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Asian American Experience: The Illusion of Inclusion and the Model Minority Stereotype

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ABSTRACT

The stereotype of Model Minority is often applied to Asian Americans, whose educational and economic achievements are held up as a sign of successful inclusion into American society. Yet the deadly anti-Asian attacks following the Coronavirus pandemic have shattered this illusion of inclusion. Using trauma theories, I explore Asian Americans' belief in the American Dream, alignment with whiteness, and the illusion of inclusion afforded by the Model Minority stereotype. In particular, I examine how the illusion of inclusion has obscured recognition of an Asian fetish, the sexualized objectification of Asian women and feminization of Asian men. Clinical examples illustrate the workings of racialized stereotypes and mutual dissociation of racial traumas in Asian therapist and Asian patient dyads. Finally, I add a plea for Asian American psychoanalysts and therapists to write and speak about their experiences from their own frame of reference for fuller recognition of Asian American subjectivity.

The Model Minority stereotype and the illusion of inclusion

The stereotype of the Model Minority is often applied to Asian Americans. Asian American educational and economic achievements are held up as a sign of successful assimilation into American society. This perception was embraced by Asian Americans for some time, to the degree that it distanced us from the long history of outright racism and xenophobia against us.[1] The Model Minority stereotype conferred to Asian Americans an honorary white status. And similarities in values between white and Asian cultures such as hard work and an emphasis on education were pointed out by both sides. Asian Americans were thought to be quasi-white or white adjacent.

Because the Model Minority stereotype is considered positive, its negative effect has been hard to see. However, it does render us part objects, as my colleague Usha Tummala-Narra

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[1]Since the first arrival of the Chinese in California in the 1850's, Asian Americans have been seen as the yellow peril or perpetual strangers, unfit for inclusion in American society. The historian Ellen Wu traces how a number of political, social, and cultural imperatives from ethnic, mainstream, and global sources came together to frame Asian Americans (mainly Japanese and Chinese) in a positive light during the mid-20th century. The Immigration Act of 1965 allowed for a large influx of highly educated professionals from Asia, which added to the perception of Asians as successful. The stereotype was subsequently used with a racist aim by some to blame African Americans for their difficulties. The 2020 census data indicate that the 20 million Asian Americans living in America are very diverse, made up of 20-plus nationalities with vastly varying levels of education, religion, economic success, and cultural value systems. For a detailed historical account of the origin of the term Model Minority, please see Color of Success: Asian Americans and the origins of Model Minority by Ellen Wu (2015).

(2022) has pointed out, and the complexity and uniqueness of each Asian person's subjectivity is lost. Winnicott has taught us that accurate mirroring by our social surround is crucial to our sense of self.

The Model Minority stereotype can be experienced by Asians as a mis-attunement or inaccurate mirroring on two levels. First, the perception of success, while ostensibly positive, works as a subtle expectation that each Asian person conform to this perception, whether that be economic success or educational and professional achievement. It can stimulate anxiety or shame if you do not fit this stereotype, and it falls on you to do the emotional labor of fulfilling, rejecting, or otherwise negotiating the stereotype. When the stereotype expectation is applied to an Asian American child, it can subtly promote false self-adaptation. Second, the perception of Asian Americans as a Model Minority or quasi-white has the effect of leaving out the racialized dimensions of our experiences and of erasing our racial distinctiveness, rendering us invisible as racial subjects. The seeming assimilation into whiteness leads us to dissociate ourselves from our history of racial trauma[2] and we are liable to miss perceiving the true nature of racism and race dynamics in this country for what they are. This misperception creates a cultural intersubjective situation that leads to the illusion of color-blindness and of full inclusion of Asians into whiteness.

In embracing the Model Minority role, Asian Americans sign onto a tacit contract. In exchange for being model citizens, we are guaranteed a secure place in America. This contract provides a promise that assimilation and equal status in America are possible, and the achievement of the American Dream is possible.

The American Dream is a naive optimism that allows an immigrant to form an attachment to America. The belief that America is a fair place, rewarding all that work hard, allows immigrants to have faith that they can create a new life in America. It is an illusion very similar to the "absolutisms of everyday life," a term coined by Robert Stolorow, to refer to our tendency to experience the world as stable and predictable (Stolorow, 2007, 2011). It is a set of illusory beliefs about the world that allows us to go on in life, and to function in the world.

