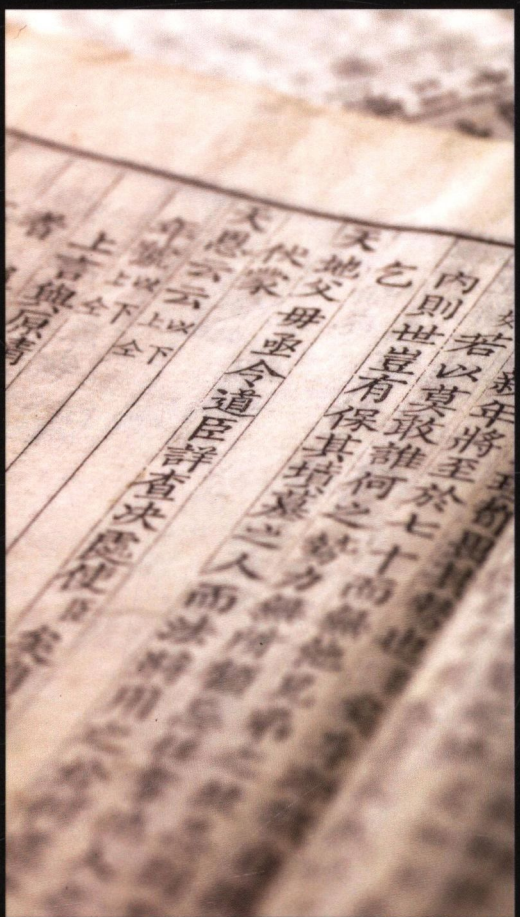
CULTURE SHOCK FOR ASIANS IN U.S. ACADEMIA

BREAKING THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH



EUNKYONG LEE YOOK

"The book is uniquely structured for everyone in higher education, K–12 practitioners, community leaders, and policy makers and political leaders at all levels in understanding Asian Americans' ideals, struggles, despairs, and hopes in American education and beyond. Due to the increasing Asian American presence in American education, the need to understand these issues is urgent. Eunkyong Lee Yook examines both myths and realities, providing many compelling cases and theories that challenge the education community and beyond to rethink stereotypical perceptions of Asian Americans in academia. A comprehensive and insightful work that de-mythifies Asian American culture and education."

—**Eung-Jun Min**, Rhode Island College

"*Culture Shock for Asians in U.S. Academia: Breaking the Model Minority Myth* deals with an important issue that has been neglected so far by academics. This book is a scholarly analysis of one of the most challenging issues confronting Asian American students and scholars in their academic lives, breaking the common myth of the Asian American 'success' model, and uncovering the hidden failures behind the 'success.' This book will be a valuable addition to scholarly research and provide a deeper understanding of Asian Americans in North America."

—**Young-chan Ro**, chair of religious studies and director of the Korean Studies Center, George Mason University

"This book presents an inner picture of Asian model minority students struggling to meet parental and societal expectations and Asian faculty at American academic institutes experiencing cultural and linguistic difficulties to adapt to the prevailing culture and customs. The author, herself a Korean immigrant mother who has raised two children and an intercultural communication scholar, analytically examines her own firsthand experiences, observations, and research from an integrated perspective of a model minority parent, an Asian female faculty member, and an intercultural communication researcher. Anyone interested in understanding the inner issues and challenges of Asian model minority students and Asian faculty in U.S. academia should read this book."

—**Ok-choon Park**, U.S. Department of Education

By exploring the cultural backgrounds of Asians in U.S. academia, *Culture Shock for Asians in U.S. Academia: Breaking the Model Minority Myth* realizes the goal of furthering understanding of the unique challenges they face, from the "teacher as guru" phenomenon to the model minority myth. This book includes an analysis of issues from an intercultural communication perspective. Short research articles, as well as practical learning activities and modules appropriate for K–16 and beyond, are included in the text.

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YOOK

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Eunkyong Lee Yook

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Culture Shock for Asians in U.S. Academia

To my parents

who sacrificed much to open educational horizons

Preface

Why Study Asians in Academia?

This book was motivated by three main reasons. First and foremost, I wrote this book because of the increasing significance of the presence of both Asian students and scholars in U.S. academia institutions. Second, both populations face cultural and linguistic challenges that have caused real and present difficulties in their lives, but these issues have not been clearly articulated in a comprehensive and systematic way till now.

