

Korean Newcomer Youth's Experiences of Racial Marginalization and Internalization of the Model Minority Myth

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This study explores the destructive effect of the model minority myth on Korean newcomer youth's peer relations at school and their internationalization of the racial stereotype. Drawing upon Critical Race Theory's counter-storytelling as a theoretical and methodological framework, this multi-regional, mixed-method study traces the pretentious voices of 63 Korean newcomer students struggling to make sense of their experience of racial marginalization and developing coping strategies. Shedding light on the Korean immigrant youth's sociocultural experiences of schooling and inter/intra racial relationships, this study portrays the ways the model minority myth operates and is perpetuated in the lives of Asian youth at school.

Background

The Korean population in the United States has been growing fast in recent years. There are approximately 1.7 million Korean descents residing in the United States, comprising 10 percent of the total Asian population in the U.S.¹ This group contains a large proportion of

¹ Elizabeth M. Hoeffel, Sonya Rastogi, Myoung Ouk Kim, and Hasan Shahid, "The Asian Population: 2010," U.S. Census Bureau, report C2010BR-11, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-11.pdf>.

newcomers. Over 25 percent of the Korean foreign-born immigrants arrived in 2000 or later. Between 2000 and 2008, the Korean immigrant population nearly doubled in many states including New York, California, Georgia, and Virginia.² Given the substantial inflow of immigration, Korean immigrants were the seventh largest immigrant group in the U.S. as of 2008 (See Table 1).

Table 1: Korean Immigrant Populations in the U.S. (1960-2008)

	Total Immigrants	Korean Immigrants	Rank
1960	9,738,091	11,171	44
1970	9,619,302	38,711	37
1980	14,079,906	289,885	11
1990	19,797,316	568,397	9
2000	31,107,889	864,125	7
2008	37,960,773	1,030,691	7

The recent increase of Korean student population in the U.S. K-12 school context is also noteworthy. Korean newcomer students who were enrolled in U.S. K-12 schools reached approximately 331,937 in 2006 according to U.S. Census Bureau³ while Korean communities in the U.S. assume that the number is largely underestimated and should be more than doubled.⁴

² Aaron Terrazas and Cristina Batog, "Korean Immigrants in the United States," Migration Information Source, <http://www.migrationinformation.org/usfocus/display.cfm?ID=793>.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, "American Community Survey," http://factfinder.census.gov/servlet/DatasetMainPageServlet?_ds_name=ACS_2008_3YR_G00_&_lang=en&_ts=306858868055.

⁴ Jong W. Lee, "The Politics of Korean American and Its Population," *Korea Times* (New York, NY), Feb. 1, 2010, <http://www.koreatimes.com/article/574585>.

As of 2009, Korean newcomers accounted for the sixth largest body of English language learners in the U.S. K-12 schools.⁵ While most of these students were found in large urban centers such as New York and Los Angeles metropolitan areas, many others live in concentrations in smaller communities. This new trend of transnational migration accelerated the growth of Korean population and diversified its communities in U.S. society and schools.⁶

Korean students, frequently lumped into the label of Asians, are often viewed as the “model minority” within the public discourses of media, pop-culture, policy, and scholarship. Asian, especially East Asian, students reportedly perform much higher than other minority groups according to the published school report cards mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, and score higher on the SAT and ACT, especially in math.⁷ Asians are overrepresented at America’s most prestigious universities, for example composing 46 percent of University of California at Berkeley’s entering class in 2006.⁸

While much attention has been paid to the seemingly successful model minority’s academic excellence for the past decades,

⁵ Jeanne Batalova and Margie McHugh, “Top Language Spoken by English Language Learners Nationally and by State,” Migration Policy Institute, http://www.migrationinformation.org/ellinfo/FactSheet_ELL3.pdf.

⁶ Jae H. Lim, Kyoung-Suk Moon, Yoonjung Choi, So Yoon Yoon, and Sohyun An, “Analysis of Economic, Social and Cultural Capital among Korean-Early-Study-Abroad Students in America: A Mixed-Method Study,” paper presented at the 12th International Conference on Education Research, Seoul, Korea, 2011.

⁷ Yong Zhao and Wei Qiu, “How Good Are the Asians? Refuting Four Myths about Asian-American Academic Achievement,” *Phi Delta Kappan* 90, no. 5 (2009): 338.

⁸ Wesley Yang, “Paper Tigers: What Happens to All the Asian-American Overachievers When the Test-Taking Ends?” *New York Magazine*, May 2011.

little attention has been given to Asian students' complex social, cultural, and educational experiences and relationships at schools beyond their academic achievement.^{9 10} The oversimplifying, misleading racial stereotype, namely the model minority myth, disguises critical educational issues such as racism and mental health challenges that Asians, particularly those who do not fit into the stereotypical model images, encounter in school, thus conceals the contentious consequences of the myth.^{11 12} Complicated schooling experiences of the highly diverse Asian students and the voices of their sub-racial, ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and religious groups have been homogenized by the monolithic model minority discourse.¹³

Listening to the voices from Korean newcomer adolescents, this study examined the detrimental effect and reproduction of the model minority myth on their racial experiences. This study aims to

⁹ Tracy L. Buenavista, Uma M. Jayakumar, and Kimberly Misa-Escalante, "Contextualizing Asian American Education through Critical Race Theory: An Example of U.S. Pilipino College Student Experiences," *New Directions for Institutional Research*, no. 142 (2009): 69.