The election of a racist president, Donald Trump, and the deadly waves of anti-Asian hate attacks on the heels of the Coronavirus pandemic, have left many Asian-Americans shaken. These events shattered what had been a soothing illusion of inclusion, a belief that a secure belonging in America was possible. These events exposed the Model Minority contract as a sham, as we were back to being seen as an existential threat to white America. White America, so willing to see Asian-Americans as like them, suddenly circled the wagons, and rendered us the disease-carrying yellow peril.[3]

Often fleeing from poverty, wars, or oppressive sociopolitical and cultural predicaments in their countries of origin, immigrants dream of better lives in America. And this can help us understand the elements of trauma and fear behind the Asian ethics of hard work and perseverance. From within ourselves, survival depends on making a successful go at life in America. This protracted survival mode entails being hyper-vigilant about one's performance and one's standing in American society. Children of immigrants feel the urgency and

[2]For an overview of a history of discrimination and racial traumas of Asian Americans, see Erika Lee's The Making of Asian America: A history (2015) and the five part PBS series on Asian Americans which aired in Tajima-Pena (2020).
[3]For a fuller description of the history of Yellow Peril, see Tchen and Yates' Yellow Peril! (2014).

the burden of compensating for their parents' traumas. And countless examples from my patients show that there is a cost to being on a protracted survival mode. Just this morning I saw Jenny, a US-born Vietnamese woman who cannot allow herself to leave a miserable job because her father, a boat refugee from Vietnam, instilled in her a belief that she had to work no matter what. Emma, another patient I saw today, is a US born Korean American woman whose immigrant mother was an Amy Chua-style Tiger Mom. Emma spent her Ivy League college years depressed, unable to get out of bed. The transmission of immigrant parents' social trauma to children can be all encompassing, both mental and somatic, as Resmaa Menakem writes in My Grandmother's Hands (2017). Children are not accurately mentalized when unheld as themselves in the minds of their anxious immigrant parents and in the collective mind of the society at large. This sometimes leads to the development of false self and difficulties knowing and valuing one's authentic self. Kirkland Vaughans discusses the similar phenomenon of the minds of the Black and Hispanic male youths not being mentalized by society (Vaughans & Harris, 2016).

From the perspective of trauma theory, the illusion that the merger with whiteness would protect us, the newcomers to this country, from vulnerability is understandable. This defensive idealization of whites takes the form of considering whiteness as the gold standard and measuring our value through our proximity to it. This ideology has led Asians to put disproportionate value in joining white spaces, living in white neighborhoods, attending predominantly white schools or white religious organizations, etc. It includes dating and marrying white people as well as striving for white beauty ideals. More and more young Asian-Americans are suffering from the symptoms of eating disorders in order to achieve the white thin body standards (Akoury et al., 2019; Ijima Hall, 1995), and are going to the extreme measure of creating double eyelids through surgical means (Ouellette, 2009) to achieve the Western look. Anti-Black racism in Asian American communities goes hand-in-hand with the idealization of whiteness, and it has led to anger and resentment from other communities of color.

Eng and Han (2000), in their landmark paper on the Asian American experience twenty-some years ago, have already made a strong observation that the promised total assimilation or inclusion in American society is ultimately denied to Asian Americans. They famously employed Freud's theory of unresolved grief or melancholia as a framework to understand the psychic consequences of society's exclusionary practices and the disavowal of such practices on Asian American subjects. They elucidate "the registers of loss and depression attendant to social and psychic processes of immigration, assimilation, and racialization" (Eng & Han, 2019, p. 35) and contend that this melancholic condition (and all its attendant ills) is an understandable, non-pathological, and collective response on the part of the Asian Americans. While Eng and Han's work addresses the violence associated with the exclusion, immigration, and the disavowal of racial traumas, they do not explicitly name these phenomenon as trauma nor do they make use of the trauma literature. My ideas discussed in this article are from the trauma lens from the psychoanalytic trauma theories and trauma studies (Ferenczi, 1949; Herman, 2015; Khan, 1963; Stolorow, 2007, 2011; Van der Kolk, 2015). From this framework, certain experiences are allowed to come into the focus, such as the shattering for Asian Americans of the basic trust and sense of safety in America. Our society's disavowal of its racist history and acts against Asian Americans erodes Asian Americans' confidence in our senses. It creates a collective "confusion of the tongues" phenomenon that Ferenczi famously discussed (Ferenczi, 1949): The alignment with

whiteness, a compulsion to achieve tangible academic/economic success, and the dissociating of experiences of otherness are Asian Americans' attempts at survival in a racist society.

