

**MASS STEREOTYPING A QUASI-MINORITY: THE CASE OF
CHINESE IN THE UNITED STATES**

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THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

One of the areas in the study of majority-minority relations is concerned with stereotypes toward minority group members held by the majority group. The purpose of this paper is to examine two major sources of mass stereotyping, namely education and mass media of communication, in terms of their function in perpetuating the usually biased image of an Oriental minority group, the Chinese. Literature in these fields will be reviewed and analyzed. However, survey research data available in large quantity in recent years will not be included except for analytical purpose.

It does not appear that children have any initial aversions to any ethnic group because they recognize physical or cultural differences. The differences that are recognized are learned or taught through association. In other words, ethnic prejudice among "typical Americans", in most instances, is derived more from unscientific sources that are traditional and emotional in nature than from sources that are rational in nature.

Thus it is desirable to trace the presentation and content of school textbooks and the mass media in their history of stereotyping any ethnic minority so that the prevailing status quo of this ethnic minority can be properly understood.

This paper will examine the treatment of an ethnic quasi-minority group, the Chinese, in American school textbooks and the mass media. This historical description will emphasize on the presentation of stereotyping the Chinese to see how "unscientific", "traditional", and "emotional" in nature the stereotypes are. Specifically, we will show the roles of education and mass media in shaping American image of the Chinese. It is hoped that some improvements on the treatment of the Chinese in American textbooks and the mass media can be taken for the best interest of both the majority and the minority groups involved.

The Chinese are the first Oriental immigrants in the United States. They are

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minority by an criteria — language, culture, customs, physical appearance, way of life, and even the number of population. They arrived in the United States at a time of “scientific racism” which quickly rendered them as scapegoat of a century-long discrimination against the Negro. They encountered a typical process of social stratification—differentiation, ranking, evaluation, and rewarding—as is identified by Tumin (1967). This process was then directed toward other Asian immigrants who were also subjected to the regulation of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, 1892, and the later quota system. Therefore, the case of Chinese can provide more understanding of the majority-minority relations in the United States.

As an ethnic minority, the Chinese receives less equal treatment than accorded to other minority groups. This in practical terms means they were not treated as a member of the majority nor of the minority but of a status lower than that of other minority ethnic groups (Chin, 1970). Various subtle discriminatory tactics produce many incidents where the Chinese have been given quasi-minority rights. For instance, it is not uncommon for a Chinese student who applis for financial aid or job to be informed that he is not eligible since he is Chinese and therefore not a “minority” within the purposes of the program, while “female and minority members are encouraged to apply.” In fact, the emphasis for the minorities is for the blacks and Pureto Ricans and not for the Chinese, nor for other Orientals. They are not accorded equal minority treatment.

A stereotype is an exaggerated belief, a fixed idea that associated with a category. Its function is to justify or rationalize our counduct in relation to that category (Allport, 1958). A stereotype is an oversimplified generalization that emphasizes only selected traits of another group. It tends to make up the whole image of an ethnic group, thus, serving as an excuse for differential treatment (Marden and Meyer, 1973).

At the individual level, the existence of a stereotype may actually affect our perception of the group concerned or reinforce our false perception. In a movie of New York subway accident, it was the black, not the white, who was intuitively perceived as a criminal. When children were shown a picture of a house and asked what the black woman was doing, the answer was “cleaning up”, although there was no black woman in the picture. Many more evidences of this type can be cited.

At the societal level, stereotypes may lead to international hostility. Klineberg (1965) argues that the stereotypes held by Germans concerning the Poles and Russians were by no means unimportant in paving the way for a German attack against these peoples. It could be argued the study of stereotypes is important to our policy-makers in a period of changing relations between the United States and China.

Mass Stereotyping

It can be easily seen that, in most cases, education and the mass media provide most resources concerning other ethnic groups, as will be specified later. Once the establishment of dominance by the majority group is accomplished, stereotypes are accorded to the minority group mainly through education and the mass media. They are so penetrating that one is predisposed to a stereotype which one is very likely to hold through out his life without even realizing it. Moreover, it can be readily seen that education and the mass media are "mass" in their very nature in disseminating ethnic information.

THE SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS AND THE MASS MEDIA AS SOURCES OF ETHNIC STEREOTYPES

It is believed that ethnic consciousness and awareness tend to have their origins in the experiences of children in a culture that reflects differences. As a child learns his mother language, he becomes exposed to ethnic prejudices, if such prejudices exist in his group of associates. While the home is one of the chief centers in the diffusion of ethnic attitudes, the school often becomes a testing ground for the integration of ethnic prejudices. Sometimes the home is free from prejudice but school situations may become a form of compulsory exposure to ethnic attitudes (McDonagh and Richards, 1953).

