



Asian American Racialization in America's Top-Ranked Public High Schools: Synchronizing Discourses of Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner

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ABSTRACT

Asian Americans are racialized into a highly complex and somewhat paradoxical position in the U.S. racial matrix. Drawing on interviews with parents at highly selective public magnet schools, this critical discourse analysis explores the processes of Asian American racialization and examines the ways that parents invoke and mobilize the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner when discussing the Asian American student presence at their children's schools. I first show how the model minority myth functions as a discursive racial weapon used to harm other communities of color, and then I demonstrate how Asian American students and families are simultaneously racialized by both model minority and perpetual foreigner discourses as competitive threats, outsiders whose presence causes unease and discomfort, and foreigners with inferior practices. Examining these racializing discourses and the ways that they function in synchrony is critical to understanding the racialized position of Asian Americans.

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Asian Americans occupy a complex and somewhat paradoxical position in the U.S. racial matrix (Lee and Sheng 2023; Lee and Zhou 2015). On one hand, Asian Americans are members of marginalized and minoritized communities of color that experience anti-Asian violence, racism, discrimination, and xenophobia – all of which have risen sharply in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (Han, Riddell, and Piquero 2023; Lantz and Wenger 2023). On the other hand, the educational and socioeconomic outcomes of Asian Americans – on average as a racialized category – generally defy conventional expectations predicted by the dominant majority-minority racial paradigm (Hsin and Xie 2014; Liu and Xie 2016; Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009). Thus, the racialized position of Asian Americans within the U.S. racial hierarchy remains a critical site of inquiry in understanding the ways that minoritized groups are racialized into the existing white supremacist structure. This article examines the micro-discursive processes of Asian American racialization in the educational context of parental discourse related to highly selective public magnet high schools.

This study seeks to explore the ways that the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner function in the context of top-ranked public magnet high schools

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with a high proportion of Asian Americans and the ways that the relationships between various ethnoracial groups (e.g. white-Asian American, Asian American-Black/Latinx) are discursively constructed. Drawing on a set of semi-structured interviews ($n = 12$) with parents whose children attend a highly selective high school and using critical discourse analysis, I show that parents discursively mobilize the racializing discourses of the model minority and perpetual foreigner in discussing their children's schools. By highlighting specific excerpts, I argue that model minority and perpetual foreigner discourses are simultaneously invoked in order to accomplish a set of inter-connected purposes: (1) to uphold meritocratic ideological myths, (2) to blame Black and Latinx communities for their educational 'failure', and (3) to ostracize and vilify Asian American families. The production of these discourses racializes a stereotypical Asian American subject while also maintaining an unequal white power structure.

In demonstrating that the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner operate in synchrony or in tandem within the specific educational context of highly selective public magnet high schools, this research demonstrates that Asian American students are racialized as model minorities in order to discipline and subjugate Black and Latinx counterparts and yet at the same time, Asian American families and their perceived parenting practices are also vilified and deemed inferior through perpetual foreigner discourse. While much research on Asian American racialization particularly in education has focused on the model minority myth, examining other racializing discourses like the perpetual foreigner – and the ways that these discourses interact in synchrony – is key to understanding the racialized position of Asian Americans in the U.S. racial structure.

Theoretical perspective: Asian American racialization

Asian Americans are traditionally racialized within the black-white binary in that some Asian American groups (e.g. Chinese) are ideologically 'whitened' while others (e.g. Cambodian, Hmong) are ideologically 'blackened' (Lee 2009; Ong et al. 1996). In theorizing beyond the black-white binary and accounting for Asian Americans, scholars have offered alternative forms or conceptualizations of the U.S. racial power structure, such as a field of racial positions (Kim 1999), a racial matrix (Coates, Ferber, and Brunsmma 2021), or multiple color lines (Quisumbing King 2019). All such perspectives conceptualize Asian American racialization as a distinct sociocultural process that warrants inquiry.

Model minority and Perpetual Foreigner

The racialized position of Asian Americans within the U.S. power structure can be generally understood through the lens of two prominent racializing discourses: (1) the model minority myth, or the stereotype that Asian Americans have achieved academic and socioeconomic success through innate intelligence, effort, diligence, or 'cultural' values, and (2) the perpetual foreigner, or the notion that Asian Americans are unassimilable outsiders or foreigners that cannot and/or do not conform to white ideals (Au 2022; Lee, Park, and Wong 2017; Walton and Truong 2023; Yi et al. 2020). Although these two racializing discourses seem to be contradictory framings, Asian Americans scholars have

argued that these constructs co-exist side by side (i.e. ‘two sides of the same coin’) and that both are mobilized to uphold the white supremacist racial structure and to undermine solidarity between minoritized communities (Lee, Park, and Wong 2017; Park 2008; Park et al. 2021; Wu 2018).

