

## The Model Minority

Just as in Gish Jen's *Typical American*, Nancy Foner's discussion of Asian immigrants in *From Ellis Island to JFK* spoke to my personal experiences. I have visited all three Chinatowns in New York City, and my father is currently renting an apartment on the upper west side from a Chinese landlord. I grew up in suburban neighborhoods in Maryland that were predominantly white, and I attended a magnet high school where Asians were overrepresented. During my senior year of high school, after getting into MIT and being named a semifinalist in the Westinghouse Science Talent Search, a reporter interviewed me for a Chinese newspaper as an example for other students to follow: seemingly the model for success within the model minority.

The idea of Asians as a model minority and Foner's characterization of the historical evolution of racial perceptions were very interesting to me. I have grown up in an environment with little discrimination against Asians, and it is difficult to imagine that just over a century ago, Chinese laborers were specifically excluded from the privilege of citizenship. Foner describes this phenomenon as the "elasticity of race," which seems like a novel concept when present day color-lines are so clearly drawn.

Foner draws parallels between the recent change in attitudes towards Asians and the "whitening" of Jews and Italians in the earlier part of the century. She claims that the massive influx of African-Americans after World War I shifted racial politics to a black vs. white paradigm, allowing Jews and Italians to fall into the distinctly white end of the spectrum. In the present day, Asians are also taking steps to distinguish themselves from blacks, becoming "almost whites but not whites." Foner places a heavy emphasis on the effect of physical skin color; when she looks into the future, all scenarios predict the racial hierarchy ordered from fair skin to dark, with the lighter-skinned of the minorities having a much better chance of achieving "majority" status.

Cast in this light, it seems inevitable that Asians, having skin color on the lighter end of the spectrum, would be closer to full assimilation than other minorities. However, I believe that economic factors are the primary reasons that Asians are "almost white." The assimilation of Jews and Italians into the white race paralleled their rise into the mainstream, white-collar economy. While social factors such as reduced discrimination, intermarriage, and the ability to blend in helped Jews and Italians reach this economic

status, these social phenomena can also be seen as the results of their white-collar status. With so many different variables correlated with each other, it is impossible to determine precise cause and effect relationships. It is likely that both sides are true: economic status led to social acceptance and social tolerance led to economic success.

In the case of Asians, the economic factors are very obvious because they show a dichotomy between the Chinese labor force of the last century and the Asian immigrant professionals of today. In Ari Zolberg's essay on immigrant labor, the usage of Chinese laborers to combat union labor is vividly described as a source of resentment for white workers against Asians. This phenomenon also occurred when Jews and Italians came to New York and were willing to work for less than the German and Irish immigrants that had come before them. The effect was mitigated at that time because the industrial economy was rapidly expanding and jobs were plentiful, but the displacement of blue collar jobs has always caused resentment towards immigrants.

This is the classic negative perception of an immigrant today: a blue-collar worker, possibly an undocumented immigrant, willing to underbid and undercut hardworking Americans. Once an immigrant group is cast in this light, the public perception of them is instantly negative. They take American jobs, move into American neighborhoods, and drag down the quality of American schools. Jews and Italians played this role in the early part of the century. After World War I, African-Americans displaced them, and today the Latino population, now the largest minority group in the United States, is the group most likely to be associated with this immigrant stereotype. The fact that modern Asian immigrants have completely avoided being seen like this is a key facet of their success.

Why Asians have been able to dodge the stereotype is not necessarily any inherent racial or cultural quality, as Foner and other writers say. The reasons may be far simpler. For one thing, there are far fewer Asian immigrants than there are Latinos, which keeps them less visible in the blue-collar world. Some of this is caused by sheer distance and some of it by emigration laws in Asian countries, but for the most part, it has been restrictive policies of the United States that have limited the number of Asian immigrants. This discrimination, paradoxically, has given Asians a privileged status in America, as their smaller numbers has allowed them to avoid heavy competition for blue-

collar jobs drawn along racial lines. Compounding that fact, as Foner points out, modern Asian immigrants are actually comprised of a large proportion of white-collar workers. In the white-collar world, competition for jobs is much more dependent upon skills, and racial tensions become much less of a concern.

Why many Asians are white-collar also has to do with immigration policies. The INS has designed a system where student visas and white-collar work visas are the only easy ways Asians can come to the United States. Sponsorship by a relative is also possible, but in many cases, the sponsoring parties first came to the United States on a student visa and the new immigrants are quickly ushered in to the white-collar world. When Asians were first allowed to immigrate en masse in 1965, it was under the new immigration rules, which placed strict limits and emphasized job skills. A large proportion of the modern wave of Asian immigrants received their visas with the INS consciously expecting them to enter the white-collar world.

In the very first chapter, Foner describes how difficult it is for immigrants to make it into the United States, even illegally. It takes someone who generally has some significant capital to uproot themselves and come to America. For Asians, this leap is much larger than other minority groups, as they must travel halfway around the world. Mexicans may still be able to fall back on relatives back home, but Chinese immigrants must invest everything in being successful in America. This fact sets the bar slightly higher for illegal Asian immigrants. Whether legal or illegal, the required education or wealth for making it to America is simply higher for Asians.

While Foner tries to explain the success of Asians in terms of a high cultural value on education, she points out that West Indian immigrants with the same attitude are not as successful. This is rationalized as a black vs. white phenomenon, but it is hard to believe that a matter of color would put Asians so far ahead of other groups. What's missing from Foner's analysis is the fact that modern immigration policies helped create the model minority by strictly defining the type of immigrant the United States desires. The success of Asians is not a model for other minorities to follow, but a model for successful immigration policies. When a country recruits alien professionals rather than alien labor, they get a population that is both wanted and welcome.