Reading the word and the world: What do the media really think about the “Model Minority”?  
Nicholas D. Hartlep

Abstract

The article explores how mass media, especially news media, in the United States has portrayed Asian Americans historically and now. It links Freire and Macedo’s concept of “reading the word and the world” with understanding how and why the model minority stereotype represents a racial project. This article gathers textual evidence, from North American (U.S. and Canada) newspapers’ articles and mainstream editorials, of how Asian Americans have been used to maintain the dominant society’s investment in Whiteness. Prior to their rhetorical role as model minorities, Asian Americans images were constructed as “yellow perils” and “coolies.” Asian Americans were originally seen as being pariahs, but since the 1960s they have been portrayed by the mass media as paragons.

Keywords: Model minority stereotype; Paulo Freire; Asian Americans; critical media literacy

Introduction

Reading the word and the world is a crucial facet of being critically literate and a critical consumer of the media (Shor & Pari, 1999). Failure to do so makes one vulnerable to manipulation by special interests that shape the media’s portrayal of the world. One develops blind spots; rather than recognizing the subjective cultural forces at work, one accepts the dominant narrative at face value, without questioning, without going deeper. As Malcolm X once warned, “If you’re not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing.” X recognized how the hegemony’s influence on the popular press can cause people to believe and behave in ways that are against their best interests.

The stereotype of the model minority is oppressive, and citizens should be aware of its oppressive nature so that they are not fooled by the supposedly “positive” and “non-racist” characterizations of the stereotype. The model minority stereotype is dangerous precisely because it constructs Asian Americans in rigid

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ways that lead not only to their own disempowerment but also to the further devaluing of other marginalized and minoritized populations. Insidiously, it has been used to divide and conquer marginalized groups by building interracial and sociopolitical coalitions (Hartlep, 2014b).

The popular portrayal of Asian Americans as successful citizens paints with broad strokes, categorizing all Asian Americans into a monolithic group. Such a homogeneous characterization is false, of course, and ultimately does more harm than good (Hartlep, 2013a). Unfortunately, any stereotype, once established in the popular imagination, is hard to dispel. Inevitably, there will be some Asian Americans who align with or “fit” this sterling stereotype. Once a stereotype has taken hold, people tend to notice the cases that reinforce the stereotype and to ignore those that contradict it or dismiss them as “exceptions to the rule.” As Gorman (2005) writes, “People are more likely to notice and remember information that confirms an applicable stereotype than information that disconfirms it” (p. 704).

Undoubtedly, the anecdotes of successful Asian Americans reported in news articles and magazine features are genuine. However, the reporting of such stories becomes problematic when the stereotype-affirming narratives are perseverated to the exclusion of any counter-stories. A false picture emerges because it is incomplete. Without context, it naively suggests that an entire minority population does not suffer the trials, challenges, and oppressions of other minority groups because of something inherent in their race or intrinsic to their culture. This is a view not only lacking in nuance; it does not fit the facts.

The media fails when it takes a single anecdote and applies it broadly. This is the mistake the media makes when it assumes Asian American success is the rule and not the exception. While people openly celebrate Asian Americans for their supposed high achievement, Asian Americans’ real needs—are they psychological, economic, educational, or social—are concurrently invalidated by model-minority-stereotype proponents. Furthermore, proponents of the myth use it to deny the existence of societal inequity. By implication, they impugn the socioeconomic, ethnic, and cultural groups who have not achieved levels of success and integration that Asian Americans supposedly have attained without the assistance of government social services. Overlooked is the fact that Asian Americans achieved many of the commonly-cited success indicators
as a result of state-sponsored practices, such as restrictive immigration policies in the United States.

Global citizens and students of all levels (elementary, middle, secondary, and post-secondary) need to be able to recognize that the media is responsible for a racial project that says more about itself than about Asian Americans’ success writ large (Fang, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c, 2010a, 2010b). This is what reading the word and the world means and requires of citizens. The model minority stereotype has direct links with critical media teaching and critical media learning. Critical media literacy requires a deep understanding of how the model minority stereotype is socially constructed for the benefit of Whiteness, hegemony, and colonial exploitation. The model minority stereotype is a textbook example of how Asian Americans were used as a group in order to maintain the possessive investment in Whiteness (Bell, 1980; Lipsitz, 1998; Ueda, 1989; Wang, 2007).

