

Myth of Model Minority

BY DAVE HART, STAFF WRITER

When Milan Pham was growing up in Charlotte, her teachers expected her to excel in her math and science classes.

Not because she showed any particular aptitude for those subjects. But she'd been born in Vietnam, and everybody knew that Asian kids are good at those things.

"Asian-Americans are steered into those fields from a very young age," said Pham, head of the Orange County Department of Human Rights and Relations, and founder of Advocacy for North Carolina Asian Pacific Americans. "In elementary school, I was expected to do well in those subjects because 'you people are so good at math.' You were rewarded when you lived up to those expectations and discouraged when you didn't.

"And it was all pretty ironic, because I was not good at math at all."

A skewed view

The attitudes and expectations Pham experienced in school still exist, she said, and in fact have a much broader reach. In much of American society, people of Asian origin are widely considered to be intelligent, educated, law-abiding and affluent. They are seen, in other words, as the model minority.

"The image is that all Asians are smart," said David Huang, an assistant professor in the neurology department at UNC. "All Asians get good grades and go to Harvard. All Asians are good at science and math and research. Look at me; I actually went to Harvard, and I have a career in science. I'm living the model minority myth.

"But it's a skewed view. I'm the exception, not the rule."

As images go, being pegged as smart, hardworking and successful might not seem like such a bad thing. But, say many Asian-born residents, the "model minority myth" is a racial stereotype that, like all racial stereotypes, paints a simplistic portrait of a diverse population, often with harmful consequences.

That misperception is just one of the challenges that face Orange County's Asian community, which has grown at four times the rate of the county's population as a whole during the past decade.

Recently arrived Asian-born residents find hurdles as varied as their own backgrounds: language barriers, cultural differences, isolation and loneliness, racial and ethnic insensitivity and intimidation -- and the high expectations that come with belonging to what is considered the model minority.

The stereotype may well be more pronounced here than in many other communities. Chapel Hill -- a university town with a plethora of good jobs within easy commuting distance and one of the top public school systems in the state -- has an uncommonly well educated and affluent population, and the Asian population reflects that.

It's not that all Asians are unusually smart, well educated and successful, Huang said -- it's that many Asians who are unusually smart, well educated and successful move here.

"If you look at the Asian population in New York or San Francisco, you'll see most of them working in manual labor or in restaurants and shops," he said. "Most Asians in America aren't academics. Most of them don't have advanced degrees. Many Asians living here are academics and are highly educated because this is one of the places where academics and highly educated Asians come."

It by no means follows, though, that ONLY academics and highly educated Asians come. And those Asian residents who are neither are the ones most damaged by the model minority myth, Pham said.

"There is an affluent community of well-educated Asians here in tech jobs and science and research," she said. "But there's another whole group of Asian immigrants who enter what I would call the service industry. They own businesses and serve in the ethnic community. For many of them, there are real difficulties accessing government and non-profit services. If you don't speak English, and you move into a community where there aren't a lot of people who speak your language, it's unbelievably difficult.

"And the misperception that fuels the model minority myth hurts those Asians who are in need. It renders them invisible. There are very few organizations to serve them. A number of people have tried to form non-profits to serve Asians, but it's extremely difficult, because local organizations rely on local funding, and local funders don't consider Asians a population in need of assistance."

The model minority myth, Pham said, puts Asians in a sort of no-man's land. They are a minority, so they aren't fully accepted by the majority. But because they are seen as so self-sufficient and successful, they are isolated from other minority groups, as well.

"The model minority myth drives a wedge between us and other people of color," she said. "We're divided from the majority because we're Asian, and we're divided from the other minorities because of the model minority myth. People obviously in need are not being served."

Some residents of Asian descent balk at being considered a minority at all, because they believe the term "minority" carries an implication of being a member of a disadvantaged group.

"One big issue we deal with is our cultural identity," said Jaya Saxena, former president of UNC's Asian-American Law Students Association. "We're considered one of the

minority student groups, but a lot of Asian students don't feel like part of a minority community. There are number of reasons for that. Most of us are from middle-class families. Many of us have had wonderful opportunities, and we're in a prestigious graduate school. For some people in that situation, it's hard to identify with what they consider the minority community."

'Language is power'

Xinshu Zhao, an assistant professor at the UNC School of Journalism, took two years of intensive English language training before he come to the United States from China.

But when he landed at the airport in Minneapolis, that didn't help him much.

"My first conversation was with a telephone operator, and it didn't go very well," he said. "Somebody was supposed to meet me at the airport, but I couldn't find them, so I tried to call. I didn't know how the phone system worked here, and the phone ate all my coins. So I was really stuck. I finally figured out to dial 0 for the operator, but I couldn't get her to understand me. She got very frustrated with me. I kept saying 'add-RESS,' and she couldn't understand, and when she finally did she scolded me: 'You should say, 'ADD-ress!'"