The Asian fetish: Sexualization of Asian women and feminization of Asian men

I offer an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon of the Asian fetish – sexualization of Asian women and feminization of Asian men – as an example of othering of Asian Americans and how the illusion of inclusion obscures it. This examination began with the deadly shooting of Asian American women in Atlanta in March 2021, as it triggered explosive reactions from many patients in my private practice, a good portion of whom are Asian American women. Some shared childhood experiences of being called racial names ("slant eyes," "chopsticks," "chink"), and others expressed alarm, fear and anxiety. They were incensed at the suggestion by the police and the mainstream media that the white male shooter was not racially motivated and that he merely wanted to get rid of sexual temptations. Several women were shaken to the core, as they re-lived racialized sexual victimization and objectification. Each patient, whose educational and career accomplishments and life circumstances were much different from those of the victims, nevertheless felt a deep identification with them. It was a racialized version of "Me-Too" experience for them. (See the outpouring of Asian American women on Twitter and Instagram sharing similar experiences of sexualized racism.)[4]

The first patient I saw the day after the Atlanta shooting was Jamie, a biracial Jewish-Taiwanese physicist in her late 20's. The first thing she mentioned was text exchanges with her family. Her white father's first question was if the victims were sex workers. Her sister and her Taiwanese mother said nothing in response. Jamie felt infuriated by her father's insensitivity. She felt that he understood nothing of her experience as an Asian woman, which for her meant coping with sexualization and objectification. She felt enraged as she re-lived other scenes from their family's past in which she and her mother experienced his erasure of their Taiwanese identity. She said that her family has utterly assimilated to whiteness at the expense of Taiwaneseness. Her mother converted to Judaism and did not teach Chinese or introduce Taiwanese/Chinese culture to her or her sister, all no doubt because her father showed no interest in their Taiwanese culture. She contemplated asking her mother, "'How do you bear all the silence?'" but felt exhausted by the thought of how it would be met with evasiveness.

[4]Of course my patients' reactions were not monolithic. For example, a patient who saw herself to be different from the victims, was unaffected by the shooting. She appeared to be blaming the victims for putting themselves in a vulnerable position. This defensive move provided her with an illusion of personal control, safety and protection. The truth is her skin color and gender, traits she has no control over, make her a target of racism. Furthermore, by putting the blame on the victim, she can't see society's systemic racism for what it is.

A Vietnamese American patient, a strong social justice warrior, showed a dissociative response. When asked about her reactions to the shootings, she was overwhelmed by a rush of intense, confusing and contradictory emotions. While she was sympathetic toward the victims, she was disgusted by the sexual aspects of their work; it triggered her own childhood subjugation to her parents who denied her bodily autonomy by controlling her body movements, her clothing, and hair style. In her mind, her parents' authoritarian and abusive parenting style was unequivocally tied to their Asian culture. She hated reading stories about young Asian people coming home to their culture and seeing images of AAPI pride and love, shown in the media following the Atlanta shooting. It felt like an assault to her perception of the inherently abusive nature of Asian culture. She wanted to smash Asian culture to smithereens, in a manner that conjured up in my mind Franz Fanon's description of blowing the colonial world to smithereens. For a more detailed discussion on the impact of trauma within the ethnic culture on racial identity development, see Yi (2014a).

Several others, preoccupied by struggles in their own personal lives, did not have strong reactions.

She had a busy day but felt no motivation to do anything. She said, "Can't wrap my mind around this broad scale hate toward Asian women. How I move through the world where I am seen like an object. I want to scream at my dad, 'You have no appreciation for what it's like for me!'"

She then contemplated her own tendency to date only white men. She has, herself, idealized white men. It was frightening and painful for her to recognize that she may have repeated her mother's self-erasing tendency with her last boyfriend, never calling him out on his subtle put downs. And she wondered why it was that she never considered his history of having dated mostly Asian women as a potential red flag?[5]

Another patient, Vicki, a Vietnamese American historian in her early 30's, was extremely triggered by the shooting: she began associating to her relationship with her white ex-boyfriend, whom she dated for a few years after college. Although she had previously made a mention of him as someone who was highly toxic, she always spoke of him in the past tense. This unbothered air was present even while she told me that this ex slept with several different women in her social circle during their relationship. Only after an incident in which he forced her to have sex with him by pinning her down violently did she find enough courage to walk away from him. She never confronted him. Shocking as it was, Vicki had little affect when she told me all this, and we had moved on to address other family traumas about which she had more readily available affect.