A problem of special concern to the educator arises out of the presence of ethnic stereotypes in the schoolbooks used by children, particularly in history and geography. As far as relations between Asians and Europeans are concerned, western schoolbooks are apparently characterized not only by a tendency to stereotype the Oriental, but also by paying much too little attention to people and events far from the western scene (Klineberg, 1965). A study by American Council on Education (ACE, 1949) reports that the treatment given to minority groups in over three hundred American textbooks reveals that many of them perpetuate negative stereotypes. The fault seems to lie not in any malicious intent, but in the culture-bound traditions which the authors of textbooks unwittingly adopted.

Stereotypes are acquired from both direct and indirect experiences in the home, the school, the street, the playground, and through various media of communication. For a child the first four areas of experience seem more important as sources of ethnic attitudes than the communication media. As one advances from childhood to adolescence the mass media, besides interpersonal contact, are the main sources of ethnic stereotypes.

Since mass communication depend on popular approval for their sales, they

serve as reinforcing agents in the maintenance and continuance of the generalized popular stereotypes (Marden & Meyer, 1973). Stereotypes aid people in simplifying their categories; they justify hostility; sometimes they serve as projection screens for our personal conflict. But there is an additional and exceedingly important reason for their existence. As Allport (1958) sees it, stereotypes are socially supported, continually revived and hammered in by media of mass communication—novels, short stories, newspaper items, movies, stage, radio, and television. We will present how the Chinese were pictured first in the American textbooks, and second in the mass media. But it would be helpful to trace briefly the roots of American image of the Chinese before textbooks and the mass media are discussed.

ROOTS OF IMAGE

Presumably the roots of American attitudes toward the Chinese are located in its European heritage. There were three distinct phases in the development of an image of China in the European mind before 1800. From Marco Polo to the sixteenth century there was a wondering, exotic never-never-land image, followed by a more realistic phase in which the assets and liabilities of Chinese civilization were carefully weighed. Then during the second half of the seventeenth century, Jesuit missionaries began to idealize Chinese government, law, and Confucian philosophy which continued to be influential in the nineteenth-century America (Miller, 1969). But the excitement over China was always more subdued in England than on European continent, leading to a lack of interest in China as was reflected by America's colonial press.

The unstructured perception of China in the American mind in the latter half of the eighteenth century has significance in terms of modern communication theory. The less that is known on a given topic, the easier it is for an opinion maker to influence his audience. Once the China trade triggered American interest in that part of the globe, the important opinion makers were the traders, missionaries, and diplomats whose influence on the development of an American image of the Chinese was greatly enhanced by virtue of having been in China. Such individuals are conceptualized as "gatekeepers", whose monopoly on a type of experience or a source of information makes them more effective in shaping public opinion on related topics.

When events in China attained worldwide significance and received wide coverage in the American press, the events themselves helped to influence American images of the Chinese. The first of these events, the Opium War (1839-1842),

coincided with the evolvement of penny press in the United States.

Furthermore, the arrival of Chinese in California provoked editorial fears across the nation, fears that can only be explained in terms of the unfavorable image of these people that preceded them to American shores. The presence of the Chinese on the West Coast reinforced many of the negative stereotypes of them, which in turn interacted with other anxieties affecting the nineteenth-century American society.

CHINA IN AMERICAN SCHOOL TEXTBOOKS

The school children as a rule do not read the newspapers, except the funny pictures parts. In the elementary schools, their chief source of knowledge is from their textbooks. The "primacy effect", the effect of their very first source of information as is called by some communication theorists, may be persistent over a long period of time and may predispose their attitude toward certain events during their childhood. This is the case in ethnic stereotypes. Two examples were mentioned by Lew (1923) in his study of the image of the Chinese in American school textbooks.

A Yale man was once confronted at the entrance of Kinning Hall by a school boy who was returning from his school for lunch, passing through the Campus.

"Are you a Jap?"

"No," said the Yale man.

"Then you are a Chinaman, eh? Are you just as bad or worse than a Jap?"

"What do you mean?"

"You Chinamen eat snakes, dogs and do lots of horrible things, don't you?" the child answered.

"Where did you learn that?"

"At school," was the swift reply.

Lew comments that the reply would not be so pathetic and significant if not for the fact that these first impressions are often the most lasting impressions (Lew, 1923).

The second example is related to a Harvard graduate who claims that all he knows about China is what he learned from his grammar school and that those

facts he finds to be far from correct. "But it is very hard for me to shake off those wrong impressions; they often blur my judgment" (Lew, 1923).

