Introduction

Imperatives of Asian American Citizenship

This is *the* success story of *a* success story.

In December 1970, the *New York Times* ran a front-page article declaring Japanese and Chinese in the United States "an American success story." Both groups had witnessed "the almost total disappearance of discrimination . . . and their assimilation into the mainstream of American life"—a situation that would have been "unthinkable twenty years ago." The *Times* opened with the biography of immigrant J. Chuan Chu as proof. When Chu arrived from China at the end of World War II, he had run into difficulty finding a place to live because of his "Oriental face." Two and half decades later, his race was no longer a handicap. A graduate of the University of Pennsylvania's school of engineering, Chu had risen through the ranks of Massachusetts-based Honeywell Information Systems, Inc. to a vice presidential position. "If you have the ability and can adapt to the American way of speaking, dressing, and doing things," said Chu, "then it doesn't matter any more if you are Chinese."[1]

Chu's experience was hardly unique. In interviews with dozens of Asian Americans, the *Times* heard little of discrimination in housing, education, and the realm of interpersonal interaction. Southerners even considered Asians to be white. By and large, Japanese and Chinese Americans no longer faced "artificial barriers" to high-status professions. Whereas most of the previous generation had had no choice but to toil in menial service work such as laundering and gardening, stars of Asian America's current cohort had achieved nationally distinguished careers: architects Minoru Yamasaki (of New York's World Trade Center fame) and I. M. Pei; multimillion-dollar investment management firm Manhattan Fund director Gerald Tsai; Nobel–prizewinning physicists Tsung Dao Lee and Chen Ning Yang; San Francisco State College president S. I. Hayakawa; and US senator Daniel Inouye. "The pig-tailed coolie has been replaced in the imagination of many Americans by the earnest, bespectacled young scholar," announced the *Times*. Hunter College junior Elaine Yuehy, the daughter of a laundryman, agreed. "My teachers have always helped me because they had such a good image of Chinese students. 'Good little Chinese kid,' they said, 'so bright and so well-behaved and hard-working,' " she recalled. Once despised by American society, "Orientals"—especially

Japanese and Chinese, the two major Asian-ethnic populations at midcentury—had become its most exceptional and beloved people of color, its "model minority."[2]

Indeed, before the 1940s and 1950s, whites had deemed ethnic Japanese and Chinese unassimilable aliens unfit for membership in the nation. Americans had subjected so-called Orientals to the regime of Asiatic Exclusion, marking them as *definitively not-white,* and systematically shutting them out of civic participation through such measures as bars to naturalization, occupational discrimination, and residential segregation. Beginning in World War II, however, the United States' geopolitical ambitions triggered seismic changes in popular notions of nationhood and belonging, which in turn challenged the stronghold of white supremacy.[3] As a result, federal officials, behavioral scientists, social critics, and ordinary people worked in tandem to dismantle Exclusion. Yet such a decision posed a problem for America's racial order and citizenship boundaries. The social standing of Asian Americans was no longer certain, and the terms of their inclusion into the nation needed to be determined. A host of stakeholders resolved this dilemma by the mid-1960s with the invention of a new stereotype of Asian Americans as the model minority—a racial group distinct from the white majority, but lauded as well assimilated, upwardly mobile, politically nonthreatening, and *definitively not-black*.

This astounding transformation reflected the array of new freedoms accorded to Japanese and Chinese Americans by the state and society in the mid-twentieth century. Their emancipation entailed liberation from the lowly station of "aliens ineligible to citizenship," the legal turn of phrase with which lawmakers had codified Asian immigrants as external to American polity and society. Landmark state and federal litigation and legislation in the 1910s and 1920s both drew on as well as reinvigorated the social consensus that peoples of Asian ancestry were wholly incapable of assimilation, because they were racially and culturally too different from white Americans.[4] Under Exclusion, immigrants from Japan and China were subjected to a shock of discriminatory and dehumanizing limitations, from harsh restrictions on entry into the country to the denial of naturalized citizenship along with its attendant rights, including the franchise and property ownership.[5] Their American-born children, birthright citizens of the United States, fared little better. Often forced to attend segregated schools, their career options were narrowly bound to the same peripheral economic niches into which their parents were funneled: truck farming, gardening, domestic labor, restaurants, and laundries. The few who managed to earn professional degrees could only hope to find clients in their Little Tokyo and Chinatown ghettos. The vast majority, however, found it futile to aspire beyond their lot as "professional carrot washers," as one second-generation Japanese American put it, until the