Her dissociated affect returned in reaction to the Atlanta shooting, as she identified with the victims, whom she imagined were being used as sexual objects by the white killer. Vicki began putting into words what had happened in her previous relationship. She remembered that he had manipulated her into posing for him in the nude and had posted the pictures online when she broke up with him. She remembered that soon after she left him, he had begun dating another Asian woman from the same workplace. She felt her stomach drop as she realized she had been replaced, not because she had any lingering feelings for him but because she realized she was a mere Asian fetish for him. And she wept as she realized that he was only one in a long line of white men who fetishized her. Later in her diary she put it this way:

> . . . I was still in elementary school when men began greeting me with catcalls. As I got older, the catcalls became more lewd and several men have propositioned me for paid sex. In each of these situations, I was stripped of my personhood and individuality and am reduced to exotic sex object, compliant, and submissive. I am presented as the perfect complement to the hyper-masculinity of the white man. And in his fantasy, I am small, weak, submissive and alluring. Colonial and military domination by white men in Asia has led to sexualization and fetishization of Asian women.

From this articulate rebuke of white male domination, you can tell that Vicki has a strong, well developed anti-colonial consciousness. The truth is that she is a scholar of colonialism. Yet even for her, her racial trauma had been deeply sealed off from the rest of

[5]For Jamie and Vicki (a patient I discuss next), their experiences are much more complex than the race and gender related traumas that I highlight in my discussions. By highlighting them, I do not mean to be reducing their experiences only to these dimensions. Familial, individual, and biological factors all play a role in shaping all of us, including these two patients. For example, Jamie's father's treatment of her is not just a function of racism, but is also a function of his overall personality organization. Similarly Vicki's traumas within her own family are extensive and have hampered her sense of agency and autonomy. I chose to focus on the sexualized racism, out of concern that this important issue not be diluted, and because these particular clinical vignettes are good examples of racialized sexism under discussion. David, the last patient I discuss in this paper, encompasses fuller complexities of his racial, gender, and familial dynamics.

her emotional world. These two emotional worlds co-existed in her, kept apart by dissociation.

I was stunned by Vicki's painful racial reckoning. I had to reflect hard on what had been my own undiscerning, complacent state, unable to look out for her and my other patients. Was I any different from Jamie's silent mother, who said nothing about her Taiwanese daughter's erasure? The strange thing was that it was not as if my patients and I had not discussed racism and sexism before. But the intensity of emotions brought out by the shooting made us realize that our previous discussions were missing something. When my patients talked about going on dates with white men with a penchant for dating Asian women or dealing with sexual overtures by white coworkers, we had done it in such a way that their true significance was missed. I realized that my patients and I had been in a fog, unable to see what was happening to us. Only in retrospect did I realize that the illusion of inclusion afforded by white adjacency has made it difficult for me to see when my patients were being objectified and targeted. It meant that I could only see their experiences as isolated events, rather than a pattern in which they, because of their gender and race, were marked for objectification and sexualization.

The first puncture in my illusion of inclusion was seeing a Trump flag go up at the house of a white family with grade-school aged children on my street. Soon after that, another white family displayed a banner supporting a pro-Trump local politician. Suddenly, I was seized by a pair of insights: I no longer felt safe in my predominantly white and Asian neighborhood of La Canada Flintridge (near Pasadena) and my sense of safety and belonging until then had been false. Thereafter, I developed a nervous habit of trying to guess if the neighbors I encountered on my daily walks with my dog were Trump supporters. A deeper and sharper puncture: my white male analyst (whom I consult only occasionally now as the bulk of my work with him has been done some time ago), told me recently that he has not heard of the term Model Minority. To feel outrage or disappointment is beyond me: We have lived through ups and downs – divorce, death, illness – in each other's lives, and we are each growing old. Yet now I realize that I don't see my racial self accurately reflected by him when I peer into him. Jasmine Ueng-McHale, an American-born Chinese psychologist, described a similar process of coming into a sudden recognition of how much she has incorporated a white perspective in her normative consciousness (Ueng-McHale, 2021). She now sees how she never noticed herself to be different from her white male analyst, or from her Irish American husband. She never noticed how the doll figures that she always chose for herself when playing with her children patients were white. Trying as I had been to be reflective of my own racial consciousness, I too could not escape adopting a white-centered consciousness as my own and operating from that vantage point. The Chinese American philosopher Robin Zheng (2016) invokes Miranda Fricker's concept of "hermeneutic injustice" to explain the confusion and shame that set in when marginalized individuals' experiences are rendered unintelligible by the prevailing collective framework of understanding. I had taken on the collective framework of whiteness and therefore could not make sense of my patients' experiences from a racialized perspective.