The visibility of each racializing discourse oscillates over time depending on the sociopolitical context. For instance, early Chinese migrant workers in the late 19th century were initially lauded as efficient and productive laborers only later to be accused of being ‘aliens who do not, will not, and cannot take up the burdens of American citizenship, whose presence is an economic blight and a patriotic danger’ (Gompers 1902, 27). Subject to civil rights violations, Japanese Americans were forcibly placed in internment camps during the 1940s only later to be lauded as a model minority during the civil rights movement (Pettersen 1966). Thus, Asian Americans are constantly being reframed and repositioned, from productive laborer to perilous alien and from foreign threat to model minority. However, these racializing discourses should be understood as analogous: the very same ‘values’ or ‘qualities’ that undergird the model minority myth are used to fuel perpetual foreigner discourse. As Okihiro (2014) argues, ‘Asian workers can be diligent *and* slavish, frugal *and* cheap, upwardly mobile *and* aggressive . . . models can be perils, and perils [can be] models despite their apparent incongruity’ (142, italics added). Whether at times in synchrony or in tension, this co-dependent interaction between model minority and perpetual foreigner is a critical site of inquiry in understanding the racialized position of Asian Americans.

Asian American Racializing Discourses in education

Within education more specifically, much attention has been placed on the model minority myth, which Au (2022) describes as the ‘defining form of Asian American racialization in education’ (185). The model minority myth has long been critiqued as an essentializing construct and a hegemonic weapon that sustains meritocratic myths, silences the racial injustices that other minoritized communities have suffered, and conceals the struggles of Asian American communities (Hartlep 2013; Lee 2009; Lee, Park, and Wong 2017; Poon et al. 2016). The stereotypical assumption that all Asian Americans are – either naturally or culturally – successful at school masks the diverse academic challenges of Asian American students, rendering their needs unrecognized and unsupported (Lew 2004; Wing 2007), and further, the model minority stereotype is argued to be a highly detrimental and constraining construct that narrowly defines what is acceptable and/or considered successful (Lee and Zhou 2015; Park 2011; Wu and Battey 2021).

While the model minority myth has been extensively critiqued, its counterpart – perpetual foreigner discourse – has been given significantly less attention. Only recently during the COVID-19 pandemic has this racializing discourse regained prominence (Daley, Gallagher, and Bodenhausen 2023; Williams, Nunes, and Tankeh 2022). Aside from a few notable exceptions (Lee, Park, and Wong 2017; Ng, Lee, and Pak 2007), the racializing constructs of model minority and perpetual foreigner are seldomly examined together in education. Thus, one of the principal aims of this study is to examine the intersection of these two Asian American racializing constructs and narratives in an educational context. In the next section, I provide a brief overview of Asian American

racializing discourses in selective admissions to first demonstrate the ways that model minority and perpetual foreigner are intertwined and to provide relevant context to the present study.

Asian American Racialization in selective admissions

Asian Americans are increasingly foregrounded in recent controversies surrounding the admissions processes at selective universities and high schools in the U.S. On one hand, the racializing discourse of model minority is invoked as evidence of a fair and meritocratic selection process in order to justify the status quo. Recent research has shown that a small group of Asian American political activists draw upon discourses of victimization, anti-Asian discrimination, and the model minority myth to contest affirmative action and race-conscious policies (Liu et al. 2023; Park, Hernández, and Lee 2022). From this view, ‘Asian Americans hold a special value for education such that high levels of academic and economic achievement are possible *despite* racism’ (Liu et al. 2023, 8, italics in original), and thus, high-achieving Asian Americans are rightfully worthy and deserving of admission. As others have argued (Liu et al. 2023; Yi et al. 2020), such a perspective is rooted in anti-Black racism, and mobilizing model minority discourse positions Asian Americans as ‘racial mascots’ that help to uphold unjust power relations (Poon and Segoshi 2018, 235).

