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## Breaking Apart the Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner Stereotypes: Asian Americans and Cultural Capital

Monisha Murjani

*Despite recent challenges to the literature and dominant narratives that shape the United States' notions of cultural capital, educational research continues to ignore the cultural capital of Asian Americans. This paper will use Yosso's (2005) framework of cultural capital among communities of color and the concept of community cultural wealth to illuminate the ways Asian American students complicate and challenge current dominant narratives in the field of higher education. In addition, the longstanding stereotypes of the "model minority" and "perpetual foreigner" are addressed, including how these have also contributed to a severely limited view of Asian American cultural capital.*

A lack of cultural capital is often cited as the reason for the low performances of communities of color in political, social, and educational realms. They are viewed as deficient populations who lack the valued skills and knowledge necessary to achieve success (Yosso, 2005). Scholars are shifting this notion and view communities of color as populations with great amounts of cultural wealth (Prudence, 2003; Solórzano & Villalpando, 1998; Tatum, 1997; Yosso, 2005). Populations of color do possess cultural capital; it is merely different than the dominant view of cultural capital. Unfortunately, much of even the more recent literature has ignored Asian Americans due to their different experiences with racism as compared to other populations of color such as Blacks and Latinos (Ng, Lee, & Pak, 2007; Ovink & Veazey, 2011). More specifically, the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes of Asian Americans mask the cultural wealth existing among this community. This has resulted in a severely limited view of the Asian American experience in the United States, especially as it relates to higher education.

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## Cultural Capital

The concept of cultural capital was first developed by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu to analyze economic structures and their relation to social mobility. In Bourdieu's (1984) original work, cultural capital served as a force of power and an explanation for social inequalities. Winkle-Wagner (2010) described the concept as "culturally based resources that act as a form of 'capital'" (p. 5). These resources include "embodied dispositions (i.e., class specific tastes, preferences, consumption patterns, ways of inhabiting space...), material objects, or educational credentials" (Ovink & Veazy, 2010, p. 373). These resources serve as agents to advance or maintain one's social standing.

Winkle-Wagner (2010) stated that cultural capital can be obtained through both family origin and education. Individuals can only improve their social status to a certain extent through education. In that sense, the foundation of cultural capital is one's class origin which is transferred intergenerationally. This "accumulation and deployment of cultural capital" (Ovink & Veazy, 2010, p. 373) is what allows the dominant class to transfer resources to maintain power and define what resources are important. Those without the cultural capital needed for social mobility are inherently at a disadvantage within the economic system. Simply put, "one who acquires high-status cultural capital through family origin and through education will be more privileged in society generally" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 6).

Bourdieu's (1984) concept has been applied and adapted to many fields, including higher education (Ovink & Veazy, 2010; Winkle-Wagner, 2010; Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital often arises in issues related to access. For example, "teachers, administrators, and others in a school system may reward, perhaps unconsciously, a student who has acquired cultural capital from her or his family over a student who has not" (Winkle-Wagner, 2010, p. 6). Furthermore:

Education appears to offer credentials based on merit when in reality these credentials may simply be rewards for displaying a particular cultural capital. Education, in this theoretical reasoning, has a direct role in the perpetuation of social stratification, in part through teaching people to accept their place in the social strata and in part through rewarding the cultural capital of those who are already of higher status (p. 20)

### Students of Color, Cultural Capital, and Education

The history of race and racism in the U.S. has directly influenced institutions of higher education. The notion that education perpetuates social stratification is especially relevant when analyzing experiences of students of color (Yosso, 2005). The concept of cultural capital "has been interpreted as a way to explain why the academic and social outcomes of People of Color are significantly lower than the

outcomes of Whites” (Yosso, 2005, p. 70). Rather than being used as a tool to address the power hierarchies and access differences among these communities, cultural capital is being used as a justification of social inequality. Students of color are seen as lacking the necessary tools – the cultural capital – needed to navigate classroom settings. This notion becomes linked to their race and class background (Yosso, 2005). Consequently, a binary of cultural wealth and cultural poverty has been created, with People of Color viewed as culturally poor.

Yosso (2005) combated this idea that communities of color come to the classroom with “cultural deficiencies” (p. 70) and instead, used critical race theory (CRT) to provide a broader view of cultural capital. Yosso (2005) argued that students of color actually come to the classroom with an abundance of cultural capital that does not get acknowledged, a concept she coined as community cultural wealth. Through the CRT lens, Yosso (2005) described six forms of non-dominant cultural capital that communities of color cultivate and pass down to one another: (a) aspirational, (b) linguistic, (c) familial, (d) social, (e) navigational, and (f) resistant. Despite the fact that they are not given value in the educational sphere, these forms of capital significantly impact communities of color and their ability to respond to and survive systems of oppression.

