

Yellow Peril, Model Minority and the Racial Triangulation

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Introduction

In our contemporary society, immigration is a frequent topic of discussion and concern. This question has become central and transformed into a problem with catastrophic consequences in some politicians' speeches and actions and in some sections of our society. There are several important examples of this matter in recent international politics - the leave of the UK from the EU and Trump Wall. All these events demonstrate how the matter of immigration can get radical, especially when the immigrants are not white and the authorities' discourses legitimate the dichotomy "us" versus "them" utilizing economic reasoning that is, based, underneath, in racism and xenophobia. However, the concern and negative opinions against non-white immigration are not new.

The Asian (in this paper, referring to Eastern Asians) wave of immigration in the mid-19th and in the early 20th centuries is one of the examples that helps us think about the matter of non-white immigration and white supremacy. Throughout this process, Asians immigrants faced racism and xenophobia. All of this, connected with the geopolitics and ideas (such as eugenics) of that time, constructed a picture of fear and prejudice against Asians that was legitimized by the media and by the authorities

So, focusing in the Asian immigration experience, this chapter will show how this experience was racialized through the concepts of Yellow Peril and Model Minority and how, using the "racial triangulation" proposed by Kim (1999), through these discourses, the white supremacy prevailed creating a "racial rank" that put Black people in the bottom while "praising" and depolitizing Asian people as the middle one. And how to confront not only prejudice against the Asian community but also racism against the Black community, we have to repel these two concepts in order to create an antiracism solidarity.

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1. The necessity for cheap workforce – the Chinese alternative

One thing that approaches the formation of the sociability of the USA and Brazil is the experience of slavery. Considering the position in the global order of both, the latter being part of capitalism center and the former being part of the outskirts of the system, there was a shared issue between the two that emerged with the end of slavery in both countries – the necessity for cheap workforce in substitution of the enslaved one. The answer was the use of Chinese labor force. Although at first, in the USA, the use of this specific workforce was connected to the then recent exploration of the West Coast (DEZEM, 2005; SHIM, 1988), when California entered the Union “as a free (non-slave)”, the “booming regional economic growth intensified the need for cheap and plentiful labor” (KIM, 1999, p. 108). In Brazil, the first experience with the Chinese was in 1814. D. João VI brought a small quantity of Chinese “farmers” to work at an experimental tea plantation in Brazilian soil. However, according to Dezem (2005), the endeavor was not successful because the workers brought were not indeed farmers; the soil and climate conditions were not satisfactory and the Chinese labors escaped due to mistreatments. The issue was forgotten as then the enslaved Blacks trafficking was in full force (Ibid, p. 50). After this first contact, Brazilian authorities would only look at this alternative after the prohibition of enslaved trafficking in 1850 when the necessity for the substitution of the enslaved workforce emerged as an issue (DEZEM, 2005). With that, the discussions regarding Asian immigration gained importance in political debate. Although not something concrete in Brazil, the discourses around Asian immigration, here translated to Chinese immigration, were shared between the two countries – the Chinese Question.

In the USA, sino-workers began to arrive after the “Treaty of Wanghia” in 1844 (Ibid.), but the situation they encountered was not friendly. One of the scapegoats of that time West Coast’s economic problems and unemployment, Chinese laborers were “blamed for competing unfairly with white workers” (LEE, 2007, p. 547) and were accused of sending “money made in the United States back to China” (SHIM, 1988, p. 387). In pair with that, the racial argument said they were “unassimilable, inferior and immoral” (LEE, 2007, p. 547). But, the cheap workforce was too much to be ignored, as even East Coast newspaper editors agreed during the middle of the 18th century that the

Chinese were not biologically suited for America, but their cheap labor was too good to be ignored (MILLER, 1969, p. 159, apud KIM, 1999, p. 209). In the end, this tension resulted in “a series of excluding laws regarding the *coolies* with the aim of avoiding further social and political participation of this element” (DEZEM, 2005, p. 170), such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, result of the increased tension against the Chinese caused by the economic retraction consequence of the Civil War (1861-65), that prohibited the immigration of Chinese for a long period and the Chinese residents in America were forbidden to acquire American citizenship. One of the sponsors of this Act, John F. Miller, said that “Chinese labors in America have threatened good order of certain districts in this country” (preamble of the Chinese Exclusion Act, apud CHEN, 2012, p. 18) – Chen (2012) explains: as it was considered impossible for Chinese to assimilate American culture and the values of Christianity and the number of Chinese workers was massive, creating a tension regarding employment, the answer was exclusion through legislation. Although in the discussions around immigration, Charles Walcott Brooks, testified that he thought Chinese were better than “Negros” (apud KIM, 1999, p. 110). As Lee (2007, p. 546-547) summarizes the situation: “by the late nineteenth century, the massive immigration of laborers from China directly overlapped with domestic fears about American race, class and gender relations and helped fan the fires of organized anti-Chinese sentiment” which led the Chinese to be characterized as a threat as workers and as a race while being considered superior to Blacks.