"When you can't communicate, the simplest things become very difficult."

Communicating in a world that operates almost exclusively in English -- and a little bit of Spanish -- is perhaps the most difficult obstacle many recently arrived Asian residents face.

"Language is power," said the Rev. David Park, pastor of the Korean Baptist Mission at North Chapel Hill Baptist Church. "It's how you connect with the people around you. The biggest challenge most people coming here face is learning English. Coming here in the first place is a very difficult adjustment, and not speaking the language makes it that much more difficult.

"Korean is a very different language. The word order is reversed. In Korean there's no subject -- the subject is assumed to be you -- and the verb comes last. When you learn English, you don't just learn the word; you also have to understand the way of thinking."

The language barrier is most difficult for people from nations that have small local populations, because they don't have a support network in place to help them.

"In that situation, people rely very heavily on anyone they can find who can communicate," Pham said. "If you're the only Vietnamese family in the area, and you find that one person who is a knowledgeable Vietnamese speaker and can also speak English, you hang on to them for dear life. If you've happened upon someone who's a good person, that's OK. But sometimes you find someone who is only too willing to exploit you."

Even those with some English training often find it difficult to communicate.

"No matter how much English you knew in India, when you first come here you won't understand," said Balwinder Bhupal, owner of Tandoor Indian Restaurant. "You can read, but the pronunciation is so different that understanding spoken English is hard. We learn English very grammatically, but most people in America don't speak grammatically."

Park agreed.

"Professors in Korean universities might know some English, but it's academic English, and that's not much good in daily life," Park said. "You might be able to talk about nanotechnology, but that doesn't help if all you want is to go to McDonald's and say, 'I'd like a hamburger.'"

Straddling cultures

The flip side of learning English for some Asian residents, especially parents, is the desire to maintain the language and at least some of the cultural traditions of their country of origin.

"My daughter Connie speaks English exclusively at school and with her friends, but I want her to concentrate on Chinese at home," said Feng Ye, assistant academic director of the Chinese School of Chapel Hill. "She was born here. She's American. But I want her to know Chinese language and culture, too. I want her to consider herself first as an American, but I want to retain her Chinese heritage, too.

"It's a big challenge. She fought it at first. She rejected Chinese; the kids at school speak English, and she wanted to speak English, too. But her grandparents speak Chinese, and we speak Chinese, and eventually she came around. Now she loves it."

Families have various reasons for wanting to maintain the language and practices of their Asian heritage. For many, it's simply a conviction that those traditions are valuable in their own right. Others have more pragmatic reasons.

"Many people come here to study or work under arrangements with their companies or institutions, so they are only here for two or three years, and then they go back," said Yuki Aratake, a lecturer in Asian Studies at UNC. "They want to make sure their children don't lose their Japanese language while they are here."

"In the world today, it's quite helpful to have another language, other than Spanish or French," said Yu Lou, a member of the board of directors of the Chinese School of Chapel Hill. "It can be a great advantage when it comes time to find a job, especially an international or overseas job. If you're one of 100 candidates for a job, knowing how to speak Chinese could be a real benefit."

The struggle to keep cultural heritage alive amid the sound and fury of American culture can be a test.

"Kids grow up in the schools here, and yet parents want to keep some of their Chinese culture," said Da-Zhi Wang, an assistant professor in the Carolina Cardiovascular Biology Center at UNC. "Many Chinese parents get frustrated when their kids speak only English. That gets to be even more difficult when you have a third generation in the house, when grandparents come to visit.

"Many of us do hope they keep some of their Chinese heritage. We understand they grow up here, they attend school here, they are educated like American kids and their friends are American kids -- but we still hope they keep some of their Chinese heritage. It helps you stay connected with your family, and that's important."

Those ties with family, important though they are, can be difficult, too. Sunil Nagaraj, president of Sangam, the South Asian students organization at UNC, said one of the most difficult issues many of the students in the group face is negotiating the differences between the culture here and the one their elders embrace.

"How do you deal with arranged marriages, for example, when you're living in a culture that celebrates romantic marriage?" he said. "Most of our members were born here, but most of their parents were born in South Asia, mostly in India. So this group is the first to bridge that cultural gap. That can produce a lot of tension in some families.

"Arranged marriages are less prevalent than they used to be; maybe 25 percent of people want to continue to adhere to that, and the others don't. The best-case scenario is where you decide you're going to date, and your parents are fine with that. The worst-case scenario is where if you decide to date you have to keep it a secret at all costs, because your parents will disown you if they find out. It varies from person to person."

