

VIETNAMESE AMERICANS AND THE MYTH OF THE MODEL
MINORITY

by

MEREDITH A. LI

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Dr. Julia Lesage

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The modern popular press has portrayed Asian Americans as a "model minority" whose phenomenal academic and professional achievements prove that they have assimilated into white middle-class society. However, the perpetrators of this model minority myth exaggerate the success of Asian Americans with misleading statistics. Furthermore, by focusing attention on only the achievements of Asian Americans, the model minority myth not only obscures the many serious socioeconomic problems in the Asian American community, but it also promotes discrimination. The model minority image is particularly inaccurate and damaging when it is applied to the Vietnamese Americans, who are even more disadvantaged than other Asian Americans by their lack of acculturation.

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INTRODUCTION

Images of the successful Asian American abound in the modern popular press. A glance at the newsstands in the late 1980s would have revealed such articles as "The Triumph of Asian Americans" in New Republic or "Why Asians are Going to the Head of the Class" in the New York Times Magazine; even the *McNeill/Lehrer Report* and CBS' *60 Minutes* aired special news segments devoted to the success stories of Asian Americans. These pervasive reports enumerate the impressive academic achievements of Asian American students, who seem to dominate honor rolls and fill top universities. They extol the rising Asian American family incomes and the growing numbers of Asian Americans in the white-collar workforce. Asian Americans are lauded for their family values and they are praised for their remarkable work ethic. According to these reports, Asian Americans have become the "model minority", whose perseverance and cultural strengths have allowed them to assimilate into white, middle-class society. Yet while Asian American engineers, National Merit Scholars, and network anchorwomen shine in the limelight, the poverty of an elderly Chinese woman and the frustration of a highly educated Vietnamese janitor are lost in the shadows. Have Asian Americans truly reached the American dream?

The myth of the "model minority" perpetuates the fallacy that Asian Americans have successfully assimilated into the dominant culture, obscuring serious socioeconomic and psychological problems in the Asian American community. The model minority myth has been particularly

inaccurate and harmful when applied to the Vietnamese community, where these problems are exacerbated by lower degrees of acculturation.

THE MYTH OF THE MODEL MINORITY

THE EVOLUTION OF THE THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

Yellow Journalism

Throughout most of their history in the United States, Asian Americans were portrayed in the popular press in not only negative terms, but often in distinctly hostile portraits. In the nineteenth century, the white community viewed the cheap labor provided by Asian immigrants as a threat to their job security; consequently, "yellow journalism" emerged, depicting Asians as swarming hordes with uncivilized ways, ready to wrest jobs away from decent Americans. Publications also warned the public by describing the Asians, particularly the Chinese, as morally inferior heathens who would corrupt the racial purity of the United States. The outbreak of World War II continued the tradition of alarmist reactions to Asian Americans in the press. Japanese Americans became treacherous spies who had infiltrated American communities, according to many newspapers and magazines. Similarly, the press associated Koreans, Chinese, and other Asian Americans with communism during the U. S. involvement in Korea. From these images created by the media, it appeared as though Asian Americans would always remain outsiders, delegated roles as barbarians or scheming villains¹.

¹ Colleen Fong, "Tracing the Origins of a 'Model Minority': A Study of the Depictions of Chinese Americans in Popular Magazines," Ph.D. Dissertation for the University of Oregon (June 1989), ; Bob Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the Model Minority Thesis," Amerasia Journal 4 (1977), 23.

Sudden Change in the Portrayal of Asian Americans

The 1960s marked a dramatic turning point in the media image of Asian Americans. Suddenly, two articles appeared in the New York Times Magazine and U.S. News and World Report which lauded the determination of Asian Americans to create a better life for themselves and remarked on their impressive work ethic. Praise flowed for their low crime rates and their devotion to family, and congratulations abounded for their rising incomes and their movement into middle class suburbia. The article in the New York Times Magazine gushed, "By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites"². The articles also gave attention to the adversities confronting the Asian American community and marvelled at their ability to overcome these difficulties. The articles asserted that the Asian cultural values - particularly the traditional respect for authority, reverence for learning, diligent work ethic, and emphasis on thrift - were responsible for the achievements of Asian Americans in the face of discrimination³. According to these new reports, Asian Americans had become the "model minority", whose phenomenal rags-to-riches story surpassed any Horatio Alger hero; furthermore, the articles strongly implied that due to hard work and strong

² William Petersen, "Success Story: Japanese Style," New York Times Magazine, January 9, 1966, 21.

³ Keith Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," in Reflections on Shattered Glass: Prospects and Promises for Asian American Studies, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro et al (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988), 166.

cultural foundations, Asian Americans had successfully assimilated into white middle class society⁴.

However, this new identity was forged in the mid-1960s, when race relations received unprecedented attention in the United States. While the Asian Americans bathed in praise, the Civil Rights Movement intensified with urban riots, black militancy, and demands for federally funded social programs to support minority groups⁵. Put into this context, the term "model minority" takes on whole new connotations; the very use of the word "model" to refer to Asian Americans suggests that there is something that is not "model" or is lacking in the other ethnic groups. In fact, critiques of Blacks and Latinos who sought relief through federal funding are explicit in the articles which praise the self-sufficiency of Asian

Americans. The 1966 article in U.S. News and World Report reads:

At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own - with no help from anyone else...What you find, back of this remarkable group of (Chinese) Americans, is a story of adversity and prejudice that would shock those now complaining about hardships endured by today's Negroes⁶.

These articles credit cultural values such as thrift and diligence for the success of Asians in the U.S., and at the same time, they imply indirectly that any failings of the other minorities are due to their own cultural weaknesses. Not only does this underhanded argument deny the need for social welfare programs in minority communities, but it also refutes the

⁴ Bob H. Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: a Revisionist Analysis of the Model Minority Thesis," Amerasia Journal 4 (1977), 24.

⁵ Ibid., 23-24; Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," 166-167.

⁶ "Success Story of One Minority in the U.S.," U.S. News and World Report, December 26, 1966, 73.

claim that the United States is a racist society. It suggests that since the Asians have "made it" through uncomplaining perseverance, then racial oppression in the United States must be a fallacy. Ultimately, the model minority image confirmed the belief that America is the land of equal opportunity which rewards deserving individuals⁷.

Studies conducted on the data from the 1970 U. S. Census seemed to validate the model minority thesis. These studies found that Asian Americans had higher rates of schooling and higher incomes than the general U. S. population. Although some critics objected to the methods of analysis which produced these results, their objections were not heard by the general public, and the stereotype of the successful Asian became more entrenched into the nation's consciousness⁸.

The 1980s Reincarnation

The model minority myth enjoyed an even greater resurgence in the 1980s. Between 1982 - 1987, at least eleven articles appeared in major popular press publications, including Fortune, Newsweek, and New Republic; in addition, special news segments were devoted to the success stories of Asian Americans on *NBC Nightly News*, *the McNeill/Lehrer Report*, and CBS's *60 Minutes*⁹. The 1980s version of the model minority myth focused on the exceptional academic records of Asian

⁷ Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," 166-167.

⁸ Bob H. Suzuki, "Asian Americans as the 'Model Minority': Outdoing Whites? Or Media Hype?," Change (November/ December 1989), 14.

⁹ Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," 7; Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 474.

Americans, citing such achievements as their high visibility on university campuses, their higher mathematical SAT scores, and their outstanding performances in the Westinghouse Science Talent competition. In addition, the recent articles highlighted the median Asian American family income, which was reportedly higher than the median white family income¹⁰.

Although the new model minority articles remain problematic, they are an improvement from the previous articles. In contrast to the articles from the 1960s, the new articles reflect better understandings of the Asian American situation to some degree. All of the 1980s articles note recent changes in the Asian American population with the addition of newly arrived Koreans, Vietnamese, and other foreign-born Asians. Furthermore, they generally acknowledge the complexities associated with the model minority thesis in some manner; several articles recognize that the median family income for Asians, which is commonly used as a measure of success, is misleading, and a handful acknowledge the added pressure to perform which has been placed on Asian Americans, as well as resentment from some Asian Americans toward the successful stereotype¹¹.

Despite the brief acknowledgement of some of the complexities of the model minority thesis, the articles continue to perpetrate the core elements of the old model minority thesis in its new 1980s reincarnation. They emphasize the "overwhelming success" of Asian Americans and continue to attribute this success to culturally based attitudes¹². For

¹⁰ Ibid., 168.

¹¹ Ibid., 168-169.

¹² Ibid., 169.

instance, a Newsweek article credits Asian Americans for "contributing a needed shot of some vanishing American values: thrift, strong family ties, sacrifice for the children", and Time attributes the achievements of Asian American students to "a powerful belief in the values of hard work and a zealous regard for the role of the family"¹³. Although these articles briefly mention diversity in the degree of acculturation and the rates of success of different Asian groups, the structure of the 1980s articles clearly emphasizes the traditional model minority thesis, making those who do not fit the pattern appear to be rare exceptions¹⁴. The construction of the articles minimizes any information which contradicts the model minority thesis by assigning priority to the passages which support the thesis¹⁵. New Republic, for example, prefaces a critique of the use of median family incomes as a valid measure of success with the following: "By at least one indicator, it seems hard to believe that Asian Americans suffer greatly from discrimination"¹⁶. The new articles further promote the model minority thesis by citing only the scholarly research which supports it, but none that contradicts it; in particular, there is no mention of the extensive body of research which shows that Asian Americans earn less than whites with the same level of education¹⁷. Thus, the 1980s

¹³ "Asian Americans: A Model Minority," Newsweek, December 6, 1982, 40; "The New Whiz Kids," Time, August 31, 1987, 42.

¹⁴ Colleen Valerie Jin Fong, "Tracing the Origins of a 'Model Minority': a Study of the Depictions of Chinese Americans in the Popular Magazines," PhD. Dissertation for the University of Oregon (June 1989), 14.

¹⁵ Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," 172.

¹⁶ "The Triumph of Asian Americans," New Republic, July 1985, 24.

¹⁷ Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: An Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," 172.

articles contain the same ideological assumptions that hard work and diligence is rewarded, and that the success of the Asian Americans proves the equality of the American system.

ASIAN AMERICANS: MYTH VERSUS TRUTH

As with all myths, the myth of the model minority is based on elements of truth. It is undeniable that many Asian Americans have excelled in both academics and in the work place. For example, the number of Asian Americans enrolled in college and universities has steadily increased, such that Asian Americans now have the highest post secondary enrollment rate for all ethnic groups. Furthermore, Asian Americans have the lowest high school drop-out rate at 3%, compared to 14% for white students¹. It is also true that the population of Asian Americans in the white collar work force has swelled in comparison to sixty years ago. However, the model minority thesis remains a myth rather than an accurate description because it draws conclusions based on only surface-level examinations of the Asian American experience. The model minority thesis not only exaggerates the truth, but it also ignores many of the limitations and obstacles which Asian Americans continue to face.

Academic Realities

Although a number of Asian Americans have excellent academic records, some of the statistics which are used to promote the image of Asian success in school are misleading. The increasing percentage of Asian Americans on university and college campuses is often quoted as

¹ Jayjia Hsia, "Rising Institutional Barriers and Asian American Strategies for Access to Higher Education," in A Look Beyond the Model Minority Image: Critical Issues in Asian America, ed. Grace Yun. (New York: Minority Rights Group, Inc., 1989), 111.

evidence of Asian American assimilation and achievement, but this phenomenon is due in part to an increasing Asian American population in general. The overall Asian population in the U.S. has increased because of the relaxation of the quotas on Asian immigrants, as well as the flight of Southeast Asian refugees in the late 1970s; consequently, the number of college-aged Asian Americans has increased while the overall number of college-aged Americans has dropped, resulting in a higher percentage of Asian Americans in college². Furthermore, the increasing presence of Asian international students on U. S. campuses exaggerates the image of the Asian American boom at colleges and universities.

The model minority thesis further ignores the pattern of bimodality in the distribution of Asian American educational achievement. Contrary to the media image, the achievement of Asian Americans in schools is not universal; for many Asian groups, academic achievement is concentrated at the upper and lower extremes of the spectrum. A case in point is the Chinese American community, which has a higher proportion of college graduates, but at the same time a higher rate of illiteracy than the general population. Therefore, the model minority thesis' use of averages loses much of its descriptive value because the extreme variation is disregarded³.

² Hsia, "Rising Institutional Barriers and Asian American Strategies for Access to Higher Education," 111.

³ Setsuko Matsunaga Nishi, "Perceptions and Deceptions: Contemporary Views of Asian Americans," in A Look Beyond the Model Minority Image: Critical Issues in Asian America, ed. Grace Yun. (New York: Minority Rights Group, Inc., 1989), 7.