### **Asian Americans and Community Cultural Wealth**

Yosso (2005) combated a singular view of cultural capital through an extensive analysis of Black and Latino communities. Examples of how these two communities of color are victims of deficit thinking are clearly explained and established. Deficit thinking is the notion that communities of color are at fault for their poor performance in academic settings. Examples of deficit thinking include a perceived lack of cultural knowledge that the dominant society expects people of color to possess or the assumption that parents are not sufficiently involved in their children’s educational experience.

Yosso (2005) mentioned Asian/Pacific Islanders as a part of the communities of color category, yet most examples of community cultural wealth focus on Blacks and Latinos. Asian American communities are rarely discussed. When discussing familial capital, Yosso (2005) shared the ideas of communal bonds in the African American community and the concept of funds of knowledge within the Mexican American community. Yet the collectivist values of Asian American communities and how these influence their view of community and relationships was not addressed. The experience of Japanese Americans in internment camps was briefly discussed, but even that is a fragmented analysis. The “racial category of Asian Americans is a sociopolitical construct consisting of more than 25 ethnic groups, such as Indians, Koreans, Filipinos, Hmong, and Vietnamese, whose language and cultural customs vary widely” (Chen, LePhuoc, Guzmán, Rude, &

Dodd, 2006, p. 462). Therefore, the explanation of community cultural wealth and communities of color is incomplete without analyzing the unique complexities of Asian American communities.

### **Asian Americans and Racism**

Cultural capital and its relationship to Asian American communities is often left out of the literature surrounding racism, oppression, and identity development of communities of color (Chen et al., 2006; Ibrahim, Ohnishi, & Sandhu, 1997; Ng et al., 2007). Yosso (2005) delved deeply into Latino and Black cultural wealth approaches because issues of race and racism are more commonly linked to these populations. When taking into account the different historical, political, cultural, and social contexts of Asian American populations in the U.S., their experiences with race and racism form a different narrative. According to the U.S. Census Bureau (2012), Asians are the fastest growing racial group in the nation, yet they continue to be cast as interlopers in a Black/White racial discourse; being neither Black nor White, Asian Americans rarely gain visibility and voice as racial minorities...An understanding of how racial meanings have been constructed about Asian Americans, or how they have been racialized, requires a departure from a Black/White racial binary. (Ng et al., 2007, p. 96)

Ng et al. (2007) described two distinct forms of racial categorization for Asian Americans. The first is the notion that Asian Americans are a model minority. The second form is the view of Asian Americans as the perpetual foreigner.

### **The Model Minority Myth**

The model minority myth frames Asian Americans as a racial “success story.” This term was first coined by sociologist William Peterson in 1966 in an article about Japanese Americans in *New York Times Magazine* (Accapadi, 2005). Peterson claimed that it was their strong values rooted in hard work and diligence that allowed the Japanese to avoid becoming a “problem minority” (Accapadi, 2005, p. 12). Today, this stereotype is still pervasive when discussing the Asian American community. The stereotype invokes a cultural expectation that all Asian Americans are smart, hardworking, and wealthy.

Suzuki (2002) described several factors that contribute to the persistence of the model minority stereotype which include:

- 1) A large proportion of Asian Americans graduate from college
- 2) The socioeconomic status of Asian Americans has continued to rise since the 1970s
- 3) Japan and other Asian countries transformed into major economic powers in the 1980s

4) Wealthy Asians immigrated to the United States due to immigration regulations in the 1960s (Suzuki, 2002, p. 23).

The combination of these factors contributes to the idea that Asian Americans have “made it.” The model minority myth suggests that there is a distinct quality in Asian Americans that promotes their success which other populations of color must not possess. Not only does the myth ignore the histories of Asian Americans and the role of American immigration policies, but it also does not account for the variances within the Asian American community. As mentioned earlier, the Asian American community consists of over 25 ethnic groups. “Creating monolithic truths based on two or three high-achieving ethnicities does a disservice to everyone” and “erases the experiences of Asian Americans who do not achieve” (Ng et al., 2007, p. 99). Additionally, high achievement cannot solely be attributed to even one group. This stereotype does not hold even within a singular Asian American identity.

This effect of the model minority myth is especially visible in educational institutions. The expectation associated with the stereotype “leads to intense pressure by family, peers, and even instructors, which leads to academic, as well as psychological problems that go unrecognized by student affairs professionals and other university professionals” (Accapadi, 2005, p. 16). Furthermore, the notion that Asian Americans are the “model” that other minorities need to follow creates cross-cultural tensions and gives rise to horizontal oppression (Ng et al., 2007; Prashad, 2000). This creates a divide between Asian Americans and other communities of color, which essentially perpetuates systems of oppression, racial hierarchy, and White privilege (Prashad, 2000). Ultimately, this stereotype rendered the Asian American community as problem-less and, in conjunction with other Asian American-specific stereotypes, further contributed to the missing perspective of Asian Americans in the racial discourse.