¹⁰ Christine J. Yeh, Pei-Wen Ma, Anvita Madan-Bahel, Carla D. Hunter, Sunna Jung, Angela B. Kim, Kyoko Akitaya, and Kiyoko Sasaki, "The Cultural Negotiations of Korean Immigrant Youth," *Journal of Counseling and Development* 83, no. 2 (2005): 172.

¹¹ Nicholas D. Hartlep, "The Model Minority Myth: What 50 Years of Research Does and Does Not Tell Us," *Diverse Issues in Higher Education*, last modified April 13, 2013, <http://diverseeducation.com/article/52979/>.

¹² Amy Liu, "Critical Race Theory, Asian Americans, and Higher Education: A Review of Research," *UCLA Journal of Education and Information Studies* 5, no. 2 (2009): 5.

¹³ Jennifer C. Ng, Sharon S. Lee, and Yoon K. Pak, "Contesting the Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner Stereotypes: A Critical Review of Literature of Asian Americans in Education," *Review of Research in Education* 31, no. 1 (2007): 98–99.

portray counter stories of the model minority myth, which illuminates the complex, heterogeneous racial experience and peer relation of Korean newcomers whose narrative had been unheard in previous scholarship.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical as well as methodological framework focusing on its application to educational research and practice. This section explores CRT in education and reviews literature on the experiences of racism of Asians, particularly Korean newcomers.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) in Education

Originated as a counter weight to legal scholarship in the positivist and liberal legal tradition in civil rights, CRT holds the belief that racism is an endemic facet of life in American society and continues to define the experiences of people of color¹⁴. The four central tenets of CRT are as follows: (a) racism is enmeshed in the fabric of American social order; (b) CRT employs counter-storytelling to analyze the myths and presuppositions about racism; (c) CRT critiques liberalism for its slow process to gain equal rights for people of color; and (d) the dominant racial group develops the ideology of color-blind racism which utilizes hidden codes to mask racist ideas and practices in order to maintain their privileges from the racial status quo.¹⁵

Scholars in education have used CRT as a powerful inquiry tool to disclose the persistent inequity that people of color encounter

¹⁴ Edward Taylor, David Gillborn, and Gloria Ladson-Billings, eds., *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21–22.

in schools and color-blind racism in various segments of education.¹⁶

¹⁷ CRT has also been used to deepen understanding of the intersectionality of multiple forms of identities, exploring the various ways in which race, gender/sexuality, and social class interact to shape the racialized educational experiences of people of color.¹⁸

Mindful of the burgeoning immigrant student populations in the U.S. schools as well as their ever increasingly complex identities, schooling experiences, and group politics, this study perceives that the construct of CRT can be extended to further racial, ethnic, national, and/or linguistic specificity and the intersectionality of multiple aspects defining the experiences of immigrants of color. Historically and in the present, immigrants of color are targeted and disadvantaged by structural racism while the racialized experiences and subordination of people from different immigrant groups vary by the intertwined factors such as English speaking ability, educational level, generational status, social class, and gender.¹⁹ ²⁰ Therefore the concept of intersectionality in CRT might be more broadly

¹⁶ Gloria Ladson-Billings, ed., *Critical Race Theory Perspectives on Social Studies: The Profession, Policies and Curriculum* (Greenwich, CT: Information Age, 2003).

¹⁷ Daniel G. Solorzano and Tara J. Yosso, "A Critical Race Theory Counterstory of Affirmative Action in Higher Education," *Equity and Excellence in Education* 3, no. 2 (2002): 150.

¹⁸ Gloria Ladson-Billings, "Just What Is Critical Race Theory and What's It Doing in a Nice Field Like Education?," in *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*, ed. Edward Taylor, David Gillborn, and Gloria L. Ladson-Billings, 17–36 (New York: Routledge, 2009).

¹⁹ Lee A. Bell, Khyati Y. Joshi, and Ximena Zúñiga, "Racism, Immigration and Globalization Curriculum Design," in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, ed. Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, and Pat Griffin (New York: Routledge, 2007), 145–52.

²⁰ Ronald Takaki, *A Different Mirror: A History of Multicultural America* (Boston: Back Bay Books, 1993).

meaningful as it extends to the examination of the connections among racism, linguicism²¹, and a variety of aspects shaping immigrant status in a racialized society.

Because of Korean newcomer students' intersectional identity as both immigrant and of color, and their marginalization within both ends, the CRT lens utilized in this study inspects the newcomer students' racial experiences and their internalization of racial stereotypes through the rigorous consideration of their immigration status and associated multiple realities and backgrounds. This study also utilizes CRT as a methodological framework for investigating the racial marginalization of Korean newcomer youth, whose voices have been largely underrepresented in the educational scholarship, and their coping strategies of the model minority stereotype.

Research on Korean newcomer students' racial experiences in U.S. schools

The image of Asians as the model minorities has become a shibboleth that posits Asians as hard-working, self-sufficient, and successful minorities who have reached the American dreams of economic and academic success.^{22 23} It is true that a large number of Asians who had been blamed for the yellow peril initially welcomed this positive image and desired to live up to it.²⁴ They value education

²¹ Tonda Liggett, "The Mapping of a Framework: Critical race Theory and TESOL," *Urban Review*, (2013): Accessed January 29, 2014. <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11256-013-0254>. Doi: 10.1007/s11256-013-0254-5

²² Ng et al., "Contesting the Model Minority and Perpetual Foreigner Stereotypes," 95–97.