Asian Americans in the Workplace

The model minority myth's treatment of Asian Americans in the white collar work force is also distorted because it fails to recognize the state of Asian American employment with any accuracy. According to Bob Suzuki, a leading critic of the model minority thesis, the current situation is the result of more than a century of discrimination. It began with discriminatory laws and practices which prevented Asian immigrants from entering unions and barred them from employment in most white-owned businesses. In reaction to these barriers, Asians developed their own self-sufficient communities, such as the Chinatowns and Little Tokyos seen in the larger cities, where conditions were often harsh. Asian parents attempted to help their children survive by instructing them in the more authoritarian Asian cultural values, particularly filial piety, respect for authority, obedience, and self-discipline. These parents hoped that their children would find a better way of life through schooling since no other options for advancement were open. The schools reaffirmed their faith in education by rewarding their obedient, docile behavior and by instilling in them the dream of an equal chance at success⁴.

Ambition and their past experiences with racism from white workers prompted Asian parents to shun blue collar jobs for their children and aspire towards white collar jobs. Racism limited opportunities for Asian Americans in upper echelon jobs such as management, so parents encouraged them to choose careers in the lower echelon of white collar

⁴ Bob H. Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the Model Minority Thesis," *Ameriasia Journal* 4 (1977), 43.

jobs, especially in the scientific-technical occupations. Such career choices were reinforced by the underdevelopment of verbal-linguistic skills for a sizable number of Asian American children (an outcome of low contact outside the ethnic communities), and by advice and guidance given by teachers and guidance counselors. During World War II, expansion in the U.S. economy opened up low-echelon white collar jobs to Asian Americans, who were particularly well suited for these jobs due to their socialization and training acquired at home and at school⁵.

Despite the fact that many Asian Americans have attained high levels of education and are able to enter high-paying occupations and industries, they are still limited today by the effects of racism, and most have been channelled into lower echelon white collar jobs having little or no decision-making authority, low mobility, and low public contact⁶. More specifically, a study in 1988 by Cabezas and Kawaguchi found that Asian Americans tend to be clustered around two categories of jobs. The first category encompasses "secondary sector jobs" which have low pay, poor job security, minimal promotion prospects, and little decision making. These jobs, which include cashiers, janitors, waiters, sales, and data-entry keyers, are often held by foreign-born Asians, Asian American women, younger U. S. born Filipinos, and older U. S. born Chinese. Asian Americans are also clustered around "lower tier primary sector jobs". Primary sector jobs have higher pay as well as more job security, upward mobility and decision-making potential; however, Asian Americans are

⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁶ Bob H. Suzuki, "Asian Americans as the 'Model Minority': Outdoing Whites? Or Media Hype?" *Change* (Nov./Dec. 1989), 15-16.

almost entirely found in the lower tier of this group, having less power, prestige, and visibility than those in the upper tier. Typical lower tier secondary sector occupations include engineers, retail buyers, and teachers; in the Asian American community, Japanese and Chinese American men and younger Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino women generally hold these positions. Very few Asian Americans occupy the upper tier jobs such as management and public administration⁷. A survey of executives of fifty major corporations in California conducted in 1970 showed that few had ever employed Asians at executive levels. It further revealed a general distrust of Asians in executive positions⁸. Finally, numerous complaints have been recorded, especially in the civil service, that Asian Americans have been passed over for promotion to supervisory positions by whites who have scored lower on written civil service exams. Employers defended their actions by stating that Asian Americans do poorly in oral interviews and that they lack the prerequisite personality traits of aggressiveness, verbal fluency, and self-confidence⁹. Clearly, Asian Americans are still trapped by the "glass ceiling".

⁷ Amado Cabezas and Gary Kawaguchi, "Empirical Evidence for Continuing Asian American Income Inequality: the Human Capital Model and Labor Market Segmentation" in Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects for Asian American Studies, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro, S. Hune, A. A. Hansen, and J. M. Liu. (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988), 162.

⁸ Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: a Revisionist Analysis of the Model Minority Thesis," 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

Inflated Incomes

In light of this apparent employment discrimination, what accounts for the higher income of Asian Americans, so often touted by proponents of the model minority thesis? According to the 1970 U.S. Census reports, the median income of Asian American families was higher than the U.S. population as a whole; additionally, the median Japanese American family income was \$3000 higher than the median family income of their white counterparts, and the Chinese American family income was \$1000 higher than that of whites'. However, these statistics did not take into account several important factors.

One of the main factors which was overlooked in the Census data was the number of family members contributing to the family income. Compared to the general population, Asian American families have a larger proportion of families with two or more income earners; these additional income earners are not limited to wives, but also include children and sometimes extended family. Moreover, Asian American families tend to be larger than average U.S. families, so they often have more potential contributors to the family income¹⁰. According to a study in 1980, white families in California had 1.6 workers per family, Japanese families had 2.1, Filipino families had 2.2, Chinese had 2.0, and immigrant Korean had 1.8 (actually, the number of income earners for immigrant Koreans should be higher since many Korean women work unpaid in family businesses)¹¹. Thus, if the 1970 Census data is broken down into

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore: a History of Asian Americans, (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 475.

median individual incomes rather than family incomes, Chinese and Filipino males make 75% of the median white male income. Japanese males still appear to have a 10% higher income than their white counterparts, but Japanese males also have a higher median age and substantially greater years of schooling; furthermore, their population is concentrated in areas like California where incomes and standard of living are higher than average. According to Suzuki, if adjustments are made for these demographic variables, then the "normalized" median income of Japanese males also falls considerably below that of white males¹².

The proponents of the model minority thesis also fail to recognize two other important factors in their analysis of Asian American incomes: the location of the Asian American population as a whole and the return of education on income. The highest concentrations of Asian Americans are found in Hawaii, California, and New York, which have higher average incomes and higher costs of living than the remaining forty-seven states. In 1980, 59% of all Asian Americans lived in these three states, compared to 19% of the general population¹³. Consequently, Asian Americans have inflated incomes compared to the rest of the population, but the model minority myth does not take this fact into consideration. The model minority thesis is further discredited by several studies which indicate that huge economic disparities exist between Asian and white males with equivalent education¹⁴. In other words, Asian American men must have

¹² Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: a Revisionist Analysis of the Model Minority Thesis," 38.

¹³ Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 475.

¹⁴ Cabezas and Kawaguchi, "Empirical Evidence for Continuing Asian American Income Inequality: the Human Capital Model and Labor Market Segmentation," 162; Robert Jiobu (1988) cited in Suzuki, "Asian

higher academic credentials to get the same job as their white colleagues, so they receive lower incomes in terms of their human capital.

The "success" of Asian Americans in the work force and the schools as portrayed in the popular press is distorted and misleading, yet it remains imprinted in the minds of the general public, overshadowing the hardships and needs of a substantial segment of the Asian American population. While the model minority proponents laud the perceived economic success of Asian Americans, many of the members of the Asian American community live in poverty. According to Suzuki, with the exception of Japanese and Filipino Americans, a larger proportion of Asian families with school-age children lives below the U.S. government's poverty line than their white counterparts. Poverty rates are exceptionally high for Southeast Asians living in several regions of the country and for the Chinese in the Chinatowns in New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco¹⁵. The crowded conditions and lack of affordable housing in some of these Asian communities, particularly New York's Chinatown, has led to an increase in the number of homeless Asian Americans¹⁶. Furthermore, the poverty and ill health rates are higher for Asian American elderly than for the elderly of any other ethnic group, including African Americans and Latinos¹⁷.

Americans as the 'Model Minority': Outdoing the Whites? Or Media Hype?," 15; Suzuki, "Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: a Revisionist Analysis of the Model Minority Thesis," 41.

¹⁵ Suzuki, "Asian Americans as the 'Model Minority': Outdoing the Whites? Or Media Hype?," 16.

¹⁶ Koo, Doris, "Homelessness in the Asian American Community," in A Look Beyond the Model Minority Image: Critical Issues in Asian America, ed. Grace Yun. (New York: Minority Rights Group, Inc., 1989), 33.

¹⁷ Stanley Sue quoted in David Crystal, "Asian Americans and the Myth of the Model Minority," in Social Casework 70 (1989), 407.

Growing Anti-Asian Attitudes

The final factor which weakens the model minority argument is the recent increase in anti-Asian sentiments. Although the lack of longitudinal data makes it difficult to substantiate claims of increasing anti-Asian American activities, recent public statements and hearings indicate a growing problem. Major newspapers have published increasing numbers of articles on anti-Asian violence, and federal, state, and local civil rights organizations have held official hearings on anti-Asian crimes. In 1984, the Los Angeles County Commission on Human Relations professed alarm concerning the increase in anti-Asian vandalism and violence in their community, and the Washington state commission reported that Asians had experienced harassment of "very serious proportions". The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights concluded in their multi-state study in 1986 that "anti-Asian activity exists in numerous and demographically different communities across the nation"¹⁸. Much of the rise in anti-Asian attitudes can be attributed to economic competition in employment, particularly with the influx of Asian immigrants since the 1960s. Some Americans have also transferred resentment towards trade imbalances with Japan and other Asian countries to Americans of Asian ancestry. In one tragic incident in 1982, Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, was beaten to death in a Detroit bar by two white men who mistook Chin for a Japanese man. The two men were convicted of second-degree murder and manslaughter, but only

¹⁸ Yen Le Espiritu, *Asian American Panethnicity: Bridging Institutions and Identities* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 136-137.

received a three-year probation term and a fine of \$3000. Although Vincent Chin's death has since become a rallying cry for the Asian American movement, violence against Asian Americans continues¹⁹.

Inaccuracy in the Model Minority Myth

The model minority myth persists as a widely accepted description of Asian America, yet most of its premises are exaggerations if not outright fallacies. The model minority myth touts Asian American children as super-students without regard to the number of Asian American students with average or lower academic achievement. More importantly, it does not take into consideration the historic discrimination in the workplace which has made over-compensation in education the only route to white collar employment for many Asian Americans. Even in white collar jobs, discrimination prevents Asian Americans from reaching prestigious positions, but this aspect of Asian America is also neglected by the model minority thesis. Asian Americans' incomes are exaggerated in the popular press because their statistics ignore the number of people which contribute to family incomes, the location of Asian American populations, and the disparities between education and income. Lastly, the image of Asian Americans in the media does not include the poverty-stricken Asians who do not fit the model minority image, nor does it speak of the increasing hate crimes against Asian Americans. The model minority myth has skillfully masked the serious obstacles which Asian Americans continue to face under a facade of success and assimilation; furthermore, the model

¹⁹ Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 481-484.

minority myth has created new disturbing problems for the Asian American community.

THE DAMAGING EFFECTS OF THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

The damage resulting from the model minority myth is not limited to the concealment of the adversities faced by Asian Americans. Frequently, the model minority thesis develops new problems for Asian Americans as well as further exacerbates the problems already in existence.

Social Service Funding

One of the areas which has become more problematic as a result of the model minority myth is social service funding. Asian American communities are in need of culturally sensitive services separate from the mainstream due to language difficulties, cultural biases against seeking help, and specific mental health problems stemming from their status as Asians¹. Contrary to popular belief, impoverished Asians exist, particularly in the populations of new immigrants, and often these newcomers do not know what help is available or how to get help because of low English skills and inexperience in U.S. society². These language and cultural barriers not only prevent them from seeking assistance, but also may lead to feelings of alienation, frustration, and humiliation, which can result in depression and other mental illness. In addition, traditional Asian culture values a dignified appearance and abhors the "loss of face"; this prevents some Asian Americans in need from actively seeking help³.

¹ Crystal, "Asian Americans and the Myth of the Model Minority", 411.

² Koo, "Homelessness in the Asian Community," 35.

³ Crystal, "Asian Americans and the Myth of the Model Minority," 407.

Therefore, the Asian American community is in want of culturally sensitive social services, such as English as a Second Language and mental health outreach programs, but the model minority myth hinders efforts to provide them. The image of successful Asians has made government and community agencies slow to recognize poverty and mental health needs; consequently, they are reluctant to fund attempts to assist disadvantaged Asian Americans. The model minority myth has led the general population to believe that Asian Americans are free of such misfortunes⁴.

The Model Minority Myth and Higher Education

Another obstacle promoted by the model minority thesis is the discrimination against Asian Americans in higher education. Research has revealed that the most selective four-year universities hold Asian Americans to higher admission standards than other applicants in attempts to control or limit Asian enrollment⁵. In 1985, five major professional educational organizations conducted a survey of undergraduate admissions policies, practices and procedures which showed that overall Asian American admission rates to four-year public and private institutions for the Fall of 1985 were lowest for all applicant groups, particularly at private schools⁶. At Brown University, admissions rates for Asian

⁴ Ibid., 411; Suzuki, "Asian Americans as the 'Model Minority': Outdoing Whites? Or Media Hype?," 16; Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 478.

⁵ Jay Hsia, "Rising Institutional Barriers and Asian American Strategies for Access to Higher Education" in A Look Beyond the Model Minority Image: Critical Issues in Asian America, ed. Grace Yun (New York: Minority Rights Group, 1989), 109-110.

⁶ Ibid., 111.