Although those in the mainstream might say one thing (e.g. “progress is being made in society”), Malcolm X saw what was happening on the streets of America and knew that what was really occurring in society was not quite so simple. Indeed, X said, “You don’t stick a knife in a man’s back nine inches and then pull it out six inches and say you’re making progress.” X went on to write, “No matter how much respect, no matter how much recognition, whites show towards me [as a black man], as far as I am concerned, as long as it is not shown to every one of our people in this country, it doesn’t exist for me.” X’s comment illustrates his unwavering commitment to justice for all economically, socially, and racially marginalized people.

Interestingly, though, as the Civil Rights Era was beginning, White architects of a racist world were beginning to change their strategy for maintaining socio-political and economic power in the United States. The dominant elites began to see that Asian Americans could be used to triangulate the relations between races. In other words, Asian Americans could be triangulated between the existent Black-White binary (Kim, 1999). If we read the word, there is evidence that this occurred as early as 1966 (Petersen, 1966).

The act of “reading the word” informs us that Asian Americans were intentionally selected to be model minorities. Perhaps African Americans could have been constructed to be “model minorities” in the United States, but it was neither logical nor their fate. Remember, the “model minority” myth was created to “divide and conquer” people of color. It achieved this aim through a variety of strategies,
one being the racial triangulation of Asian Americans, African Americans, and Whites (Kim, 1999).

William Petersen’s article “Success Story: Japanese American Style” in The New York Times Magazine did not come about because the Asian population was superior to other minorities. More likely it was fueled by the U.S. government’s desire to shift negative international attention away from itself. Why? During the Cold War Era, the international community was beginning to question America’s commitment to racial and social justice (Lee, 2010). By manufacturing an Asian American success story, White supremacist and nationalistic agendas could be concealed. The model minority myth shielded the race-relations status quos, insulating politicians from accusations that African Americans were unsuccessful due to racism and discrimination. Provided that Asian Americans had “made it,” they could be presented as confirmation that America was a land of opportunity. Petersen’s model minority construct helped fortify the meritocratic and American Dream narratives being espoused during the peak of the African American Civil Rights Movement.

It also certainly helped that Petersen’s story came on the heels of the release of The Negro Family: The Case for National Action (the 1965 Moynihan Report) written by Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Moynihan’s report blamed African American ghetto culture for the difficulties the population experienced. Thus, Petersen’s decision to write an Asian American success narrative was as purposeful as it was politically intentional. What, then, does the world inform us in relation to the model minority stereotype?

Traditionally, the average citizen in the United States has gotten his/her information from newspapers, which is one reason they are important sources of textual information for analysis by social scientists. Through their reporting, newspapers also publicize and preserve ideological influences in the day’s news stories. However, since the advent of the Internet in the 2000s, the pattern of news consumption has changed radically. The worldwide web has allowed readers to obtain news information in snippets from a host of news media (social media feeds, Twitter, news channel web sites, text message alerts, etc.).
Background

Data

Data was obtained from 1966-2000. Those time points were intentionally selected for two reasons. First, 1966 is when the social architects of the possessive investment in Whiteness began their social engineering of the model minority stereotype. Second, the 2000s marked a shift in the patterns of news consumption in the United States. Many citizens, be they old or young, are now exposed to news media in alternative forms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. Consequently, they are reading fewer printed newspapers.

The purpose of this media study was to “read the word and the world” while analysing the journalistic coverage of Asian American success by the U.S. media during 1965-2000 in popular literature. In addition to newspaper articles, mainstream editorials were critically analysed in this study. Table 1 below gathers several headlines of newspaper and magazine articles that applaud Asian Americans for their individual accomplishments.

Since its origination in 1966, there has been a steady stream of pro-model-minority-stereotype writing, as one can observe merely by noting the titles. By “pro” I am referring to conservative writing that supports the ideology of meritocracy. In addition to analysing the headlines of model minority writings, I also examined the texts of these ideologically conservative writings in order to gain a more nuanced look (something that “reading the word and the world” requires).