Meanwhile in Brazil, the Chinese Question appeared with force after the Rio Branco law and the Agricultural Congress of 1878 in which one of the most debated subjects was, as mentioned above, the lack of workforce for the expanding agriculture. At first, the agricultural elites and representatives of the government desired the white, European immigrant to their farms; they were the ideal because besides working, they were supposed to whitewash our “mixed” race. However, the persistence of slavery and the preference of these immigrants for the U.S. and Argentina made the farm owners look for an alternative. This alternative was the Chinese. On the side favorable to this immigrant, along with the argument of abundant and cheap workforce, the sino-worker was characterized as a necessary transitory element between the Black and White races, as a preparation to the ideal European immigrant, but not desired as a permanent one (Ibid, p. 73). However, on the other side, the racial question prevailed; the Chinese were viewed as “weak”, “depraved”, and “indolent”, “narcotized by the opium” and would bring “physical decadence and moral degradation” (Ibid, p. 75). In the end, as Dezem

(2005, p. 108) summarizes, the Chinese Question in Brazil didn't concretize and became a "ghost question" impossible to be solved. On top of that, this debate, supported by the racist and ethnocentric theories of then, served as the embryo of the stereotype against the Yellow - danger to the whitewash project of the Brazilian race.

Thus, the North American – dated from the 1860s until its dissolution post-1895 - discourses regarding the Chinese immigration pointed towards the Yellow as a threat to their economy, culture and race, towards a racialized experience that sees Asians as the "other", as something degraded and only needed as cheap and abundant workforce. Therefore, constructing the Yellow, in this case the Chinese, as a peril who will, if temporary, send the country's fortune to their motherland while stealing jobs or, if permanent, will contaminate the population or be like an "alien" – the White Americans perceived Asians as unassimilable foreigners who "would eventually overtake the nation and wreak social and economic havoc" (FONG, 2002, p. 189, apud KAWAI, 2005, p. 113). In Brazil, as argues Dezem (2005), the fact that the country did not receive Chinese workers contributed to different formulations of the discourses regarding the Yellow and the discussions produced in political debate didn't resonate in the population. However, the idea of the Asian immigrant as a threat, at least against the whitewashed population desired, and as a cheap workforce worth of being explored despite racial issues was at stake. The yellow peril would enter with force after the eminent coming of "ambassadors of the victorious Japan" in 1907, as we will see ahead.

2. The Yellow Peril - geopolitics and racism

The idea of the Yellow Peril is a racial stereotype working with geopolitics background that has been constructed in the West since Medieval times with the threat of Genghis Khan and Mongolian invasion of Europe (KAWAI, 2005). In the 19th century it emerged associated with China aiming mainly to invade it and exploit it (CHEN, 2012). "The Yellow Peril Doctrine" was "an imperial slogan", an instrument used by European and American potencies with "means to instigate the people into evil business, or excuse to defend themselves" (GOLLWITZER, 1962, p. 8-9, apud CHEN, 2012, p. 6) in the process of invading China. But it was thanks to the German Kaiser, Wilhelm II, in the end of the 19th century, that the term "Yellow Peril" was named and popularized (KAWAI, 2005). In this context, another element was added to the Yellow equation – the Japanese.

The Meiji era (1868-1912) in Japan came with the objective to modernize it, rebuilding its internal structures according to capitalist molds (DEZEM, 2005). Along with this the desire of being acknowledged by the West and the desire of expansionism was also included. In this context, the first look to Japan by the Occident was in the win against China in the Sino-Japanese war in 1895. This marked the real expansionist of Japan in Asia (Ibid.) and the substitution of China for them as the Eastern potency. In this frame, the German Kaiser, searching for alliances with Russia, annunciated his hatred against the Yellow race and saw in China's defeat an opening to a supposed yellow invasion (Ibid.). This was a political tactic, as Wilhelm II appreciated the idea of the Czar being occupied with the Orient, creating a relief for German's oriental borders (STORRY, G. R., 1968, p. 81 apud Dezem, 2005) in a situation where the balance of power between the potencies was an issue. It was in this context of imperialism, expansionism, of Yellow threat, and fight for power between the potencies that emerged the war that would settle Japan and its people as a threat – the Russian-Japanese War (1904-1905).

The Japanese victory against the Russian showed the world the first military defeat of a representative of the “White race” against an Eastern country (DEZEM, 2005) – from there the possibility became a reality, Japan presented itself as potency willing to expand its sphere of influence. With this, it can be argued that that the ideas that constituted the “Yellow Peril” discourse through the first half of the 20th century have its genesis in racial and expansionist questions (Ibid.).

Around the same time, in the US, the anti-Yellow movement was fully consolidated and pointing towards the Japanese. Dezem (2005) explains that different from the Chinese, the Japanese immigrant was supported by its own government. This allied with the notion that the Nipponese were ambassadors of Japan, with an education based around nationalist ideas and a religion based on the cult of the emperor, made them the “new Oriental peril”, different from the Chinese. The racial element was present – the Japanese were accused of being unassimilable, they feared a Nipponese invasion in the West Coast (Ibid.) - as well as the economic one – the Japanese were seen as competition by the White, as the “spirit of sacrifice [...] made them subject themselves to extreme conditions, which [...] led them to break strikes for extra salary” (NOGUEIRA, 1973, p. 73 apud DEZEM, 2005, p. 183). On top of that, the literature from that time converged to the idea of a Yellow Peril – a book written by ex-Marine officer and congressman Richmond Pearson Hobson alerted that a Yellow Peril was

coming for the West Coast² (DEZEM, 2005). It was in this context that suspecting a political character of the Japanese immigration and looking at the conflicts between them and its citizen that the Washington government restricted Nipponese immigration (TAKEUCHI, 2008) – it was the *Gentleman's Agreement Act* of 1907.