Americans from 1984-1987 were the lowest for any group including whites, Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans. The Asian Americans admitted to Brown had higher SAT scores (both verbal and quantitative), class rankings, and achievement tests than the white admitted students, indicating that Brown had higher academic standards for Asian Americans⁷. Other highly competitive universities bear similar statistics. Asian Americans at the University of California at Berkeley had the lowest admission rate in 1984⁸. Admission data from Harvard University shows that in 1982, Asian American applicants had an average combined SAT score of 1251, seven points below the white American average, but Asian American admittees' average SAT was 1467, 112 points above the average white admittees' score, suggesting a bias against Asian Americans⁹.

Elite schools are able to discriminate against Asian Americans because of the flexible nature of their admissions processes. Unlike most public schools, highly selective private schools (and a few prestigious public schools such as UC Berkeley) do not have rigid, formula-driven academic requirements. Instead, these universities use admissions practices which access non-academic criteria as well; these include high school academic honors, participation in extracurricular activities, personal statements, and teacher references. In general, Asian American applicants offer competitive academic credentials; furthermore, native-born, long-term resident, and socioeconomically advantaged Asian American students

⁷ Ibid., 116.

⁸ Ibid., 116.

⁹ Jeffrey K. D. Au, "Asian American College Admissions - Legal, Empirical, and Philosophical Questions for the 1980s and Beyond" in Reflections on Shattered Windows: Promises and Prospects for Asian American Studies, ed. Gary Y. Okihiro et al (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1988), 53.

understand the necessity of non-academic criteria. However, many Asian newcomers, even with strong academic records and well developed verbal and quantitative reasoning skills, are disadvantaged by this process. In most Asian countries, strong academic records and high test scores are the sole criteria for elite university admission, so less acculturated students are unaware of the importance of non-academic qualities. When confronted with large numbers of academically qualified Asian Americans, selective private and public schools often weigh the non-academic criteria of Asian American applicants more heavily than their academic credentials, which has lowered the Asian American admission rates below average¹⁰.

University administrators often cite lower non-academic achievement as one of the reasons for the lower admission rates. Administrators also claim that Asian American rates had to be lowered in order to admit other minority groups; Henry Rosovsky, former Dean of Harvard's Faculty of Arts and Sciences, stated that since Asian Americans were "no doubt the most over represented group in the university", the school had worried that "other ethnic groups, particularly Blacks, feel they have been leap-frogged by yet another group of later arrivals when it comes to scholarships, class rank, and jobs"¹¹. Another reason for the low admission rates offered by administrators such as Anthony Cummings, Dean of Admissions at Princeton, was the belief that Asian Americans are "underrepresented among groups given preference for general undergraduate admissions,

¹⁰ Hsia, "Rising Institutional Barriers and Asian American Strategies for Access to Higher Education," 112.

¹¹ Quoted in Jayjia Hsia, *Asian Americans in Higher Education and at Work* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988), 94.

such as athletes, Blacks, and the children of alumni"¹². Finally, elite schools cited the narrowness of chosen subject fields and career interests of Asian Americans as a justification for their low admission rates¹³.

Critics believe that these explanations by universities are unfounded. Although admissions officers claim that Asian Americans are deficient in non-academic activities, a study by Samuel S. Peng et al of 58,000 Asian American and white high school students showed no significant difference in their participation in extracurricular activities. According to the study's results, 34% of whites and 30% of Asian Americans participated in varsity athletics, and a higher percentage of Asian Americans belonged to honorary clubs and student government¹⁴. A study in 1987 by John H. Bunzel and Jeffery K. D. Au found that among applicants to Stanford with the same academic and non-academic standing, Asian Americans still had lower admission rates than white Americans¹⁵. Universities' allegations that the admission of Asian Americans occurs at the expense of other minority groups with small numbers of applicants was challenged by two studies in 1989. The findings revealed that Asian American competition was with white applicants who were not athletes nor the offspring of alumni or employees, as well as other Asian American applicants¹⁶.

¹² Quoted in Hsia, Asian Americans in Higher Education and at Work , 94.

¹³ Hsia, Asian Americans in Higher Education and at Work , 94.

¹⁴ Au, "Asian American College Admissions - Legal, Empirical, and Philosophical Questions for the 1980s and Beyond," 53.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁶ Hsia, "Rising Institutional Barriers and Asian American Strategies for Access to Higher Education," 101.

The outcry from Asian American students and organizations caused some universities to investigate their admission policies. In 1984 at Brown University, a committee of administrators, faculty, and students unanimously concluded that:

An extremely serious situation exists and immediate remedial measures are called for...we concur with the thrust of the statement that Asian American applicants have been treated unfairly in the admissions process¹⁷.

The committee also admitted that numerical limits existed on Asian Americans. Despite their conclusions and their vow to correct the admissions process, Asian American admit rates at Brown in 1989 continued to be the lowest among all groups at 15.5%, 20% lower than the total admit rate¹⁸. Likewise, Stanford University's Faculty Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aids released a summary of its 1986 report in which they admitted that Asian American applicants had significantly lower admission rates than white Americans, and that they had not found a factor in their analysis that could sufficiently account for this difference¹⁹.

The model minority myth justifies discrimination against Asian Americans in education. Thanks to their successful media image, Asian Americans appear to have all the advantages which help them create disproportionate competition at the expense of other minorities and even

¹⁷ Quoted in Au, "Asian American College Admissions - Legal, Empirical, and Philosophical Questions for the 1980s and Beyond," 51.

¹⁸ Hsia, "Rising Institutional Barriers and Asian American Strategies for Access to Higher Education," 101.

¹⁹ Au, "Asian American College Admissions - Legal, Empirical, and Philosophical Questions for the 1980s and Beyond," 51.

whites; therefore, quotas on Asian American students seem warranted. Additionally, since needy Asian Americans are obscured from the public's consciousness, college administrators have sometimes excluded Asian Americans from such programs as the Equal Educational Opportunity Programs, which were intended for all students from low-income families, regardless of race²⁰. Due to the pervasive notion of the successful Asian, many college administrators do not recognize the existence of poverty-stricken Asian Americans.

Anti-Asian Sentiments on Campus

The discourse on Asian American success is also connected to increasing anti-Asian sentiments on university campuses and elsewhere. Echoes of the "swarming yellow hordes" can be heard in some articles which express Asian American achievement in mildly alarmist tones. An article in the New York Times Magazine is one of several which imply that Asian Americans occupy more than their fair share of the population at elite schools, describing Asian Americans "surging into the nation's best colleges like a tidal wave"²¹. The "threat" posed by Asian American students has resulted in resentment from non-Asian students. Some students have reportedly dropped courses because there were "too many Oriental faces" in their classes²². Resentment also surfaces in jokes which claim that the acronym MIT stands for "Made in Taiwan" and UCLA

²⁰ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 478.

²¹ Osajima, "Asian Americans as the Model Minority: an Analysis of the Popular Press Image in the 1960s and 1980s," 171.

²² *Ibid.*, 171.

comes from "University of Caucasians Living among Asians". Some college buildings bear anti-Asian graffiti such as "Chink, chink, cheating chink!" and "Stop the Yellow Hordes!"²³. In addition to building resentment against Asians, the model minority myth encouraged the admission ceilings placed on Asian American applicants.

Dividing and Conquering

The model minority myth has also been detrimental to the relations between Asian Americans and other minority groups. By parading Asian Americans as an example of a "successful" minority, the model minority thesis not only divides Asians from other minorities, but also uses Asian Americans as a critique of other ethnic groups in the U.S.. This has only fostered resentment and animosity between groups which could benefit from cooperative efforts²⁴.

Expectations Created by the Model Minority Myth

Finally, the model minority myth has created unrealistic expectations within the Asian American community. Numerous Asian Americans have accepted the model minority myth, often out of pride for the accomplishments of their community. For others, it may be more convenient and comforting to accept deceptive stereotypes than to acknowledge anti-Asian prejudice or the subordinate position of Asians in

²³ Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 479.

²⁴ Ibid., 478.

the U.S.²⁵. Acceptance of the model minority myth's premises can lead to expectations that Asian Americans have the same opportunities and advantages as white Americans. A study by Stanley Sue found that some Asian Americans with high aspirations experience disillusionment, frustration, and alienation when they compare their progress to that of white Americans with similar qualifications²⁶. The model minority myth did not prepare them for the adversities and barriers that hinder Asian Americans. Impoverished Asian Americans are sometimes trapped by the image of the model minority; the contrast to the media image of Asians amplifies their sense of failure, and they are led to believe that they should pull themselves up by their own bootstraps without assistance in order to meet the expectations created by the model minority myth²⁷.

Additional Problems for Asian America

The model minority myth has not simply hidden the problems faced by Asian Americans; it has added to them. Because of the model minority image, the Asian American community has difficulty obtaining social service funding and Asian American students are denied equal access to elite universities and educational opportunities. The model minority myth has increased resentment at college campuses and in the public at large, and it has soured relations between Asians and other ethnic groups. The

²⁵ Setsuko Matsunaga Nishi, "Perceptions and Deceptions: Contemporary Views of Asian America," in A Look Beyond the Model Minority Image: Critical Issues in Asian America, ed. Grace Yun (New York: Minority Rights Group, 1989), 3.

²⁶ Crystal, "Asian Americans and the Myth of the Model Minority," 411.

²⁷ Koo, "Homelessness in the Asian Community," 35.

acceptance of the model minority thesis by some members of the Asian American community has created expectations which cannot be fulfilled. But because the model minority thesis is disguised as praise, its damaging effects are almost unknown.

THE EFFECT OF THE MODEL MINORITY ON VIETNAMESE
AMERICANS

INTRODUCTION

While the model minority myth is detrimental to all Asian American ethnic groups, it is particularly harmful to Southeast Asians. The perpetrators of the model minority thesis have extended the successful Asian American stereotype to the most recent Asian arrivals in the U.S. by highlighting the achievements of Vietnamese students and professionals. However, the model minority myth is an even greater fallacy for Vietnamese Americans than for other Asian Americans; as refugees who fled to America in only the past two decades, Vietnamese Americans continue to face more severe hardships than most other Asian Americans. Furthermore, their lower degree of acculturation inflates the disadvantages created by the model minority myth.

The following section contains interviews conducted in the Vietnamese communities of Eugene, Springfield, and Portland, Oregon. The interviewees were selected on the basis of their willingness to share their oral histories. The interviewees, some of whose names have been changed to preserve their privacy, consist of five undergraduate university students, one graduate student, one junior high school teacher, and one nun at a Vietnamese church; the interview with the nun was conducted with the aid of a translator. Due to the limited number of interviewees, the informant group cannot be considered as representative of the entire

Vietnamese American population; nevertheless, these interviews provide valuable insight into the experiences of Vietnamese Americans¹.

¹ See Appendix A.

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE VIETNAMESE AMERICANS

A Condensed History of Conflict and Domination in Vietnam

The Vietnamese in America come from a long history filled with conflict and invasions. The earliest known kingdom in present-day Vietnam, Van Lang, was established sometime between 1000 and 500 B.C.. According to folklore, a northern aggressor conquered Van Lang and formed the short-lived kingdom of Au Lac. Fifty years later, in 207 B.C., a Chinese general founded the independent state of Nam Viet, marking the beginning of the recorded history of the Vietnamese¹.

For almost one hundred years, Nam Viet held off the massive Chinese Empire, but with the unification of the Chinese under the Han Dynasty, the Chinese had the resources to colonize their tiny neighbor. The Chinese occupied North Vietnam from 111 to 939 AD, during which time the Vietnamese masses remained in poverty while the Chinese-occupied state grew rich from technological and economic advances. After nearly 1000 years of foreign rule, the Vietnamese ousted the Chinese. The Vietnamese retained the Chinese system of law and government, as well as the Confucian customs of ancestor reverence and hierarchical social structures, but otherwise formed their own distinct nation; despite the long history of dominance from China, the Vietnamese tenaciously retained their own unique language and culture. Even under the native Vietnamese

¹ Darrel Montero, Vietnamese Americans: Patterns of Resettlement and Socioeconomic Adaptation in the United States (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1979), 12.

government, periodic military conflicts with the Chinese continued until 1788, in addition to occasional conflicts with the Khmer and Champa from South Vietnam and Cambodia, and fierce rivalries between ruling clans within Vietnam².

European Colonialism

In the sixteenth century, merchants from Portugal arrived and opened trade with Vietnam, followed by the Dutch, English, and French in the seventeenth century. However, the strength of the Vietnamese government under the powerful Trinh and Nguyen feudal clans prevented the plunder of Vietnam by the West; discouraged European merchants pulled out of the area, leaving only missionaries from France and Portugal. The influence of missionaries gave France a strong foothold in Vietnam. When the Vietnamese Emperor Tu Duc died in 1883, France seized the opportunity to declare Vietnam a French colony³.

After successfully repelling fifteen invasions from China, the usurpation of their power by a European country humiliated the Vietnamese. Resentment against the French increased during the colonial period, as France exploited Vietnamese labor, implemented an unjust system of colonial taxation, and prevented almost all Vietnamese from attaining positions of wealth, power, or leadership⁴.