Adapting to a dramatically different culture can be jarring and traumatic, many Asian residents say -- especially for those who don't have friends or family already here. Many recently arrived residents may face isolation, loneliness and alienation -- feelings only exacerbated by language difficulties.

"The other big challenge to overcome is isolation," Park said. "That's a big problem for a lot of people. The language barrier can make it more difficult, but some people also use language as an excuse to stay isolated: 'I don't know the language, so I won't get involved in the community.' People coming to a new place tend to hide. They want to come here quietly and eventually leave quietly. And that's a shame, because so many of us have a such a rich, incredible culture, and it would be good for everyone to share that culture with the Chapel Hill community."

A residue of racism

It's more than a little ironic that residents of Asian descent have come to be seen as a model minority; for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, Asians were considered so foreign and unassimilable that they were forbidden from settling in the United States in any significant numbers.

Many Asian residents will tell you that there remains, even in the 21st century, at least some residue of that sort of racism, especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

Three weeks ago, an Indian student wearing a turban was assaulted by three men on Franklin Street; the incident was reportedly sparked when one of the men called the victim "Osama bin Laden," and the suspects have been charged with ethnic intimidation.

Few incidents of racist or ethnic stereotyping go as far as physical assault. More commonly, residents of Asian origin find themselves subjected to subtler forms of racism.

"Occasionally you do face people with racial prejudice," said Judy Tseng, vice-president of the North Carolina chapter of the National Association of Asian-American Professionals. "Often it's little things, done more out of ignorance than anything. My husband and I were at a function associated with his work, and one of his colleagues said, 'How did you learn to speak such fluent English?' And the thing is, my husband is fourth-generation Chinese American; his family has probably been in America longer than that guy's. Those kinds of things aren't really done with ill intent, but they come across as something of an affront. They make you feel like an outsider."

'It's a different world'

David Huang's parents moved to Chapel Hill in the late 1960s, when his father took a post in cancer research at UNC. He was born in Taiwan, but he's lived in the United States since he was a year old. He works now in the neurology department at the university.

"Growing up, I saw my parents and their friends go through a lot. It wasn't usually overt discrimination. It might be that it took three or four tries to get a driver's license, for no good reason. It might be that a shopkeeper ignores you to wait on other customers who came in after you did. You don't see that so much now, partly because Asians have come to be seen as desirable consumers. But I have seen it. Everybody in line gets waited on except me, that kind of thing. It's frustrating. You try to turn the other cheek, but it's hard.

"When you are one of the only Asian families in town, you did see it more. One thing that happens is that you become very loyal to those people who treat you well. My dad built a good relationship with this one guy at the Sears in Durham. So for a long time we bought everything from the Sears in Durham.

"I've learned that the first thing I need to do when I walk in to see a patient is open my mouth and say something. There have been times when I walk in and they see my face

and there's still a sense of, 'Oh, a foreign doctor,' and I have to dispel that. It's not often, but occasionally it can be a barrier. Nobody's going to voice it, but with some people you can see the relief come over their faces when I start talking and they hear that I don't have an accent.

"Time changes everything. I recognize the things my parents went through, and it's a very different time now. This area has changed so much in the last 20 or 30 years. It's a different world."

'Separated lives'

Sudha Shreeniwas was born in Chennai, India, and came to the United States in 1986 to attend graduate school at the University of Michigan. She and her husband moved to Durham in 1996 when he took a job here, and two years later they moved to Chapel Hill. Shreeniwas had worked professionally and as a volunteer with South Asian women suffering from abusive relationships, and in 2001 she and five other area women founded Kiran, a non-profit organization dedicated to helping South Asian women in crisis:

"When we first came here, I was the trailing spouse, and that can be difficult. I had a very hard time finding a job, and ultimately I went back to India for a time while my husband continued working here. That was hard, too; it was about the longest commute you can have and still stay on the planet. I came back to stay when we had a daughter.

"I had a very hard time. I was going crazy with loneliness and isolation. Aside from my husband, I had no friends and no relatives here. I'm not talented in singing and dancing, and most of the South Asian organizations here were built around music and dance. I like social interaction, but there weren't any independent umbrella organizations for Asian women.

"Finally I found a big e-mail list based at N.C. State; I sent out some e-mails asking if any other South Asian women wanted to get together just to talk. We did that, and several of us found we had a shared interest in working with South Asian women in crisis and domestic violence situations. The need was there, and that's how Kiran came about.

"For many new immigrants, there are enormous cultural adjustments. People live separated lives. There are fewer people on the street; everybody's in cars. Even something as simple as just getting around can be very difficult. In India, the public transportation system is so extensive; that's how many people get from one place to another. When they come here, if they can't drive, they're lost. And if you don't have friends or relatives, it's really tough."