Although the racialized construction of the model minority Asian American subject is used to defend the existing ‘objective’ meritocratic system, Asian American overrepresentation eventually – at some point – causes unease and anxiety, particularly among whites. A notable Asian American presence becomes a racialized foreign threat to white institutions and white entitlement of educational resources (Cabrera 2014; Dong 1995). This fear is made evident by racist nicknames given to particular institutions (MIT as ‘Made in Taiwan’ or UCLA as ‘United Caucasians Lost Among Asians’) and by racist graffiti like ‘Stop the Asian Hordes’ found at U.C. Berkeley (Osajima 2005). I suggest that white fear is rooted in the racializing discourse of perpetual foreigner: Asian Americans are racialized as outsiders and foreigners whose presence causes fear and danger. Other recent evidence suggests that white parents strongly prefer schools with fewer Asian American students, and parental perceptions of less student ‘fit’ and ‘commonality’ and fear of competition – arguably manifestations of perpetual foreigner discourse – may undergird patterns of white flight (Boustan, Cai, and Tseng 2023; Mellon and Siegler 2023).

While other critical discourse analyses have examined Asian American racialization using legal documentation (Liu et al. 2023; Park, Hernández, and Lee 2022), this study builds upon this previous work by examining parental discourse – both Asian and non-Asian – in an interview setting. Parents are an emerging group with power to advance significant challenges and influence educational change and thus are a critical stakeholder to study (Lareau and Muñoz 2012; Lareau, Weininger, and Cox 2018). Taking a micro-discursive approach to critical discourse analysis, I specifically examine the ways that parents from a diverse set of ethnoracial backgrounds discursively mobilize and appropriate the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner when discussing their children’s schools. I focus on several key instances ultimately arguing that these two racializing discourses are simultaneously present in synchrony and construct the Asian American student and family as both a model and a peril.

Method

Research context

This critical discourse analysis draws on a set of 12 semi-structured interviews that I conducted with parents who had children that attended a highly selective public magnet high school on the East Coast (at the time of the interview). Because parents were recruited via publicly available contact information, each of the parents served on the parent-teacher organization or parent-school support organization. I use the term, 'highly selective public magnet high school', to refer to high schools that have the following three features: (1) the magnet high school offers a curricular theme (e.g. health sciences, engineering), (2) the school is a public option within a school district (i.e. intra-district school choice), and (3) due to demand, earning admission is highly competitive and selective. Each of the 7 magnet high schools represented in this study is consistently ranked in the top 10 public high schools in their respective states. Of the parents interviewed ($n = 12$), 5 self-identified as White, 5 as Asian, 1 as Latinx, and 1 as Black. 8 of the participants were mothers, while 4 were fathers. The averaged racial composition of the 7 high schools represented in the study, based on publicly available data from 2021, is as follows: 25.9% White, 6.6% Black, 12.3% Latinx, and 50.3% Asian (I choose to present the averaged racial composition to protect the anonymity of the schools). In some cases, Asian American students compose 80–90% of the student population.

Interview protocol

I organized the semi-structured interviews into a series of three basic questions: (1) Why do parents want to send their kids to this school? (2) What is the admissions process like? (3) What do you feel like your child has gained as result of attending this school? These questions were primarily intended to stimulate an open-ended discussion. My initial research questions were related to parental perspectives on academic merit, high-stakes testing, and selection. For the initial data analysis, I followed the 6-phase progression of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006); these findings are presented elsewhere (Hu *forthcoming*). As a result, I extensively familiarized myself with the interview data by first focusing on broader emerging themes via thematic analysis and then selected specific excerpts to analyze in detail through critical discourse analysis. I provided space for participants to freely discuss any topics, but I never explicitly asked about race or the racial composition of the school. Nonetheless, participants brought up race both explicitly and implicitly in each of the interviews. When this occurred, I asked follow-up questions for further clarification and elaboration. Thus, the following excerpts in this analysis are parent-initiated moments of racial discourse.