²³ Ronald Takaki, *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans* (New York: Penguin, 1989), 414–17.

as a formal and serious process and work hard to achieve middle class socioeconomic positions in order to acculturate to the mainstream society. Asians reported the highest percentage of adults with academic degrees and highest median earnings of any racial group.²⁵

However, this seemingly glowing stereotype overshadows the diversity of the Asian community that is composed of over 25 different ethnic groups with diverse histories, languages, cultures, and masks critical educational concerns Asian students are facing.²⁶ Those who do not fit into the successful image (e.g. newcomers, English language learners, low-income immigrants) have suffered from cultural maladjustment, academic failure, low self-esteem, and many other cultural, academic, or psychological problems while they have not received proper social, educational, and institutional help.²⁷

Studies reveal that direct/indirect forms of racism, often stemmed from the model minority stereotypes, were a fact of life of Asian students.²⁸ According to Alvarez, Juang, and Lian, 98 percent

²⁴ Laing Du, "Model Minority as Ethnic Identity and Its Limits: An Ethnographic Study in a Middle-Class Chinese American Community," in *Model Minority Myths Revisited: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Demystifying Asian American Educational Experiences*, ed. Guofang Li and Lihshing Wang (Charlotte, NC: Informational Age, 2008), 73–74.

²⁵ Camille L. Ryan and Julie Siebens, "Educational Attainment in the United States," U.S. Census Bureau, 5–13, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2012pubs/p20-566.pdf>.

²⁶ Zhao and Qiu, "How Good Are the Asians?," 339.

²⁷ Valeria O. Pang, Peter N. Kiang, and Yoon K. Pak, "Asian Pacific American Students: Changing a Biased Educational System," in *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, 2nd ed., ed. James A. Banks and Cherry A. McGee Banks, 542–66 (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004).

²⁸ Wing, Jean Yonemura, "Beyond Black and White: The Model Minority Myth and the Invisibility of Asian American Students," *Urban Review* 39, no. 4 (2007): 456.

of their 254 Asian student participants reported encountering a daily life type of racism or microaggression, from verbal insults to racially motivated harassment to physical assault, at least once or twice a year.²⁹ The experiences of racial discrimination negatively affect Asian students' psychological and behavioral well-being, causing distress, feelings of helplessness, depression, violent behaviors, suicide risk, and so forth.³⁰ Socially, Asian immigrant students frequently find themselves marginalized from English speaking mainstream peers and develop a sense of inferiority.^{31 32}

Notably, Yeh et al.'s study indicates that Korean immigrant youth were found to have higher levels of mental health symptoms in comparison to their other Asian counterparts.³³ Korean newcomer adolescents, mostly early-study-abroad youth in their studies, were often overwhelmed by high expectations of academic excellence that were held by not only their immigrant parents but also ethnic communities, schools, and peer groups. They experienced role conflicts within different racial, social, and religious groups that

²⁹ Alvin N. Alvarez, Linda Juang, and Christopher T. H. Liang, "Asian Americans and Racism: When Bad Things Happen to 'Model Minorities,'" *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 12, no. 3 (2006): 483.

³⁰ Arthur L. Whaley and La Toyna Noel, "Academic Achievement and Behavioral Health among Asian American and African American Adolescents: Testing the Model Minority and Inferior Minority Assumptions," *Social Psychology of Education* 16, no. 1 (2013): 23–43.

³¹ Yoonjung Choi, Jae H. Lim, and Sohyun An, "Marginalized Students' Uneasy Learning: Korean Immigrant Students' Experiences of Learning Social Studies," *Social Studies Research and Practice* 6, no. 3 (2011): 8–9.

³² Stacey J. Lee, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype: Listening to Asian American Youth*, 2nd ed. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2009), 60–62.

³³ Yeh et al., "Cultural Negotiations of Korean Immigrant Youth," 179.

caused being caught between different cultures, feeling alienated, or having interpersonal conflicts with Whites, during the process of acculturation.

Studies that paid close attention to Korean newcomer youth's racial experiences at K-12 schools, though few in number, similarly disclose the detrimental effect of model minority myth on their making sense of racial marginalization and developing coping strategies.^{34 35} Experiencing racial hierarchy and associated racial stereotypes and discriminations from teachers, peers, and other school personnel, Korean immigrant adolescents chose to live up to the model minority image in order to achieve "honorary white" status, sometimes, at the expense of their ethnic, cultural, and linguistic identities as Koreans.^{36 37} Illuminating Korean newcomer youth's experiences of racial marginalization within inter/intraracial peer groups and their coping strategies, this study seeks to add to the currently limited body of knowledge on the racial experiences of Asian, particularly Korean newcomer students and the influence of the model minority myth.

Methodology

This study employs critical race methodology, a theoretically grounded approach to research that foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of education. Emphasizing racial experiences of students

³⁴ John D. Palmer, "Who Is the Authentic Korean American? Korean-Born Korean American High School Students' Negotiations of Ascribed and Achieved Identities," *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education* 6, no. 4 (2007): 277-98.

³⁵ Gilbert C. Park, "Becoming a 'Model Minority': Acquisition, Construction and Enactment of American Identity for Korean Immigrant Students," *Urban Review* 4, no. 5 (2011): 631-32.

³⁶ Lee, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype*.