² Tricia Knoll, Becoming Americans: Asian Sojourners, Immigrants and Refugees in the Western United States (Portland, OR: Coast to Coast Books, 1982), 176; Montero, Vietnamese Americans, 12-13.

³ Montero, Vietnamese Americans, 14-15.

⁴ Knoll, Becoming Americans, 179; Montero, Vietnamese Americans, 16-17.

Build-up to the Vietnam War

Two rival nationalist movements emerged, each determined to overthrow French rule. One was based on Western individualism, and the other was dedicated to the Communist doctrine. The Communists, led by Ho Chi Minh, emerged as the more powerful movement because of their superior organization, their use of deception when necessary, and the murders of the opposition leaders. During World War II, when Japan occupied parts of Vietnam, Ho Chi Minh formed the Viet Minh and started an insurrection against the French. While the French and Japanese were preoccupied with other battles, Ho Chi Minh announced Vietnam's independence at Hanoi, North Vietnam. France rejected his announcement, and with the support of the Allied Powers, reasserted its claim to Vietnam via the First Indochina War⁵.

In 1954, nationalists from South Vietnam and the communists from North Vietnam joined forces to defeat the French at Dien Bien Phu. A humbled France agreed to meet at the negotiation table in Geneva, where French and Viet Minh representatives signed the Geneva Accords. The accords included a cease-fire line at the seventeenth parallel that was also designated as a temporary partition between North and South Vietnam; it additionally included a provision for an all Vietnamese election in mid-1956. However, South Vietnam did not join the French or the Viet Minh in signing the accords⁶.

⁵ Montero, Vietnamese Americans, 17-18; Knoll, Becoming Americans, 179.

⁶ Knoll, Becoming Americans, 179.

In South Vietnam, Emperor Bao Dai (the nominal head of Vietnam under the Japanese occupation during World War II) asked Ngo Dinh Diem to form a new government in Saigon before the Geneva Accords were even signed. With aid from the United States, Diem stabilized the government and made himself president of the Republic of Vietnam in 1955. However, because the South Vietnamese did not sign the Geneva Accords, they refused to consult with the North Vietnamese government concerning the all-Vietnamese election; consequently, the elections designed to unite the country were not realized. During the following decade, the South Vietnamese government changed hands nine times, until Marshall Nguyen Cao Ky gained power in 1965. This new repressive government imprisoned political opponents and restricted civil liberties, particularly the freedom of speech. Opposition to the South Vietnamese government grew, led by the National Liberation Front, which included nationalists and communists. Sensing the growing discontent, the North Vietnamese began supplying the opposition with weapons and military expertise⁷.

U.S. Involvement in Vietnam

Meanwhile, the temporary division of Vietnam alarmed the U.S. government, which saw the struggle in terms of non-communism versus communism at a time when communism was perceived as the greatest threat to world peace. From 1954 to 1960, the U.S. supported the non-communist South Vietnam with military equipment, financial assistance, and 700 army training advisors. By 1961, the Kennedy Administration

⁷ Ibid., 180.

decided to use counterinsurgency to protect the South Vietnamese government against the perceived communist insurgency. The U.S. Special Forces, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) personnel, and U.S. political advisors arrived to train Vietnamese mountain peoples for military combat and intelligence gathering. U.S. involvement escalated in 1964, when Congress passed Johnson's Gulf of Tonkin Resolution, which essentially gave the President the power to wage war⁸.

In 1965, Johnson ordered bombing raids on North Vietnam in an attempt to stop the North Vietnamese from moving arms and men to South Vietnam. When the bombing failed, the U.S. sent ground troops into South Vietnam while they continued to provide economic support to the South Vietnamese government. However, the successful Tet Offensive by the North Vietnamese in February of 1968 prompted Johnson to scale down U.S. involvement and begin negotiations with the North Vietnamese. Under Nixon, U.S. troops gradually withdrew from Vietnam, but fighting spread into Laos and Cambodia. In 1973, the United States and three Vietnamese groups signed a cease-fire which called for the rapid withdrawal of U.S. troops and for equal recognition of the National Liberation Front and the Saigon government. The Vietnamese continued to fight each other until the National Liberation Front took over Saigon in 1975⁹.

Flight from Vietnam: the First Wave

⁸ Ibid., 182-183.

⁹ Ibid., 183.

The fall of Saigon to the North Vietnamese produced a massive exodus from Vietnam. Those who were forced to flee included the thousands of citizens who had helped the American military or diplomatic services, or who had held positions in the South Vietnamese government or military; these people justly feared that they would be executed as traitors. Refugees also included the social and economic middle class, whose status was in opposition to communist philosophy and placed them at risk of "re-education" or even execution. Some feared persecution for religious beliefs, and others feared that they would be forced into agricultural labor camps because of their education or urban lifestyles.

The Vietnamese who fled as Saigon was under siege had no time to prepare physically or psychologically for their departure; in a 1975 survey conducted at refugee camps in the United States, more than half of the refugees said that they were given less than ten hours to evacuate¹⁰. While underfire from North Vietnamese troops, the U.S. government airlifted employees and their families from the U.S. embassy grounds. Other civilians jammed into public airports and harbors, where the immense panic created confusion; in the crowded conditions, many family members were separated from one another. Some refugees only intended to leave for a couple of months and did not anticipate leaving permanently. Some even reported that they had followed fleeing crowds in the general panic, and that they had not realized that they were getting on boats destined overseas¹¹.

¹⁰ Ronald Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans (New York: Penguin Books, 1989), 451.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 451.

A majority of the refugees eventually settled in the United States. This was due in part to the ties created with U.S. citizens or the U.S. government during the war, but also because it was the only plausible choice in many cases. Although many refugees preferred to resettle in other Asian countries, these neighboring countries did not always welcome Vietnamese, especially the later refugees¹². The Japanese government, for instance, prohibited Vietnamese from settling permanently in Japan until 1978, when both domestic and international pressure forced them to change their policy; however, because the new policy required the refugees to find Japanese patrons and stable jobs prior to their entry into the country, only one family was accepted in 1978 and only a handful of refugees in the following years¹³.

The U.S. began accepting Southeast Asian refugees in May of 1975, and by the end of the year, more than 130,000 Vietnamese refugees had immigrated to the United States. The first wave refugees were generally educated; 37% of the heads of households had completed high school and 16% had attended college. Most were from urban areas and were more westernized than the general population. Almost two-thirds could speak some English, and about one-half were Christian (compared to 10% in the population at large). Furthermore, more of the first wave were able to emigrate in complete family units in comparison to later refugees¹⁴.

¹² Paul James Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America (Bloomington, ID: Indiana University Press, 1992), 10.

¹³ Masaya Shiraishi, Japanese Relations with Vietnam: 1951-1987 (Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program, 1990), 89-90; Makita Suito, "Indoshina nanmin no jisso," Sekai 402 (May 1979), 158-159.

¹⁴ Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 451.

The Second Wave of Refugees

Treacherous Journeys

A second wave of refugees began in 1976 in response to new policies pursued by the new Vietnamese government, culminating in the emigration of 12,000 refugees a month, fleeing overland to Thailand, or more commonly, on boats destined for Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines, Hong Kong, or Singapore. The boats were generally unsafe, leaky, and overcrowded. Pirates attacked at least two-thirds of the boats; they not only robbed the passengers, but also often killed the men and raped the women. Starvation and treacherous waters created further hardships¹⁵. Although the exact number of deaths at sea is unknown, it has been estimated at 60%¹⁶.

The experience of Tri Bui, who escaped Vietnam in 1980 as a twelve-year old, is not uncommon among second-wave refugees:

My dad arranged for several boats - we basically paid these people in advance with money in gold and we were ripped off three times. They told us, "Give us the money and we'll tell you a place to meet. At that time, you will find a boat." We went, but nobody showed up. We couldn't really take it to the officials because what we were doing was a violation. The fourth time, we went and saw a river boat. They also promised that we would get lots of food and water. We got into that boat and it went out to sea. There wasn't any water at all, and there were only two bags of cu san (which is a tropical fruit that people would normally take along for thirst). What some

¹⁵ Ibid., 452-454; Knoll, Becoming American, 192-194.

¹⁶ Knoll, Becoming American, 194.

people did was pour out some of the tanks of gasoline to take the river water. With the gasoline smell in the water, people threw up.

The next day we encountered the Vietnamese naval police force. They shot at us and chased us down, but luckily we went into the fog and lost them. Unfortunately, the oil tank got a hole in it, so one of the men in the engine room put his thigh against it. By morning, his thigh was beyond recognition, it was burned so bad. That was the start of the trip.

We went into international waters and we encountered pirates, who were Thai fishermen. They came on board and searched for valuables like jewelry. I specifically remember the time when they pulled out this guy's gold teeth. They took a wrench and pulled them out! Something I didn't see but heard about was that they took the young women onto the fishermen's boat or onto another section of our boat to be raped by the pirates. We went through that several times.

Survivors floated to Thailand, Hong Kong, or Malaysia, where they were placed in squalid refugee camps for months or even years before they were sent to Australia, Canada, France, or the United States¹⁷. Tai Truong still vividly remembers his thirteen months in a refugee camp in Malaysia:

The conditions were really bad. It was pretty much a concentration camp. We had to live in this fenced off area - it seemed like they were afraid we'd spread diseases or something. We couldn't have contact with the outside world. Health issues were really bad. My sister almost died. She got ill and couldn't walk. It took them a while to realize she needed medical attention...There was this guy whose toe was infected with something, but there were no doctors around to help him. He looked really in pain - you could see the worms, like larva, crawling around in his toe.

¹⁷ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 452.

Diversity in the Second Wave

Although they are generally regarded as a homogeneous group by the American public, the 513,000 Vietnamese who entered the U.S. between 1976 and 1985 come from diverse backgrounds. Some refugees in the second wave were fishermen, farmers, and storekeepers from rural areas, as well as mountain and tribal people from relatively isolated areas of Vietnam; these people fled the government's attempts to relocate their communities or to persecute them for allegedly assisting the CIA during the war¹⁸. Others in the second wave were urban and professional elites who had been ordered to do hard labor on agricultural communes as part of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam's program to restructure society by nationalizing private businesses and resettling urbanites in rural areas.

In their determination to rid the country of "bourgeois" elements, the new Vietnamese government targeted ethnic Chinese Vietnamese, who constituted only 7% of the entire population of Vietnam, but controlled 80% of the retail trade. The Vietnamese government closed Chinese businesses, language schools, and newspapers, confiscated the assets of Chinese-Vietnamese citizens, removed them from civil services posts and denied them entry in certain occupations, and reduced their food rations¹⁹. Tai Truong's family was among the Chinese-Vietnamese affected:

Before the war, my dad was the only one who worked. He pretty much supported the whole extended family. We were pretty wealthy. After the war, we got a lot of things taken away from

¹⁸ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 7; Knoll, Becoming American, 198.

¹⁹ Sucheng Chan, Asian Americans: An Interpretive History (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 157

us, and we were forced out of our home. My dad owned this trucking company - all his trucks got taken away. After the war, my whole family was forced into farming.

At first, neighboring Southeast Asian countries considered the Chinese-Vietnamese as political refugees and granted them asylum . However, in the late 1970s, the number of Chinese became 50-80% of the refugees, many of whom had lost their means of subsistence when the government confiscated their private enterprises. Chinese-Vietnamese became considered "economic refugees" and were unwelcome in the former host countries; subsequently, all boat people were placed under closer scrutiny, putting them at a greater disadvantage than previous refugees²⁰.

²⁰ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 63-64.

ADJUSTMENT TO THE UNITED STATES

Arrival

In May of 1975, the U.S. began accepting Southeast Asian refugees at processing camps established in California, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, and Florida. At the camps, newcomers registered with one of nine voluntary agencies, known as "volags", such as the United States Catholic Conference, the Lutheran Immigration Service, and the International Rescue Committee. For each refugee, volags found formal sponsors who promised to provide food, shelter, and clothing until the refugee could fend for him or herself. Sponsors also agreed to help refugees find jobs and enroll their children in school, as well as help ease their traumatic entry into America. Families constituted 60% of the sponsors, churches made up 25%, and individuals were the remaining 15%¹.

Once a sponsor had been found, refugees could leave the processing camp (refugees who had at least \$4000 per household member were not required to have a sponsor, but these refugees were rare). At first, American refugee policy attempted to disperse the Vietnamese population among sponsors throughout the United States so that any one local or state government would not be overwhelmed by a sudden influx of refugees. However, this policy changed when it became apparant that the loss of community aggravated isolation and depression, and compelled the

¹ Knoll, Becoming American, 185-186.

migration of refugees to areas with large Asian populations such as California².