It has been moving for me to see the dissolution of dissociation in Vicki. It has brought about some amazing changes in her personal life. She has begun sharing her abuse history with her husband, who is white, and a select few female friends. She has been rewarded with an enlivening affirmation from them.

How did the shootings usher in the dramatic return of Vicki's dissociated affect in therapy? I believe the intersubjective field created by our shared kinship as Asian women played a role. Robert Stolorow (2007, 2011) gives a trauma-informed meaning to Kohut's idea of twinship: the experience of belonging with others who have experienced the same trauma as you lessens feelings of singularity, estrangement, and solitude. Racial kinship or twinship then is belonging with others with a shared experience of racial marginalization. Over the four years of working together, Vicki and I had formed such a racial twinship, especially from our shared, heightened awareness of danger from the year-long-anti Asian attacks leading up to the Atlanta shooting. She knew that she would find a relational home with me for her past racial traumas when they were triggered by the shooting.

For my part, the shootings did not elicit any specific traumatic racial memories as they did in Vicki. I did not feel any direct identification with the victims, with the exception of a faint familiarity with them. My more notable emotional reaction was in the form of sadness. I gradually came to understand that my reaction held a clue to my own dissociated past: my Korean mother was a mail order bride. In time, the faint familiarity evoked by the slain massage parlor women crystallized into specific memories of my childhood in Korea.

The recovery of this lost past took shape slowly while I was researching the history of American involvement in Asian wars and its legacies. It began with listening to podcasts by Yuri Doolan (Patterson, 2021) and Grace Cho (Choi, 2021), two adult children of American soldiers and Korean camp town women. Camp towns are communities that sprang up around US military bases in various parts of South Korea, to cater to the needs of the American soldiers. Prostitution was the core part of the camp towns' economy (Vine, 2017). Both Cho and Doolan are excellent scholars producing work on their personal experiences, camp towns, and military prostitution (Doolan, 2019). Listening to their podcasts was eery, as I recalled my own vivid images and memories of the camp town I intimately knew. My mother worked in one of them near Seoul, after a failed relationship with my father. She taught English to women in need of basic English skills to communicate with American soldiers. After six years of stay there, she began a mail correspondence with an American bachelor living in California. At the age of 49, with the proverbial two hundred dollars in her pocket, she arrived at LAX with her two teen girls to meet her new American husband. The marriage ended in divorce one year later, and soon after that the whole experience was "forgotten," almost never spoken about except by the three of us. As an adult, I spoke about it in my analysis with a white male analyst, but the whole experience still remained unincorporated into my life. Not surprisingly, I never found it convenient to share it with my Korean friends. And frankly I had never met any other Koreans who either were children of camp town or mail order brides until I heard the podcasts by Cho and Doolan. Their moving stories as well as those of my patients like Vicki, ultimately helped me to embrace this part of my life. Deep sadness washed over me; I pondered its source. Ultimately, it is grief over the human condition itself, man-made or not – war, poverty, patriarchy, sexism, misogyny, racism – and sorrow over our very human struggle to survive within it. And it is through my emotional kinship with others like me, Grace Cho, Yuri Doolan, my mother, and Vicki, that I find solace, that we are all in this together.[6]

[6]In his autobiographical novel On Earth We Were Briefly Gorgeous (2019), Ocean Vuong, a Vietnamese American gay writer, chronicles his and his family's harrowing traumas: from war, family violence, sexual identity, to poverty. His grandmother was a sex worker serving the American GI's during the Vietnam War. He turns to the beauty inherent in life and art to counteract human finitude.

Asian women and racial stereotypes

From the margins, Asian American scholars across a wide range of disciplines, — history, law, sociology, political science, literature, and film – have been putting together extensive evidence (Chou, 2012; Moon, 2009; Parrenas Shimuzu, 2007; Ramirez, 2021; Woan, 2008; Zheng, 2016) that what underlies the Asian fetish is a trove of racialized stereotypes about Asian women. They point to a diverse range of practices that has led to the sexualization of Asian and Asian American women – the US federal immigration laws, military occupation of east and Southeast Asia, prostitution, and derogatory stereotypes promulgated through variety of cultural means. Even before the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned Chinese immigrants from becoming US citizens, the Page Act of 1875 prohibited the immigration of Chinese women, as they were feared to be engaging in prostitution in the US (Lee, 2015; Wu, 2015). The legal scholar Sunny Woan (2008) chronicles the white heterosexual male presence in Asia and its lingering effects on diasporic Asian women. She asserts that the idea of the hyper-sexual Asian woman began taking hold in connection to the US-led wars in Asian countries, such as the Philippine-American War (1899–1902), the Korean War (1950–1953) and the Vietnam War (1955–1973). Sex industries proliferated around the US military bases in these countries, to service the American GI's. This phenomenon is especially pronounced in South Korea (Vine, 2017), where camp towns that surround US bases have become incorporated into the country's economy, politics, and culture. Not an insignificant number of Asian immigrants to America are women connected to sex industries, from mail-order brides to military brides (Yuh, 2002), and trafficked women (Patterson, 2021). The sexual tourism industry continues to flourish even now in Southeast Asian countries and contributes to the image of Asian women as sexual objects.