³⁷ Park, "Becoming a 'Model Minority,'" 628.

of color and valuing their voices as critical knowledge of racism, critical race methodology provides a solid methodological ground of this research. Using CRT's counter-storytelling, this study examines Korean newcomer students' peer relations at school, particularly focusing on their racial marginalization, coping strategies, and impact of the model minority myths that shape their experiences.

Sixty-three Korean newcomer students between 5th and 12th grade in four different states, two urban and two suburban/rural areas in the Northeast, Southeast, and Midwest participated in this multi-regional, mixed-method study. The four research sites were selected based on their representations of the diversity of school and regional settings as well as accessibility to research data. Participants from the two urban areas attended schools that were located in culturally diverse immigrant communities and therefore served students from varying racial, ethnic, and linguistic backgrounds. Meanwhile, the other two suburban or rural locations had relatively smaller Korean populations, thus most Korean newcomer youth in these areas attend predominantly white, culturally homogeneous schools. The majority of the participants were pre-collegiate study-abroad students whose average length of residence in the U.S. is 3.1 years. Detailed demographic characteristics of participants are described in Table 2.

Table 2: Participant Demographics

	n (N=63)	%
Gender		
Male	32	50.8
Female	31	49.2
Regions		
Urban Northeast	17	27.0
Urban Southeast	17	27.0
Suburban Southeast	14	22.2
Rural Midwest	15	23.8

Grade Level

Elementary (1-5 grade)	5	7.9
Middle (6-8 grade)	23	36.5
Secondary (9-12 grade)	35	55.6

School Type

Public	39	61.9
Private	24	38.1

Length of Residency in the U.S.

0-2 years	28	44.4
3-5 years	25	39.7
More than 5 years	8	12.7

Data sources include survey and in-depth interview. From 2010 to 2011, a survey including 28 questions was conducted in an effort to investigate participants' personal backgrounds and overall perceptions about their schooling experiences in the U.S. Researchers conducted on average 40 minute to an hour long, in-depth interviews with each participant, totaling 63 interviews, to understand the negative influences of the model minority myth on their experiences of racial marginalization and coping strategies.

Data were analyzed both quantitatively and qualitatively. First, descriptive statistics were used to investigate the background information of the participants and their peer relations at school based on survey results. To analyze in-depth interview data, this study employed inductive coding³⁸ and "constant comparative method"³⁹ to identify patterns and themes in Korean newcomer youths' struggles to make sense of their experiences with racial marginalization and the influence of the model minority myth. Researchers first individually

³⁸ Matthew Miles and A. Michael Huberman, *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Sourcebook of New Methods*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1984), 57.

³⁹ Barney Glaser and Anselm C. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine, 1967), 101–16.

read, coded, and analyzed transcribed interview data, then consistently compared the two data sources and cross-checked each other's analytic results in order to ensure the credibility of findings of this study.⁴⁰ Through the axial coding process of interrelating categories and subcategories, the major findings of this study were generated.

Findings

Korean newcomer youth in this study experienced multiple forms of racism, from racial microaggression characterized by a sense of distance and indifference to more explicit types of physical assault, in their peer relations at school. Fifty-two out of 63 Korean newcomers, almost 82.5 percent of the total participants, reported having experienced varying degrees of racism, either directly or indirectly, from their school peers. Only the remaining 11 indicated that they had never noticed racial remarks against Asians or had undergone racially discriminatory practices at school.

To many of Korean newcomers in this study, unfriendly, racially-motivated verbal abuse and associated discriminatory behaviors by mainstream English-speaking peers were the major forms of racial marginalization. Groundless, yet pervasive racial stereotypes against Asians became major sources of their experience of racial marginalization, and functioned as significant barriers to their building of healthy inter/intraracial relationships with peers. In the following section, we will explain how the misleading racial stereotypes against Asians, prevalent within K-12 school contexts, affected Korean newcomers' peer relations as well as how Korean students coped with their racial experiences.

⁴⁰ John W. Creswell. *Qualitative Inquiry & Research design: Choosing Among Five Approaches*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013), 253-255.

Stereotype 1: Perpetual Foreigners

As previous studies on Asian immigrants articulated, the major forms of anti-Asian racism faced by Korean immigrant youth reflected the stereotypical views of Asians as perpetual foreigners and considered their cultural heritages and customs as exotic.⁴¹ A number of Korean newcomer students in this study were subjected to degrading racial remarks such as “Chink” (typical derogatory label against Asians, particularly Chinese) by their mainstream peers. Many participants tended to consider the verbal assaults as sorts of hazing that newcomers have to undergo; some students felt insecure and distressed sensing the unwelcoming sociocultural atmosphere and unfriendly peer reactions in their new school.

Language was one of the major sources of racial assaults experienced by Korean newcomer students. Often interacting with race, language has been used as a screening device to discriminate and marginalize immigrant students of color, especially whose English proficiency skill is low.^{42 43} It was evident in the Korean newcomers’ peer relations. A majority of them, at least once in a while, became laughingstocks and victims of bullying due to their limited English speaking skills. Dae-In, a 15 year-old boy described his painful experiences of being bullied by other students who knew of Dae-In’s new immigrant status and lack of English proficiency. They repeatedly mocked his “incorrect accent” and “strange pronunciation,” and threw food at him at school cafeteria. Finding no other way to vent his frustration and anger, he shouted “Shut up!” while what returned to him was even worse ridicule. For those of who had

⁴¹ Derald W. Sue, Jennifer Bucceri, Annie I. Lin, Kevin L. Nadal, and Gina C. Torino, “Racial Microaggressions and the Asian American Experience,” *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology* 13, no. 1 (2009): 76.