### **Asian Americans as “Foreigners”**

The concept of Asian Americans as “perpetual foreigners” emerged during World War II when Japanese Americans were placed into internment camps because they were seen as threats to the nation’s safety. This stereotype solidified when Asian countries began to gain more economic power during the 1980s and were viewed as a threat to U.S. dominance (Suzuki, 2002). After the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, South Asians emerged as “the other” and faced a large backlash (Prashad, 2000). These experiences taken together reiterate the stereotype that Asian Americans are “not legitimate Americans” (Accapadi, 2005, p. 32; Omi, 2008). This “[results] in the marginalization of the Asian American community in social, academic, and political realms” (Accapadi, 2005, p. 34). Viewing Asian Americans through the lens of these stereotypes ignores and disregards the cultural capital and unique values they cultivate.

## Community Cultural Wealth of Asian Americans

The contradicting experiences of the model minority and perpetual foreigner myths reiterate the idea that Asian American communities are victims of oppression, racism, and discrimination, albeit in different ways than other communities of color. Below, I outline Yosso's (2005) six types of non-dominant cultural capital and the ways Asian Americans come to institutions of education with their own community cultural wealth in order to demystify the model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes, challenge the Black/White binary, and address the invisibility of Asian Americans in literature regarding racism.

### Aspirational Capital

Yosso (2005) defined aspirational capital as “the ability to hold onto hope in the face of structured inequality and often without the means to make such dreams a reality” (p. 77). In the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks, many in the South Asian community were victims of hate crimes, bias acts, and discrimination. This especially affected those in the Asian American community who practiced Sikhism. Sikh men were often attacked because their turbans served as visible targets (Prashad, 2011).

Asian American communities lost family members and experienced devastation in the aftermath of the attacks. Their resiliency was exemplified in their ability to remain hopeful. South Asian Americans Leading Tomorrow (SAALT) is a non-profit organization that works towards developing South Asian leaders and bringing South Asian voices to the national discourse. In its publication, “Community Resilience” (2011), SAALT shared stories of several South Asian American families and their resilience to fight for justice after losing loved ones. Talat Hamdani, mother of Salman Hamdani, a New York Police Department cadet who lost his life, is one example of the way aspirational capital is exemplified in Asian American communities. She

has become a tireless voice for healing and unity. As a steering committee member of September 11th Families for Peaceful Tomorrows, an organization founded by family members of the victims killed during the attacks and who develop and advocate for nonviolent actions in the pursuit of justice, Ms. Hamdani has rallied against the PATRIOT Act and racial and religious profiling, and supported civil rights and civil liberties for all Americans. (Community Resilience, 2011, pg. 2)

Hamdani is just one of many examples of the resiliency of Asian American communities in response to national and personal crises. These narratives create community among Asian Americans and cultivate hope after the serious injustices inflicted upon them.

## Linguistic Capital

Linguistic capital refers to communication, intellectual, and interpersonal skills gained through bilingualism and multilingualism (Yosso, 2005). Many Asian American children serve as “language brokers,” or translators for their families. The role of a language broker has many unexpected positive effects that go unrecognized, especially in educational institutions. Tse (1996) conducted a study with Chinese and Vietnamese bilingual students to explore how language brokering affected their identity development. She found that besides being translators, these students took on significant responsibilities and often become decision makers and mediators for their families. Students reported that language brokering increased their confidence, independence, and maturity. Perhaps most importantly, it also gave them an avenue to increase their cultural knowledge and improve their relationship with their parents. These results suggest that Asian American students enter the educational sphere with communication and social skills that are not always recognized.

## Familial Capital

Familial capital is defined as “cultural knowledge nurtured among familia (kin) that carry a sense of community history, memory, and cultural intuition” (Yosso, 2005, p. 79). East Asian American values and heritage are influenced by Confucianism, which emphasizes a collectivist viewpoint. This is in contrast to the dominant culture of the U.S. which focuses on individualism. Collectivist values highlight respect for age, value of both the nuclear and extended family, and a shared responsibility among family members (Le & Stockdale, 2010). Asian American communities pass down stories and values with “respect to family relationships, respect for age, social interaction, communication style, family expectations of success, humility, school situations, decision making, and socialization barriers” (Ng et al., 2007, p. 101).

Another important component of Asian American familial identity is religion. Although religion is not prevalent for all Asian American communities, it is a large component of identity for many groups. Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, Jainism, Christianity, and Taoism are some examples of the religions practiced in Asian American cultures. Not only does religion serve as hope, but also as a way to build connection among families and larger communities. Many Asian American communities have built faith-based organizations and religious sites across the nation to serve as a refuge. Furthermore, “religious imperatives powerfully intersect self, family, and society and prescribe certain relationships among them” (Carnes & Yang, 2004, p. 3). Religion is used as a way to pass down family values and nurture family bonds. “The role of Asian American religions in negotiating, accepting,

redefining, changing, and creating boundaries” (p. 3) within their communities is a unique form of familial capital that is often overlooked.

