

“Not Your Model Minority”: An Inquiry on the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965

Esther June Kim and Anna Falkner

Introduction

The realities of COVID-19 have clearly revealed the myth of the model minority, a stereotype in which Asian Americans are seen as successful and high achieving in contrast to other Communities of Color.¹ A rise in violence against those of Asian descent is a reminder that Asian Americans are still lumped into one group and perceived as forever foreigners,² or people who can never be truly American. As historian Madeline Hsu writes, in the public eye, “Chinese remain perpetual foreigners in our midst ready to attack and betray America when beckoned by China.”³ Chinese Americans and many other Asian Americans have been targeted during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This ever-present, but sometimes seemingly dormant, anti-Asian racism in the United States is reflective of patterns in U.S. immigration history. Yet, neither is often taught in PK-12 education. Elementary social studies curricula have rarely dealt with Asian American history other than in simplified narratives of the railroad and Japanese American incarceration.⁴ Recent efforts and research to include these histories in elementary grades demonstrated the significant impact of Asian American students learning their history. As Rodriguez’s article on studying Angel Island with third and fourth graders reveals, the stories of Asian immigrants often go unheard, especially in contrast with stories of European immigration in U.S. History and curricula.⁵ When immigration curriculum excludes Asian Americans, they suddenly appear in the narrative of the United States without an actual history, erasing both their agency and the systemic racism faced by Asian immigrants even before arriving onto U.S. shores. In this article, we briefly outline the history of two major policies in Asian American immigration history and share an inquiry designed to help students explore the institutionalized racism that has defined who is a “good” immigrant. Recognizing that students’ interests, experiences, and questions are varied, we share this core inquiry along with related resources and topics for further explorations based on students’ curiosities.

A Short Context

In 1869, Frederick Douglass addressed the rise in anti-Chinese sentiment, clearly stating the issue as one of white supremacy, xenophobia, and racism:

I submit that this question of Chinese immigration should be settled upon higher principles than those of a cold and selfish expediency. There are such things in the world as human rights.... Among these is the right of locomotion; the right of migration; the right which belongs to no particular race, but belongs alike to all and to all alike.... I have great respect for the blue-eyed and light-haired races of America.... But I reject the arrogant and scornful theory by which they would limit migratory rights, or any other essential human rights, to themselves, and which would make them the owners of this great continent to the exclusion of all other races of men.⁶

Almost a century later, the Civil Rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s and Cold War politics paved the way for the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, also known as the Hart-Celler Act. The act was praised as correcting the overtly racist Chinese Exclusion Act and other racist laws that had shaped U.S. immigration policy since 1924.⁷ In contrast to previous legislation, the Hart-Celler Act set a limit on immigration numbers equally across countries, seemingly erasing racial or national preferences. Yet, a closer examination reveals that the intention of the act was, like other policies before it, to maintain white supremacy.

Even when legislation has seemed more inclusive, U.S. immigration policies have served the economic interests of a predominantly white nation. In the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, merchants and students were still allowed to immigrate. This pattern was maintained in 1924 and formalized in 1965. Allowing entry to merchants and students when other people were not allowed to immigrate determined the type of

Asian who was allowed to immigrate to the United States. This ultimately contributed to the model minority stereotype. The following three-part inquiry addresses the essential question: Who does the U.S. define as a “good” immigrant?

This inquiry focuses on racist immigration laws and policies and their impact on Asian and Asian American communities. This inquiry will likely connect with content most often taught in grades 3–5, but we think it is important to introduce these ideas in earlier grades as well. We include options for modifications throughout. This inquiry attends to the following NCSS themes: ❷ **TIME, CONTINUITY AND CHANGE** and ❸ **POWER, AUTHORITY AND GOVERNANCE**. In the first part, students will use a picture book and primary sources to explore how the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882) impacted Chinese immigrants. In the second part, students will examine the motivations and purposes of the Hart-Celler Act (1965) to determine the “good” immigrant. The third part extends the impacts of the Hart-Celler Act into the present and allows students to explore ways in which the model minority myth is perpetuated today. Because this inquiry focuses heavily on policy and structural issues, we highly recommend following it with lessons focusing on Asian American activism.