In his study of American history and geography textbooks, Lew was able to show extensively how the Chinese were treated either by stereotyping or by misunderstanding, with ample excerpts from the textbooks he studied. Very few pages in the textbooks are devoted to China. Two main reasons stand out for so doing. Firstly, some authors think that China has not made any contribution to American civilization or has stood apart from the Western civilization. "The only historic race is the Caucasian, the others having done little worth recording," says an author of a history textbooks. Secondly, the Chinese as a race have not done much in advancing the civilization of the world and they lack a tendency to progress.

Other excerpts from the textbooks examined are not to be re-quoted here. In short, there were more pages devoted to China in modern history, but, again, there were errors of facts and misinterpretation. A study conducted by American Council on Education (1964) yields identical results. Through Western eyeglasses China is presented with inaccuracies and omissions. Other errors resulting from oversimplification or generalization are to be found too. The majority of the inaccuracies, however, is due to acceptance by the authors of certain stereotyped impressions about the Orient (ACE, 1946).

For example, Chinese exclusion is treated with superficiality. Of the modern problems and civics textbooks studied, only one book suggests that the basic pulls on the Chinese to come to the United States were identical to those that brought the Germans, Irish, Italians, Slavs and other immigrants from Europe. Nearly all of the books say that exclusion was justified because the Chinese competed unfairly with American labor and that they practiced "those disgusting habits of thrift, industry, and self-denial" (ACE, 1946).

One of the chief problems for Americans, so far as the Orient is concerned, is the matter of race relations. According to a study by American Council on Education, only three junior high books and four senior high books attempt to discuss this crucial problem at all.

It is generally recognized today that an intelligent understanding of racial attitudes is fundamental for international peace and friendship, as well as for American domestic welfare (Klineberg, 1951, 1965; Buchanan and Cantril, 1953). One cannot, however, overlook the undesirable attitude engendered by the fact that students are led to see the culture, civilization, and standard of living of the people of China only through Western eyeglasses. This may create in the students a

feeling of superiority and a patronizing, pitying attitude. The "poor" Chinese may be liked, but the average textbook does little to engender respect for them as human beings on an equal basis with Americans. Isaacs (1956) interviewed some American elites and considered what most of them learned about Asia. "Their scattered recall of classroom gleanings confirm to a remarkable degree a number of studies which have examined the marginal appearance of Asia in the world as it is discovered by most educated Americans at the beginning of their lives."

This type of treatment of China is not new in the textbooks. In 1930, Bessie L. Pierce made an extensive survey of civic attitudes in American textbooks (ACE, 1945). She found that the textbooks she examined treated China as an example of America's generosity to a weaker nation; they gave the impression that exclusion of the Chinese was completely justified, and regarded Japan with more esteem than China because of her adaptation of Western ideas. This study was replicated in 1944 and the findings still hold true as far as textbooks' attitudes toward China and the Chinese are concerned, though of course their attitude toward Japan has changed because of her aggression.

In general, the persistence of stereotype toward the Chinese was confirmed by Gilbert (1951) in his study of stereotypes held by American college students toward ten ethnic groups. The American image of the Japanese changed drastically between the United States and Japan. However, this was also the period in which the Chinese experienced the greatest change of stereotype held by the Americans. Gilbert attributed this change to the greater popularity of social science in American colleges, which is having some effect in producing a little more sophistication about social stereotypes and prejudices. A more general cultural factor, according to Gilbert, is the gradual disappearance of stereotyped characterizations in American entertainment and communication media.

One question remains unanswered is that: Is there any change of American stereotype toward the Chinese in the past 30 years in American elementary and secondary school textbooks? If yes, in which direction? Studies showed that the type of relations between countries is the major cause of a changing stereotype. For instance, the American image of Japan before and after Pearl Harbor (Seago, 1947) and India's image of the Communist China before and after Sino-Indian border dispute (Sinha and Upadhyaya, 1960) differ considerably. We may reasonably ask: What would be the impact of Nixon's visit to the Communist China in 1972 and of Carter's "normalization" of relationship with it regarding American image of China as reflected in the textbooks, if any?

THE MASS MEDIA

Before the coming of the Chinese immigrants to California, the American image of China came from traders, diplomats, and protestant missionaries who were so much predisposed by the American culture that their experience in China led to a negative image of the Chinese. This image has a strong impact upon the editors of newspapers and journals. Thus the Chinese did not arrive on American shores in an opinion vacuum.

It is clear that stereotype serves the function of rationalizing our treatment of other groups. If our image of the Negro is that they make good servants but not effective teachers or doctors, we will be less prepared to give them equality of opportunity with whites. In the case of the Chinese on the West Coast of the United States, this mechanism has been clearly demonstrated.