Although there are a variety of ways that a researcher can perform textual and/or content analysis (Krippendorff, 2013; Weber, 1985), for this article I chose to share salient quotations taken directly from sixteen writings, which help to elucidate how and why the “model minority” stereotype exemplifies a “racial project” (Hartlep, 2014a, 2014b; Omi & Winant, 1994).
Table 1: Model minority headlines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Newspaper or Magazine</th>
<th>Article (Date)</th>
<th>Headline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Time (1966)</td>
<td></td>
<td>The New Whiz Kids</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parade Magazine (1985)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Where the Family Comes First</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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\( n = 16 \)

Extracted quotations

U.S. News & World Report’s (1966) “Success Story of One Minority Group in the U.S.” contains several statements that compare and contrast Chinese Americans with African Americans. All of the following quotations imply that there exists such a thing as Asian American cultural superiority and African American cultural inferiority:

“Few Chinese-Americans are getting welfare handouts—or even want them” (p. 73).

“What you find, back of this remarkable group of Americans, is a story of adversity and prejudice that would
shock those now complaining about the hardships endured by today's Negroes” (p. 73).

“But the large majority [of Chinese Americans] are moving ahead by applying the traditional virtues of hard work, thrift and morality” (p. 74).

“The Chinese people here will work at anything. I know of some who were scholars in China and now are working as waiters in restaurants. That’s the stopgap for them, of course, but the point is that they’re willing to do something—they don’t sit around moaning” (p. 74).

“It must be recognized that the Chinese and other Orientals in California were faced with even more prejudice than faces the Negro today. We haven’t stuck Negroes in concentration camps, for instance, as we did the Japanese camps, for instance, as we did the Japanese in World War II” (p. 76).

The most salient quote taken from Petersen’s (1966) The New York Times Magazine “Success Story: Japanese American Style” is the following, which contrasts Japanese willingness to overcome adversity to African Americans’ inability to follow suit:

“But a Negro who knows no other homeland, who is as thoroughly American as any Daughter of the American Revolution, has no refuge when the United States rejects him. Placed at the bottom of this country’s scale, he finds it difficult to salvage his ego by measuring his worth in another currency. The Japanese, on the contrary, could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion in part because of their meaningful links with an alien culture.” (Petersen, 1966, p. 40).

Conservative ideological writings

Allis’ (1991) Time article, published in the “Education” section, points out that “[f]our out of every five [Asian American] students are in public two- or four-year institutions rather than elite universities” (p. 64). However, despite its intentions of refuting the model minority stereotype, “Kicking the Nerd Syndrome” reinforces it. It reinforces the construction because the counter-narratives it shares are largely ineffective. Noting that Asian Americans are pushing back against the stereotype is great, but in the process, Allis (1991), in effect, supports
the notion that Asian Americans are stereotypically smart. For instance, Allis (1991) shares that a senior at Harvard University made a conscious decision not to study science. But Allis (1991) also shares two facts about the student that can’t help but reinforce the model minority myth: (1) he scored 1580/1600 on the SAT, and (2) although he chose not to go to MIT, he attends Harvard. Stories like this one are classical given that they—in effect (not intent)—support the model minority stereotype. This Times article also illustrates that the classical period of the model minority stereotype (read: when narratives supported the model minority stereotype) was not merely during the mid-to-late-1960s, but continued on into the 1990s.

Quindlen’s (1987) New York Times Magazine story “The Drive to Excel” shadows the life and educational success of David Kuo, a 16-year old Bronx High School of Science student who, at the time the story was published, “had been selected one of the top 40 young scientists in America” (Quindlen, 1987, p. 32). Quindlen’s (1987) story documents Kuo’s already successful family—pointing out that “the Kuos had become the first family in the history of the [Westinghouse Science Talent Search] competition to have a child in the Westinghouse finals for three consecutive years” (p. 32). Kuo’s father was a surgeon in Kaohsiung, Taiwan; his mother was a nurse. This article is a textbook example of “classical” reporting on Asian Americans and the model minority stereotype: although it presents a cursory view of Asian American success (i.e., their success is due to structural relativism, cultural and familial values, being children of “brain-drain” immigrants, etc.), it nevertheless focuses on arguments that reinforce the model minority myth. By narrowly defining academic success, Quindlen reinforces Asian American students as “model minorities.” For instance, Quindlen (1987) writes the following (which is true, but which inevitably types Kuo as being academically extraordinaire):

Each morning, David takes the express bus for the 45-minute ride from Queens to the Bronx. Most nights, he does not finish studying until after midnight; two days a week he does not even return home until after 8 P.M., because he is taking graduate courses in combinatorial math and introduction to math analysis at New York University’s Courant Institute (p. 36).