⁴² Choi et al., “Marginalized Students’ Uneasy Learning,” 8–9.

⁴³ Sonia Nieto, *Affirming Diversity: The Sociopolitical Context for Multicultural Education*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 2003), 81.

advanced English skills also faced dismissive remarks such as “Oh, I didn’t know that you speak English well.”

Other common reasons that Korean newcomers were bullied were their physical appearances, such as body figure, foods they ate for lunch, or insubstantial prejudice and associated hatred, which they were not able to change or control. Jenny recollected the unpleasant days in her first American school where her classmates surrounded her and watched her like a “guinea pig” while frequently calling Asians “yellow” or “sleepy eyes.” Another student, Bin felt terrified when a girl in his class asserted that Asians are dirty, and did not let him stay around her. There was no one to stop her since she was the daughter of his homeroom teacher. This made it very difficult for Bin to handle the situation because he assumed no one would be on his side when he reported the incidents to other school personnel. Facing such racial prejudice and enduring racially insulting comments made by his peers, Bin came to believe that “Americans feel uncomfortable with those who have different ethnicity, and it is often expressed as xenophobia.”

Korean newcomer youth understood that the prevalent racial stereotypes and discriminatory practices were partly rooted in American peers’ lack of understanding about the heterogeneity among Asians, fast-changing Asian regions, including Korea, and the global trend of increasing transnational migration.⁴⁴ Participants noted that most of their mainstream peers perceived Asians as a homogeneous group, which was simply equated with Chinese, despite its national, linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity. A majority of them reportedly felt tired of receiving such questions like “Are you Chinese? Japanese? If not, what are you?” Seran, a 14 year-old girl, wondered, “Can’t they just ask ‘where are you from?’”

It is noteworthy that a significant number of the Korean youth (21%) were legally American citizens or permanent residents.

⁴⁴ Bell et al., “Racism, Immigration and Globalization Curriculum Design,” 249.

Several students (12%) were in the process of obtaining permanent resident status at the time of this study. The majority of the youth (57.4%) expected that they would attend college in the United States. Almost half of them envisioned that they would ultimately reside in the United States as their permanent home in the future (44%). However, these newcomers found themselves being perceived as perpetual ‘foreigners’ by their school peers. They initially hoped to be fully integrated into American society by making close relationships with peers and other individuals who they believed were part of the mainstream American society. Yet, their peer relationships clearly showed to them that it was not a simple task to accomplish. As a result, they explored a different way to survive at their school as a member of “perpetual foreigners.” This will be explained in a later section.

Stereotype 2: Model Minority

Given the pervasive model minority myth, Asian students are often considered successful minorities who are hard-working and high-achieving, especially in the areas such as math, science, and engineering at school. As existing research on the model minority myth indicates, this apparently positive label, however, could provide destructive impact on the academic choices, sociocultural relations, and mental health of Asian newcomers while disguising the harmful effects of racism on other racial groups and justifying the current racial status quo.^{45 46}

The stereotype of Asians as “math whiz kids” frequently appeared as the dominating form of the model minority myth. This view was widely held and frequently reinforced by school teachers, counselors, and peers of Korean newcomers. This stereotype, in fact, played mixed roles in shaping Korean newcomers’ relations with

⁴⁵ Hartlep, “Model Minority Myth.”

⁴⁶ Zhao and Qiu, “How Good Are the Asians?”

peers at school. For example, Young, an 8th grader shared her embarrassment when she first faced with such a racial stereotype by peers instantly asking her “So, you are good at math, right?” She, back then had been in the U.S. for less than a year and struggling with cultural adjustments and new language learning, was shocked when her classmates came to her to ask math problems during her first several days in school and assumed she would be superior in math. Though surprising, she, who considered herself as a “math failure” previously in Korea, did not dislike the seemingly positive representation, rather became flattered by her peers’ attention. Young worked hard exclusively in math to live up to their expectations. Her teacher soon placed her in honors math class and encouraged her academic success in math.

Meanwhile, the model minority label would also become in conflict with academic, social, and emotional needs of Korean newcomers. For those who did not meet the images of high achieving Asians, the model minority bias, by placing excessive academic pressure, increased their anxiety, lowered self-esteem, and evoked strong resentment toward the whole schooling. Gary expressed his emotional distress and resentment toward peers who kept pressuring him to conform to the model minority stereotype. He complained:

So it’s more like sarcasm that they said, “So you guys are all smart” or “How come you can’t do this? You are Asian.” They [classmates] said “Asians must be good at this,” and made me answer a quiz everyday in math class...It’s so much pressure, and I tried to avoid them...But if they do more, I think I will be aggressive.

Social isolation and self-blame are commonly found among the participants who were not able to live up to the model minority standards. Yunho, an academically struggling high school senior, confessed he often felt shameful of his failure to meet the model minority expectations not only from mainstream peers but also held

by those who are of Korean descent. During the first couple of years he came to the U.S., his legal guardian forced him to stay at home and to invest much of his time for school work, which eliminated his chance of getting along with friends from his school. Surrounded by family, neighbors, and Korean newcomer friends frequently throwing comments like “Why can’t you achieve high like other Asians?” either jokingly or seriously, Yunho seemed significantly isolated from both mainstream peers at school and Korean ethnic groups within the community.