Up to now, there has been research that shed light on this topic from an education or social perspective. These single-perspective approaches have brought some of these vital issues to light. However, I believe that a multi-dimensional communication approach will provide a new and more effective way of dealing with these complex issues that supersedes disciplinary boundaries. The comprehensive and fluid nature of the communicative approach is the primary reason why I chose to become a communication scholar. A multiple-party communication perspective will reflect theories from multiple disciplines to promote analysis of real life situations and comprehensive understanding of the issues. It will also open up a dialogue between students and their instructors, instructors and administrators, as well as between scholars and their academic counterparts and will be useful in pointing out avenues for resolving them.

Third, after first articulating the core cultural differences as the cause for differences in the different academic contexts, this book will focus on what each can do to ameliorate those issues. I have always wanted to do research that can bring about real change in human lives. I believe that by providing theoretical insight from multiple perspectives, and practical avenues for resolving issues,

the lives of those involved in the educational and professional processes of Asian students and scholars will be made more effective and purposeful.

Why Write This Book?

I was blessed with the experience of different educational systems all over the world in different cultures from a young age due to my father's job as a diplomat. As such, I was given the fortunate opportunity to see cultural events and interactions from an insider's as well as an outsider's perspective. Things that are taken for granted by Koreans in Korea, where I came from originally, became questions in my mind as I sought the reasons why they were done in those particular ways. For example, the honorific system of the Korean language dictates that we use different verb forms and different nouns when we address elders or "superiors" in society (Korean is a hierarchical society, or High Power Distance culture, in Hofstede's words; this is explained in detail in Chapter 4 of this book). The honorific form is used in the French language also, a language that I was immersed in at a Belgian boarding school at a very young age. These honorific forms are similar to formal language forms for use with those who are new acquaintances. I confused the two, using the honorific / formal language for peers at school when I first met them, resulting in confusion and laughter from my new friends. I became keenly aware of these forms of language and questioned why English didn't have these forms, while Korean and French did.

Ironic as it seems, I experienced culture shock when I returned back to my own country after living abroad for six years out of twelve years of my childhood. Cultural aspects that would have been taken for granted became the focus of interest in my mind. Communication scholar Dean Barnlund calls this "cultural myopia": that is, human nature leads us to not be aware of our surroundings until we are taken out of them. Just as a fish does not realize that it is in water until the minute it is taken out of it, humans tend to live in our cultural ways unaware of our cultural ways until we step outside of our own cultural environment. This cultural curiosity about my own culture after living in various continents and countries made me curious about cultural differences. Similarly, anthropologist Edward Hall in his book *Beyond Culture* (1976) states:

> "Recognition of the cultural unconscious is a relatively recent development in Western thought, so recent in fact that understanding out-of-awareness cultural processes is rare. Some of my most learned and erudite colleagues reject the notion that there is even anything to discuss in man's unconsciously structured temporal and spatial system. Talking about unconscious culture in concrete terms is a bit like talking about writing systems for language prior to the development of writing. The reader should ponder a moment on what it would be like to live ten thousand years ago or more, trying to grapple with the

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> analysis of language. Of course there would be those who verbalized freely, yet were completely unaware of the fact that there was a system that regulated their speech" (pp. 162 – 163).

Furthermore, I also experienced culture shock when studying in the United States as a graduate student. The differences in cultural expectations of fellow students and my professors were an additional layer of factors that I had to adjust to. It wasn't just that the curriculum didn't "ring true" to me: communication theories that were discussed in graduate seminars were just not valid based on my cultural experiences. Theories were Eurocentric, derived from a Eurocentric ethnomethodology. I began to question the validity of those theories and wonder why they were not reflective of my world view and experiences.

Besides the questionable validity of the curriculum in multicultural contexts, adjusting to the new U.S. educational system with its own requirements and expectations was an additional layer of adjustment that needed to be addressed. Adaptation was an issue for me even though English was not an issue for me personally due to my learning of English during my early childhood. Having been socialized in Korea during my pre-kindergarten years, issues of how classes are conducted, the appropriate norms for who speaks to whom, when, and why, and how to manage peer relationships and relationships with professors outside of the classroom were all cultural barriers to my full involvement in the educational process. Later, having been educated in the British and European educational systems, I found that unfortunately those newly learned cultural classroom norms were no longer valid or relevant in the North American educational system. This prompted me to focus on intercultural issues when studying the act of human communication in educational contexts, and to want to share my experiences and study of this topic with others. This intercultural experience promoted me to write my dissertation on an intercultural communication topic. By then I was mesmerized by the study of cultures and communication, especially in the educational context.