Provoking Curiosity

We encourage teachers to begin this unit by discussing a current event related to Asian Americans broadly or immigration issues, such as the unfounded espionage accusations against Chinese and Chinese American scientists or the deportation of Southeast Asian Americans and which refugees are currently welcome or not welcome (see Joanne Yi’s article in this issue). Through this current event, teachers may highlight questions such as: How do people view Asian Americans? Who is welcome in the U.S. and who is treated as if they belong? Who does the U.S. think is a “good” immigrant? Consider using a KWLW chart (Know/Want to Know/Learned/Want to Know Now) to record students’ accompanying questions throughout the inquiries.

Part One: Excluding Asia

In the nineteenth century, U.S. railroad companies recruited Chinese labor (“coolies”), paying them less and prompting white laborers to perceive the Chinese as unfair competition. The Chinese Exclusion Act was, in part, a bid to protect white labor on the West Coast. Racist beliefs and laws such as the Page Act (1875) also positioned Chinese men as Other and Chinese women as a threat to morality and family values. This inquiry begins with students exploring the Chinese Exclusion Act. The narrative of anti-Asian sentiment was solidified in immigration policies in the years following 1882. In 1917, the Barred Zone Act expanded exclusion to most other Asian countries (see Pullout, Appendix 1).

In 1924, the Johnson-Reed Act established a quota system based on the country of origin, allowing only 100 individuals

(excluding students, businessmen, and diplomats) per Asian country. European countries were granted far higher numbers. By comparison, Great Britain and Northern Ireland received a quota of 65,721 and Germany 25,957. The quotas were also a way for the government to limit immigration from southern and eastern European countries whose people were seen as less desirable than northern and western Europeans.⁸ Race was very important in deciding who was allowed into the United States. For example, individuals of Chinese descent immigrating from Great Britain still counted towards the quota for China. Going strictly by numbers, the U.S. made obvious the immigrants they wanted and those they did not.

Introductory Activity

Introduce this part with the children’s picture book, *Paper Son: The Inspiring Story of Tyrus Wong, Immigrant and Artist*. In the beginning of the story when Tyrus Wong is traveling with his father, the author mentions that most Chinese immigrants were not allowed into the United States in 1919. Pause the story to introduce primary sources. K-2 teachers can analyze photos of Tyrus Wong, such as the immigration card available in the peritext of the picture book. Teachers can briefly explain the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act and ask students the following questions:

- What do we know about Tyrus based on this card?
- What is listed next to “name”? Why?
- How did the laws about immigration affect Tyrus and his family?

Grades 3–5 teachers can pair the book with primary sources such as the text of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act (Pullout, P1). Using small groups or turn and talks, students can discuss the following questions:

- Based on this law, who was allowed into the United States?
- Why do you think the United States put this law into effect?
- How did the laws about immigration affect Tyrus and his family?

This source will help provide the historical foundation for students to understand the direct role of the U.S. government in making immigration harder for certain types of communities. For this source, teachers may wish to have students in a whole group to discuss the meaning of the vocabulary (Pullout, P1) and the implications of the act. After the read-aloud, teachers can facilitate a discussion using the following questions:

- How did the Chinese Exclusion Act and the beliefs behind it affect Tyrus’s life and career?

- Have you ever heard of a policy or rule like this today?

This was the first immigration law excluding an entire group by ethnicity. As Chinese “coolies” were recruited by U.S. companies to work on railroads or Southern plantations, anti-Chinese sentiment grew among white workers. To explore this history further with students, see Rodríguez⁹ and the Labor & Economic Priorities Lesson Plan on immigrationhistory.org.