Housing

The first obstacle encountered by most Vietnamese families was finding suitable housing. Since most Vietnamese refugees arrived without material possessions or money, they could not afford to buy houses; furthermore, without a work history or credit history in the U.S., it was almost impossible to qualify for home loans, even if all family members were employed. Renting housing has also been problematic. According to Vietnamese custom, the family is the center of community and family members should live in one location, but in general, rental units which are large enough to house an entire Vietnamese extended family are beyond the financial constraints of newly arrived refugees. Fire codes, zoning restrictions, and the policies of landlords prevent large families from sharing smaller rental units, so many Vietnamese family members have been forced to live apart from each other. A number of Vietnamese refugees live in low income housing projects, where they often fear the crime and violence associated with their neighborhoods. Vietnamese-run organizations have tried to address housing problems by purchasing housing or offering low interest rate loans to other Vietnamese, but suitable and affordable housing remains elusive³.

² Chan, Asian Americans: An Interpretive History, 156; Knoll, Becoming American, 185-186.

³ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 97-98; Knoll, Becoming American, 187.

Economic Self-Sufficiency

Achieving economic self-sufficiency is another area which continues to be a major problem for Vietnamese in the United States. From 1975 to 1978, the Indochina Migration and Refugee Assistance Act provided federal funds to state governments for cash assistance and medical and social services for refugees. The 1980 Refugee Act continues federal support for the later refugees by providing states with reimbursement for assistance to Vietnamese refugees; services which receive support include cash assistance, medical services, employment counseling, translation, and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. However, this economic assistance is generally short-term, limited to eighteen months after entry into the United States⁴.

The U.S. government also provides job training which teaches skills for short-term, low skilled, entry-level jobs to support refugees until they can enhance their education, learn English, or find more appropriate employment. However, the preferences of many Vietnamese to work in groups or in ethnic businesses, or to seek white collar jobs, are not compatible with the government's programs. Furthermore, critics charge that such training programs have failed because the income from these jobs is grossly insufficient, and the jobs tend to be unstable and susceptible to elimination⁵. Tri Bui believes that his family was disadvantaged by this system:

⁴ Chan, Asian Americans: An Interpretive History, 156; Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 85.

⁵ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 86.

When my dad first arrived, he didn't get any kind of work because he went through an ESL (English as a Second Language) program. After learning English for a while, the welfare system, which we lived on, forced him to go find a job...they only allow you to learn English so that you can find work, so that you would stay at that level and not rise past the poverty level. My dad saw that and decided he wasn't going to work, he was going to school. During that time, my brothers and I were underage. We were able to receive support, so our dad basically lived off of that. It was hard, but we were able to manage it...If those who come over here at that age are without children or older people that receive welfare, then they are forced to basically quit school to go out and work. And most of the time, they have to work in the lumber mill, or washing dishes, or serving in restaurants.

The difficult task of finding employment is even more of a burden for refugees from rural areas of Vietnam who lack the educational background of refugees from the urban elite⁶. However, even the urban elite has had to settle for jobs much lower in status than the jobs they held in Vietnam in order to support themselves. In Vietnam, Thanh Duong's family belonged to the middle class and his father worked for the special service in the South Vietnamese army, but in the United States, the language barrier limited his father's opportunities:

Now, my dad's a baker. He's really bitter about it because back in the old country, he was in a higher position. He considers baking like peasants' work since he has an education and everything. He only works there because he doesn't speak English.

Such frustration and resentment is typical among Vietnamese men who have been forced to work in low-status occupations.

⁶ Knoll, Becoming American, 198.

Research verifies that Vietnamese Americans have not reached economic parity with the population at large. A study by R. W. Gardner et al found that the Vietnamese had the highest percentage of persons who had been unemployed at some time during 1979 to 1980 among whites, Blacks, Latinos, foreign-born Japanese, and Vietnamese; in fact, at 32.6%, it doubled the rate for the whites. The study also discovered that over 30% of Vietnamese families lived below the poverty level, compared to 26.5% for Blacks, 7% for whites, and 5.6% for foreign-born Japanese. The median family income for the Vietnamese approximately equaled that of the Blacks at \$12,840, compared to \$20,835 for whites. The median income for a Vietnamese year-round, full-time worker was also similar to that of the Blacks at \$11,641, well below the median white worker's income of \$15,572; however, the median income of a Vietnamese full-time female worker was over \$2000 less than even her Black counterpart at \$7261⁷.

According to the 1980 U.S. Census data, Vietnamese made up 57.3% of labor force participation, compared to 62.2% from white Americans and 66.6% from other Asian Americans. Furthermore, the Census Bureau considered 8.8% of Vietnamese as professionals, while they placed 12.8% of whites and 18.3% of other Asian Americans in this category⁸. More recent studies indicate that Vietnamese have still not reached the economic level of the rest of the nation. According to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement's Report to Congress in 1989, Southeast Asian refugees (mainly Vietnamese) who arrived between 1983-1988 had a labor force

⁷ Hsia, Asian Americans in Higher Education and at Work, 169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 166, 169.

participation rate of 32% and an unemployment rate of 11%, in contrast to the general population's respective rates of 65% labor force participation and 5% unemployment. Additionally, 65% of these refugees receive some cash assistance, with even higher rates in states with larger Southeast Asian populations⁹.

Adjustment to New Roles

Economic necessity has moved many Vietnamese women from their traditional position in the home to a new position in the workplace. This has resulted in a difficult transition for both men and women. Although Vietnamese women in the U.S. retain their roles as wives and mothers, their new status as working women establishes new identities separate from their husbands. Since men generally dominated social settings in Vietnam, working wives may threaten their husbands' sense of security; no longer the sole provider, a Vietnamese husband may feel that he is losing control over the family. Such role reversals may place stress on marriages, sometimes resulting in divorce, domestic violence, or substance abuse¹⁰.

Many Vietnamese women do not view employment opportunities as necessarily positive because they do not feel prepared for such changes. Separation from spouses during the flight from Vietnam has made many

⁹ Jeremy Hein, "Indochinese Refugees' Responses to Resettlement Via the Social Welfare System," in Asian Americans: Comparative and Global Perspectives, ed. Shirley Hune et al. (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1991), 154-155.

¹⁰ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 124.

women into heads of household, but a number of women report that they feel unqualified for so many responsibilities¹¹.

Children in refugee families also undergo changes in their roles and responsibilities. Although children generally need special guidance during the adjustment period, the parents may be as confused as the kids; as a result, children in refugee families may learn to be less dependent on their parents. Furthermore, since most children learn English at school at a faster pace than their parents, their parents often rely on them in more difficult language situations. This reversal from the traditional dependent role of a Vietnamese child sometimes causes conflict in families¹². Quang Van, who arrived in Nebraska with his family when he was seventeen, observed the effects of his and his siblings' new roles on his parents:

For older people, it's very hard because the children looked at them with respect when they came over here. But they didn't have knowledge about the language, so some of us didn't treat them as well as when they were in Vietnam. We used to listen to them, but now we challenge them and ask questions. Sometimes we correct our parents with their English, and sometimes we have to translate for them.

Tri Bui had even greater adjustments to make when his mother, who had been left behind in Vietnam, finally joined his family in the U.S.:

After ten years of separation, it was difficult, especially for her, to relate to us. She really doesn't know who we are. The past two years has been a testing ground...For me and my brothers, we have a different expectation of her, and she too has a different expectation of us, so it has been really difficult to fulfil each other's expectations.

¹¹ Ibid., 125.

¹² Ibid., 127.

U.S. Schools

While adjusting to their new responsibilities at home, Vietnamese children also adjusted to U.S. schools. Upon their enrollment in school, the initial problem they encountered concerned grade placement. Most Vietnamese children did not arrive in the U.S. with their school records, so school officials placed them according to their corresponding age group¹³. However, some Vietnamese children, particularly those from rural areas, had very little education in their homeland; this fact, compounded by their lack of skills in English, made it impossible for them to perform at the American grade levels into which they were placed¹⁴. Even those with solid educational backgrounds have been greatly hindered by language difficulties. Tai Truong's struggle with English prevented him from participating in class:

Learning vocabulary and pronunciation - I had trouble with that. It made me really self-conscious and not wanting to speak in class, so I was really quiet and introverted in high school.

Without bilingual personnel in schools, education can be unmeaningful to Vietnamese students; consequently, educational practitioners estimated that the drop-out rate of Limited English Proficient (LEP) Indochinese students at the high school level is between 40 to 60%, depending on the availability

¹³ Knoll, Becoming American, 190.

¹⁴ Vuong G. Thuy, "Adjustment of Indochinese Refugees," in A Look Beyond the Model Minority Image: Critical Issues in Asian America, ed. Grace Yun. (New York: Minority Rights Group, Inc., 1989), 51.

of programs to assist them. In comparison, the drop-out rate for the general population is 15%¹⁵.

Other adjustment problems for Vietnamese students can be attributed to the differences between Vietnamese and U.S. educational systems. Before 1975, the South Vietnamese government offered free education, but it was only mandatory for the first five primary grades. In some areas, further education was difficult to obtain. North Vietnam's Marxist school system, which the Socialist Republic of Vietnam implemented after 1975, emphasized political indoctrination. Both systems involved learning through observation and listening, with an emphasis on the memorization of material. Tri Bui, who attended an elementary school in Vietnam until his family fled the country when he was twelve, remembers teaching methods practiced in his classes:

Teachers were more looking for students who could recall things as well as recite. One of the most common daily exercises that teachers went through was reciting verses from books, reciting poems, and things of that sort.

The teacher was the symbol of learning and culture, and children were taught not to question his or her authority¹⁶.

For a Vietnamese child entering the American school system, which emphasizes analysis, individual research, hands-on instruction, and decision-making, the classroom could be unnerving. Culture shock in the classroom caused Tri to misbehave when he started school in the U.S.:

¹⁵ Thuy, "Adjustment of Indochinese Refugees," 51.

¹⁶ Knoll, Becoming American, 190; Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 90.

When I was a kid in elementary school, I was rebellious, partly due to having problems relating to the American students, as well as relating to the curriculum. Over there, we were required to just memorize. Here, it was hard to memorize things because it was in English, and they asked more critical questions.

Unfamiliar practices as class debates and group projects bewildered some Vietnamese students, and sex education and group showering during physical education classes shocked many¹⁷. Vietnamese students in general have difficulty telling a teacher that they do not understand, even when asked directly, because of the traditional obedience and deference they hold for teachers¹⁸. Most American teachers are unable to discern when their Vietnamese students are struggling because Vietnamese culture traditionally hides fear, confusion, and disappointment behind an agreeable smile¹⁹.

Such problems are even worse for the youth who came from Vietnam without their families. Parents sent these "unaccompanied minors" alone to the United States, hoping that their children would receive educations, become U.S. citizens, and then sponsor their parents to America. Often these children have no English skills, and they may not have had much education in Vietnam. Without family support, they become frustrated with school, and many develop anti-social behaviors and delinquency problems, often associated with gangs²⁰.

Adjustment problems in school do not necessarily end after high school graduation, but often persist for Vietnamese college students. Since these students may be the first in their families to attend a Western

¹⁷ Knoll, *Becoming American*, 190.

¹⁸ Thuy, "Adjustment of Indochinese Refugees," 52; Knoll, *Becoming American*, 191.

¹⁹ Knoll, *Becoming American*, 191-192.

²⁰ Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore*, 457; Thuy, "Adjustment of Indochinese Refugees," 52.

university, they often do not know what to expect. One of Tom Lee's most stressful moments in college occurred when he initially arrived at his university with all his belongings but without anyone to guide him; it was his first time in that town, and he did not know where he was going to live or how to find housing. Quang Van's years at the University of Nebraska were spent largely in isolation because there was no one to prepare him for college life:

I was lonely. I didn't know anything about college, about the system at the university. I had to find out all by myself, no one helped me. And I lived all by myself. For three years, I didn't even know where the library was.

Because many Vietnamese parents are not familiar with U.S. higher education, they are often unable to relate to what their son or daughter experiences in college. Tai Truong admits that sometimes he feels pressure to graduate quickly from his parents, who do not comprehend the necessity of his five-year program. In addition, Tai indicated that his parents have discouraged him from seeking an advanced degree because they are not aware of its advantages:

I'm thinking about graduate school, but my parents want me to work. I wish my parents understood the system so that they could be more supportive.

Although Vietnamese parents generally value a higher education for their children, most lack exposure to the U.S. education system; therefore, Vietnamese college students often have no precedent to follow and may face greater adjustment problems than the average college freshman.

Clash of Cultures

While learning to adjust to the U.S. lifestyle, the majority of Vietnamese families try to retain their cultural continuity by practicing Vietnamese customs and using the Vietnamese language at home and in their local ethnic communities. Ideally, these families are able to retain traditional values and belief systems while adapting to select American cultural patterns which are necessary for economic survival²¹. However, there are invariably numerous conflicts between Vietnamese culture and American culture.

Generation Gaps

At school, children learn American behavior which conflicts with Vietnamese culture at home, increasing the generational gap between children and parents. Parents may think that young people do not spend enough time at home, that they do not show proper deference for their elders, or that the clothing they wear is too revealing. Thanh Duong acknowledged this generation gap:

My parents used to say to us if we were being disrespectful, 'You've been hanging around too many Americans!' And it's true. The kids have left the culture, but my parents haven't. If we were back in Vietnam, we'd definitely give them more respect.

