Research in Context

# From Model Minority to Yellow Peril: The Shifting Narratives of Asian International Students

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## ABSTRACT

*The ongoing pandemic, COVID-19, has demonstrated how quickly depictions of Asian individuals can shift from "model minority" to "yellow peril" during times of crisis. These times were particularly difficult for Asian postsecondary international students who were directly impacted by these shifting narratives, as many faced discrimination, violence, and prejudice as a result of the rise of anti-Asian hate that occurred across Canada. Thus, utilizing critical race theory (CRT), the purpose of this article is to provide an overview of these contrasting narratives, how the "model minority" and "yellow peril" can contribute to the maintenance of White supremacy, and possible considerations and interventions to better support Asian international postsecondary students during their studies in Canada.*

**Keywords:** Asian international students, COVID-19, critical race theory, model minority, white supremacy, yellow peril

Since its first outbreak in December 2019, COVID-19 has had an immense impact on the health and well-being of individuals worldwide. In Canada, the federal government began to provide support for much of the general population to ease the worsening conditions of COVID-19, implementing programs such as the Canada Emergency Response Benefit (CERB) program aimed at providing financial support to those struggling with employment (Buckner et al., 2021). However, it became apparent that while support measures were being considered and applied for Canadian citizens across the country, international students in Canada faced heightened barriers and restrictions (Buckner et al., 2021). These times were especially difficult for Asian international students in higher education, as research has already identified these populations as vulnerable due to the cultural, academic, and social practices they possess, which contrast with their host countries (Lee, 2020). As such, through the

lens of critical race theory (CRT), the overall purpose of this article is to (1) provide an overview of the dual narratives of "model minority" and "yellow peril" and (2) encourage discussion of how these conceptions contribute to the maintenance of White supremacy and racial capitalism.

## CRITICAL RACE THEORY (CRT) AND WHITENESS AS PROPERTY

CRT is a concept that was first used to analyze inequity in education in the US to understand how race and racism are embedded within public policy and legal systems (Hiraldo, 2010). This framework advocates against White supremacy, the belief that White people are the superior race, as well as claims of color blindness. Ideals surrounding equality and notions of color blindness can ultimately lead to disguising or disregarding racial issues or acts of discrimination and the perpetuation of policies that sustain a system of social inequality (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hiraldo, 2010). Within CRT, whiteness as property is a principle that suggests that racism is rooted in all societal aspects and that whiteness can be "considered a property interest … [that] operates on different levels [including] the right of possession, the right to use and enjoyment, the right to disposition, and the right of exclusion" (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 55). As such, Whiteness as property is "an asset that only White individuals can possess" (p. 55) and take advantage of, as Whiteness is consistently situated as the normative within Western society. Although CRT originally emerged to address the lack of racial reform in the US, this theory can be expanded and applied to examine global interactions. In particular, the experiences of international student populations that originate from nonwhite or non-English-speaking countries can be examined, as they often face increased difficulty adjusting to their host countries, experiences of social isolation, 'othering', prejudice, and outright racism (Yao et al., 2018).

## "MODEL MINORITY MYTH" AND "YELLOW PERIL"

The model minority is a myth that presents Asians as the ideal example that other minorities should strive to achieve, placing them on a pedestal due to their high academic, economic, and social accomplishments (Padgett et al., 2020). Although this myth appears to be a positive depiction for Asians, it harbors many issues and contradictions. It has been quoted as a potential factor for the relative invisibility of Asian communities, as their struggles are often disregarded or go unacknowledged due to these perceived positive portrayals and successes (Wu & Nguyen, 2022). This is exemplified in the 2019-2022 anti-Racism strategy published by Canadian Heritage (2019), where anti-Asian racism was not even stated within the document, despite mention of other racialized communities such as Muslim, Black, Jewish, Indigenous Peoples, and LGBTQ+ communities.

This myth often diminishes the individual achievements of Asians and instead associates their success with their cultural qualities and ethics, leading to circumstances where the holistic development of students is ignored. This myth silences Asian students and limits the opportunities they may receive for support, as this pressure often leads students to criticize themselves for low academic performance, feel ashamed to reach out for assistance, or even have their safety and

well-being overlooked by teachers despite studies demonstrating that these students often experience racial harassment in schools (Wu & Nguyen, 2022). Similarly, a study conducted by Yao et al. (2018) that analyzed the literature on international student experiences in the US through the lens of CRT identified prevalent themes of White supremacy. The most distinct themes were the privileged power that White American culture possessed, the dominance of English as the superior language, and the assumed notion that international students will adapt and assimilate to host country standards. Many faculty members also expressed positive feelings toward their predominantly Asian students because of their "high intellectual ability…" (p. 47), demonstrating how the model minority underpins their perceived identity. This can lead to the silencing of Asian international students' concerns and disregard for serious difficulties they face in acculturating to their host countries.