Part Two: The Hart-Celler Act of 1965

The next two parts focus on the Hart-Celler Act and its aftermath. They will help students explore how the model minority myth has persisted both in immigration policy and public perception. The intention of lawmakers was to increase the number of white immigrants, specifically from southern and eastern Europe, who already had established communities in the United States. In actuality, the act increased the number of immigrants from Asia and Africa while capping immigration from Latin America for the first time. This cap immediately created a community of undocumented peoples who were perceived as threats. The type of immigrant who was welcome continued the model minority stereotype. The perceived economic and educational success of Asian Americans was used as proof that People of Color could succeed in the United States and that the oppression and marginalization of, for instance, Black and Brown communities, was due to faults in their cultures rather than to any systemic inequities. Immigration policies helped shape this idea. A closer look at statistics within and across Asian American communities shows that there were and remained economic and educational disparities (see aapidata.com). In other words, Asian Americans were not one big successful group but experienced the inequities of systemic racism across various communities.

In the Hart-Celler Act, seventy-five percent of immigration was allocated for family reunification, through which a documented immigrant or U.S. citizen could help immediate family members immigrate to the U.S. Twenty percent of immigration went to individuals who met the U.S.’s economic preferences or needs, and the remaining five percent was reserved for refugees. Because of the circumstances under which they came to the United States, the economic and educational experiences of refugees were significantly different than those of immigrants who arrived due to family reunification or economic priorities. For Asian Americans, this means that when data such as median income and education level are broken down by ethnicity, there is a vast divide between groups.¹⁰

Step 1

Students in grades 3–5 should read the quotations below individually or in pairs. These quotations are from individuals who were influential in the creation and passage of the act.

1. Attorney General Robert Kennedy described immigration policies before 1965 as suggesting that “a man or woman born in Italy, or Greece, or Poland, or Portugal, or Czechoslovakia, or the Ukraine, is not as good as someone born in Ireland, or England, or Germany, or Sweden.”¹¹
2. President Lyndon B. Johnson: “This bill [Hart-Celler Act] that we sign today is not a revolutionary bill. It does not affect the lives of millions. It will not reshape the structure of our daily lives, or really add importantly to our wealth or our power.”¹²

Students should consider:

- What were the wrongs lawmakers wanted to address with the 1965 Hart-Celler Act?
- Who were they thinking about when they wrote the law?
- Why might President Lyndon B. Johnson want to downplay the impact of this act?
- What does this act tell you about how U.S. citizens felt about immigrants at that time?

Step 2

For K-5 classrooms, look at the pie chart (Pullout, P2) showing the distribution of immigration categories, as defined by the Hart-Celler Act. Teachers may wish to briefly explain what the categories mean. Drawing on Tyrus Wong’s experiences, the quotations from Step 1, and the information in the pie chart, discuss the following:

- What do you notice about the different categories?
- What do you think the experiences of refugees was like? How might that have been different than the experiences of people who came to the U.S. for their jobs or to join their families?
- How did the Hart-Celler Act change who could come to the United States? How was it different than the Chinese Exclusion Act?
- Do you think the laws changed enough? Why or why not?

Step 3

Look back across all the previous sources. Drawing on these multiple sources and activities, students should write a paragraph response to the question: Based on these sources, who does the U.S. treat as a “good” immigrant? Alternatively, students can participate in an affinity mapping exercise. First, have students write down individual characteristics of the “good” immigrant onto sticky notes with their initials, or the teacher may record responses on sticky notes. Students could then post them on the board, grouping them

continued on page 17

NOT YOUR MODEL MINORITY *from page 16*

according to similar responses. For instance, students might group “merchants” and “have a good job” into a category about occupation. This would allow for more discussion across responses and allow for accommodations for various writing levels.

As an optional extension, ask: How do you think the U.S. government should decide who to let in?

Part Three: From 1965 to Today

Throughout the Cold War, the U.S. wanted to attract knowledge workers who would help them compete against the Soviet Union both scientifically and economically. As noted previously, this was a continuation and expansion of policies which allowed for students and businesspeople to immigrate. The general successes of these policies connected U.S. competitiveness to strategic immigration approaches. By the late 1980s, the image of Asian Americans as the model minority was solidified for many people when the cover of *Time Magazine* featured “Those Asian American Whiz Kids” (Pullout, Appendix 2). This cover story, while describing the costs of the model minority myth, still depicted Asian American youth as hard-working and highly successful students.