They may also disapprove of the materialistic American values their children learn from their peers. Meanwhile, their daughters and sons want

²¹ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 60-62.

to use the money they earn for personal purposes rather than giving it to the family, and they want to make purchases without parental permission. The economic independence of the younger generation has led to greater freedoms and the break-down of some traditional patterns; for instance, although it would be considered unorthodox in Vietnam, Vietnamese American young people commonly live away from home before marriage²².

American dating and marriage customs are particularly alienating for the older generation of Vietnamese. According to traditional Vietnamese practices, dating prior to engagement is forbidden, and the extended family participates in the selection of a marriage partner. For traditional Vietnamese parents, dating, especially interracial dating, is difficult to accept, and public displays of affection are frowned upon. The media attention given to premarital sex is absolutely shocking to the older generation of refugees²³.

Significant dissimilarity in behavior and opinion exists even between younger and older siblings in the same family. Tai Truong, the seventh child and the first member of his family to attend an American university, observed differences between himself and his older siblings:

The way we perceive things is different. My older brothers and sisters don't know as much about American society. With college and extended high school, I'm more aware of things in society. They're so busy with everyday life that they don't think about those things.

²² Ibid., 121.

²³ Knoll, *Becoming American*, 191-192; Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 129-131.

Tanie Hotan also noticed varying attitudes and behavior within her family, especially in regard to the role of women:

I'm less traditional than my older sisters. I speak out more, in front of males especially. I'm more stubborn. I voice my independence more and make that a very positive trait for myself. I don't understand my parents as well as they do, I think. Actually, maybe I can understand where their side is, but I have different views, I don't have the same views as my parents. My elder sister, who is sixteen years older than me, shares some of the same views.

Because siblings within the same family spent different amounts of time growing up surrounded by the Vietnamese culture, there can be "generation gaps" within a single generation.

Cross-cultural Misunderstandings

Different cultural values often lead to misunderstandings between Vietnamese and other Americans. For instance, because the traditional Vietnamese concept of family may include several generations who are held together by tight bonds, the American sense of a mobile, nuclear family can be perplexing to many Vietnamese²⁴. Vietnamese culture also values humility, but this generally conflicts with Americans' value for "rugged individualism"²⁵; Vietnamese may be affronted by what they

²⁴ Knoll, Becoming American, 187.

²⁵ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 47.

perceive as bragging, whereas Americans would perceive the same situation as merely a show of self-confidence.

As much as Vietnamese struggle to comprehend American culture, other Americans also have difficulty interpreting Vietnamese culture. Two different perceptions of time cause confusion and frustration between the groups, especially in the workplace. Vietnamese are not as time oriented as Westerners and tend to have a more relaxed attitude toward time; because Vietnamese value hard work more than the quick completion of a task, some employers or co-workers become frustrated with what they consider inefficient work²⁶. In addition, most Americans are unfamiliar with the Vietnamese concept of harmony. In order to avoid conflict, Vietnamese will sometimes agree to something rather than decline. For example, refugees who had received assistance from Christian or Catholic groups often showed interest in converting to Christianity when questioned by church agencies or members, but interest was designed to show appreciation rather than to actually declare a change in religion. Since they did not understand the cultural context, some church groups were disappointed or upset when these refugees did not join their organizations²⁷.

Cultural Difficulties with Health Services

More serious cross-cultural problems arise involving medical services due to different cultural definitions of health and illness. In

²⁶ Ibid., 80-81.

²⁷ Ibid., 45, 53.

Vietnam, people commonly treated illness with a combination of modern Western medical practices and traditional practices based on Taoist concepts of balance. As a result, some of the traditional Vietnamese are dissatisfied with American medical treatment because it does not take into account the metaphysical aspects of healing²⁸. In addition, mutual cultural ignorance can cause miscommunication and huge misperceptions.

American doctors occasionally misinterpret Vietnamese folk remedies, such as one which involves rubbing the skin with a coin or spoon to alleviate minor cold symptoms. The bruising that results caused doctors in several cities to mistakenly report incidents of child abuse. Another example of cultural misperception involved a family in Oklahoma City who refused to enter a hospital when they saw the white uniforms and white rooms; this reaction is understandable in the context of Vietnamese culture, where white is the color of death²⁹.

Treating mental illness in the Vietnamese community is especially problematic. The medical field of mental health is essentially unknown in Vietnam and is subsequently a new concept to refugees, who may equate the term "mental health problem" with insanity. In Vietnam, mental problems were handled discreetly within the family, and "mentally unhealthy" people were often taken to institutions and isolated from society. In addition to this bias against mental health treatment, the variety of mental health problems in the Vietnamese population makes treatment a difficult task³⁰.

²⁸ Ibid., 99-101.

²⁹ Ibid., 101.

³⁰ Ibid., 103.

Mental Health Problems

Sources of Mental Anguish

Mental health needs do not usually surface immediately after a refugee enters in the United States. Once a refugee becomes more settled in the States, between six to twenty-four months after arrival, psychological stress arises. The most common sources of stress include the sense of loss from the absence of family members, decreased social status, culture shock, and intense feelings of isolation. Other mental health problems result from dealing with memories of violent experiences, anxiety about resettlement, the Americanization of one's children, unrealistic expectations about life in the U.S., and guilt from living while others died³¹. Many Vietnamese experience stress related to concern for family and friends left in Vietnam; additional anxiety occurs when refugees lack extra money to send to family and friends to prevent their relocation in one of the "New Economic Zones"³².

A study by Laurence Aylesworth et al on refugees who had been in the U.S. for one and a half to two years found that informants were not generally optimistic about their abilities to form new lives in the U.S.. Many had no sense of belonging and did not feel welcome in their new country. Among the most insecure were persons lacking fluency in

³¹ Ibid., 103, 105.

³² Laurence Saigo Aylesworth, Peter G. Ossorio and Larry T. Osaki, "Stress and Mental Health Among Vietnamese in the United States," in Asian-Americans: Social and Psychological Perspectives, Vol. II, ed. Russell Endo et al. (Science and Behavior Books, 1980), 68.

English who were unable to travel around a city alone or even ask for help. Female heads of household also reported a high rate of insecurity because they were unaccustomed to living without the support of their husbands or extended families, and they typically did not possess marketable skills to support their children³³.

The elderly Vietnamese are also subject to higher rates of mental health problems. They may feel useless after undergoing a sudden change in status from their former positions as revered leaders, and they may feel insecure and alienated as the Vietnamese traditions disappear in their families. These senior citizens tend to be even more confined within the home because they cannot afford cars and are bewildered by public transportation. A Vietnamese nun at a Catholic refugee center explained how transportation difficulties can lead to depression:

The older generation has problems with things like going from place to place because they'd have to know how to drive, they'd have to speak English. In Vietnam, they would go places, visit their relatives, anything they'd want to without any problem. But here they have to depend on their children to take them around and have to know how to speak English.

As their children or grandchildren (who they depend on for not only assistance with translation and transportation, but also for psychological security) become more independent, the older generation often experience a profound sense of loneliness³⁴. While growing up, Tai Truong and his younger sister helped his parents with translation, but now that they live in a different city, they cannot always be there to help them:

³³ Aylesworth et al, "Stress and Mental Health Among Vietnamese in the United States," 67-68.

³⁴ Ibid., 68; Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 95, 101.

My parents are pretty old and they don't speak English...If my little sister or I aren't at home, they have a difficult time communicating. My older sister lives (nearby) and my parents can always call her. Sometimes I go home every two or three weeks or so, just so that if they have some bills to pay or something (I can help them). My little sister also goes to the university now, so it's nice to go visit them once in a while. They do get lonely - it seems like they're very isolated.

However, mental health needs are not limited to adults. A study of 150 Vietnamese youth revealed frequent feelings of hopelessness and general anxiety. The majority of those interviewed also had low self-esteems and experienced social isolation³⁵.

Common Ailments

The most common mental health problem for Vietnamese is depression. In most cases, the depressed attempt to handle depression by themselves and cause no harm to others, but occasionally it leads to alcoholism or domestic violence³⁶. Vietnamese tend not to seek help until depression manifest in physical symptoms, such as insomnia, headaches, or chest pains³⁷. Some Vietnamese may acquire "busy-busy syndrome" in which they become almost hypomaniac and preoccupied with trivial tasks. After finally slowing down, they have time to contemplate memories and may fall into deep depressions. A problem known as "anomic syndrome" mainly afflicts single servicemen who lack ties to the community. These men have no motivation or life goals, and they tend to act in socially

³⁵ P. S. Fry, "Stress Ideations of Vietnamese Youth in North America," *The Journal of Social Psychology* 125 (February 1985), 37-39.

³⁶ Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 105.

³⁷ Aylesworth et al, "Stress and Mental Health Among Vietnamese in the United States," 73.

inappropriate ways. Isolation is another common ailment which is often related to a fear of open spaces, a fear of transportation, and a fear of strangers³⁸.

Mental health problems frequently surface as forms of dependency. Extreme dependency is usually found in wives or elderly who feel helpless and disproportionately depend on their husbands and children. Some refugees become dependent on volunteer social services and become hostile when their expectations are not met or when they are encouraged to become more independent³⁹.

Refugees, Not Immigrants

The fact that the Vietnamese came as refugees rather than immigrants is the key to understanding the Vietnamese people's uneasy transition in the United States. Unlike other Asian immigrants, almost all of the Vietnamese did not consciously choose to come to the United States; they were forced to migrate toward an unknown destination by powerful military or political opponents. The necessity for hasty escapes did not allow time to prepare for resettlement, materially or psychologically⁴⁰. Even if refugees were able to procure currency or precious items to take with them, these valuables were usually spent on exorbitant transportation fees and bribes or stolen by pirates and bandits before reaching the United States; consequently, most Vietnamese arrived literally with just the clothes

³⁸ Ibid., 73.

³⁹ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁰ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 10-11.

on their backs. The refugees could not have mentally anticipated the traumatic experiences which awaited them in their escapes from Vietnam and in the refugee camps, and most did not know what to expect in the United States. Thanh Duong summarized the experience of his parents in the U.S.:

The adjustment was horrible. My mom and my dad still haven't adjusted to it here. People always criticize us for taking jobs and being a burden to society. Well, my parents didn't want to come here. They weren't immigrants, they were refugees. We came here because our lives were endangered, and that was the only reason why. They weren't thinking about themselves, but only about the family, the kids. They wanted a better way of life. It was hard enough coming here. They lost all their family members. To just pick up and leave your grandma and grandpa knowing they might die, all your brothers and sisters might die - it's been traumatic for my parents. It still is.

Considering the urgency of their escapes and the subsequent lack of preparation for their new lives, it is not surprising that the adjustment of the Vietnamese to the American lifestyle has been so tumultuous. Unfortunately, the reaction of the American public to their arrival has done little to ease their resettlement.

ATTITUDES TOWARDS VIETNAMESE IN THE UNITED STATES

The Reaction of the American Public

Prior to the Refugees' Arrival

When the U.S. government proposed to admit Vietnamese refugees in 1975, the American public gave a mixed reaction. On one hand, a portion of the population prepared to welcome the refugees, spurred on by a sense of responsibility for the U.S. intervention in Vietnam and by humanitarian concerns. Numerous religious agencies, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, the Lutheran Church, and the Roman Catholic Social Agency, donated funds, recruited supporters, trained volunteer, and renovated old houses in anticipation of the refugees' arrival. Local businesses and groups of war veterans in some communities contributed money for aid, and individuals and organizations nationwide volunteered as sponsors¹.

On the other hand, a sizeable proportion of Americans opposed the resettlement of Vietnamese in their country. Several prominent politicians led the opposition. California Governor Edmund "Jerry" Brown, Jr. suggested that efforts to admit refugees would mean "neglecting people

¹ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 40.

who are living here"². Congressman Burt Talcott, also of California, stated, "We have so many Orientals already...the tax and welfare rolls will be overburdened and we already have our share of illegal aliens"³. Even liberal Senator George McGovern declared, "I think the Vietnamese are better off in Viet Nam, including the orphans."⁴ The sentiments of like-minded politicians were reflected in the House of Representative's sound defeat of a proposal to provide humanitarian aid to the refugees⁵.

After the government initially proposed to admit the Vietnamese in 1975, calls, letters, and telegrams to the President in opposition to the proposal outnumbered those in favor two to one⁶. A similar negative response occurred in the results of a 1975 Gallup Poll, in which 54% of the Americans surveyed did not favor Vietnamese resettlement in the United States⁷.

Reaction to Refugees in the American Communities

The Vietnamese received a hostile initial reaction from some Americans for two main reasons. In the first place, a great number of

² "Greetings for Refugees: From Open Arms to Outright Hostility," U.S. News and World Report, 5 May 1975, 22.

