, p.33). Prejudice made it harder for Japanese Americans to find jobs commensurate with their educational attainment (Chan & Wang, 1991). A Nisei student stated the following:

The goal of all American youth to achieve the greatest economic and social successes in life through higher education and training [lay] behind the vocational aspirations of the Nisei college student. The Nisei are in a position where they are attempting to make a group advancement from the lower socio-economic status of the first generation Japanese to a higher one achieved through professional and 'White-collar' jobs (quoted in Yoo, 2000, p.36).

Yet most college-educated native-born Asians ended up seeking jobs in their own communities such as Chinatown and Little Tokyo. In those days, White Americans saw it suitable for Asian Americans to work in areas where they did not have to compete against each other for employment or had no direct contacts with each other. It was especially difficult for Nisei Japanese Americans to work in professional areas such as medicine, dentistry, teaching, and law. Accountants and actuaries were the only occupations plausible for Japanese Americans (Woo, 2000). In many cases, the dreams of young Japanese Americans to move up from middlemen were deferred during the prewar period. It was not until the postwar period that investment in education of Japanese Americans gradually began to bear fruit (Yoo, 2000).

3. Model minority theory

As seen above, Japanese and Chinese Americans have long been reconciled with the middleman minority status. According to Lee (1996), Asian Americans were stereotyped as “devious, inscrutable, unassimilable, and in other overtly negative ways (p.6)” when they experienced manifest discrimination at the hand of White racists. Along with the upheaval of the civil rights movement during the 1960s, however, these racists needed to come up with techniques to divert criticisms against them and to quell social unrest. Accordingly, the media, as a spokesman of the majority, abruptly began praising Asian Americans as the “model minority” (Kobayashi, 1999; Lee, 1996). For example, The New York Times Magazine illustrated the academic and economic success of Japanese Americans and U.S. News and World Report acclaimed Chinese Americans (Kobayashi, 1999). “By any criterion we choose, the Japanese Americans, are better off than any other group in our society, including native-born whites. They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort” (The New York Times Magazine, 1966, January 9, p.21). Lee (1996) argues that Asian Americans were desired as the example of economically successful minority groups to show to African Americans and other minorities.

Such techniques as replacing negative stereotypes with positive ones are problematic for Asian Americans. In the case of Japanese Americans, there are at least three disadvantages. First of all, the model minority theory obscures discrimination of both the past and the present. Unlike new immigrants from Southeast Asia, Japanese Americans have been acculturated into the host society and thus have achieved better in school and at work on the average. Even if there is hidden discrimination existing in those places, it is difficult for them to claim it as Japanese Americans are generally considered one of the best-off ethnic groups among Asian Americans. In fact, there are glass ceilings on Japanese Americans in the workplace, which will be discussed later in this paper. Furthermore, the emergence of Japan as an economic power in the 1980s brought about hate crimes including the murder of Vincent Chin, a Vietnamese American, who was killed by two Whites who mistook him as a Japanese American (National Education Association, 1998).

Second, Kobayashi (1999) points out difficulty in refuting the model minority theory because of its apparently positive images. Unlike stereotypes toward other minority groups, the model minority theory sounds better, which conceals such negative impacts as mentioned above. A third disadvantage is the misconception that all Japanese Americans achieve well in school and are successful in their careers. Kobayashi (1999) argues that the performance of Asian students including Japanese Americans is broken

into two groups: either several extremely high achievers or others who are not. The media intentionally focuses on the former to exaggerate high achievements of Asian students. This contributes to perpetuating the stereotype as the model minority toward Asian students.

Regarding income differences between Japanese American and Caucasian families, statistics are often misleading. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (1999), Asian family medium income is \$51,200 while that of White non-Hispanic families is \$44,400. Takaki (as cited in Kobayashi, 1999) maintains that although Asian families earn more than Caucasian families, there are other factors to be considered when comparing these numbers: First, Asian Americans are condensed in areas where the living cost is higher including California, New York, and Hawaii. Second, there tend to be more workers in Asian families. According to Takaki, "whereas only 1.6 members per family were workers in Caucasian groups in California in 1980, the rates were 2.1 for immigrant Japanese" (p.11).

Oftentimes, proponents of the model minority theory base it on cultural factors and ignore underlying structural and class issues (Woo, 2000). These cultural factors include Confucianism and Buddhism. Woo discusses that these proponents usually ascribe high educational achievements to a high value placed on learning, and to parental pressures to perform, which are commonly seen in Confucian societies. Likewise, low employment rates among Asian Americans are thought to be due to a strong work ethic. The problems of depending solely on such cultural explanations Woo maintains lie in the ignorance and obscurity of structural conditions, institutional policies, and privileges available exclusively to certain groups of people. For example, the reason why Japanese American students study harder and achieve better than other students might be not only because their parents put pressure on them but because certain social conditions such as institutionalized discrimination oblige them to do so.