Newspapers and Journals

When the Chinese were needed in California, because of a labor shortage, the Chinese were welcome. During that period newspapers and journals referred to them as among "the most worthy of our newly adopted citizens", "the best immigrants in California"; they were spoken of as thrifty, sober, tractable, inoffensive, law-abiding. They showed an "all-round ability" and an "adaptability beyond praise." This flattering picture had prevailed for a considerable period. Then around the 1860s, when the economic situation had changed and other groups were competing with the Chinese for the positions they were occupying, there was a corresponding change in the stereotype of the Chinese. The phrases now applied to the Chinese included "a distinct people", "unassimilable", "their presence lowered the plane of living", "they shut out white labor." They were spoken as clannish, criminal, debased and servile, deceitful and vicious; they were filthy and loathsome in their habits, undesirable as workers and residents in the country (Shrieke, 1936).

The rise of the penny press in the 1840s had brought a vastly increasing emphasis on overseas developments, including those in China. As Miller (1969) sees it, the development of the nation's first real mass medium was a crucial factor in the crystallization of the American image of China on a popular level. The events in China reported by American newspapers helped reinforce American's stereotype. The Opium War (the first Anglo-Chinese War) in 1839-1842, while in a manner was reminiscent of the Spanish-American War at the end of the century, furnished a convenient battleground in the larger struggle for domination and competition

between newspapers.

The descriptions of China in these newspapers, which had ignored that nation up to the Opium War, reflected a highly unfavorable conception of the Celestial Empire. In an extensive survey of fifty-five newspapers published at that time, Miller (1969) found that what had been reported was just the American editors' perception of the event. These perceptions not only affected the image of the Chinese, but in turn clearly indicated the viability of the image shaped by missionaries, traders, and diplomats.

Magazines

Being unable to compete with newspapers, serious commentary on the Chinese was left up to the magazines before 1840. However, the number of magazine article was limited until a decade before the Anglo-Chinese war when articles on the Celestial Empire increased sharply. For the first three decades of Sino-American trade, American editors demonstrated a marked preference for the older, more favorable conceptions of the Chinese. They quickly discovered the European controversy in progress over the merits of Chinese civilization. Because of their relative ignorance of China, and their disadvantage in not having been there to see for themselves, these editors felt somewhat helpless in the face of the growing criticism of the Chinese on the part of traders returning or writing from Canton. They soon joined the newspapers and expressed considerable anxiety over the nature of Chinese immigration. They were, in the main, content with restricting the Celestials to the Pacific slope, denying them citizenship, and encouraging them to return to China after having filled their economic function in the United States. The largest Chinatown in the United States was fully reported through magazine fictions.

In a quantitative analysis of about two hundred magazine fictions published in eight of the most widely read magazines in the United States in 1937 and 1943, Berelson and Salter (1946) found that there were substantial differences in the treatment of "Americans" and members of minority or foreign groups. Their study showed that fully three fourths of the minority and foreign characters were described along the lines of widely diffused stereotypes. They concluded that magazine fiction would increase the tendencies to assign stereotypic descriptions to foreign groups and give readers the impression that they had found "proof" for their stereotypes.

Motion pictures

The role of motion pictures cannot be overlooked as a conveyor of ethnic stereotypes. To be sure, American audiences receive what Hollywood wants them to want; but in the long run audience desires, acute or dormant, determine the character of Hollywood films. The audiences also determine the way these films picture foreigners. Kracauer (1949) argues that the subjective factor in any such image is more or less identical with the notions American public opinion entertains of the people portrayed. It is therefore highly improbable that a nation popular with the average American will be presented unfavorably; nor should we expect currently unpopular nations to be treated with condoning benevolence. Similarly, screen campaigns for or against a nation are not likely to be launched unless they can feed on strong environmental moods in their favor.

With the development of movies, "the Chinese quarter of San Francisco was reproduced almost to its smells" (Gorelik, 1940). Jones (1955) notices that the image of the Chinese held by some Americans came from Lon Chaney's portrayals of a murderous highbinder and the evil "Mr. Wu". Or perhaps they merely examined the poster advertising Boris Karloff's performance as the sinister "Dr. Fu Manchu" which promised "menace in every twitch of his finger . . . terror in each split second of his slanted eyes."