demise of Exclusion.[6] With the regime's abolition in the 1940s and 1950s, Asian Americans enjoyed access to previously forbidden areas of employment, neighborhoods, and associational activities. They also benefited from the federal government's relaxation of immigration restrictions and its revocation of their ineligibility to citizenship.[7]

But Asian Americans discovered, too, that various authorities—both within and outside their ethnic communities—checked their autonomy to choose their own futures by pressuring them to behave as praiseworthy citizens. Some gladly complied, others inadvertently went along, and not a few refused to succumb to these demands. All found their lives conscripted into the manufacture of a certain narrative of national racial progress premised on the distinction between "good" and "bad" minorities. The questions at the crux of this book ask: How did this reasoning take hold? What explains the drastic turnaround of the image of ethnic Japanese and Chinese, long regarded by many in the United States as the unalterably strange and despicable "pig-tailed coolie"? Put another way, how did the Asian American success story *itself* become a success story—literally front-page news—edging out other possibilities for understanding their place in the nation? And what did their crowning as model minorities ("the earnest, bespectacled young scholar") mean not only for themselves but also for all Americans?

Answering these queries begins with comprehending the model minority's debut as the unanticipated outcome of a series of intersecting political, social, and cultural imperatives—ethnic and mainstream, domestic and global—that impelled the radical restructuring of America's racial order in the mid-twentieth century. Excavating the origins and aftereffects of this formidable concept therefore necessitates a consideration of the vicissitudes within Japanese and Chinese communities alongside the broader sweep of national and international historical change. In other words, connections between internal and external developments are indispensable to uncovering the birth of this construct; this book moves between these worlds, bringing them into dialogue in order to tell a new story about race making in wartime and postwar America.

The evolution of the political philosophy known as liberalism was foremost among the dynamisms that set the stage for the coming of the model minority. Historians have pointed to liberalism's centrality as well as its "protean" character in US history. The foundational tenets at the core of liberalism—freedom, rational self-interest, and a belief in human progress—have undergirded the nation's political life since the early days of the republic, but Americans have acted on them in ways that have changed decidedly over time. At the start of the twentieth century, the social and economic inequalities resulting from industrial capitalism motivated Progressive Era reformers to redefine liberalism from its

nineteenth-century iteration (laissez-faire economics and limited government intervention) to one that valued an activist state attuned to the welfare of its citizens. The impulse to "tame capitalism" dominated liberal thinking through the Great Depression and early years of the New Deal. By the 1940s, however, liberals embraced new priorities cherishing the protection and promotion of the freedoms of individuals as well as social groups.[8]

Mobilization for World War II fostered the advent of *racial* liberalism: the growing belief in political and intellectual circles that the country's racial diversity could be most ably managed through the assimilation and integration of nonwhites. The ideology emphasized federal government intervention in orchestrating the social engineering necessary to achieve civil rights and equality of citizenship for minority groups.[9] Champions of racial liberalism—including many ethnic Japanese and Chinese themselves—pushed the notion that Asians might be something other than indelibly and menacingly alien, and that they deserved to be included in the national polity as bona fide citizens—a giant conceptual leap from the unanimity of previous decades.[10] Liberals of all races invested racial reform with grave urgency: the failure of the nation to live in accordance with its professed democratic ideals endangered the country's aspirations to world leadership. The United States' battles against fascism and then Communism meant that Asiatic Exclusion, like Jim Crow, was no longer tenable. Seeking global legitimacy, Americans moved to undo the legal framework and social practices that relegated Asians outside the bounds of the nation.[11] Certainly, Japanese and Chinese Americans had not lacked in attempts to attain substantive, full citizenship and respectable social standing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. But their efforts to claim unfettered inclusion only gained traction with the rise of racial liberalism and outbreak of global wars. Japanese and Chinese American fortunes, in short, were tied directly to the national identity politics of World War II and the Cold War.[12]