Even high-achieving students who seemingly fit well into the stereotypical image found such high academic pressure hard to deal with. Sue, a straight A student in the 9th grade, hated math because she always felt burdened by the math genius image from her peers. She was often confused and worried by thinking “Why don’t I like math since most other Asians like and are good at it?” During interviews, a number of participants who did not like or excel in math, including Sue, shared their feelings of self-condemnation, frustration, and multiple challenges of and dissatisfaction with schooling caused by the model minority myth.

Coping Strategy 1: Silence and Self-blame

Facing racial prejudices and discriminatory practices of microaggression in their school, Korean immigrant students developed coping strategies, either voluntarily or involuntarily, as a way to counteract psychological stress and other negative consequences of being a victim of those racial biases. One of the major strategies utilized by Korean newcomer students was silencing their racial experience and/or self-blaming for the incident or situation. More than a half of 63 participants ignored or tried to avoid racially discriminatory practices and bullying targeted toward Asians. Twenty-five Korean newcomers chose to pretend that they did not hear the verbal racial remarks thrown upon them. They often forced a smile or innocent look in order to conceal their resentment and grief. Several Korean newcomers experiencing subtle types of racism did

not want to overreact to such situations. Huang, a 9th grader who frequently became a scapegoat of racial bullying, suppressed his anger and urge to fight against repeating racial remarks from bullies around him. He was afraid that he would become more isolated from mainstream peer groups or disadvantaged if he openly reacted to the bullies. Therefore, those who worried of potential retaliatory act or harsher physical assault censured their own experiences of racism and wished to simply avoid them.

Some Korean newcomer students kept silent about their racial marginalization in order to maintain the trouble-free model minority reputations. Gary, who was subject to mainstream peers' ridicule on his low academic achievement throughout his schooling, still chose to censure his own experiences of racial bullying, instead of making troubles with it, because he did not want to tarnish Koreans' "model" reputation. The majority of the participants assumed, as expressed by Sora, that "Whites are mainstream in American society anyway" and having the model minority label is better than "lazy, lower-class images against other minorities like Hispanics."

Indeed, there were some students who brought up the issue of their suffering from racism to the surface and openly acted upon it. Nine Korean newcomer adolescents were in this category, including five who gave either verbal warning or logical explanation of the unfairness of such practices to their peers, two who ended up having physical fights with their aggressor(s), and two who reported to school teachers. Unfortunately, the students who sought out help from school teachers did not receive adequate support, which made those students much more intimidated, or sometimes worsened the situations. Yooni, a 7th grader, who complained of being harassed by offensive racial remarks from a classmate to her homeroom teacher, shared her pains as follows:

The teacher gave just a couple of warnings, and that's it!
That didn't make any difference, and they are still doing

the same things...The worst thing about American school is racism. And there is nothing good about it.

Repetitive racial harassment, lack of support, and worsening situations made Yooni have a strong distrust about the whole school culture.

In the cases of the two students who had physical fights, one did not have any involvement from school personnel who witnessed the brawl. The other student, Jinsu received a week-long detention while his counterpart who evoked the fight by throwing Jinsu's backpack to a locker evaded it. Teachers at his school refused to listen carefully to him and other newcomer friends who witnessed the incident, and pretended not to understand what they explained given their limited English speaking skills. Jinsu, upon the school's decision to give him a week-long detention, trivialized the meaning of the unfair disciplinary act as "nothing but just sitting and studying, which is not that bad" despite the fact that he felt deeply "sad, really sad" over the whole situation. Being advised by his parents to "be extra careful," Jinsu decided to make friends with other international students who "share a similar background" and determined that he "would do even better [at school work] and show who I[he] really am[is]."

Those who suffered from negative racial experiences and received lack of institutional support seemed to put the blame on themselves: their limited English skills, immigrant status, and low ethnoracial power. Surprisingly there were only five students who viewed the issue of racism as a structural, institutional matter while they critiqued the prevalent racial biases and discriminations against people of color including themselves. The rest either had no idea or believed that racism might be a matter of individuals' actions, especially those few who are thoughtless, simply a distinction, rather than hierarchy, among different racial groups, or a type of territoriality toward newcomers.

Experiencing anxiety, feelings of inferiority, and a sense of shame evoked by overt or subtle practices of racial prejudice and

discrimination, the majority of Korean newcomers strived to preserve their self-worth by conforming to the stereotypical image of Asians as hard-working students concentrating on academic achievements. Huang chose to make more academic investment hoping the racism would end when he became more academically successful and spoke English more fluently. Jongsoo added, "Once you speak English well, everything will be fine." As previous studies on Asian students showed (Lee, 2009; Zhao & Qiu, 2009), to those Korean newcomer students, focusing on academic success, thus consequently living up to the image of model minority, seemed to be their own, sometimes forced, strategy to survive in response to racism.

Coping Strategy 2: Alliances with Other New Comers and Claiming Ethnic Solidarity

To cope with racial marginalization and isolation within the mainstream school culture, a number of Korean youth chose to deepen peer relationships with non-mainstream groups. Only 10 out of 63 Korean newcomers claimed that they maintained close relationship with mainstream, mostly White English speaking students. Approximately 73 percent of total students (n=48) found their comfort zone within non-mainstream international/immigrant peer groups. A majority of them, 33 students, built exclusively strong ethnic solidarity with other Korean newcomers. The remaining five either had no response or did not have close peer groups that they belonged to.

