Chapter 4
From Model Minority to “Angry Asian Man”:
Social Media, Racism, and Counter–Hegemonic Voices

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ABSTRACT

In various social media formats, Asian Americans have posted angry and creative reactions to cyber racism. This chapter discusses the benefits of using social media discourse analysis to teach students about the modern societal impact of the model minority stereotype and Asian Americans who resist online. Methods and theories that support this interdisciplinary approach include racial identity development theory, racial formations, critical race theory, feminist perspectives, and culturally relevant pedagogy. As a result, students learn to deconstruct cultural productions that shape the sociopolitical meanings of Asian American identity while critically reflecting on their own experiences with the stereotype. The work discussed in this chapter is based on participatory action research principles to develop critical media literacy, foster counter-hegemonic stories, and promote social change that expands our knowledge, institutional support, and compassion for the divergent experiences of Asian Americans, particularly in college settings.

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INTRODUCTION

Each quarter, as a college sociology instructor, I lecture about the impact of race and racism on Asian American communities in the United States. Our examination includes a review of the sociopolitical history of the model minority stereotype and the disaggregate data that refutes the stereotype. We also discuss the social process of identity construction and the negative effect of the model minority stereotype on vulnerable Asian American students and their families, such as maladaptive perfectionist tendencies (Yoon & Lau, 2008). Occasionally a few students unabashedly recite the commonly known behaviors and traits associated with “model minorities” (Chao, Chiu, Chan, Mendoza-Denton, & Kwok, 2013). Yet, the broad impact of the model minority stereotype is complex and reaches beyond those who appear to adhere to the stereotype.

Once, when a white student asked in a resentful tone if candidates with Asian names are more likely to get jobs over non-Asian candidates because of the model minority stereotype, Phanat, one of my Cambodian students, broke his silence and spoke candidly in class for the first time (Chang & Au, 2007). Holding back tears, he turned to the student in frustration and said with a quiver in his voice, “What are you talking about? My parents (uh)…I can’t even get a job interview because of my name! Teachers don’t pronounce my name correctly, and they think I can’t speak English. It’s like I’m invisible. I guess I’m a different kind of model minority….”

The consequences of the Vietnam War and the violent dictatorship of Pol Pot and the Khmer Rouge, a communist guerilla group, forced Phanat’s family to flee for their lives during one of the worst genocides of the twentieth century. His parents’ history is filled with trauma, loss, and uncertainty, and their lives in the U.S. contradict the social expectations of the model minority stereotype. His family’s last name is not Chin, Hong, or Lee. They are not acculturated as fourth or fifth generation Asian Americans. Nor are they fluent in English. Frankly, teachers and students find his full name difficult to pronounce, and his “ambiguous” Asian identity is incongruent with their presumptuous ideas about place of origin and voluntary migration (i.e., China or Japan). Phanat wants to take pride in the Cambodian heritage his name reflects (Kiang, 1997), but his name is a constant reminder of his “otherness” in a Eurocentric and ethnocentric culture full of contradictory messages about assimilation, honorary whiteness, invisibility, and an exclusionary American identity (Hall, 1997; Li, 2008; Yamada, 1981).

Phanat’s family story offers insight into a lesser-known aspect of the social phenomenon where the model minority stereotype, race, and class intersect. Many Southeast Asian refugees do not fit the model minority mold because they encounter numerous educational challenges that are related to their migration to the
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