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### Review: The color of success: Asian Americans and the origins of the model minority myth by Ellen Wu

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**Review: The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority.**

By Ellen Wu. (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014. 376 pp. hardcover, \$39.50).

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Weaving rich institutional histories of groups that have purported to speak for all Asian Americans, like the Japanese American Citizens League and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association, Ellen Wu's *The Color of Success* meticulously describes how their claims to represent their ethnic communities were vigorously contested by Japanese and Chinese Americans themselves from the 1930s to the 1960s. Wu sets these representational challenges against the larger backdrop of the rise of an American liberal political framework and its assimilationist agenda for racial minorities in the United States in the 1930s, which was produced by the geopolitical challenges of totalitarian fascism and communism. Always careful to position Asian Americans themselves as the agents of community formation, Wu describes how the "success story" of the so-called model minority could only have been produced by Asian American acceptance of such liberal racial ideologies. In so doing, Wu demonstrates with sophistication that intra-community contestations among Asian Americans over the making of American liberal racial formations have produced the ambivalent present of an ideologically fraught Asian American community landscape.

Wu divides her account into two parts. In the first part, Wu argues that the geopolitical relations between the United States and east Asian nation-states configured the alliances of some Japanese and Chinese American community institutions with a liberal American state. The results of this ambitious task leave us with detailed institutional histories of the Chicago Resettlers Committee in the wake of the *yogore/pachuke* zoot suit crisis among post-internment Japanese Americans, the English language Chinese News grappling with the "second generation problem" among Chinese Americans, the Japanese American Citizens League's struggle to gain credibility among Nikkei who saw it as selling out to American liberal ideologies, and the Chinese Consolidated Benevolent Association's attempt to gain a voice among the overseas Chinese as international brokers for the American state. What is valuable about the narrative that Wu provides is that while each of these institutions attempted to convince the American federal state that they would best represent its liberal interests, they were also involved in fierce contests of legitimacy within their own communities. By the second part of the book, then, these intra-community contestations are well established as these very groups then attempt to develop a model minority narrative situated against African American activism during the civil rights movement. Here, the thrust of Wu's narrative is to track the metamorphosis of several Japanese and Chinese American institutions. We see, for example, how the JACL's post-internment "recovery narratives" at UCLA's Issei Stories Program became transformed into William Petersen's (in)famous "Success Story, Japanese American Style" profile for the *New York Times Magazine*, an implied model for African Americans. So, too, does Wu track the rise of a non-delinquency thesis that Chinatowns prevented juvenile criminality (another putative lesson for African Americans), and the politics of race in the debate over Hawaiian statehood (an attempted solution to the "Negro Problem"). Running as a counter-subject is the constant community debate over whether such representations adequately captured Asian American communities—and if they did not, whether such misrepresentations amounted to propaganda that could in turn inflict harm on the community in the long run. As it is, while Wu tells the "success story of a success story," the dominance of the model minority trope is fraught with community politics, accounting for the complicated rise of an Asian American Studies movement that simultaneously contested this success story while being unable to completely banish it from American national consciousness.

This complicated history leaves Asian American communities with a critical point of departure for further reflection: to what extent are Asian American communities themselves still constituted by liberal racial ideologies? To take but one example for future probing, Wu peppers her account with the presence of religious communities. Churches are lumped in with other community organizations that often advocate for a politics of assimilation, calling for Asian Americans to adopt a liberal practice of integrating with an American mainstream while casting off criminality and psychological obstructions to becoming “white.” While Wu convincingly demonstrates that churches were thus agents of the liberal state, she does not explain what motivated their liberalism. This ecclesial example can be applied to other community groups that provide social services to ask the question: in the face of community contestations over American liberalism, what motivated their tenaciousness in sticking to liberal agendas? Was it, say, a Machiavellian will to power, as Wu sometimes comes close to asserting about some organizations that aspired to become community spokespersons, or were there other philosophical motives in play?

One should not underestimate the political risk that Wu took to write this book. Wu’s history of Asian American contestation could have become a piece that—in the wrong hands—would undermine, in the words of Kandice Chuh, the imagining otherwise for which Asian Americanists have worked so long. It could, after all, have shown that the inability of Asian American institutions to speak for all Asian Americans demonstrates that Asian Americans have always been mired in a hopeless disunity that has stunted their political efficacy. It does not. Instead, it transfigures that very internal differentiation into a vehicle by which to imagine new possible futures. By describing the complexities of Asian American community contestation over liberalism, Wu calls Asian American communities down the same path that Yuji Ichioka, Him Mark Lai, Lisa Lowe, Henry Yu, Kandice Chuh, and Madeline Hsu have, to re-read Asian American history for new, liberating alternatives to the current exclusions of contemporary, historically-derived racial orders in America. Ellen Wu has delivered a close reading of intra-community contestations over Asian American complicities in the development of a liberal model minority assimilationist myth.

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