Critical discourse analysis

Critical discourse analysis is an approach to understanding the intersection of language and social structure by using the key constructs of discourse, power, and ideology (Blommaert 2005; Fairclough 2001; Gee 2011). Discourse can be generally understood as 'language-in-use' that involves the communication of ideas or beliefs within social interaction (van Dijk 1997). Thus, discourse is a form of social practice – that is, discourse is agentively produced and interpreted by individuals, groups, and institutions

within particular sociohistorical, situational, and interactional contexts. Key tenets in critical discourse analysis are that discourse is inextricably connected to power relations and that discourse functions as a site of ideological contestation. Existing power relations and the effects of ideology shape and constrain the ways in which individuals act in discursive interactions such that these existing unequal power relations are reproduced. However, a critical discourse analysis approach does not take a deterministic view but instead positions discourse as an on-going negotiation through which and in which dominant ideologies are maintained. As a result, critical discourse analysis seeks to reveal and make clear the effects, outcomes, and processes of power (Blommaert 2005); its purpose is to illuminate the ways that discourse patterns are related to social structure.

In relation to race as an enduring structure of self and other that is negotiated through social and interactional processes, critical discourse analysis provides a means to specify these processes of self-ascription and ascription of others. Its key analytical power is to connect the micro-level of social interaction to the macro-level of social structure. Critical discourse analysis therefore allows us to understand the ways that racial categories are discursively mobilized and constructed to categorize self and other and thus the ways that social interaction contribute to solidifying the broader structuring concept of race itself (and vice versa). For this study, I conceptualize the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner as 'big D' discourses (Gee 2011), which inform the larger context of Asian Americans in the U.S. racial structure. These 'big D' discourses become relevant in the interview setting because I specifically inquire about their child's attendance at a selective high school-one of its implicitly but mutually acknowledged features is Asian American overrepresentation. Finally, I conceptualize the interview as a social interaction, and therefore the interview is a 'little d' discourse situated within the 'big D' discourse. The objective of this critical discourse analysis is to construct an argument that relates these two discourses.

Research questions

The following research questions guided my inquiry:

- (1) In what ways do the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner function in the context of top-ranked public magnet high schools with a high proportion of Asian American students?
- (2) How is the relationship between whites and Asian Americans, between Asian Americans and Black and Latinx students, and between various Asian subgroups discursively constructed?

Data analysis

First, I reviewed all of the interview transcripts, noting when race was explicitly mentioned. Then, while re-listening to the audio recordings of the interviews, I re-transcribed selected excerpts in greater detail using the Jefferson transcription notation (Jefferson 2004 see Supplementary Material for a transcription key). After transcribing and analyzing each excerpt, I wrote an analytic memo to begin analysis and interpretation of the discursive actions and strategies of the interviewee and the context of the conversation at that moment (Maxwell 2005). I reviewed all of the excerpts repeatedly over a sustained

period of time (Lincoln and Guba 1985). At the same time, I reviewed scholarship related to Asian American racialization and racializing discourses, which informed the theoretical perspective. Finally, I selected excerpts that best elucidated the ways that the parents that I interviewed invoked and contributed to Asian American racializing discourses. These excerpts are not intended to be representative but rather to highlight discursive phenomena.

Findings

Drawing on selected excerpts from interviews with the set of parents that I interviewed, I demonstrate how these parents at highly selective public magnet schools invoke and draw upon the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner when discussing the Asian American student presence at their children's schools. I first show that the model minority myth is a discursive racial weapon that is used to target, antagonize, and blame Black and Hispanic students and families. Moreover, I demonstrate how model minority and perpetual foreigner discourses are subtly intertwined together. While Asian American students are racialized as model minorities with superior innate intelligence, these same students are framed by perpetual foreigner discourse as outsiders whose presence causes concern, anxiety, and fear of competition. In addition, in what I call the racialization of parenting, stereotypical 'Asian parenting' is – on one hand – framed as the reason behind student academic success, but on the other hand, this racialized style of strict and demanding parenting is castigated and deemed inferior to the white standard. This critical discourse analysis reveals the ways that Asian American students and families are simultaneously racialized by both model minority and perpetual foreigner discourses, which positions the Asian American subject as both a racial weapon and an inferior outsider.

Model minority myth in action: a discursive racial weapon

In this first excerpt (Table 1), Florence, a Filipina mother, defends the standardized admissions test as the most equitable means of selection, justifying her claim by invoking model minority discourse. She explicitly denies that any form of privilege (e.g. racial, class) influences this process. The evidence that she presents is that she personally knows many Asian families that, despite their class disadvantage, have been able to successfully send their children to highly selective public magnet schools in the area by preparing them to take the admissions test through several years of out-of-school tutoring. Without acknowledging that private tutoring and out-of-school test preparation require substantial economic resources, Florence frames earning admission into these schools as merely a matter of individual choice or preparation, and not privilege.

