Silencing, Again: Denouncing the Homogenization of the East Asian American and Southeast Asian American Experience

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Abstract

Asian-Americans are oft held to the golden standard of the Model Minority Myth, wherein Asians—as a gross generalization—are esteemed as the epitome of Minority Success. However, Southeast Asian-Americans (SEAA) reach educational attainment levels more similar to African-American, Latina/o-American, and Native American populations than those of other Asian-Americans in the aggregate. Through the examination of SEAA histories, whose experiences are rooted in the refugee crisis spurred by the Vietnam War, and East Asian-American histories, whose experiences in entering the United States are similar to SEAA yet are set in different timeframes with dissimilar journeys, a question is raised: how do the differences in historical experiences and context influence disparities today? I hypothesize that specific factors have led to disparities in educational attainment and success today and, ultimately, call for a more accurate and current acknowledgement of the differences between ethnic groups, while still encompassing the needs of each.

Keywords: Southeast Asian Americans, East Asian Americans, Model Minority Myth, education
Common stereotypes that Asian Americans are held up to in American culture include the following:

- Asians are academic achievers
- Asians are ubiquitous in higher education
- Asians are economically well off

When looking at the data for bachelor’s degree attainment, this stereotype appears to ring true: the US Census Report issued in 2012 stated the following attainment rates for the US population aged twenty-five and older:

- **Asian American: 50.2%**
- White American: 30.9%
- African American: 17.7%
- Pacific Islander Americans: 14%
- Native American: 13%

Asian Americans, as one aggregate, have the highest rate of higher education attainment. However, once the data is disaggregated into the more specific Asian American communities within the aggregate, one can discover a troubling gap within: whilst 74.1% of Taiwanese Americans aged twenty-five or older have a bachelor’s degree, 12.4% of Laotian Americans of the same age group have a bachelor’s degree (Department of Labor, 2016). By disaggregating the data, a disparity between South Asian American, East Asian American, and Southeast Asian American subgroups becomes apparent. The extent of this educational disparity within the Asian American Community can be observed in Figure 1. Though one can more clearly pinpoint this educational attainment issue in the Southeast Asian American community in disaggregated data, policy-makers who are only given aggregated data would create policies on the 50.2% bachelor’s degree attainment statistic for all Asian-Americans, thus leading to a lack of resources and support for communities with hidden needs.
Figure 1: Educational Attainment for Asian American Sub-Groups, 2008-2010. Source: CARE National Commission on Asian American and Pacific Islander Research in Education

The diversity within the Asian American community is vast; to narrow the scope of this study, a comparison between only East Asian American communities and Southeast Asian American communities has been made. However, it is necessary to acknowledge the diversity, successes, and struggles of other Asian American subgroups such as South Asian Americans.

The Model Minority Myth

The stark differences in educational attainment within the Asian American community are shrouded by the generalization of Asian Americans as the United States’ “Model Minority.”

Through this myth, Asian Americans are stereotyped to have stable-to-high incomes, high educational achievement, low criminality, and high family and marital stability (Yang, 2004). While seemingly a compliment, this Model Minority Myth: firstly, does not accurately reflect reality; secondly, discounts the historical struggles and efforts of these communities; and thirdly, is detrimental to both Asian Americans as a marginalized group, and all other marginalized groups in the United States.
The Model Minority Myth places Asian Americans as the epitome of racialized success and achievement, the poster children for the idea of the American Dream. Asian Americans were pit against other ethnically marginalized groups, with policy-makers and media contrasting Asian Americans to other marginalized groups in the US, namely the African American and Latinx American “counterparts” (Lee & Zhou, 2015). In this way, institutions were able to imply that it was the fault of the non-model racial groups for not being able to succeed, rather than a lack of resources and assistance programs, a history of exploitation and oppression, and continual discrimination and institutional bias.

A Comparative Look at East Asian American History and Southeast Asian History

In this study, East Asian Americans include the following subgroups: Chinese American, Taiwanese American, Japanese American, and Korean American. These groups have ridden multiple waves of immigration, generated the consequent variance of generations within the community, and endured significant discrimination and struggle in the United States.

The Southeast Asian-American subgroup for this study consisted of the following eleven communities: Vietnamese-Americans, Cambodian-Americans, Hmong-Americans, Laotian-Americans, I Mien-Americans, Indonesian-Americans, Myanmar/Burmese-Americans, Malaysian-Americans, Thai-Americans, Singaporean-Americans, and Pilipino-Americans. The key historical event that ties these groups together in the context of this study is the Vietnam War Refugee Crisis (1975).