Additionally, my personal experiences of bringing up two children of Asian heritage in the U.S. educational system also brought insight into more issues, and made me want to share my ideas with others even more. The issue of gender and cultural identity, the issue of powerlessness and the internal turmoil that brings about to students, especially males, in a culture that is at once their own and foreign, are all issues that I have dealt with first-hand with my children. The issue of language and parental involvement in their children's schooling, the issue of discipline and when to let children follow their own wants, and the issue of wanting them to have a cultural identity that the children may not necessarily see the need to maintain, were all experienced first-hand.

All of these issues were experienced while being a mother and a scholar pursuing another two graduate degrees (my first Masters degree in simultaneous

interpretation was not comprehended by my advisor; consequently I had to redo a Masters degree to be able to proceed to pursue a Doctorate). This experience brought about the issues of gender identity and traditional gender roles and alter egos to the surface. As an Asian female scholar, where is the line to draw when your young child is asking you to make Barbie doll dresses and you have a stack of papers to read for tomorrow's seminar? Does telling her that I can't make me a bad Asian mother? These issues, as well as the difficulties in applying for jobs using my ethnic name for fear that universities would hesitate to hire me due to the link an ethnic name has with lack of English proficiency, and related issues that will be further discussed in later chapters of this book have motivated me to share these ideas and experiences, grounded in scholarly research. These are all issues that come from a lived perspective into which those from the mainstream culture may not otherwise have an opportunity to gain insight.

The Value of Applicable Research

Finally, as mentioned earlier, I firmly believe that "good" human research is not just esoterical theory-building for the sake of abstract discussions within the ivory tower. I believe that the ultimate goal of research should be of practical use to better humankind. Therefore, I have always believed in the value of research that can be applied to solve some real-life problem. That is why when I read Brislin, Cushner, Cherrie, and Yong's *Intercultural Interactions*, I became certain that this is the kind of useful research that I wanted to do. I used the method of intercultural training called Intercultural Sensitizers, which were used in *Intercultural Interactions*, for my doctoral dissertation. I have created Intercultural Sensitizers in my past research, whether they are regarding Asian students, mainstream U.S. students, their teachers, or educational administrators. They are included in this book as well as several newly created explicitly for this book. By doing this research and writing this book to resolve this significant but eclipsed issue in U.S. academia, and more importantly to help Asian students understand the issues that they are experiencing, I feel honored to be able to make a contribution to intercultural understanding.

A Caveat

In writing this book about Asia, I would be remiss to not acknowledge the complex and sometimes contradictory nature of this region. Asia is a geographical location where many cultures co-exist. It would be impossible to cover all Asian countries in an adequately in-depth manner in a single book. For that reason, I

choose to cover in this book only Asian countries with the similar foundational bond of Confucianist thought. These countries include China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other nations such as Malaysia, Vietnam, and Singapore, with Chinese ethnic roots due to their common Confucianist base. In this book, countries with Confucianism as their foundation for world view will be treated as a group because of the commonalities in common philosophy and mentality which serves as the basis for cultural norms and behaviors.

One may refute that grouping also, stating that each culture is unique. It is certainly true that many of these sub-cultures of Asia have distinct individual characteristics. However, everything is relative. In comparison to other cultures, due to the common histories, locations, and exigencies the Asian continent has experienced, there are common characteristics that tie them together as one group, as opposed to other cultures such as the U.S. or African culture. Those cultures, the argument would go, are also made up of myriad unique cultures. That is also true. However, we call them the Asian, American, or African culture because of certain common and significant characteristics that bind them together, despite the differences. Therefore the following paragraphs will "tie" Asian cultures together when discussing their characteristics. A discussion of the uniqueness of different relevant sub-cultures of Asia as discussed in scholarly texts, will follow later in this book.

The Value of Pancultural Perspectives

In closing, I would like to further express my desire to, and justification for, "tying" Asian cultures with Confucianist influences together. In researching during the process of writing this book, I came across a statement by a colleague who wrote a book on non-western perspectives on human communication. She states her opinion that research that focuses solely on extremely unique culture-specific communication slows down our understanding of cultural differences and advocates focusing on comparisons of larger pancultural groups, such as Western and non-western cultures instead. She states "Although some culture-specific research dealing with currently hot areas (e.g. Indian theory of communication, Chinese philosophy and human communication) is all but inevitable, it should be buttressed by work focusing on more general theoretical and empirical concerns" (Kim, 2002). I agree with that belief, although I don't think that these are mutually exclusive research foci. I believe that with the important pioneering culture-specific work that has now accumulated, extant culture-specific research can be used as a basis to begin to make some meaningful applications to groups such as Asians in the educational context. I am excited to embark on that journey with you in this book.

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