Although the model minority theory dramatically switched stereotypes toward Japanese Americans from negative to positive, the shift happened merely in appearance but not in nature. Put another way, the class structure whereby Japanese Americans are subordinate to Whites remains the same. Prejudice and racism persist on the part of Whites and come out as a suppressing power especially when Japanese Americans seek upward mobility. The next section examines actual barriers that Japanese Americans have been experiencing. To this aim, I illustrate actual conditions surrounding Japanese Americans drawing on examples of affirmative action in admission to higher education and glass ceilings in the workplace.

4. Contemporary barriers in higher education and at work

4-1. Admission ceilings

When affirmative action came into being in the 1960s, Asian Americans were regarded as underrepresented and benefited from it in admission to colleges and universities (Chan & Wang, 1991). But soon after its implementation, admission officers found that a great deal of Asian American students became overrepresented on many prestigious campuses. For example, Asian American students accounted for 20 percent of freshman class at Harvard and 37 percent at UCLA. Gradually tension between Asian Americans and others mounted, which also impacted the admission of Japanese Americans later (Fugita & O'Brien, 1995).

In around 1983, there was a sheer and sudden decline in the numbers of Asian American freshmen in many elite universities such as the Ivy Leagues and University of California (UC) system (Chan & Wang, 1991; Takagi, 1992). This reflected a shift in admission criteria unfavorable to Asian American students. There was even a rumor that universities set quotas, upper limits on the number of Asian American students.

In fact, evidence indicates that some universities put informal ceilings on Asian American admission (Takagi, 1992; Chin et al., 1996). At Berkeley, a group called the Task Force composed of lawyers and community leaders began research on the decline of Asian American admission in 1984 and

uncovered a series of deliberate policy changes (Takagi, 1992). A first change was the redirection of Asian American students who needed the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) to other campuses of the UC system and an attempted institutionalization of a minimum SAT verbal test score of 400 for immigrants. This has affected especially newer immigrants because the EOP helps low-income and educationally disadvantaged students and newer immigrants tend to have deficiencies in English. Second, supplement criteria were employed: the personal essay, extracurricular activities, extra European foreign language courses, attendance at a high school that does not offer honors courses and so on. The Task Force argues that admission officers knew that these changes would reduce Asian American students.

These policy changes have affected not only newer Asian immigrants but also other Asian Americans. Given that many Japanese American parents are not in favor of extracurricular activities but are of honors courses which offer in-depth coursework to talented and motivated students, it is highly possible that Japanese Americans have been also disadvantaged. Furthermore, some other selective universities have employed criteria such as alumni, athletic, and geographic preferences (Nakanishi, 1995). These criteria are negative factors for Japanese Americans in that the majority of population is concentrated on the West Coast and they have fewer alumni in elite Ivy League institutions, which have historically disfavored minority groups.

Why did university officials abruptly begin to restrict admission to Asian Americans? Chan and Wang (1991) use the term “new yellow peril” and explain that university officials were so much concerned about the pipeline functions that higher education operated that they tried to limit the number of admissions to Asian Americans. When these officials saw a rapid influx of Asian American students enrolling in university, they saw it threatening; more and more Asian American students would enter the middle class after graduation and compete against middle-class Whites as professionals or entrepreneurs.

4-2. Glass ceilings

Another possible form of discrimination against Japanese Americans is glass ceilings at work, especially managerial and professional positions as well as the top rungs of the governmental positions (Fugita & O'Brien, 1995). Institutionalized prejudice is often subtle and difficult to expose (Chin et al., 1996). Despite their higher achievements in education, Asian Americans tend to gain lower returns in the workplace compared with Whites (Hsia, 1988; Woo, 2000). In the case of Japanese Americans, Woo quotes Eric Woodrum as saying that “those college-educated professional Japanese Americans celebrated as exemplifying as ‘assimilation success story’ systematically receive less prestigious, authoritative employment and less financial compensation than similarly qualified whites” (p.66). This section examines glass ceiling issues surrounding Japanese and other Asian Americans in corporate America, academia, and government.

Compared with White counterparts, the ratio of Asian Americans in managerial positions to their numbers in the professional pool is lower (Woo, 2000). Woo addresses that even native-born Asian Americans of corresponding skills with Whites are less likely to be in managerial positions. In 1980, 6.5 percent of native-born Filipinos and 10.5 percent of native-born Japanese were identified as managers whereas 12 percent of Whites were in managerial positions. Oftentimes Asian Americans in managerial positions are concentrated in such specific areas as research and development. Woo further discusses that Asian Americans are more likely to be found in lower-level managerial positions. Even though education assures Asian Americans of access to certain occupations in fields such as engineering and physical sciences, their career advancement to executive positions is strictly blocked. Consequently, most Asian American CEOs are founders themselves. For instance, in 1998, Robert Nakasone, a Japanese American, was the only Asian American CEO of a Fortune 500 company that was not founded by him/herself.