### **Social Capital**

Yosso (2005) defined social capital as “networks of people and community resources” (p. 79) that help provide support in navigating dominant institutions. One of these institutions is higher education. Asian American students have developed organizations on college campuses solely focused on their ethnic identities. These include Asian American student unions and organizations, fraternities and sororities, and other, more specific, identity-based organizations (Inkelas, 2004). These organizations strengthen the ability of Asian American students to navigate higher education institutions. By participating in these organizations, Asian American students gain a commitment to their identity in predominately White institutions. Moreover, they develop intercultural skills and racial understanding (Tatum, 1997). Inkelas (2004) conducted a study on Asian American ethnic identity organizations at a large, public institution and found that participation in these clubs helped develop community advocacy skills and knowledge about political activism among students. The sense of belonging Asian American students feel in organizations based on Asian American identity help them succeed and prevail in institutions where they face assumptions because of the model minority stereotype or obstacles due to systemic oppression (Inkelas, 2004).

### **Navigational**

Navigational capital “refers to skills of maneuvering through social institutions... not created with Communities of Color in mind” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). A movement towards Asian American Civil Rights can be seen through the numerous non-profit organizations that Asian Americans have developed and the coalition being built across communities (Prasad, 2000). Organizations such as Asian Professional Exchange, Asian American Alliance, Asian American Justice Center, and Asian American Institute are just a few of the hundreds of non-profit organizations fighting for Asian American representation and rights in politics, education, media, and other social realms. More specifically, in New York City, South Asian groups committed to social justice and liberation held Desi Dhamaka (Explosion)... an event that promises both to promote the vitality of South Asia in the United States and to show its vibrancy from the standpoint of its social justice traditions (Prashad, 2000, p. 118)

Examples, as the one above, demonstrate the indomitable strength Asian American communities possess in finding their voice within and navigating through predominately White spaces.

## Resistant Capital

Resistant capital is defined as “knowledges and skills fostered through oppositional behavior that challenges inequality” (Yosso, 2005, p. 80). Yosso (2005) described the Japanese American community’s ability to “[resist] racism by...nurturing various forms of cultural wealth” (p. 80) during their imprisonment in internment camps as an example of resistant capital. Another example of resistant capital among Asian Americans is the community rebuilding that occurred during the aftermath of the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek shooting on August 5, 2012. The Sikh community joined forces across the nation to honor the six individuals who died through candlelight vigils, open-forums, and prayer ceremonies (Yaccino, Schwirtz, & Santora, 2012). These experiences turn resistant capital into transformative capital in order to foster social awareness and promote social change (Yosso, 2005).

## Student Affairs Implications

Analyzing the community cultural wealth of Asian Americans allows an understanding of this group in a racially distinct way compared to other communities of color. This is especially important to recognize in higher education because:

Asian-Americans compose less than 5 percent of the U.S. population, a sizable and increasingly visible percentage of students at elite private and public universities throughout the country are Asian-American. In California, such students make up 24% of the undergraduate population at Stanford, 39% at UCLA, and 42% at Berkeley. (Omi, 2008, p. 56)

These statistics foreshadow that the presence of Asian Americans on college campuses will continue to increase.

The model minority and perpetual foreigner stereotypes convey a one-dimensional view of Asian American students. Their community cultural wealth is not seen as cultural capital because it is masked through the persistence of these stereotypes. Furthermore, stereotypes prescribe experiences onto Asian American students who then internalize these expectations. This leads to negative views of themselves and the Asian American community in general. It is crucial for student affairs professionals to recognize their unique experiences by understanding what cultural capital Asian American students bring in order to combat these stereotypes.

Ovink and Veazey (2011) suggested that advisors play a key role in the academic and professional development of students of color. Advisors are a direct way to ensure that Asian Americans students feel supported at higher education institutions. Advisors need to understand the different obstacles that Asian American students face in comparison to other students. One way to address this issue is

by ensuring that Asian Americans are represented in student affairs staff such as in counseling services and in faculty.

The examples of community cultural wealth in this paper are not all-encompassing of the entire Asian American population and require more exploration. Asian American narratives are lacking in the literature regarding racism and more research needs to be done on Asian American students. The representations that are present are “severely limited” (Ovink & Veazey, 2011, p. 99). “The educational community needs to critically assess these representations and understand the deleterious impact they have on Asian American students and faculty/teachers” (p. 99). Recognizing the unique cultural wealth of Asian American students challenges the institutionalized racism in education and provides a context to reframe the structural hierarchies within the field.

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