International imperatives of the 1940s and 1950s anchored the nation's recasting of Asian Americans into *assimilating Others*—persons acknowledged as capable of acting like white Americans while remaining racially distinct from them. Unlike the progeny of turn-of-the century southern and eastern European immigrants who melted into unambiguous whiteness in the crucibles of mass consumption, industrial unionism, New Deal ethnic pluralism, and military service, Japanese and Chinese did not disappear into whiteness after the end of Exclusion.[13] Instead, state authorities, academicians, cultural producers, and common folk renovated Asian America's perceived differences from liability to asset to benefit US expansionism. In the throes of the worldwide decolonization

movement, more precisely, Cold Warriors encountered the dilemma of differentiating their own imperium from the personae non gratae of the European empires. As nonwhites, the entrance of Asian Americans into the national fold provided a powerful means for the United States to proclaim itself a racial democracy and thereby credentialed to assume the leadership of the free world. The rearticulation of Asian Americans from ineradicable aliens to assimilating Others by outside interests bolstered the framing of US hegemony abroad as benevolent—an enterprise that mirrored the move toward racial integration at home.[14]

Above all, Japanese and Chinese Americans harbored a profound interest in characterizing anew their racial image and conditions of citizenship, and they often took the lead in this regard. By yoking US officialdom's world-ordering logic to their own quests for political and social acceptance, they actively participated in the revamping of their racial difference. They made claims to inclusion based on the assumption of not only Americanness but also and particularly diasporic Japanese and Chinese identities. Recognizing that the Asian Pacific region loomed large on the US foreign relations agenda, community representatives strategically typecast themselves, asserting that their own ancestries endowed them with innate cultural expertise that qualified them to serve as the United States' most natural ambassadors to the Far East. Therefore, they suggested, admitting people of Japanese and Chinese heritage to first-class citizenship made good diplomatic sense.

Equally decisively, Asian Americans' self-stereotyping convinced others not only because of its payoff for foreign relations but also because it corroborated the nation's cultural conservatism at midcentury. Ethnic Japanese and Chinese emissaries consistently touted their putatively "Oriental" attributes, such as the predisposition to harmony and accommodation, the reverence for family and education, and unflagging industriousness to enhance their demands for equality. These descriptions endorsed not only liberal assimilationist and integrationist imperatives but also the Cold War cultural emphasis on home life rooted in the strict division of gender roles. Self-representations of Japanese and Chinese American masculinity, femininity, and sexuality, purposefully conforming to the norms of the white middle class, were crucial to the reconstruction of aliens ineligible to citizenship into admirable—albeit colored—Americans.[15]

Undeniably, this embrace of Cold War nationalism and traditional values was a politically charged calculation. Japanese and Chinese America were hardly monolithic entities in this period. Rather, they were rife with internal divisions, rival agendas, and disagreements about their collective futures—all of which helped dictate how they would make their way in American society after World War II. External pressures generated

commonalities and a modicum of cohesiveness within the two communities, but they also provided the structures that enabled certain individuals and factions to achieve authority and influence. Demographic shifts also mattered. As US-born, second-generation Japanese and Chinese came of age in the 1930s and 1940s, they began to vie with the immigrant elite for leadership positions and the privileges of representing themselves in the public sphere. The winning contenders were those whose politics hewed closest to the reigning dogmas of the day: liberal assimilationism, prowar patriotism, anti-Communism, and respectable heterosexuality. As ethnic spokespersons, the victors in these contests spun flattering portrayals of their peoples to dislodge deeply embedded "yellow peril" caricatures. At the same time, their tales of exemplary Asian American citizenship validated their own political choices and upheld intracommunity power arrangements in their favor. A task of this book is to show how these success story narrators beat out alternative voices including those of zoot-suiters, sexual deviants, draft resisters, those who renounced citizenship, leftists, Communists, and juvenile delinquents—the various entities who did not subscribe to postwar racial liberalism and political-cultural conservatism as the most suitable guidelines for encountering postwar American life.[16]