Woan (2008) asserts that the stereotype of hyper-sexual Asian women in turn fostered the "over-prevalence of Asian women in pornography, the mail-order bride phenomenon, the Asian fetish syndrome, and worst of all, sexual violence against Asian women" (p.275). This trend has only been furthered by how Asian women are depicted in media. One scene in Stanley Kubrick's 1987 Vietnam War film Full Metal Jacket has become an iconic portrayal of Asian women as sexual objects. In this scene, a Vietnamese woman propositions two American GI's saying, "Me so horny . . . Me love you long time." Over time, this phrase has become a widely recognizable meme in the American context (in school yards, locker rooms, music lyrics and TV shows, etc.).

The stereotype of Asian women as docile, passive and subservient has circulated widely in popular culture as well; the film scholar Celine Parrenas Shimuzu (2007) points out the enduring popularity of the Western trope of an Asian woman as submissive, blindly loyal, and tragically in love with a white man. Some examples of this trope appear in the popular opera Madama Butterfly, the silent film Toll of the Sea (1920s) and the musical Miss Saigon (1989). Each of these productions features a demure and naive Asian girl falling deeply in love with a white man, only to be abandoned or separated from him. In each of the productions, she commits suicide when he reappears with an American wife in tow.

I am not suggesting that Asian women and white men in inter-racial relationships are all based on stereotyping and fetishization. Plenty of relationships involving white men and Asian women are based on mutual recognition of each partner as whole subjects, not based on part object stereotypes. I merely wish to point out that we live in a culture saturated with sexualized stereotypes of Asian women and that it influences the way Asian women are

viewed and treated in this society. Furthermore, sexual harassment and violence by men who target Asian women on the basis of sexualized stereotypes do happen, as was the case of the Atlanta shooting as well as the 2001 case in Seattle, in which two white men kidnapped and raped two Japanese teenagers (Tizon, 2001). They had targeted the Japanese girls because they believed the girls would be docile and not call the police.

The feminization of Asian men

The other side of the Asian fetish is the feminization of Asian men. Edward Said points out in Orientalism (1978) that the West's perception of the East is that it is passive, feminine, weak, and in need of the guidance and patronage of the West. So if Asians as a racial group are feminine, then it produces what Robin Zheng called a double feminization of Asian women (2016). Asian women are doubly feminine because they are female and Asian. If this double feminization increases the sexual capital of Asian women, it reduces that of Asian men.

Stereotypes associated with Asians, such as docility, passivity, non-assertiveness, quietness, agreeability, etc., are considered feminine and make Asian men appear un-masculine, unmanly, and sexually unattractive. A recent survey (Shen, 2016) found that Asian American men reported dealing with negative gender and sexual stereotypes in their daily lives: 88% of participants reported experiencing ridicule stemming from negative racial stereotypes: 71% reported experiencing "nerd" stereotypes and 67% experiencing "small penis" stereotypes. Furthermore 79% of participants endorsed "race was a relevant factor in their dating life," with 46% indicating that they have been told in person, "I don't date Asian men," and 11% having heard this statement six or more times. And these stereotypes seem to lead to real-life consequences in dating and romantic relationships.[7] Major online dating service OK Cupid found that over a five year span, in an analysis of message response rates, Black females received the least frequent responses from interested suitors, while Asian males received the least frequent responses out of all men (Kao et al., 2018). And this negative response pattern appears to be true for Asian women's attitude toward Asian men. Data from Yahoo! Personals in the early 2000s found that among those who stated racial preferences, 40% of Asian women said they would not date an Asian man, while less than 10% of Asian men said they would not date an Asian woman (Kao et al., 2018). Mok (1999) cites empirical data suggesting that Asian American women tend to date or marry white men at a higher rate than Asian American men dating or marrying white women, a trend that has existed since the 1950s.