Others have experienced a revolutionary manipulation of their conception of the Chinese through books of Pearl Buck and other writers, and through Hollywood's versions of Pearl Buck's "The Good Earth" and her other books. There were some whose image of the Chinese came from Charlie Chan whose Confucian wisdom was employed in catching criminals rather than in concocting mysterious poisons for a white hero. McDonagh and Richards (1953) mention a vivid personal document in which the author recalled his image of the Chinese was associated with Charlie Chan. In summarizing the portrayal of minority characters on the American screen, McDonagh and Richards state that the movies tend to depict the Negro as amiable and as a person in a servant category, the Jew as a businessman, the Chinese, in the mystery play, as a deceitful person, the Mexican as personalities ranging from a lazy dweller to the owner of a rancho, and so on.

Radio and Television

The radio and television have been continuing the same process. In fact, the "top" ethnic entertainers are often the persons who can give "realism" to the

stereotypes of the designated ethnic groups (McDonagh and Richards, 1953). Unfortunately, to my knowledge, there is no study of this kind. The only source which I have access to is "Kung Fu" television series. My own experience in watching this program is that this series do not viciously stereotyping the Chinese. On the contrary, there are many more "bad" whites than Chinese and the leading actor is portrayed as a character with all the virtues and merits of a "good" Chinese. Can it be a new type of stereotyping?

This is corresponding to Gilbert's (1951) finding that there is a gradual disappearance of stereotyped characterizations in American entertainment and communication media. But it is difficult to say which is the cause and which is the effect. Perhaps American's curiosity about China after Nixon's visit to Communist China can explain why. Another reason might be that Americans are now more objective than before so that they are less likely to degrade a culture different from theirs. Whatever the change might be, the treatment of the Chinese in American television reflects that, like movies, the American majority's attitude has partly shaped the policy of mass media in so far as portraying minority groups is concerned.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

A Chinaman is cold, cunning and distrustful; always ready to take advantage of those he has to deal with; extremely covetous and deceitful; quarrelsome, vindictive, but timid and dastardly. A Chinaman in office is a strange compound of insolence and meanness. All ranks and conditions have a total disregard for truth.

----- "China", *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 7th ed.
vol. Vi, (1842); quoted from Miller's
The Unwelcome Immigrant.

In this paper, we have discussed the origin of American stereotype toward the Chinese, the portrayal of the Chinese in American elementary and secondary school textbooks and the mass media in a period of emotional and unscientific racism. We also have discussed some of the changing stereotype, due to the changing environment, namely, economic competition and international relations.

It seems that in the absence of the blacks the anti-Negro sentiments were applied to the Chinese. While asserting that the main dynamic for the anti-Chinese movement came from the historic experience with blacks and slavery, Saxton (1971)

suggests that the cycle of prejudice was completed when anti-Chinese feeling in many labor unions contributed to the drive for restrictions against blacks and reinforced other forms of nativism. In other words, like blacks, the Chinese have experienced a period of institutionalized stereotyping in which the school textbooks and the mass media play a dual roles of both a cause and an effect. Although Spoehr (1973) finds that among whites positive stereotypes of the Chinese were much more prevalent than positive stereotypes of blacks, the process of stereotyping is identical. The difference, according to Spoehr, is that Chinese tended to be classified primarily by racial nationalist (or cultural) criteria, while blacks were classified primarily by linking racial nationalist with racial naturalist (or biological) criteria.

It can be seen that the American stereotype of the Chinese before 1800 was simply a blindfolded social legacy of the Europeans, since there were few direct contacts between people of the two nations. The stereotype persisted until the Chinese arrival on the West Coast. In the years that followed, discrimination and racism against the Chinese could best be understood in terms of social and economic group conflicts.

In the beginning, there was a labour vacuum and the Chinese was welcome. Then around the 1860s the economic situation had changed and other groups were competing with Chinese immigrants for the positions they were occupying. The gold mines were not so productive as they had been before. The completion of the Central Pacific Railroad (1864-67) and the immigration of white labour from the East in search for works on the Pacific Coast filled San Francisco with unskilled workers. The concurrence of all these circumstances, which caused a serious depression (1869-73), made inevitable a readjustment of occupations and wages. A negative image of the Chinese was exaggerated and institutionalized in this era when both political parties introduced into their platforms legislation "protecting" Californians against Mongolian competition in the 1876 elections. The formal suspension of immigrants from China by the Congress marked the beginning of the third era. The school textbooks and media of mass communication served as the major agents of racial socialization well beyond the suspension was renewed in 1892.

As China became American's wartime ally, during World War II, it is hypothesized that a conception of Chinese in a positive direction may emerge from textbooks and the mass media. Today the success of the Chinese communists may threaten to begin a new phase in a historic cycle of American's opinion, especially after Nixon's visit to China. Yet we do not have data of this kind. An up-to-date survey of the treatment of Chinese by American school textbooks and the mass

media is suggested.

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