Quindlen’s (1987) story classically reifies the notion that Asian American students are all mathematical and scientific giants.
Brand’s (1987) Education article is the cover story to this issue of Time. The story is briefly highlighted in the beginning of the periodical, which includes this claim:

Just 2% of the population, they will be 14% of the new Harvard freshman class, 25% of Berkeley’s. But the sky-high marks and superlatives are exacting a price: stress, a dropout problem among the poorer and less gifted, even the specter of anti-Asian quotas at the best universities. Still, this is the most impressive generation of immigrants’ children in decades (p. 3).

Brand’s (1987) story is much like Quindlen’s (1987) in that although it does cover Asian-American struggles and reasons why the model minority stereotype is problematic, it nevertheless reinforces the model minority argument. The story’s title, “The New Whiz Kids,” with its subtitle “Why Asian Americans are Doing So Well, and What it Costs Them,” foists the fable that Asian American students succeed despite the odds. Indeed, the article includes seven exposés on Asian Americans—Satia Tor, a Cambodian 19-year old admitted to Stanford; Lucia and Maria Ahn, 18-year old South Korean sisters who participate in Julliard’s precollege musical program; Angie Tang, an 18-year old undocumented student from Hong Kong who was admitted to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire; Hoang Nhu Tran, a 22-year old Vietnamese Rhodes Scholar who aspires to attend Harvard Medical College; Michael Rendore De Guzman, a 14-year old Filipino who was admitted to Chicago’s highly competitive Lane Technical High School; and Chua Pham, a 17-year old Vietnam escapee who was valedictorian of Abramson High School, received multiple scholarships, and begins pre-med studies at Vanderbilt University—that all serve as paragon reinforcement for the model minority stereotype. Brand’s (1987) story also quotes some of the same material that Quindlen’s (1987) article did, like the success of the Kuo family.

The model minority stereotype as a racial project

What is a “racial project”? Omi and Winant (1994) write that a “racial project is simultaneously an interpretation, representation or explanation of racial dynamics, and an effort to reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines” (p. 56, italics in original). The model minority stereotype fits this definition of a racial project because it was created not only to reorganize and redistribute resources along racial lines that benefit the status quos and preserve Whiteness, but also to
naturalize inequality (read: Asian American culture explains why they exhibit high levels of effort while African American culture explains their laziness and dependence on welfare services).

How has the model minority stereotype, as a racial project, directly impacted Asian Americans in terms of affirmative action eligibility or in the official/unofficial college admissions? Well, if Asian Americans are racialized to be overrepresented and successful, their eligibility can be easily taken away from them (Takaki, 1989).

Paradoxically, the model minority racial project is concealed behind a facade of color-blindness; however, the project itself was created with race very much in mind. For instance, if we were to revisit the texts that were analysed earlier in this article, we would see the nefarious ways in which Whiteness is preserved by manufacturing a “model minority” that can be used as a distraction (Hartlep, 2013b). Meanwhile, other minority groups can be demonized for not achieving parity with Asian Americans. While this divide and conquer tactic takes place, socio-political resources—such as affirmative action protection—are slowly and consistently taken away from Asian Americans who are ascribed social and educational status.

A certain level of success is necessary for the racial project to racialize Asian Americans as model minorities. However, too much success makes them cause for concern, since they are in direct competition with Whites. Nowhere is this more apparent than in affirmative action policies for higher education. Research has shown that white people support academic meritocracy when it benefits them (Samson, 2013). According to research conducted by Samson (2013), responding to a line graph that randomly displays a freshmen enrolment trend toward a white plurality or an Asian American plurality, white student evaluators lower their minimum class rank standard for admitting white applicants when exposed to an Asian American plurality trend. They also raise the minimum test percentile standard for admitting Asian American applicants.