The greater reluctance on the part of Asian women to date or marry Asian men (than vice versa) has been understood as Asian women also being under the sway of society's prevailing stereotype about Asian men as undesirable romantic partners[8] (Tizon, 2014).

[7]For descriptions of Asian American men addressing these stereotypes head on with humor and deep resilience, see Alex Tizon's autobiography Big Little Man (2014), Adrian Tomine's graphic novel, Shortcomings (2009), Eddie Huang's article, Hey, Steve Harvey, Who Says I might Not Steal Your Girl? (January 14, 2017, NYT), and Thessaly La Force's The Comedians Challenging Stereotypes About Asian-American Masculinity (August 26, 2019, NYT). For a description of a troubling movement of an anonymous group of Asian men notorious for directing their racial rage at Asian women for dating non-Asians, see Aaron Mak's "Men's Rights Asians" think this is their moment (September 15, 2021, Slate).

[8]While I agree with this view, it is not the only explanation for why Asian women might not want to date Asian men. For some Asian women, turning away from Asian men may represent a flight from traumas associated with patriarchy and sexism within their own ethnic culture.

The Model Minority attributes of cooperativeness, agreeableness, upstandingness, etc., do not particularly enhance perceptions of masculinity. Data from online dating sites suggest that Asian men's superior educational and professional statuses do not translate to a greater desirability (Kao et al., 2018). The reverse appears to be true for Asian women. For them, the Model Minority traits of educational and professional accomplishments, when combined with their femininity, make them more desirable.

David, a Korean American male in his late 20's, sought therapy with a Korean male therapist.[9] The presenting problem was his feeling of inadequate masculinity. He loved women, especially Asian women. But he had no luck meeting them in online dating site, bars, nightclubs, or anywhere else for that matter, confirming his fear that he was undesirable to women. This feeling was especially heightened when he saw Asian women with white men.

David came from an upper middle-class family. His parents immigrated from Seoul, Korea. He grew up seeing his father as unassertive and weak. He felt contemptuous toward him for his submissiveness to his bossy, volatile mother. He grew up on the outskirts of a major city in Southern California, which was predominantly white. He was bullied by white kids who made fun of his small size. One incident in particular stood out in his mind: when he was an adolescent some kids mistook him for a girl from behind and laughed at him. As a young adult, he was keenly aware of racial power dynamics. He could not help but notice that Asian men always seemed to place last in the hierarchy of manhood. They never got the girl, especially if it was a white girl.

David found himself studying and copying how alpha males, i.e., white men, carried themselves physically – straight spine, square shoulders, forward stride, firm eye contact, and strong voice. In his sexual fantasies, he imagined himself as a white man. In fact this was the only way he was able to achieve orgasm, either with a partner or masturbating on his own. Being an Asian in his sexual fantasy reminded him of his father and made him impotent.

This is a case that demonstrates the complex interplay of family dynamics, stereotypes, race and power in an Asian individual. David has a deep sense of personal worthlessness, with his self-concept composed of an amalgam of false self ideals and judgments. While I do not know any more about his developmental history, I assume that this problem originated from his relationships with his parents and that he garnered little sense of basic worth from either one of them. In particular, he appears not to have been able to see his father as idealizable, as a source of strength and power. Instead he felt contempt for his father's submissiveness and passivity toward his mother. As such he could not form a viable masculinity based on identification with his father.

David organized his father's submissiveness to his mother in racial terms, equating it with being Asian. Ironically, from an Asian cultural standpoint, his father's submissiveness is not the typical male behavior in an Asian family. In fact, his father's passivity is an inversion of Asian maleness. That David attributes it, incorrectly, to Asianness suggests that he sees his father (and himself as well) from a Western lens, applying American society's emasculating stereotype of Asian men. Through the societal racism he endured (bullying in school and portrayals of Asian men as emasculated, broadly, in society), he came to see race

[9]This case description is based on a single session consultation I did with David's therapist. No further detail is known about David's developmental history, especially his early relationship with his mother.

as a defining factor in manhood. His equating of Asianness with sexual inadequacy puts him in an impossible bind, since as long as he remains Asian he is unable to work out a viable masculinity for himself. The only way out is merger with whiteness. Only this way does he feel potent enough to achieve a climax.