³ Paul D. Starr and Alden E. Roberts, "Attitudes Toward New Americans: Perceptions of Indo-Chinese in Nine Cities," in Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, Vol. III, ed. Cora Bagley Marrett and Cheryl Leggon. (Greenwich, CT: Jai Press, 1982), 170.

⁴ "The Final Commitment: People," Time, 12 May 1975, 26.

⁵ Starr and Roberts, "Attitudes Toward New Americans," 170.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁷ Knoll, Becoming American, 186.

Americans were fed up with the Vietnam War, and the refugees served as a reminder of what many considered to be a terrible action taken by the U.S. government. Secondly, some Americans could only see the Vietnamese as the enemy, despite the fact that most refugees were allied to the United States during the war⁸. Evidence that Americans misidentified Vietnamese refugees as the enemy appeared in interviews conducted by Paul Rutledge in Oklahoma City, where refugees had moved into an area of low-income whites. In one of the interviews, a thirty-four year old white woman stated, "I bought myself a gun today. I don't think those damn communists should be allowed to come over here and just take over"⁹. A white veteran echoed her comments when he said, "I didn't go to Vietnam so these bastards could just come over here and move in with me"¹⁰.

Studies conducted in the early 1980s indicated little improvement in the attitudes of Americans towards Vietnamese resettlement. In a nationwide survey completed by Alden D. Roberts in 1980, over 77% of those surveyed reported that they would disapprove of the marriage of an Indochinese refugee into their family, and 65% were unwilling to have a refugee as a guest in their homes. However, only 7% stated outright that they disliked the company of refugees, and only 11% approved of excluding Indochinese refugees from the United States. Roberts concluded that:

In short, the majority of respondents were willing to have Indochinese refugees in their country, but they did not want

⁸ Ibid., 186.

⁹ Rutledge, *The Vietnamese Experience in America*, 107.

¹⁰ Ibid., 107.

them too close¹¹.

The same study revealed the Vietnamese population's awareness of anti-Vietnamese sentiments during the resettlement. About 50% felt that the average American was not friendly toward Vietnamese. One-third indicated that they had experienced racial discrimination since coming to the United States, and almost two-thirds agreed that Vietnamese are deprived of opportunities enjoyed by other Americans because of their ancestry¹².

A 1982 study of nine cities in southern California and the Gulf Coast of Texas, where refugee populations are high, reported stronger resentment towards the refugees. In this study, only one in five approved of the arrival of refugees in their community, while almost one-half agreed that "it would have been better for everyone" had the refugees settled in other Asian countries. Almost two-thirds of the respondents disapproved of federal aid to refugees, and about one-half believed that the enrollment of refugee children burdened the local schools. Finally, about 50% of those surveyed felt that the refugees would take jobs away from others in the community¹³.

¹¹ Alden E. Roberts, "Racism Sent and Received: Americans and Vietnamese View One Another," in Research in Race and Ethnic Relations, Vol. IV, ed. Cora Bagley Marrett and Cheryl Leggon. (Greenwich, CT: Jai Press, 1988), 81.

¹² Roberts, "Racism Sent and Received," 86.

¹³ Starr and Roberts, "Attitudes Toward New Americans," 173.

Economic Competition

The issue of competition in the workplace has proven to be one of the most volatile issues involving the Vietnamese Americans. In areas where jobs are scarce, other Americans often perceive Vietnamese as a threat in the labor market¹⁴, and some charge that the competition created by the refugees is unfair¹⁵. One of the most publicized cases took place in the Gulf Coast region of Texas, where many Vietnamese employ themselves as fishermen. Initially, the Vietnamese misunderstood American fishing regulations and surpassed the fishing quotas, building resentment from other local fishermen; however, checks by government agencies showed that this action ceased once the rules had been carefully explained. Later, the Texas fishermen complained about the success of Vietnamese fishermen, but the Vietnamese asserted that their success was not due to unfair practices, but rather to eating the fish they caught, repairing their own boats, living on boats rather than houses, and working longer hours. Despite the rationale of the Vietnamese, the local Klu Klux Klan organized rallies to threaten mob action if the government did not intervene to stop competition from the Vietnamese fishermen. Surrounded by an atmosphere of tension, a quarrel between two Vietnamese brothers and a Texan crabber ended in the crabber's death. Although the judicial system acquitted the brothers on grounds of self-defense, the Texan fishermen blamed the Vietnamese and erupted with rage. Following the incident, locals torched two Vietnamese boats, and Klansmen burned

¹⁴ Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 254.

¹⁵ Knoll, Becoming American, 195.

crosses on other boats and patrolled the bay dressed in hooded robes and carrying guns¹⁶. One Texas fisherman declared on network television:

There's too many of them, and there's not enough room for them, and there's going to be lots of hard feelings if they don't get some of them out of here and teach the ones that they leave how to act and how to get along. I think they ought to be put on a reservation somewhere or some of them put in a compound to teach our laws and our ways, the way we live, our courtesy as a people¹⁷.

Competition for Housing

Vietnamese are also considered a threat in places with a scarcity of low-income housing, where their presence creates competition with other ethnic groups, particularly Blacks and Latinos¹⁸. In Denver, the huge influx of refugees prompted the city administration to place Vietnamese into a newly completed housing project designated for Latinos. Because this project had been a source of pride for a group that had often been overlooked by the community, the Latinos viewed the city's action as preferential toward Vietnamese. In response, young Latinos vandalized the refugees' cars and destroyed portions of the project. Meetings between ethnic leaders failed to reach reconciliation and the Vietnamese ultimately moved out of the project¹⁹.

¹⁶ Ibid., 195-196.

¹⁷ Quoted in Knoll, Becoming American, 196.

¹⁸ Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 254.

¹⁹ Rutledge, The Vietnamese Experience in America, 107-108.

Vietnamese Americans commonly have difficulty dealing with clashes involving other ethnic groups. They may be reluctant to call the police because of previous bad experiences with security forces in Asia. Furthermore, their language abilities may not be adequate to express their points of view, which only increases their frustration²⁰.

Intraethnic Conflict

Regional, Religious, and Socioeconomic Prejudices

Competition among varying groups of Vietnamese in the U.S. has added even more conflict to Vietnamese American communities. Although they have been treated as homogeneous by the American public, the refugees from Vietnam are actually a diverse people who sometimes harbor deep-rooted prejudices against one another²¹. Some of these prejudices are based on stereotypes of people from different geographical regions in Vietnam. Other conflicts arise from differences in religion, particularly between Buddhists and Catholics. New social hierarchies have developed since the arrival of refugees in the United States, with those from the well-educated, upper class families in the First Wave placed above the later "boat people"²².

²⁰ Ibid., 106.

²¹ Ibid., 6.

²² Ibid., 109-110.

Vietnamese Minorities

The legacy of prejudices held toward minorities in Vietnam continues in the American Vietnamese communities. The Cham, a minority from south central Vietnam, were targets of discrimination in Vietnam due to their Hindu and Islamic roots; Cham refugees still receive such treatment from some Vietnamese Americans. Likewise, the Vietnamese mountain tribes, known collectively as the Montagards, also are victims of discrimination in Vietnamese American communities. Some ethnic Chinese-Vietnamese, recalling persecution and harassment in Vietnam, have not favored reestablishment in Vietnamese communities overseas²³.

Amerasians

A final subgroup which cannot easily assimilate into Vietnamese American communities is the population of Amerasians, the children of American soldiers stationed in Vietnam. Although the U.S. government acknowledged these children as American citizens since 1982, most could not leave Vietnam until the passage of the Amerasian Homecoming Act in 1987, which was designed to bring all Amerasians and family of U.S. servicemen to the United States. The exact number of Amerasian children is unknown, but the 1989 Refugee Reports estimate it at about 30,000, which would constitute 2 to 3% of the American refugee population. Since many Amerasians could not identify any relatives in the United States,

²³ Ibid., 6-8.

sponsors for these children were few in number. Therefore, the government clustered many of the Amerasians together throughout fifty locations in the U.S. in an attempt to provide them with some sort of support group. However, the Vietnamese communities have not been readily accepted the Amerasians due to a bias against them, especially toward those with African-American heritage. Some Vietnamese do not consider them "legitimate Vietnamese"²⁴.

Vietnamese Gangs

Another source of tension in the Vietnamese American community is the development of Vietnamese gangs in Southern California, Houston, and other areas. These gangs participate in robbery, extortion, and the murder of other Vietnamese. Their actions have not been well reported because many refugees are ignorant about U.S. law and are afraid of the local police; some Vietnamese do not report crimes committed by gangs in order to protect their communities' reputations. Fortunately, Vietnamese leaders in several communities have denounced gang members and are educating the refugee population about the American legal system²⁵.

²⁴ Ibid., 133.

²⁵ Ibid., 111-112.

Discrimination and Hate Crimes

Prejudice

Although intraethnic conflict troubles the Vietnamese community, it is a minute worry compared to those created by problems existing between Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese Americans. Like other people of color in the United States, the Vietnamese have experienced their share of prejudicial treatment. For many, this treatment began in school, where subtle prejudices caused discomfort and stress for Vietnamese students. Although Tai Truong found it simple to make friends when he first arrived in Salem, Oregon as a young child, his years in secondary school were not as easy:

Once I got to junior high school and high school, I really struggled because I was trying to define who I am. A lot of times, I noticed when people looked at me, and I wondered if it was because they thought I was different. There was a lot of internal conflict - sometimes I wondered what it would be like to be white. You would fit in perfectly, you would go places with other kids, and join in on their games without questioning yourself. I felt like there was pressure on me to do good. In sports, playing basketball, I felt if I didn't do good, all the white kids would look down at other Asian kids the same way. There was some pressure to represent Asians as a group.

Tri Bui faced similar adversities in high school, where the other students did not always accept him because of his cultural differences:

As far as peer pressure goes, that was the difficult thing. That was the most difficult because I was more reserved. In the Vietnamese culture, you're not supposed to be an extrovert, you're supposed to be an introvert. Sometimes that introspective

worked against me in the sense that students didn't really understand who I am, so they treated me different, called me names and stuff like that.

The fact that English is the second or even third language for most Vietnamese Americans also biases people's expectations of them. Even if a Vietnamese person speaks fluent English, another individual may detect an accent or may know that English is not that person's native language, and so derive false assumptions about him or her. This happened to Tri when he entered college:

Originally, when I first came to the university, I was considering political science (as a major). But some friends said that because I'm a student of color, I should go into more practical fields: medicine or engineering. So I chose pre-med. Then, after a year and a half of intensive study, I discovered I didn't have the personality for it - it was too hard for me to relate to scientists - so that's why I changed my major to political science. Being not just a person of color, but also because English is not my first language, they assumed that because my English is not fluent, I shouldn't go into fields that use a lot of English, verbal communication and written communication.

Even as an elementary school student, Tanie Hotan was conscious of the stigma against the Vietnamese accent:

Just being able to understand a language is fine, but having an accent is detectable of being a foreigner, and I didn't want any of that. I don't think I had the pride that I have now of my Vietnamese culture. I just wanted to be able to integrate as well as possible. I noticed a lot of Americans did not think highly of Vietnamese accents, that maybe European accents were acceptable, but not Oriental. I made it a point to speak as clearly as possible.

Frustrated with confronting prejudices based on accents and physical traits, Thanh Duong noted:

If I was in Vietnam, I wouldn't have these problems. If I went to a job interview, they'd look at me for who I am, and if they didn't like my personality, fine. At least it's not the color of my skin.

Of course, many forms of discrimination are not so subtle. Tom Lee observed that being Vietnamese has made him an easy scapegoat on occasion:

People have looked at me differently. I have been accused of doing stuff, such as stealing money from the till at work, because I was Vietnamese and from a different culture.

For Thanh, the first encounter with open discrimination was like a slap in the face, aggravated by the fact that he could not find anyone to empathize with his pain:

I was riding my bike down the road and I remember looking at this one guy, and he said to me, 'You fucking gook!' And that threw me off! That was the first time I experienced racism, I mean blatant racism. So I go home, and I can't explain it to my parents because it's hard to explain it to them. I went to one of my friends and said, 'This guy called me a gook!' and he said, 'Oh man, that sucks.' So here I am stuck with this really intense pain inside, and all my white friends can't do a thing about it.

Hate Crime

In instances across the nation, discrimination has escalated beyond biased expectations and name-calling into hate crime against Vietnamese Americans. At a high school in Davis, California in May of 1983, two white students confronted Thong Hy Huynh and three other Vietnamese students about an incident a few weeks earlier in which racial slurs were directed at Vietnamese. The verbal confrontation escalated into a physical fight, during which one of the white boys produced a knife. While

attempting to disarm his attacker, Thong was fatally stabbed in the chest²⁶. In the initial court hearing following the murder, testimony from a psychologist, Davis High School teachers, and the school principal focused on the violent tendencies and the delinquent history of the defendant, with no mention of his racist attitudes. The local district attorney saw the racial motivations, but chose to pursue the case as a straight homicide because he believed it would be a more effective way to convict the assailant. While the Davis community expressed concern over the incident, statements issued by community groups avoided the term "racism" and instead used such euphemisms as "human relations". Consequently, they denied the existence of racism against Asians, despite the seemingly racist nature of the murder²⁷.