What kinds of obstacles do Asian Americans face? According to the study of Federal Glass Ceiling Commission on glass ceilings after the passage of the Glass Ceiling Act in 1991, there are three broad types of artificial barriers: “(1) societal barriers which may be outside the control of business; (2) internal

structural barriers within the direct control of business; (3) governmental barriers” (Woo, 2000, p.45). The Commission defines artificial barriers as those barriers obstructing qualified employees. Internal structural barriers include discriminatory behaviors on the part of bosses and coworkers including harassment by colleagues. Institutionalized discrimination also exists in the form of organizational practice. As for governmental barriers, the Commission illustrates the lack of consistent monitoring and law enforcement and so forth. There is evidence that Japanese Americans are no exception to such barriers. A 1987 study shows that about three-fourths of Japanese Americans reported three major company-related barriers: corporate culture, management insensitivity, and lack of informal networking (Woo, 2000).

Next, let us examine the cases of glass ceilings in academic spheres. Minami (1995) claims that just as in corporations, Asian American faculty members confront glass ceilings in hiring and promotional decisions. Although 24 percent of all doctorates were awarded in 1993 to Asians combining native-born and noncitizens, for example, Asian Americans occupied only 4.7 percent of faculty positions in higher education (Woo, 2000). Likewise, the underrepresentation of Asian Americans is evident in high-level administrative positions. Since there is little research on the dearth of Asian American academic administrators, this situation might be due to the lack of interests in administrative positions on the part of Asian Americans. Yet it is certain to fail to bring in diversity, or a friendlier atmosphere for minority faculty in the workplace.

The process of tenure review is also subject to racial bias. Minami (1995), an attorney who has dealt with several tenure cases for Asian American faculty, maintains that tenure decisions entail political factors; candidates who have weak informal networking among other professors, or whose research interests differ from those of their colleagues might have difficulty in attaining tenure. Thus, it is more likely to be difficult to obtain tenure among White-dominant faculty especially if a minority professor does not socialize well and his/her research is irrelevant to those of tenure reviewing committee members. Minami illustrates how subjective considerations were employed to evaluate his client’s work in his defense of UCLA professor Don Nakanishi. Minami also addresses the difficulty of proving discrimination when challenging powerful institutions.

Lastly, Asian Americans are underrepresented in high-level governmental positions. It is uncertain if there exists a glass ceiling in government. Yet the status quo surely disadvantages Asian Americans. Underrepresentation in decision-making bodies makes it more difficult for Asian Americans to have their voices heard by others. Woo (2000) indicates that Asian Americans being underrepresented in high-level governmental positions has led to scanty research on Asian Americans under the auspices of the federal government.

Before concluding this section, let me discuss the influences of glass ceilings on Japanese American students’ career decisions (Wong, 1985). Wong claims that persistent anti-Asian discrimination deters Japanese and Chinese Americans from seeking occupations in the non-scientific fields including social sciences and humanities, where there is a tenacious reluctance to employ Asian Americans. Given that most Japanese Americans have no difficulty in English unlike new immigrants, it can be concluded that they choose to enter fields such as natural and biological sciences not only because they are interested in these areas but also because it facilitates them to gain employment.

5. Conclusion

This paper has examined how the model minority theory disguises racism against Japanese Americans by making certain barriers invisible. Although Japanese Americans are better off compared with other Asian Americans, it does not follow that they are always free from prejudice. Stereotyped as hardworking and silent, Japanese Americans tend to remain nonresistant even when they face barriers like glass ceilings. In the past, when Japanese Americans were treated as the middleman minority, discrimination

was rather manifest and discernible. Today, on the other hand, barriers placed on Japanese Americans are subtler but sneakier and thus difficult to reveal. Even if Japanese Americans successfully make inroads into White-dominant environments, they often meet obstacles when attempting upward mobility. Many of them might feel alienated with less support available from colleagues and give up challenging injustice as a consequence. It can be concluded that despite the changes in stereotypes toward Japanese Americans from middleman to model minority, that is, from negative to apparently positive images, meanings implicated behind the treatment that Japanese Americans receive basically remain unchanged: Both in the past and present, Japanese Americans have been deemed more or less as aliens and been granted inferior positions by White counterparts.

One of the best viable solutions to fight against racism is to garner collective political forces in concert with other minority groups as well as from their own communities. In fact, Nakanishi (1995) reports that Japanese Americans succeeded in obtaining redress and reparation through grassroots campaigns as well as overturning the light sentences given to two Whites who killed Vincent Chin. It is necessary for Japanese Americans to form coalitions with other Asian Americans to challenge prejudice and disadvantaged status caused by the model minority theory.

Lastly, further research must be conducted on actual barriers on each subgroup of Asian Americans. Not until we have pinpointed the problems of each group we can begin wrestling with them.

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