Furthermore, these 'positive' depictions of Asians can quickly devolve into negative portrayals, especially during recent years in Canada, where Asians have been confronted with the notion of "Yellow Peril." Due to increased Asian student enrollment and immigration, there is a growing concern that these students may dilute Canadian cultures as they begin to dominate universities and produce environments described as "Too Asian" (Padgett et al., 2020). Since COVID-19, there have been over 1,150 incidents of anti-Asian racism across Canada (Nicholson, 2021). Such experiences are extremely difficult for many Asian international students, who already face difficulties adjusting or feeling a sense of belonging in their host countries amidst stigma, racial slurs, and public demands to "go back home" (Nguyen & Balakrishnan, 2020, p. 1375). Furthermore, not only do these students suffer from the health and safety stressors generally associated with COVID-19 but also other issues the pandemic has either introduced or worsened for their demographics. These include, but are not limited to, financial strain, transitioning from in-person to online learning, and rising geo-political tensions between Canada and Asia. All of these factors impact these student populations, leaving them more vulnerable and less prepared or able to develop a sense of belonging in their host nation.

## SHIFTING NARRATIVES AND WHITE SUPREMACY

This model minority myth has been applied strategically throughout history to foster interracial conflicts, as the construction of race in this myth is a method to create racial hierarchies, ultimately benefiting White individuals or groups. This myth pits minorities against one another and establishes a hierarchy where Asian groups are favorably generalized as being passive and "good, law-abiding minorities who know their place…" (Ho, 2015, p. 119). Governments have exploited this myth to implement policies, programs, and education systems that rationalize anti-Black racism, often using the myth to compare other races to Asian populations. Governments achieve this rationalization by highlighting how racial prejudice and the educational or career struggles that minorities may face are exaggerated or even nonexistent, as Asian individuals clearly demonstrate how "successful" they can be without societal reform (Iftikar & Museus, 2018).

By placing people of color in direct conflict with one another, the model minority myth distracts minorities from working together to change the status quo

and dismantle lingering White supremacy in systems of government and policy. The increased competition between minorities benefits White people because institutionalized whiteness is left relatively unchallenged. Instead, it is preserved, which perpetuates the disproportionate distribution of social capital and cultural inequity. As other minority groups are encouraged to strive to be like Asian individuals, who have achieved relative intellectual and economic success as they have assimilated into whiteness, this myth becomes another tool wielded by White individuals to reinforce racial othering and maintain expectations of conformity to the White standard (Chou & Feagin, 2015).

Despite the façade of Asian acceptance in these White spaces, Asian individuals can never truly grasp whiteness as property. Their status of "model minority" can be applied when they are viewed as relevant or needed and quickly disregarded and transformed to the status of "'unassimilable foreigner' or 'Yellow Peril,'" (Ho, 2015, p. 120) during times of crisis or circumstantial changes. This was particularly clear during the outbreak of COVID-19 when Asian communities quickly took the fall for the pandemic and were seen as a hazard toward society (Yao & Mwangi, 2022). For Asian international students in higher education, research revealed that many students were already feeling the academic pressure that is associated with the model minority stereotypes. This in turn can cause many students to become more hesitant to share their struggles, issues, and concerns, as these student populations are often quieter and obtain support services far less frequently than other races, despite equal or higher rates of mental health issues (Gupta et al., 2011).

## CONCLUSION

Narratives such as the model minority and yellow peril can all contribute to producing a system that perpetuates white supremacy within programs, laws, and policies that dehumanize and discriminate against Asian individuals (Iftikar & Museus, 2018). There is often a push for higher education to meet multicultural or diversity initiatives. As multiculturalism is a prevailing component of Canadian identity, it is often utilized and endorsed by Canada to market their education systems across the globe. Many institutions are utilizing international students to achieve goals toward multiculturalism, as institutions not only benefit financially from increased international enrollment but also reputationally. These institutions then further monetize their perception as multicultural by enticing domestic students with opportunities to "become more cultured at the expense of the international students" (Hiraldo, 2010, p. 56).

Educational institutions need to engage in genuine interactions and understand their more vulnerable, international student populations. There also needs to be a call to action for institutions to truly reflect on how their diversity initiatives may be founded by the dominant voice from a place of white privilege. Higher education institutions need to consider how programs may be constructed based on assumed ideologies or narratives of Asian students, such as the model minority, and how the emphasis on achieving equality could potentially lead to color blindness. This may lead to the concealment of real issues or blatant forms of discrimination that many students face as institutions ultimately fail to address the racist policies or

standards that sustain a cycle of social disparity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hiraldo, 2010).

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