Looking back and “reading the word” of history reveals to us that Asian Americans were originally seen as pariahs. According to JACL (2008), “Anti-Asian sentiment was widely prevalent during the late 1800s” (p. 2). Asian Americans’ status of being pariahs has changed since the 1800s; now they are constructed by the mass media to be paragons of success (Rose, 1985). However, if one observes the current state of affairs, one could arrive at the conclusion that the situation for Asian Americans has not drastically improved. The
model minority stereotype is not positive; it is negative and more of the same. The Latin expression, “plus ça change” (gloss: the more it changes, the more it’s the same thing) is instructive in how the model minority stereotype acts like a bikini. What the stereotype reveals, suggests that Asian Americans are uniformly successful. But what the stereotype conceals is vital for its perpetuation. In other words, the model minority stereotype mollifies the facts and obfuscates reality. Rhetoric replaces reality, resulting in hyperbole and exaggeration.

“Reading the word and the world,” a concept Freire and Macedo (1987) introduced in their book Literacy: Reading the Word and the World, is instructional for individuals who hope to become critically literate with regard to the news media. This article has shared evidence in the form of a textual analysis of news headlines that supports the notion that the media perpetuates the model minority stereotype. It further suggests that the model minority stereotype is a racial project that has evolved over time. As was true when the racial project was hatched in 1966, the model minority myth shields the race-relations and political status quos in the United States. By insulating politicians from accusations that African Americans are unsuccessful due to racism, discrimination, and inequitable opportunity structures, the mainstream media continues to reinforce mendacious myths about Asian Americans’ triumphs. This mendacity is strengthened by one-sided reporting and through mollification of reality, substituting race with culture and reality with rhetoric.

This paper challenges citizens, especially teachers, to “read the word and the world” and to be able to “read between the lines.” The stereotype of model minority is oppressive to people of color, and citizens should be aware of the oppressive nature of this characterization so that they do not become fooled by the supposed “positive” nature of the stereotype.

Asian Americans are oppressed by White supremacy: the model minority stereotype, if deconstructed as a “racial project,” can be used to interpret the ways in which power and racial hierarchies in the United States remain in the hands of a powerful elite who create them through the Washington Consensus. The Negro Family: The Case for National Action written by then-Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, commonly referred to as the 1965 Moynihan Report, blamed African Americans’ “culture of poverty” for the difficulty the population experienced. As was argued early in this paper, Petersen’s (1966) New York Times Magazine story “Success Story: Japanese American Style” mollified the general public’s
understanding, creating a misunderstanding that the news media continues to perpetuate to this day.

I will conclude by again emphasizing that the model minority stereotype is prevalent in the general mainstream media. It is a millstone around the neck of Asian Americans and other minoritized individuals. It makes people of color more vulnerable to racism and discrimination because, according to Prashad (2000), the model minority stereotypic construction is the solution to Du Bois' (1903) question, “How does it feel to be a problem?” (p. 4). If Asian Americans are successful, and other minorities are unsuccessful, then discrimination can be said not to exist. Ipso facto, then, inequality becomes the problem of the minority group or individual for not being successful—not the larger society itself.

References


Category for academic journals of media studies. (For additional journals related to interdisciplinary field of communication studies, see Category:Communication journals.) Subcategories. This category has the following 3 subcategories, out of 3 total. F. Film studies journals (19 P). The Journal of Media Studies Publishes research papers in all areas of media and communication studies for researchers and media professionals. The journal provides a forum for publication of high quality research papers and emphasizes openness and flexibility. Instant paper submission Free plagiarism checking No copyright transfer Subject specific journals Author loyalty reward. Journal home. The journal aims to provide complete coverage on theory and practice of communication studies and become the complete and reliable source of information on recent developments in global arena. Benefits For Authors. Subject specific journals You can publish paper in the wide range of subject specific journals. Journal publishes articles on quarterly basis. Our online edition is devoted to the topical issues in the field of studies of media and mass culture in the broadest coverage of: history, cultural studies, anthropology, philosophy, etc. The title of the journal was chosen as a reference to the work of the famous theorist of media culture, Herbert Marshall McLuhan, who in his periodization of the invention and assimilation by mankind of mass communications (media) introduced the concept of "Galaxy" (Galaxy of Gutenberg, Galaxy Marconi, etc.). Aim and Scope. Project goal is to create a virtual pl