In January of 1989, Patrick Purdy, dressed in combat fatigues, fired 105 rounds from a semiautomatic assault weapon into a crowd of children at Cleveland Elementary School in Stockton, California. Purdy managed to kill five children and wounded thirty others before killing himself; all of those killed and most of those wounded were Southeast Asians²⁸. At first, Stockton police dismissed any racial motivation from the case, but after appeals from the Asian community, the attorney general stated:

It appears highly probable that Purdy deliberately chose Cleveland Elementary School as the location for his murderous assault in substantial part because it was heavily populated by

²⁶ George Kagiwada, "The Killing of Thong Hy Huynh: Implications of a *Rashomon* Perspective," in Frontiers of Asian American Studies: Writing, Research and Commentary, ed. Gail M. Nomura et al. (Pullman, WA: Washington State University Press, 1989), 254.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 255-258.

²⁸ Yen Le Espiritu, Asian American Panethnicity: Briding Institutions and Identities (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 155.

Southeast Asian children. His frequent resentful comments about Southeast Asians indicate a particular animosity toward them.

Occasionally, hatred of Vietnamese leads to crimes committed against other Asians. In July 1989, two white men pistol-whipped a Chinese man in North Carolina after allegedly mistaking him for Vietnamese. The victim, Jim Loo, died two days later from severe head injuries. Witnesses recalled that the men used anti-Vietnamese racial slurs while attacking Loo and his Asian American friends. Later, the men admitted that they blamed the Vietnamese for the death of their brother during the Vietnam war²⁹.

Rather than decreasing with time, hate crimes against Vietnamese Americans seem persist. Another student was beaten to death in August 1992, this time in the Florida town of Coral Spring. According to witnesses, eight young white men participated in the killing of Luyen Phan Nguyen, a sophomore at the University of Miami, after he objected to their use of an anti-Vietnamese racial slur at a party; seven were charged with second-degree murder³⁰.

Attitudes and Acceptance

Despite the efforts of some Americans to welcome the refugees into this country, attitudes toward the Vietnamese in the U.S. often have been marked with prejudice, resentment, and sometimes open hostility. From the moment that the government proposed to resettle the refugees

²⁹ Ibid., 157.

³⁰ "Biased-incited Beating Death of a Vietnamese Stuns a Florida Town," The New York Times, 23 August 1992, sec. 1, p. 35; "Seven Charged in Death of Student Who Objected to Racial Slur," The New York Times, 11 September 1992, B8.

in the United States, a portion of the general populace has opposed the Vietnamese presence due to negative images of Vietnamese resulting from the Vietnam War. Many Americans also have feared that the resettlement would result in a national economic burden, and charges of unfair competition for jobs and housing has fueled the flames of discontent. Even within the Vietnamese community, attitudes regarding Vietnamese minorities have caused intraethnic competition. Finally, Vietnamese Americans have been the victims of prejudice and discrimination; in the worst cases, these prejudices can escalate into hate crimes against Vietnamese. The persistence of anti-Vietnamese attitudes indicates that the Vietnamese still have not been fully accepted into the United States after almost two decades since the First Wave refugees arrived.

CONCLUSION: VIETNAMESE AMERICANS AND
THE MYTH OF THE MODEL MINORITY

THE HARMFUL EFFECTS OF THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH ON
ALL ASIAN AMERICANS

The myth of the model minority originated as a justification of the ideology that the United States is a land of opportunity and equality for all deserving citizens; by parading a minority group which seemingly had achieved the economic and social status of white America, the proponents of the model minority thesis discredited claims of racial discrimination. The model minority myth has persisted, and despite the sizeable body of research refuting its claims, the successful image of Asian Americans has been widely accepted by the American public.

In focusing attention on the achievements of the Asian Americans, the model minority thesis disregards the many serious socioeconomic problems that still plague the Asian American community. Furthermore, the model minority thesis misrepresents the prosperity of Asian Americans with its use of inaccurate statistics. As a result, the U.S. population only perceives the inflated incomes and exaggerated scholastic records of Asian Americans, unaware of the Asian American students at the lower end of the academic spectrum, the Asian American workers trapped by the "glass ceiling", the Asian American victims of hate crime, or the many Asian Americans living in poverty.

Disguised as praise, the myth of the model minority obscures the barriers facing Asian Americans and creates false assumptions which promote discrimination. It promotes biases against Asian Americans in

higher education, encourages anti-Asian sentiments, and increases tensions between Asian Americans and other ethnic groups. In addition, it has discouraged funding for badly needed social services in the Asian American community.

THE APPLICATION OF THE MODEL MINORITY THESIS TO VIETNAMESE AMERICANS

Inclusion of the Vietnamese in the Asian Media Image

Although the model minority myth misrepresents and harms all Asian Americans, it is most erroneous and most damaging when applied to Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian Americans. As not only the most recent newcomers but also as refugees who were forced to migrate to the United States, the Vietnamese Americans are the least likely to fit the image of the Asian who has comfortably and completely integrated with white middle-class society, and they are the most likely to be adversely affected by that image. The Vietnamese in the United States continue to confront numerous adversities, yet their voices and concerns are largely unheard in the general public due to the images fostered by the myth of the model minority. Some model minority articles explicitly highlight the achievements of Vietnamese students and professionals. A few of these articles also briefly mention the difficulties encountered by the Vietnamese American communities, but then discredit any disadvantages by offering contradictory examples. For instance, an article in Time acknowledged that Indochinese "war-scarred children, struggling with a new language and culture, often drop out of school"; however, the same article specifically

lists Indochinese among the "young Asian Americans...setting the educational pace for the rest of America and cutting a dazzling figure at the country's finest schools", and it devotes half of a page to a profile of a Vietnamese American student who was the class valedictorian at the U.S. Air Force Academy, accepted as a Rhodes Scholar, and preparing to enter Harvard Medical School¹. Another article hurriedly notes that the median household income of the Vietnamese falls below their white counterparts', but then chooses to profile a successful physician and photograph an anesthesiologist as two of the three Vietnamese Americans showcased in the piece (the third was a student who memorized a page of the English dictionary each day)².

More often, the model minority articles indirectly include Vietnamese Americans by encompassing all Asians into the successful image; furthermore, the model minority thesis is so rooted in the American consciousness that even if they have not read the articles or personally heard the model minority media hype, Americans automatically group the Vietnamese with the prosperous Asian stereotype. Consequently, the model minority image has hidden the needs and struggles of the Vietnamese Americans.

The Invisibility of Struggling Vietnamese Students

According to the model minority myth, Vietnamese American students are among the most amazing Asian academic *wunderkind*, but the

¹ "The New Whiz Kids," *Time*, 31 August 1987, 42, 46.

² "To America with Skills," *Time*, 8 July 1985,

accolades drown out the voices of Vietnamese students who face huge obstacles in the classroom. Disadvantaged by the language barrier and disoriented by the American educational system, the Vietnamese student population has an abnormally high drop out rate; yet, ironically, the model minority image has placed high expectations on Vietnamese American students. Tri Bui, who confessed that he has no remarkable aptitude for math or science, recalled the assumptions made at his high school:

I don't know if it was just (at my school) or if was a similar experience for all the other Vietnamese students, but we were treated differently. We were looked at as smart, smart at math, not at English.

Tom Lee observed similar attitudes during his school days:

I guess most other students thought I was smart. When I was in grade school, I had some kids try to copy off me...I think people think because you're Asian, you're smart.

Although such assumptions can be advantageous among peer groups, they can also lead to inaccurate assessments of a Vietnamese student's progress. Teachers who are influenced by the model minority image may assume that a Vietnamese student does not need special attention or assistance; this misconception is reinforced by the Vietnamese cultural bias against asking teachers for help. Therefore, a Vietnamese student's struggles with academics may go unnoticed.

In addition to academic obstructions in grade school, Vietnamese students also face financial obstructions in higher education. Despite the fact that a large percentage of Vietnamese American families fall into the low-income category, Vietnamese do not qualify for Equal Educational Opportunity Programs intended for financially disadvantaged students at some universities; due to the image of the affluent Asian, school

administrators are unaware of financial need in the Asian community³. Furthermore, Vietnamese Americans are ineligible for many minority scholarships and fellowships because Asian Americans are no longer considered a minority on most campuses. The higher admission standards held for Asian Americans at prestigious colleges as a result of the model minority myth have the greatest negative effect on Vietnamese applicants and other Southeast Asian newcomers; as some of the least acculturated members of the Asian American community, Vietnamese Americans tend to have lower verbal SAT scores and less preparation for the admissions process than other Asian Americans.

Masking the Economic Adversities

The model minority thesis also obscures the economic disadvantages facing Vietnamese Americans. The Vietnamese have high unemployment rates and low labor force participation; in addition, a large percentage of Vietnamese families live below the poverty level and Vietnamese are among the lowest paid workers. Although limited federal funds are available to refugees, the services these funds provide are short-term and insufficient. Furthermore, government programs tend to channel refugees into low-status jobs before the refugees are able to acquire language skills necessary for better jobs, thus trapping them at the poverty level. However, thanks to the rosy portrait painted by the model minority thesis, the poverty and economic woes of the Vietnamese community are not well recognized; in fact, because the Vietnamese Americans appear to be

³ Takaki, Strangers from a Different Shore, 478.

successful, a number of Americans perceive them as economic competitors and resent federal funds devoted to the Vietnamese.

Fabricated Assimilation

Finally, the model minority thesis falsely asserts that the Vietnamese have successfully assimilated into the mainstream U.S. culture. This assertion conceals the trauma of their resettlement in the United States and the loneliness, frustration, and alienation which many refugees have endured. Moreover, it disregards their cold and sometimes hostile reception by a considerable segment of the U.S. population at large. Until the prejudice and hate crimes against Vietnamese Americans cease, any assertion of assimilation is premature.

ELIMINATION OF THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH

The model minority myth portrays Asian Americans as a people who have assimilated into the white mainstream through their remarkable cultural assets of uncomplaining perseverance, respect for authority, and reverence for learning. According to this ideal, Asians have overcome historic discrimination to reach, if not surpass, Anglo-Americans' income levels and educational attainment.

In reality, Asian Americans, particularly the Southeast Asians, have not reached parity with the white majority, nor have they been fully accepted into the white majority's culture. The model minority thesis has not only overlooked the grave problems of poverty, discrimination, and inequality

which confront Vietnamese Americans and all of Asian America, but it has obscured these issues from the U.S. consciousness. At the same time, it has promoted hostility, resentment, and additional discrimination. Finally, the myth of the model minority has had its most crippling effect on those who most deviate from its successful image, such as the Vietnamese and other Southeast Asians .

The negative aspects of the model minority myth are almost invisible to the general public because it is a form of "positive discrimination" which seems to praise Asian Americans and promote their interests. However, the harm generated by this myth outweighs any benefits. Although the media is no longer the sole proponent of the model minority thesis, it is the most responsible for the perpetuation of the successful Asian stereotype; therefore, the media should balance recognition of Asian Americans' achievements with Asian Americans' adversities. The elimination of "the model minority" as an image for Asian Americans will not definitively erase all of the problems confronting the Asian American community, but it will serve as a crucial first step; if the cloak of absolute success and assimilation is shed, the discrimination induced by the model minority myth may cease , and the obstacles may at least be acknowledged and addressed. Without a model minority, the U.S. public will be forced to reexamine the sources of discrimination and oppression facing not just Asian Americans, but all minorities within its society.

APPENDIX

PROCEDURE FOR INTERVIEWS

I made my initial interview contacts with the help of the Vietnamese Student Association at the University of Oregon. After attending a VSA meeting, I introduced myself and explained my thesis topic to the VSA members; I then asked those willing to assist me to sign-up on a circulated sign-up sheet. I found six interviewees in this manner. I unsuccessfully tried to find interviewees by distributing flyers at a local Asian American festival and by contacting Vietnamese churches. I finally located the other two interviewees through connections made by VSA members.

At the beginning of each interview, I provided the interviewee with a brief explanation of my thesis project, which included my phone number in case of questions concerning the interviews. I also asked each interviewee to sign a consent form. During each interview, I tried to maintain a conversational rapport rather than relying on direct questioning; my purpose was to encourage interviewees to share their experiences freely rather than supply answers to fit pointed questions. For instance, rather than asking directly, "Were you treated differently in school because you came from Vietnam?", I asked, "Could you tell me what it was like when you started school in the U.S?". Although much of the material in the resulting interviews is unrelated to my thesis topic, I am confident that the oral histories related during the interviews are less biased than if I had kept strictly to the themes of my thesis. In addition, I sent each interviewee written excerpts from his or her interview which I intended to use in my thesis; the interviewees approved the excerpts before I incorporated them into my work.

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