The model minority myth is wielded as a discursive racial weapon beginning on line 1–6. Florence contrasts the model Asian families previously mentioned with 'some type of families' and 'other demographics', actively avoiding naming these groups. It is clear, however, that she is referring to Black and Latinx students who are significantly under-represented. In particular, Florence advances an accusation that Black and Latinx families do not prioritize their children's education, and she is only able to do so in direct comparison to the model minority myth that Asian families deeply care, prioritize, and

Table 1. Florence (part I).

1-1	I-I think (.) um it-it's very controversial especially these days but (.)
1-2	for me I think it's an equit-it's the most e-quitable uh criteria for admissions um (2.0)
1-3	of course a lot of people still feel that umm privilege goes into it ↑ but uh=
1-4	I don't think so because I as I know a lot these Asian families (.) you know xxx
1-5	It will sound a little bit racist but a lot of Asian families even if they're po:or (1.0)
1-6	send their kids to this school they prepare them hhh and however for some type=
1-7	of families it's not the priority uh that's why (.) in terms of o:the: demographics=
1-8	You will see that their um (3.0) their enrollment in *High School* is very=
1-9	SMALL compared to their actual share (.) of students in the public school system

value education. Thus, the racializing discourse of model minority discursively positions Asian American students and families in an oppositional and antagonistic relationship with Black and Latinx students and families. While model minority discourse certainly perpetuates meritocratic myths and positions Asian Americans as a racial wedge, the model minority myth can be discursively wielded as a racial weapon that blames, accuses, and commits a form of symbolic violence against other minoritized communities.

Synchronizing discourses part I: an intelligent but worrisome outsider

Furthermore, model minority discourse was often accompanied by and intertwined with perpetual foreigner discourse; these racializing discourses are invoked in synchrony. For instance, in the next excerpt (Table 2), Allison, a white mother, subtly mobilizes both model minority and perpetual foreigner discourses. She first says that her son is 'bright' (Line 2-8), but she is uncertain about his abilities in comparison to an unnamed group (read Asian American students). The implication is that she views Asian American students as 'brighter' or 'smarter', which invokes the model minority myth of cognitive intelligence, or the perception that innate intelligence explains Asian academic success. However, at the same time, Allison repeatedly expresses nervousness and concern about both the exclusivity of earning admission into the selective school and the competition between her son and others (Line 2-7). Here, perpetual foreigner discourse manifests itself in constructing the Asian American subject as a competitor.

At a later point, Allison admits that one of her and her husband's chief concerns was that her white son would attend a school in which he might be a minority or, even worse,

Table 2. Allison (part I).

2-1	Um (.) I was really ↑ nervous
2-2	I was xx ((chuckle)) xx I was really nervous=
2-3	>There was actually two things I was nervous about< hhh
2-4	I was nervous because (.) um (.) like I said (.) there were so many=
2-5	There were only (.) so many slots hh
2-6	Um and I was nervous that he wouldn't (.) uh=
2-7	wouldn't be offered one of them because it's so exclusive(.) you know ↑
2-8	Um xxx I mean he's bright but (.) you know like compa:red to xx like=
2-9	I don't know what th-the process is too
2-10	You know they try to be (1.0) they try to take as many from as many different towns
2-11	Umm (.) but I think you'll notice as you interview others (.) that (1.0)
2-12	xx there's a concentration (.) and it's not just (.) um (.) th-th-the concentration=
2-13	in the area and also in the ethnicity (1.0)
2-14	So that was my other concern is the the racial (1.0) um (2.0)
2-15	I don't know (1.0) xxx just you know xxx

Table 3. Allison (part II).

3-1	There is (.) a very heavy concentration in one ethnic group (3.0)
3-2	So that's (2.0) so I would encourage you to look at the statistics=
3-3	On the-online because I think they have on there=
3-4	So that was one of our concerns that x he was going to go into a school=
3-5	Where he would be (.) the minority and he might be the ONLY (1.0)
3-6	ONE (.) in the whole (.) grade

the only white student in the entire grade (Table 3). The anxiety and discomfort associated with the presence of Asian American students racializes them as perpetual foreigners who do not belong in such institutions. Presented in a different way, a white parent most likely would not express any anxiety about their child attending a predominantly white school, but the notion of their child attending a predominantly Asian American school is troubling only to the extent that Asian American students are racialized as outsiders. Taking these excerpts together as an example, we see that model minority discourse is invoked to highlight the perceived cognitive intelligence of Asian American students, but perpetual foreigner discourse is also present in that a 'concentration' of Asian Americans leads to a fear of competition and other racialized anxieties about being surrounded by foreigners. The effect is that Asian Americans are discursively distanced from whites.