In this part, students will explore the unexpected rise in Asian immigration in the 1970s and 1980s due to the Hart-Celler Act and will conclude by examining recent immigration policies. The H1-B Visa, which originated in 1990, has largely benefited Asian migrants (and U.S. corporations). However, the conditions by which one can immigrate are similar to the policies that came before it by requiring applicants to benefit the American workforce.¹³

Step 1

Have K-5 students make observations and inferences about the *Time* “Whiz Kids” cover. In particular, highlight questions around what this source reveals about how Asian Americans were viewed at the time. Connect this image to Part One and the perception of Chinese and Asian immigrants as “undesirable.” Consider asking these questions:

- How have people’s beliefs about Asian Americans changed across time?
- Have they changed enough?

Grades K-2, Step 2

Teachers may choose to focus on the model minority myth as a stereotype and how some people are working to disrupt it. Teachers should read books that show varying experiences of Asian American children, such as *Hana Hashimoto, Sixth Violin* (Cheri Uegaki), *The Yasmin* series (Saadia Faruqi), *Chef Roi Choi and the Street Food Remix* (Jacqueline Briggs Martin and June Jo Lee), *Juna’s Jar* (Jane Bahk), *A Different*

Pond (Bao Phi), and *Hair Twins* (Raakhee Mirchandani). With each text, teachers may ask:

- How is the main character similar to the “whiz kids”? How are they different?
- Why is it important for us to read these stories?

Grades 3-5, Step 2

Ask students to make a prediction based on the *Time* “Whiz Kids” image and its date (1987): what happened with Asian American immigration after 1965? Then, use the dot map (Pullout, Appendix 3) and have students make observations about what they notice, particularly around immigration from Asia to the United States. Ask:

- How does this compare to what we predicted?
- What connections can you make to other major legislation brought up in these inquiries?
- Since the map only shows immigration through 2013, what do you think the map would look like if it showed patterns up through the current context?

Grades 3-5, Step 3

As the dot map shows, Asian immigration to the U.S. expanded in the 1970s and 80s. In this final step, students will examine how the ideas of the 1965 act continue to this day through the H1-B visa. The H1-B visa attends to labor needs, specifically allowing U.S. companies to “sponsor” immigrants who have the skills and knowledge needed. Have students analyze the charts in the Pullout.

- Appendix 4: 2019 approved visas by education level
- Appendix 5: 2019 approved visas by industry

Across these charts, ask the following:

- What do you think you know about Asian American immigration history based on these charts?
- What do these charts tell us about who the government is approving to come to the U.S. and why?
- Do you think this is fair? Why or why not?
- What do these charts tell us about the model minority myth in 2019?
- How do you think the pandemic might influence our immigration and citizenship policies in the coming years?

Final Thoughts

As noted in the opening activity, these inquiries will likely produce branching questions and curiosities among both students and teachers. We encourage teachers to include these questions as part of their inquiry. Below we list several

examples of related inquiries that could emerge along with some potential resources for both students and teachers.

- Because the focus of this inquiry is on the structural implications of the immigration policies, the voices of Asian American immigrants and their experiences are missing. Consider using these resources to explore those experiences in more depth: the PBS documentary *American Masters: Tyrus Wong; Dia's Story Cloth: The Hmong Peoples' Journey of Freedom*; Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation Archive of Personal Stories (<https://www.immigrant-voices.aiisf.org/>).
- The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act further positioned Asian American and Latinx folks in contrast to one another as documented and undocumented immigrants. This perception continues today, even though many DACA (Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals) recipients are Asian. Teachers who want to explore ways in which those communities have countered divisive narratives by building solidarity may include narratives about Latinx and Asian American collaborations during the short civil rights movement (e.g., Larry Itliong), formerly incarcerated Japanese Americans protesting the detention of Central American migrants, and Karen Korematsu's essay decrying the "Muslim Ban."
- Regarding the model minority myth and the charts in part three, consider the occupations which are not often approved for the H1-B visa, such as culture creators (e.g., artists, storytellers). Why are movies, such as *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), significant for Asian Americans?
- Explore the experiences of Asian Americans during the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly around citizenship and their ability to stay safely in the country (e.g., anti-Asian violence and accusations of espionage against Chinese researchers).¹⁴ These past few years show how communities' positions as the "good" or "bad" immigrant can flip very quickly, a pattern that Frederick Douglass exposed as white supremacist.
- For modern narratives of anti-Asian sentiment related to labor, read Paula Yoo's *From a Whisper to a Rallying Cry: The Killing of Vincent Chin*. This story is also a powerful resource for teaching about Asian-American activism.

