

# "YELLOW PERIL" & "THE MODEL MINORITY"

## STEREOTYPES OF ASIAN-AMERICANS/ CANADIANS, TRANSFORMATIVE MEANINGS, AND CO-RESISTANCE

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### WHAT IS A RACIAL STEREOTYPE?

A stereotype is an idea about a group (usually of people) that communicates cultural and social categories by attaching meaning to specific traits.

Racial stereotyping uses specifically **racialized traits**— connected to things such as culture, language, and physical appearance— to create these meanings. These meanings are **simplified, exaggerated, solidified, and then applied** to groups of people who are lumped together based on perceived similarities in order to indicate difference from the dominant culture.

Stereotypes may not always appear negative; some may even seem to have a positive slant. However, regardless of whether a racial stereotype seems harmful, all stereotypes exist with the purpose of **drawing boundaries between groups.** Stereotypes are **often not factually reflective of the realities of the groups they represent.**

Two of the most powerful, widespread, and long-standing stereotypes projected onto Asian-American/ Canadian communities are the "yellow peril" and the "model minority myth."

### "YELLOW PERIL"

"Yellow Peril" is a racial stereotype that grew out of the West, becoming most popular in the mid 20th Century. It is a socio-political and cultural **imagining of Asian people as a threat to the economic, political, and military powers of the dominant "White race,"** a foreign enemy that should be feared and destroyed.

This idea is **spread through the media,** particularly films, which use stereotyped images of Asian people that are aligned with these political aims: the specific Asian nation or nationality that is portrayed as an enemy shifts over time in accordance with the political climate.

### "YELLOW PERIL" OVER TIME

The fear of "Yellow Peril" has roots in Medieval Europe during the threats of invasion by Genghis Khan and the Mongolian military. **Domination of Asia was justified as a preventative measure to protect Europe from this imagined threat.**

In Europe in the late 19th/ early 20 centuries, "Yellow Peril" stemmed from the fear of the large population of East Asia, combined with China's economic and military power, and the rise of Japan after defeating China in the 1885 Sino-Japanese war and the Russians in the Russo-Japanese war in 1905.

At the same time, "Yellow Peril" in America referred to **suspicion of Asian immigrants.** This logic led to the **exclusion of Asian Americans,** and to American conquest in the Asia-Pacific. This logic **portrays Asians in the US (and Canada) as foreigners:** even naturalized citizens and those born in Western countries.

"Yellow Peril" is not a real threat, but a cultural and social myth created to justify anti-Asian exclusion in the West, and imperial conquest of Asia.

Today, the association between COVID-19 and China (due to nothing more than the fact that the first documented outbreak was in Wuhan) has led to **new formation of "Yellow Peril" paranoia.** This association is used as a new justification for anti-Asian racism (particularly against those perceived as being Chinese) that has led to various levels of violence against many people of Asian descent living in the West.

### THE "MODEL MINORITY" MYTH

The **myth of the "model minority"** is a new phenomenon that emerged in the mid 20th Century.

This myth **leverages the economic successes of some (not all) Asian-Americans (and Canadians, too) to argue that socio-economic and political barriers to people of colour no longer exist in these nations,** and that all people, regardless of racialization, can be successful under neoliberal capitalism if they work hard enough.

It is used to support the false idea that the United States and Canada are multicultural, post-racial sites of equal opportunity.

### "MODEL MINORITY" STATUS AND REINFORCING STATE POWER

The trope of the "model minority" is sometimes seen as a positive solution to the "Yellow Peril" stereotype, as it is a narrative of inclusion. This narrative, however, **only further solidifies the political power of the United States.**

The "model minority" myth encourages Asian Americans to shelter themselves from the state ideas about "Yellow Peril" by **turning to the state for legitimation and protection.** This logic legitimizes state policing and the carceral system as a solution to anti-Asian violence, including such violence being used as a reason to increase hate crime legislation. Instead of critiquing the dominant logic of "Yellow Peril," **aspirations to "model minority" status are directing the state harm at other groups.**

## "YELLOW PERIL" AND THE "MODEL MINORITY" MYTH: NOT A SPECTRUM, BUT A CYCLE

The "model minority" myth and the threat of "Yellow Peril" are often seen as opposites, but in fact they are both forms of racist stereotyping that are connected to one another.

"Yellow Peril" highlights the colour line by imagining Asian people as a threat, but the "model minority" myth is a claim that the colour line does not exist.

## "MODEL MINORITIES" IN CONTRAST TO OTHER GROUPS

Asian Americans as a "model minority" are also created in contrast to Black Americans, and to White Americans: Asian Americans are situated in the socio-economic hierarchy of white supremacist America below "White" Americans but above Black Americans.

The idea of the "model minority" as "evidence" that upward mobilization is possible for people of colour is used to imply another myth: if Black Americans are unable to gain socio-economic and political traction, it is not because of their racialization, but because they are not working hard enough.

These ideas not only overlook the systemic racism that prevents Black Americans from gaining socio-economic traction, but also discredits the calls of Black Americans for racial justice.

## "YELLOW PERIL SUPPORTS BLACK POWER"

During San Francisco's 1968 protest to free incarcerated Black Panther leader Huey Newton, members of Berkeley's Asian American Political Alliance attended with signs that read: "Yellow Peril supports Black Power." (See image, right)

In this way, the term "Yellow Peril" became repurposed for a practice of cooperative resistance against racism, imperialism, and capitalism. The position of Asians in the US as "foreign" became a way to critique US empire, and reinstated a commitment to revolutionary, international action to undermine dominant powers—including the very existence of the United States.

Asian communist and anti-imperialist movements were important supplements to the Black Panther's fights against anti-Black racism and white supremacy.

Some say that this slogan decentres Black struggles—but leaders of the Black liberation movement encouraged Asian American activists to take on a global perspective in their work.

Bae, M., & Tseng-Putterman, M. (2020). Reviving the history of radical Black-Asian internationalism. *ROAR Magazine*. Retrieved December 9, 2020, from <https://roarmag.org/essays/reviving-the-history-of-radical-black-asian-internationalism/>

Berkeley Historical Plaque Project – Asian American Movement Birthplace. (n.d.). Retrieved December 11, 2020, from <http://berkeleyplaques.org/plaque/birthplace-of-the-asian-american-movement/>

Kawai, Y. (2005). Stereotyping Asian Americans: The Dialectic of the Model Minority and the Yellow Peril. *Howard Journal of Communications*, 16(2), 109–130. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10646170590948974>

If the "model minority" becomes more successful than their "white" counterparts, they are perceived as a new form of "yellow peril."

"YELLOW PERIL"

THE ASIAN-AMERICAN/  
CANADIAN  
STEREOTYPE CYCLE

"MODEL MINORITY"

The "model minority" is assimilated and acts in accordance with the state, working *with* the dominant powers and reduces the perceived threat of "yellow peril."

## "YELLOW PERIL" AS A SITE OF FREEDOM

Though "Yellow Peril" exists as a stereotype for the maintenance of White supremacist power, it has also been turned on its head and given new meaning as a site of co-resistance against dominant powers.

W.E.B. Du Bois, a renowned Pan-African socialist and sociologist saw the phenomenon of "Yellow Peril" as a means for Asian people across the world to gain a political consciousness about the "global nature of white supremacy." He believed it would inspire Black, brown, and Asian people around the world to collaboratively rebel against the colour line.

The challenge to this co-resistance is that it requires Asian-Americans to resist the temptation of assimilation and "model minority" status and instead align themselves with the revolution of their Third World counterparts.