Synchronizing discourses part II: a successful but inferior parent

The coalescing of model minority and perpetual foreigner discourses is further made evident in the ways that parenting is racialized. The trope of strict and over-burdening parenting is racialized as 'Asian parenting'. Although the academic success of their children is attributed to this approach to parenting and is applauded to some degree (i.e., model minority discourse), racialized 'Asian parenting' is also denigrated as inferior to white parenting (i.e., perpetual foreigner discourse). For instance, when discussing the high academic achievement of the students that attend her son's high school, Jillian, a white mother, laments the 'level of demand' that has been placed upon the students by their parents (Table 4). Like others, she avoids naming whose children and which families she is referring to (read Asian American). When I ask her to clarify the source of motivation for success and achievement, Jillian immediately responds 'a hundred percent', but she does not complete her thought (Line 4-10). Based on the context, it seems that she intended to say 'a hundred percent the parents', but instead she presents an important caveat: her son's academic success can be attributed to his 'internal drive'. In contrast to the other students whose success is 'family driven' or an externally placed demand, her son's achievement is intrinsically motivated. Thus, the source of motivation – whether intrinsic or

extrinsic – is racialized. While white students are intrinsically motivated to succeed, Asian American students are only extrinsically motivated to excel through demanding and harsh parenting. The stereotypical form of parenting that undergirds the model minority stereotype becomes vilified and demonized as an inferior approach to parenting when compared to the white standard. In other words, while Asian families should be applauded for their success, the parenting that produces such success is positioned as a source of difference and inferiority.

Table 4. Jillian.

4-1	J	I had a conversation with the NURSE who was there a couple years ago=
4-2		and she was just like (.) hhh oh my GOSH I mean the level of (.) demand
4-3		upon the kids from their FAMILIES is is overwhelming (.)
4-4		that's not universal of course [but]
4-5	*	[yeah]
4-6	J	it it can often be the case (.)
4-7	*	Wow (2.0) WOW yeah cuz I was gonna ask you you know where does=
4-8		that drive to succeed to excel to (.) you know to achieve=
4-9		where does that drive [come from] †
4-10	J	[a hundred] percent I mean hhh I HAVE to say=
4-11		for my son it's sort of an internal drive I mean I don't think we=
4-12		parent in that way hh uh (.)I mean we certainly applaud the success but=
4-13		it was not a demand placed upon my kids I am grateful they BOTH are=
4-14		internally driven hh but um (2.0) I think its uh (1.0) cultural it's uh (3.0)
4-15		it's a (.) family (2.0) driven thing xx I-I-I yeah I have yet to see a parent=
4-16		there who's like UN-involved you know what I mean ((chuckles))

Table 5. Florence (part II).

5-1	I am a Filipina I am ASIAN so I KNOW I KNOW a lot of like Chinese families
5-2	Korean families they start in fifth grade which I think is INSANE they send their kids to
5-3	CRAM school I'm not kidding you I have friends who tell xxx WHAAAA ((laughter))
5-4	I can't do that (.) I did not do that obviously but I know a lot of (.) Chinese families=
5-5	And Korean families even if they're not rich fam-they're not rich families by any=
5-6	you know by any stretch of imagination but the first thing they do (.)
5-7	fifth grade (.) BAM (1.0) go to CRAM school

Not only does the racialization of parenting emerged based on racial categories (e.g. White vs. Asian), the same form of racialization occurs along ethnic lines, particularly between East Asian versus other Asian American ethnic groups. At a later point in my interview with Florence (Table 5), she re-iterates the idea that even resource-poor Asian American families are able to successfully send their children to highly selective public magnet schools because they put forth the effort in preparation. Florence makes a statement of self-identification as Filipina in order to differentiate herself from the Chinese and Korean families that she knows that engage in 'insane' parenting practices such as sending their children to cram schools as early as 5th grade.