This inquiry is based on the idea that Asian American history and immigration history are deeply connected. We cannot fully understand one without the other, and they are both integral to understanding current events in Asian American communities and working to take action against anti-Asian racism. To conclude this inquiry, teachers should connect back to the current events about immigration or other Asian American issues introduced at the beginning

of this unit. Teachers should ask:

- How has learning about immigration laws and the model minority myth helped us understand what is happening?
- What do we want to know now?
- What action can we take with this new knowledge?

Children are capable community members who can affect change in a wide range of ways, including civic and social action, learning about and caring for others, and sharing what they know. To that end, we encourage teachers to affirm their students' abilities to determine next steps. Teachers are experts who can facilitate student action through further lessons to support student curiosities, resources, and inquiry into how others have changed their communities. 🌍

Notes

1. Robert S. Chang, "Toward an Asian American Legal Scholarship: Critical Race Theory, Post-Structuralism, and Narrative Space," *California Law Review* 81, no. 5 (1993): 1241–1323.
2. Mia Tuan, *Forever Foreigners or Honorary Whites?: The Asian Ethnic Experience Today* (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1998).
3. Madeline Y. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants: How the Yellow Peril Became the Model Minority* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2016), 243.
4. Sohyun An, "Asian Americans in American History: An AsianCrit Perspective on Asian American Inclusion in State U.S. History Curriculum Standards," *Theory & Research in Social Education* 44 (2016); Noreen N. Rodríguez, "Invisibility is not a natural state for anyone':(Re) constructing narratives of Japanese American incarceration in elementary classrooms," *Curriculum Inquiry* 50, no. 4 (2020): 309–329.
5. Noreen N. Rodríguez, "Teaching Angel Island through Historical Empathy and Poetry," *Social Studies and the Young Learner* 27, no. 3 (2015): 22–25.
6. Frederick Douglass, "Composite Nation," *Blackpast*, 1869/2007, <https://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1869-frederick-douglass-describes-composite-nation/>.
7. Mei M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2014); Kunal Parker, *Making Foreigners: Immigration and Citizenship Law in America, 1600–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015).
8. See chart in Ngai, *Impossible Subjects*, 28–29.
9. See also Noreen N. Rodríguez in *Inquiry and Teaching with Primary Sources to Prepare Students for College, Career, and Civic Life (PreK-6)*, ed. Scott M. Waring (Silver Spring, MD: NCSS, in press).
10. Abby Budiman and Neil G. Ruiz, "Key Facts About Asian Americans, a Diverse and Growing Population," *Pew Research Center*. April 29, 2021. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/04/29/key-facts-about-asian-americans/>.
11. Parker, *Making Foreigners*, 208.
12. Lyndon B. Johnson, "Remarks at the Signing of the Immigration Bill, Liberty Island, New York," >The American Presidency Project, October 3, 1965, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/node/241316>.
13. Hsu, *The Good Immigrants*.
14. See Vivin Qiang, "21 Years After the Arrest of Dr. Wen Ho Lee, Asian American Scientists Still Find Themselves Under Scrutiny," *Medium*, December 10, 2020, <https://medium.com/advancing-justice-ajc/21-years-after-the-arrest-of-dr-6098b921589a>.

Esther June Kim is an Assistant Professor at William & Mary. She can be reached at ejkim05@wm.edu.

Anna Falkner is an Assistant Professor of Instruction, Curriculum and Leadership at the University of Memphis. She can be reached at Anna.Falkner@memphis.edu.