Korean newcomer students shared bonds of sympathy and empathy for difficulties associated with immigration experiences, for example linguistic barriers, cultural adjustments, and racial discrimination against international and new immigrant students. Walter, an 11th grader who had been in the U.S. for four years and felt a big cultural distance from the mainstream peers, mostly hung out with international students and felt intimacy with them. He felt safe and comfortable being part of the international group, which protected him from hearing derogatory racial remarks and feeling a

sense of inferiority. He believed those international students, mostly newcomers, had higher morality and cared more about academic achievements at school than mainstream American peers. He liked the fact that he could share his academic concerns with his newly-found friends and that they could learn diverse cultural perspectives from each other. This tendency—building a comfort zone with other international, immigrant students from diverse ethnoracial backgrounds rather than with mainstream students, was found across all five research sites revealing the difficult racial climate and marginal status of the Korean newcomers in American school contexts. .

However, some international peer groups were not a safe haven for the Korean newcomers. Ironically, the pervasive racial stereotypes and derogatory racial remarks that Korean newcomer students experienced within the mainstream groups continued, or reinforced among some international students. Korean newcomer students experienced obscure, yet negative stereotypes against Koreans, for example making hurtful comments about their physical/facial appearance and imposing negative images of North Korea, by the member of their own international peer groups. Those who made fun of Chang's small eyes and persistently laid over North Korean communist images onto him were Filipino newcomers. Interestingly, a majority of the Korean newcomers, though puzzled and initially upset, having received negative racial comments from peers in their international group, tended to consider such comments as friendly teasing and jokes rather than a hostile expression of racism.

Most disturbing was the finding that some, though not all, Korean newcomers accepted and co-constructed another layer of racial hierarchy by utilizing the model minority stereotype. These students eagerly accepted the model minority stereotypes, developed Korean supremacist notions by separating themselves from other ethnic groups, and acted as perpetrators of racial assaults to other international students. These Korean newcomers being proud of their relative "model" status as high achievers than other minority groups, disregarded other international students, especially those who

were from less economically affluent countries. They distanced themselves from those who showed low academic performance at school, and thus failed to live up to the model minority standards. They often reproduced the negative prejudices and discriminatory racial practices against other racial minority groups, which they previously experienced in their interactions with the mainstream peers. Steve, a 15 year-old boy, often mocked his Muslim immigrant peers as terrorists or bomb-dealers, while he barely felt guilty about his racist assaults because “Everybody did so.” Hyesoo, claiming Korean superiority, disliked the fact that she was often categorized as Asians with other “smelly” Asian ethnic groups. Consequently, Korean newcomers accepted their racialized socialization and peer relations by internalizing and even reinforcing the racial dominance/oppression structure.⁴⁷

Other Korean immigrants or Korean-American students who did not live up to the image of model minority were also the subject of their criticism and discriminatory practices. Daein said that he ignored and stayed away from another Korean-American student in his ESL class whom he evaluated as having “bad quality” and “associated with bad students.” It was unfortunate that some Korean newcomers like Steve and Hyesoo used the model minority label to position themselves on the top of the racial minority groups and to marginalize those who did not live up to the glowing image. In this case, the model minority myth turned into a destructive tool of the reproduction of racial hierarchy among the racially minoritized groups.

Not surprisingly, a sizeable number of Korean newcomers maintained strong ethnic solidarity, therefore built exclusive peer communities of Korean newcomers. More than a half of the participants expressed that they felt most comfortable being around

⁴⁷ Ozlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?* (New York: Teachers College and Columbia University, 2012), 49–50.

others of Korean descent they had met in schools, churches, or local communities because of the cultural and linguistic homogeneity. As Kibria,⁴⁸ Lee,⁴⁹ and other researchers on Asian American studies suggested, the strong ethnic solidarity among the Korean students seemed to be a protective reaction to experiences with racism. Sharing similar academic, linguistic, social, and cultural difficulties in American schools, the students could relate to each other and build ethnic unity and sense of belonging within the ethnic group. In the meantime, they often claimed their ethnic superiority and elitism by separating themselves from other “non-model” ethnic minorities.

Discussion and Implications

The model minority label and its false racial representation of Asians contributed to Korean newcomer youths’ painful experiences of racial marginalization and discrimination at school. The exotic, perpetual foreigner image, pervasive in mainstream school culture, linguisticism, and associated hatred against Asians often made Korean students in this study viewed as an inassimilable, inferior, non-English speaking racial minority group by their peers. Racism was a fact of life in Korean newcomers’ schooling and continuously defined their sociocultural relations and positions at school as CRT posits.⁵⁰

The model minority image seemed to be a benefiting stereotype, by portraying Korean newcomers as successful, high-achievers in math. Indeed, the stereotype at some level provided positive academic motivations to some newcomer students, in particular those who experienced academic struggles while in South Korea, to succeed in math class and helped them become accepted

⁴⁸ Nazli Kibria, *Becoming Asian American: Second-Generation Chinese and Korean American Identities* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002), 43.

⁴⁹ Lee, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype*, 18–21.