The therapist explored this in the transference: If he felt Asian men were losers, how did he feel about seeing an Asian male therapist? David said that he still looked up to the therapist. This seemed true to the therapist, who nevertheless felt the idealization was problematic, as it was based on his status as a Model Minority, i.e., his academic and career accomplishments (I suspect that sexual masculinity is split off in David's conception of Asian men, even the successful ones,[10] mirroring the society's view. Admirable as Asian men may be, as doctors, lawyers, engineers, and even psychotherapists, they were still not shining symbols of Western-style masculine sexuality). Instead of addressing David's problematic transference or racial feelings head on, the therapist decided to concentrate on the provision of empathic attunement first. This was based on the theory that David sought out an Asian male therapist, because he had unconsciously wanted to have a corrective experience with an Asian father figure. I agreed with this theory, as it occurred to me that one important aspect of David's extremely negative view of Asian men is rooted in his traumatizing personal experience of his father, whom he could not respect or idealize. His therapist, by being a presence attuned to his life experiences in general and to these experiences of his father in particular, can open up a space for David to experience an Asian male as a dependable and helpful source of understanding.

This new experience of an Asian male therapist may help him to recognize that his attribution of his father's individual passivity to all Asian men was a result of an internalized racial stereotype, a product of a Western point of view. With this he might be able to see and appreciate that Asian masculinity is possible, defined from within. Kenji Miyamoto (2020) discusses this process of decolonizing (Tummala-Narra, 2022) beautifully. The son of a Japanese father who was born in the internment camp, he grew up being angry at his father, whom he deemed compliant. Seeing his father from an Asian cultural perspective helped him to appreciate his father's "private self-sacrifice and humble suffering as masculine ideals"(p. 277). He stated,

> While I previously viewed many of my father's generation as passively accepting the discrimination they were subjected to at the time of the internment, in reality it was a highly active and incredibly demanding process for a Japanese American like my father to turn his lifetime of opposition born behind barbed wire, into a scholarship to Stanford University and successfully raising his family in American society. Viewed through this cultural lens, masculinity can be seen as the willingness and humility to put one's own personal ego and pride behind the need and desire to provide a better life for the family collective. (p. 278)

Ultimately, David can use these new experiences and perspectives gained from his work with his Korean male therapist to forge a viable and flexible masculine identity and understand that power and masculinity are not inherently tied to any one race.

[10]It would appear that the Model Minority stereotype enhances Asian women's desirability, as it combines hard work and achievement orientation with femininity.

Conclusion

In her book *Minor Feelings: An Asian American Reckoning* (2020), Cathy Park Hong likens the Asian American experience to a set of minor feelings. While major emotions, such as the ones erupting after George Floyd's death, lead to societal upheavals, minor feelings are to be merely put up with and not taken seriously: Asian Americans have made it in this country, and since we did not have it as bad, racially, as African Americans to begin with, what do we have to complain about? The virulent anti-Asian attacks over many months that culminated in the Atlanta killings shattered the illusion of inclusion that Asian Americans, by the virtue of being exemplary citizens, have a secure belonging in America. The Atlanta killing exposed what had always been lurking under the Model Minority veneer: ugly and pernicious stereotypes and the fetishization of Asian men and women. The outpouring of emotions from my Asian American patients has led me to understand that our experiences are not minor at all. It was just that they could not be acknowledged from the prevailing, white-centered frame of reference.

Psychoanalysis is one such white-centered frame of reference. Whiteness is so ubiquitous that it is never seen or questioned. Its practitioners, almost always white, wield power to call psychopathology for all people and often harm people of color in the process. However, the racist and colonial underpinnings of psychoanalytic theories are finally beginning to be addressed (Holmes, 2016; Stoute, 2017; Swartz, 2018; Tummala-Narra, 2022), and various writers have argued that psychoanalysis's racial blindspot is in part due to its dissociated racial traumas from anti-semitism and the Holocaust (Kuriloff, 2013; Yi, 2014b). I am heartened to see many white analysts grappling with whiteness in their clinical work and their encounters with psychoanalytic theories, as judged by the increasing number of articles in journals and presentations on whiteness (Anen, 2021; Caflisch, 2021; Jacobs, 2014; Levine, 2022; Suchet, 2007). What is especially inspiring is to witness African American and Hispanic analytic colleagues writing about their experiences from their own frame of reference (Christian et al., 2016; Gherovici & Christian, 2018; Vaughans & Harris, 2016; White, 2002). We Asian American analysts and analytic therapists should also be investigators of our own subjectivity. We have, for too long, been the object of the white analytic gaze or have been lost in the shuffle. Even if there is not yet a critical mass of us, it is imperative that we begin these investigations, not only to help Asian American patients but also to contribute our differentiated voices to the development of a genuinely inclusive psychoanalysis.

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