The first Asians to immigrate to the United States did so in the 1850’s: Chinese workers who aimed to partake in the bolstering gold mine and railroad industries. (Lee, 2015). However, this group’s experience was tumultuous, faced with discrimination and resistance both in social and political spheres. (**People vs. Hall, Naturalization act 1870)). Korean Americans, Japanese Americans, and Pilipino Americans were welcomed with similar negative sentiments (Chan 1991). From this sprung a series of immigration laws that, inadvertently or not, created and reinforced the Model Minority Myth.

Within the series of immigration acts were those that blatantly barred entry for specific ethnic or racial demographic(s): Chinese Exclusion Act (1882-143), the Gentleman’s Agreement (1907), the Immigration Act (1924). For others, the immigration law strictly filtered those who would be accepted into the United States, such as the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952 and 1965. These two acts limited immigration from the continent of Asia to the United States to the following criterion: immediate family members of a citizen of the Unites States, refugees or asylees, or those who had skill sets deemed valuable by the state.
Because of these immigration laws, many of those immigrating into the United States were educated or business class—not laborers. While this resulted in a larger concentration of highly educated Asians immigrating; it does not reflect any innate ability to excel in academics. While about 36% of adults in Korea have a bachelor’s degree, 56% of Korean immigrants have a Bachelor’s Degree or higher. Though only 4% of adults in China have graduated from college, 51% of Chinese immigrants have graduated from college. Immigration laws have had a significant influence on the US’ population demographic in terms of ethnicity and educational standing.

In contrast, the narratives of Southeast Asian Americans reflect a different face of the Immigration and Nationality Acts: those who came to the United States seeking refuge and asylum. Due to the purges of intellectuals prior to the Vietnam War, in addition to the purges during and following the refugee crisis, many of the refugees lacked the skills and resources—financially or educationally—to effectively assimilate into this new country. English-speaking ability, economic strife, and lack of knowledge and resources each play a role in the community’s success in navigating the state’s various institutions.

**Significance of Disaggregation**

37.9% of Hmong Americans do not have a high school diploma; 95.1% of Taiwanese Americans do. 51.5% of Chinese Americans have attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, whereas 87.6% of Laotian Americans do not. This contrast between the educational attainment rates of East Asian Americans and those of Southeast Asian Americans continue in a similar pattern.

While it is crucial to acknowledge the struggle and efforts of East Asian Americans, one must also recognize the role of aggregated data: though about one in two Asian Americans over the age of twenty-five have attained a bachelor’s degree or higher, six of seven Cambodian Americans will not. By aggregating the data, the needs of more specific ethnic or racial subgroups are erased and left unseen by policy makers who could have otherwise created resources and opportunities for these communities.

One method to raise awareness for this issue would be to disaggregate the data. Statistical data is critical in policy making, as it’s the main source of data for policy makers to look at in terms of demographics. Some governments and educational institutions have taken steps toward disaggregating their data, but for it to truly be effective, we must be knowledgeable of both the causes and the effects of these disparities to help future generations.
Conclusions and Future Study

The key differences between East Asian Americans and Southeast Asian Americans are the historical motivation to enter the United States and the resources that either group had available when they entered. Though East Asian Americans have had many struggles in gaining a space in this new frontier of the United States, one must consider the immigration laws under which they entered the United States from, and how that has affected their ability to effectively assimilate. Where the immigration laws introduce an area of possible disparity, the Model Minority Myth and aggregation of data play major roles in hiding the issues and preventing equity for the Southeast Asian community in need. This results in a lack of spaces, support, and resources for a community whose higher education attainment more closely mirrors their African American (17.7%), Pacific Islander (14%), and Native American (13%) counterparts more so than their East Asian American peers (Yang, 2004).

Whilst researching this topic, multiple possible routes for future study emerged. Following the Vietnam War, those who fought alongside the US troops and many of the refugees who could enter the United States were often given subpar housing in areas of lower educational funding and higher crime rates; delving deeper into the housing laws and regulations that impacted Southeast Asian Americans could possibly unveil more obstacles to educational attainment that could be worked on.

Expanding into personal narratives is also an area of potential informational wealth. Using surveys and/or interviews would allow a different scope of the questions at hand, and allow for a collection of qualitative rather than quantitative data. Knowing the flaws and gaps in the current available quantitative data, this method may allow for some remedy.
References