In the mid-1960s, the assimilating Other underwent a subtle yet profound metamorphosis into the model minority: the Asiatic who was at once a model citizen and definitively not-black. The zenith of liberal racial reform—the 1964 Civil Rights Act and 1965 Voting Rights Act—also marked the beginnings of its collapse under the weight of both progressive and conservative critique. The abolition of de jure apartheid had done little to alter the vast disparities between black and white incomes, housing, employment, and education. Participants in the African American freedom movement urgently pressed for lasting changes to, if not a complete overhaul of, the nation's—and the world's—existing structures of capitalist democracy. Liberals unnerved by blacks' wide-ranging, radical challenges to effect a meaningful redistribution of wealth and power held up Japanese and Chinese Americans as evidence of minority mobility to defend the validity of assimilation as well as integration. Conservatives who feared that black power would go even further than racial liberalism to destroy white supremacy also looked to Asians to salve what they viewed as the decline of "law and order"—wrought especially by black and brown peoples—in American society. Either way, Japanese and Chinese in the United States were catapulted to a new status as model minorities—living examples of advancement *in spite of* the persistent color line and *because of* their racial (often coded as cultural) differences.[17] In recirculating Asian American success stories, both liberals and conservatives grafted the now-familiar postwar tropes of Japanese and Chinese American conduct (patriotism, family values, accommodation,

and so forth) onto the new imperative of taming the reach of the Civil Rights revolution.

At its heart, *The Color of Success* concerns the racial order in twentieth-century America—its evolution, consequences, and significance. Japanese and Chinese Americans, the largest ethnic Asian populations, and the two that figured most prominently in the public eye between the 1940s and 1960s, are central to this investigation.[18] Their trajectories unfold separately in order to illuminate their distinct histories. The argument proceeds in alternating chapters to showcase the divergences in their experiences. Yet Japanese and Chinese Americans also appear in tandem to emphasize the many parallels that account for their concurrent emergence as model minorities. As a mix of cultural, social, and political history, this study highlights how the discursive and the material mattered for Japanese American, Chinese American, and ultimately Asian American identity formation from World War II through the "Cold War civil rights" years.

In chronicling the invention of the model minority, this story challenges the black-white paradigm that prevails in histories of race in the twentieth-century United States.[19] To be sure, the question of black racial equality loomed as the paramount social issue of the day, particularly as civil rights activists disrupted the perpetuation of the racial system that had for centuries hinged on white exploitation and degradation of African American people for profit, comfort, and pleasure.[20] This transformation, though, was more complex than its standard treatment as a black-white conflict. A consideration of Japanese and Chinese Americans within the universe of the "Negro Problem," as it was called, demonstrates that the presence and actions of Asians in US society complicated, yet simultaneously reinforced, this central dichotomy. What it meant to be Japanese, Chinese, and Asian American was profoundly shaped by understandings of blackness and whiteness. Just as important, definitions of blackness and whiteness in this period cannot be understood without taking Japanese and Chinese Americans into account. Rather than remaining silent and aloof, as the conventional wisdom goes, Asian Americans were integral participants—and an integral presence—in skirmishes and debates over race in the 1940s through the 1960s.[21]