By saying that she did not and would not do such a thing, Florence – as a self-identified Filipina – distances herself from racialized 'East Asian parenting', which is portrayed as strict, harsh, extreme, etc., implying a substantive difference in parenting approach along ethnic lines. Not only is Asian parenting racialized, but it is also 'ethnicized', or made ethnic. These negative characterizations of East Asian parenting as foreign, abnormal, and/or unreasonable are rooted in perpetual foreigner discourse.

Discussion

In examining the processes of Asian American racialization within parental discourse related to highly selective public magnet high schools, I have argued that the discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner function in synchrony to racialize Asian

American students and families in a complex and somewhat paradoxical position (i.e. both a model and a peril). First, the model minority myth positions Asian Americans in an antagonistic relationship with other minoritized communities and functions as a discursive racial weapon used to commit harm to Black and Hispanic communities. Secondly, the coalescing of model minority and perpetual foreigner racializes Asian Americans as both ‘other’ and inferior to whites. Although Asian American students should be applauded for their cognitive abilities and their families should be praised for ensuring their children’s success, Asian Americans are racialized as competitive threats, outsiders whose presence causes unease and discomfort, and foreigners that practice a demonized and vilified form of parenting. Indeed, both model minority and perpetual foreigner are racializing discourses that must be examined in tandem to understand the racialized position of Asian American students and families.

In line with previous research, this critical discourse analysis confirms that the model minority myth continues to persist as a dominant racializing discourse for Asian Americans (Au 2022; Hartlep 2013; Lee et al. 2017; Poon et al. 2016; Yi et al. 2020). However, while others use the concepts of a racial wedge or mascot to describe Asian Americans being positioned in service of white hegemony (DeCook and Yoon 2021; Hsieh and Kim 2020; Poon and Segoshi 2018), I prefer to describe the model minority myth as a weapon to more accurately reflect the harm and violence that is directed towards other minoritized communities of color. The first excerpt from my interview with Florence (Table 1) shows how, in a brief social interaction, model minority discourse can be used to advance blame and accusations against others. Perhaps the most insidious of which is that the cultures of these communities of color are to blame for educational failure, ultimately misrepresenting systematic oppression and unequal structures as individual-level deficiencies.

However, the racializing discourse of model minority cannot be analyzed separately from perpetual foreigner discourse. My analysis here demonstrates, in one particular educational context, how these racializing discourses are necessarily intertwined. The very same qualities that inform the model minority myth are the same qualities that are used against Asian Americans to ostracize and vilify them, positioning them as inferior outsiders to whites. Within perpetual foreigner discourse are several narratives, such as the threat of foreign competition, un-Americanness, outside-ness, unbelonging, etc.—all of which are critical concepts to understanding the racial position of Asian Americans. This research also helps us to understand the processes within Kim’s 1999 theory of the racial triangulation of Asian Americans. Asian Americans are simultaneously racialized in a process of ‘relative valorization’ in relation to other communities of color (i.e., model minority) yet are also racialized in a process of ‘civic ostracism’ in relation to whites (i.e., perpetual foreigner).

Researching Asian American racialization remains an important phenomenon to examine because doing so reveals the enduring nature of white supremacy. The U.S. racial power structure demotes Asian Americans as foreigners and outsiders in order to maintain the racial hierarchy and to reinforce existing power relations. Understanding how the white supremacist structure has weaponized various myths and discourses vis-à-vis Asian Americans to perpetuate meritocratic ideologies and systemic racism, how these discourses are internalized by Asian Americans themselves, and how whiteness can be disrupted remain important future directions of research

(Dhingra 2021; Hartlep and Hayes 2013; Yi and Todd 2021). Furthermore, as scholars have taken a growing interest in Asian Americans within white suburban contexts (Lung-Amam 2017; Park 2020; Warikoo 2022), I suggest that perpetual foreigner discourse is a key racializing construct that can help us understand white fear and flight as well as neighborhood/spatial segregation (Boustan, Cai, and Tseng 2023; Kye 2023; Mellon and Siegler 2023).

Taking a micro-discursive approach to critical discourse analysis, this research has focused on the processes of Asian American racialization, particularly the racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner, in the context of highly selective public magnet schools. This is but one of the many possible contexts in which Asian American racialization can and should be examined; future work should study ethnographic and interactional contexts (e.g., student-teacher interactions). The primary contribution of this work is to provide one particular instance of how these racializing discourses of model minority and perpetual foreigner function and operate in synchrony.

Competing of interests

The author reports that there are no competing interests to disclose.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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