⁵⁰ Taylor et al., *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*.

within mainstream groups. However, researchers wonder whether their excellence in math class could be a forced academic choice and performance given the model minority “myth” held by schools personnel and peers at the expense of their original academic interests and social and emotional needs. The model image also caused a sense of helplessness, anxiety, and low self-esteem for those who did not fit into the label. Korean newcomers who did not show high academic performance, especially in math, began to doubt their ethnoracial identities. This finding is consistent with previous research indicating Asian students’ academic achievement in math or related fields comes at the costs of knowledge and skills in many other alternative areas of study⁵¹, and causes multiple psychological problems they dealt with, such as the burdening of being a model minority.⁵² That being said, the seemingly positive model minority bias can serve as an ideology that masks harmful effects of racism on Asian students’ academic capabilities and potentials while reinforcing the success myth of the racial minority and endorsing racist concepts of intelligence and academic achievement as genetic. This study proposes that Asian immigrant students’ difficulties in dealing with the misleading racial label need to be further explored by CRT so that the students can receive an adequate and culturally relevant learning opportunities and build more productive and less prejudiced peer relations.

In this study, the model minority myth, despite its glowing image, functioned to silence the racial experience of Korean newcomer youth; it even prompted them to accept a blame-the-victim approach to the issues. In order to avoid further disadvantages and not to harm the trouble-free model minority image, Korean newcomers decided to stay quiet about the racially discriminatory

⁵¹ Choi et al., “Marginalized Students’ Uneasy Learning,” 9.

⁵² Du, “Model Minority as Ethnic Identity and Its Limits,” 84.

assaults they faced and gradually internalized the structural racial oppression.⁵³ Limited English proficiency also hindered the immigrant students to disclose the racial assaults and seek out help from relevant school authorities. This finding is particularly noteworthy because it is in line with previous CRT studies that immigrants of color, particularly those who are non-English speakers, are vulnerable to racism and often unable to seek institutional support due to their unstable legal status and language barriers, thus suffer from greater intersectional subordination.⁵⁴ The Korean newcomers in this study chose to become more invested in academic performance and English speaking skill development, hoping to be accepted by their mainstream peers sometime. Such coping strategies were similarly examined in previous studies on Asian students' schooling experiences and identity developments.⁵⁵

Sadly, Korean newcomers' self-silencing and self-blame coping strategies seemed to perpetuate their uncomplaining, quiet, obedient, and "nerdy" images. These coping strategies may lead educators' attention away from real racial barriers that hinder Korea newcomers' positive peer relationship building and undermine the importance of institutional supports, instead of individual solutions, to tackle the matter.⁵⁶ ⁵⁷ Studies on CRT explain that the model

⁵³ Sensoy and DiAngelo, *Is Everyone Really Equal?*, 50.

⁵⁴ Kimberle Crenshaw, "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," in *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*, ed. Edward Taylor, David Gillborn, and Gloria Ladson-Billings, 213–46 (New York: Routledge, 2009).

⁵⁵ Stanley Sue and Sumie Okazaki, "Asian-American Educational Achievements: A Phenomenon in Search of an Explanation," *Asian American Journal of Psychology* 5, no. 1 (2009): 45–55.

⁵⁶ Pang et al., "Asian Pacific American Students."

⁵⁷ Taylor et al., *Foundations of Critical Race Theory in Education*.

minority myth authorizes flat denial of racism and structures of racial dominance.⁵⁸ Indeed, some Korean students who were vocal about their suffering from racism failed to receive adequate support or fair action from school personnel. It is important that future research examine the complex effect of the model minority myth on Asian students' experiences of racism and the costs associated with it. Educators should better acknowledge the pervasive racial remarks and practices including microaggressions as structural instead of individual matters, and provide more racially conscious and just educational support to the self-victimizing adolescents.

It was ironic that the pervasive racial stereotypes that Korean newcomer students experienced within the mainstream groups were repeated, or even reinforced among international student groups in which most Korean newcomers found their comfort zones. Korean newcomer students were still, sometimes more explicitly subject to the model minority and forever foreigner stereotypes within their cross-racial alliances. It was also surprising that some Korean newcomer youth who were the victims of racial bullying within the mainstream peer groups used the model minority image to claim their ethnic superiority, or acted as inflictors of racial bullying by distancing themselves from other "less-modeled" ethnic minority groups. This finding implies that Korean students consciously or unconsciously internalized the racial bias that they critiqued and suffered from as a self-protective action to their experiences of racism.⁵⁹

This finding also indicates that the model minority misperception produced destructive effects creating the vicious circle and reproduction of racism within school culture. In history, the model minority rhetoric emerged in order to maintain the dominance

⁵⁸ Lee, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype*.

⁵⁹ Kibria, *Becoming Asian American*, 206.

of Whites in the racial hierarchy by setting Asians as the standards of how minorities should behave within the black and white discourse on race.⁶⁰ In this study, the rhetoric serves as a hegemonic tool that racial minority groups used in claiming their sense of ethnic superiority and individual agency while reproducing the prevalent practices of racism among themselves. Due to the limited studies on the reproduction of the model minority myth by different racial minority groups, it is difficult to unravel how the destructive myth is internalized and reproduced as a tool of racial discrimination within minority groups and what its consequences are. Therefore, this study calls for more research on the internalization and reproduction of the model minority myth among racial minority immigrant groups through the expansion of the current CRT framework, particularly the concept of intersectionality, inclusive of racism, linguicism, and immigration status of people. The expanded CRT framework will serve as a powerful theoretical and analytic tool to examine the connections across multiple forms of racism and oppression by drawing counter narratives of people, not only native racial minorities but also newcomers, thus adding a new dimension to the research on Asian studies guided by CRT.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Lee, *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype*, 92–112.

⁶¹ Buenavista et al., “Contextualizing Asian American Education through Critical Race Theory.”

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