In this way, then, this chronicle is not simply about race relations but is more fundamentally concerned with race *making*—the incessant work of creating racial categories, living with and within them, altering them, and even obliterating them when they no longer have social or political utility.[22] Two factors for generating and reproducing race are particularly salient here. The first considers the formation of racial classifications as interactive phenomena, contingent on and constitutive of concurrent

racial groupings.[23] In the case of Asian Americans at midcentury, the most obvious interdependencies were with whites and blacks.[24] But at various moments, other comparisons also came to the fore, including internal divisions *within* ethnic groups (discrepancies between "loyal" and "disloyal" Japanese during World War II; the state's discrimination between "good" anti-Communist and "bad" pro-Communist Chinese in the 1950s), assumptions about Mexican American waywardness in the 1940s, and contrasts between Native Hawaiians, *haole* (whites), and Asians in postwar Hawai'i.[25] The model minority is a wonderfully telling example demonstrating that racial categories are never static or omnipresent, that they change over time and vary across space, and that they pivot on the contemporaneous making and remaking of other racial categories. It also vividly illustrates how productions of race are crucially determined by confluences with other axes of identification—in this case, gender, sexuality, class, and nation.

The second outstanding element of race making in the following discussion is that of its historically contingent fabrication. Racial ideas do not appear out of nowhere and float around unmoored to social realities. They are consciously concocted and disseminated—if not always accepted without challenge—and are tied to structural developments.[26] Charting the rise of the model minority clarifies how the machinery of race making operated in the mid-twentieth-century United States, when social science, the burgeoning public relations industry, and liberal antiprejudice initiatives coordinated by the state, private foundations, and religious and civic organizations all functioned as puissant crafters of racial knowledge. An examination of these institutional channels offers precision about how green ideologies achieve political and social purchase.[27]

Tracing the course of Japanese and Chinese American racialization in the mid-twentieth century provides a useful way to revise the standard narrative of democratic citizenship in the United States by linking inclusion to racism. The mythology of American democracy depicts liberal egalitarianism as a succession of triumphs over exclusions, and that the circle of those included in the polity as full members of society has continued to widen over time.[28] The ascendance of racial liberalism and its reforms, including the death of the Asiatic alien ineligible to citizenship, would seem to uphold this folklore. Yet the lifting of Exclusion did not result in a teleological progression toward the unmitigated inclusion of Asian Americans in the nation. Rather, the racial logic that politicians, scholars, and journalists deployed to invent the model minority generated new modes of exclusion. Their reliance on culture to explain postwar Asian American socioeconomic mobility re-marked ethnic Japanese and Chinese as not-white, indelibly foreign others, compromising their improvements in social standing. This same reasoning also undergirded

contentions that African Americans' cultural deficiencies was the cause of their poverty—assertions that delegitimized blacks' demands for structural changes in the political economy and stigmatized their utilization of welfare state entitlements. The history of the model minority therefore destabilizes the conceptual boundaries between exclusion and inclusion, allowing for a more complete understanding of how the United States and other liberal democracies devise, uphold, and justify social differences and inequalities, even as they expand their boundaries of inclusion and ostensibly progress toward the achievement of universal citizenship for all members.[29] Approaching the model minority as a simultaneously inclusive *and* exclusive reckoning supplies clues to how racism "reproduce[s] itself even after the historical conditions that initially gave it life have disappeared."[30]

Ultimately, the ideas and experiences of Asian Americans offer a fresh perspective on the history of the United States in an extraordinary moment of domestic and global upheaval. By following the careers of Japanese and Chinese American racialization and citizenship from the Pacific War through the Vietnam era, details of how the United States merged its various regional racial landscapes (the North, South, West, and Hawai'i) into a single, national racial order come into sharper focus.[31] As a multifaceted process that operated on local, national, and international registers, Asian America's metamorphosis illuminates the reach of diplomatic concerns into the realm of the everyday as well as the impact of stateside race relations in the ambit of geopolitics. In the end, the fashioning of Japanese and Chinese Americans first into assimilating Others and then definitively not-black model minorities did not only answer the question of Asian American social standing after Exclusion's end. It also worked to square the tension between the planetary spread of decolonization and the United States' designs to propagate its hegemony across islands and continents. Assimilating Others and model minorities performed an indispensable service for the imperative of narrating American exceptionalism to the nation and the world.