According to Dezem (2005), in Brazil, the series of conflicts won by Japan served to a process of construction/deconstruction of the Japan/Japanese imagery. Unlike other countries, such the USA, who already received large quantities of Asians immigrants, Brazilian's common sense regarding Nippon still revolved around the idea of an exotic country – where the “other” is exalted by their exotic features. The idea of a “yellow peril” only circulated between the authorities. It was not until the coming of Japanese immigrants in 1907 that this idea gained force and recovered the stereotypes used against the Chinese, adapted to the Japanese. The consensus went from “Japanese from Japan” to “Japanese from Japan in Brazil” – in this logic, the new immigrant had to fully integrate and dilute themselves into the local culture, avoiding any cultural pluralism.

This idea was in authorities' discourse since before the beginning of the process. In 1907, Luiz Guimarães Filho, in charge of Brazil's business in Tokyo, warned of the danger of Japanese Immigration. According to Takeuchi (2008), he said that the Japanese was unassimilable, intended to impose their costumes and caused conflicts for not being able to live a Japanese lifestyle. In his opinion, if the Japanese immigration became a reality in Brazil, it would create an “enemy inside our house”, that in the future would be “a danger both to national integrity and to the formation of a white Brazilian population” (TAKEUCHI, 2008, p. 58). For him, the Japanese were a “spy of birth and our enemy by the blood” (LEÃO, 1989, p. 22 apud TAKEUCHI, 2008, p. 58).

This “danger” was later addressed in 1923 by a project of law proposed by Fidélis Reis – the project number 391 of October 22th 1923. It proposed the regulation of immigration to Brazil, forbidding Black immigrants and restraining Yellow immigrants to 5% of individuals from this origin located in each State. To defend his project, the congressman said that the “economical needs were irrelevant before the formation of the Brazilian race and the risk represented by the insertion of an unassimilable element for its moral and culture” (TAKEUCHI, 2008, p. 59). He considered the miscegenation with the Asian not worth from a eugenics point of view,

² The book's name is: “Japan may seize the Pacific slope” from 1907.

since this element was condemned to remain caged and could be a danger for the nation's future (Ibid.).

The debate of the so-called Japanese danger would return to the spotlight in the National Constituent Assembly in 1933 where the immigration would be one of the themes. There three characters would stand out as the “heroes of the anti-Nippon campaign”- Miguel Couto, Xavier de Oliveira e Artur Neiva (TAKEUCHI, 2008). Utilizing racist and political arguments, the trio wanted to stop Asian immigration. For example, Couto, a doctor, treating Asians immigrants as a disease, tells a parable where an animal, supposedly domestic, exterminate its owner in a fury attack – like the former, the country didn't know the immigrants mentality. Xavier also evokes racial arguments, for him, the Japanese were predisposed to mental diseases, were undesirable and unassimilable. He also says that, following USA's example, Brazil should forbid Asian immigration (TAKEUCHI, 2008). The example Xavier is talking about is the Immigration Act of 1924 – which “prohibited any further Asian immigration by denying admission to all aliens who were 'ineligible for citizen ship’” (LEE, 2007, p. 560).

Following the trend set by the USA with this Act (LEE, 2007), from the Constituent debate, the Miguel Couto Amendment was approved and put in the Federal Constitution of 1934 (TAKEUCHI, 2008). Born from the concern by the authorities and intellectuals with the establishment of the nation, in racial and cultural terms, with the “undesirables” and with the aim to whitewash the Brazilian population, the law stated that “restrictions must be imposed on the entry of immigrants with the objective of ensure the ethnical integration and physical and civil capacity of the immigrant” (Ibid, p. 65). The racism arguments in the Constituent Assembly and the subsequent law show the endorsement by the State of exclusion and segregation.

One of the crucial points in the Yellow Peril history was the World War II. When Japan's desire to becoming an imperial power clashed with U.S interests in the Asia and Pacific regions, the Yellow Peril concentrated in Japan (KAWAI, 2005). After the attack in Pearl Harbor in 1941, one of the consequences was the Executive Order 9066 signed by the Roosevelt, which suspended Japanese Americans civil rights and put them in concentration camps due to their origins (SHIM, 1998; TAKEUCHI, 2008). In Brazil, the violence was present too. After the rupture of diplomatic relations with the Axis in 1942, the discourse was transformed, accusing Japanese and their descendants of being war spies – the idea of an invasion plot (TAKEUCHI, 2008).

In the 1950's the eyes turned to China when the communists took over in 1949, fought against the U.S. in the Korean War and "cruelly" mistreated American prisoners (SHIM, 1998). According to Chen (2012), several slogans were proposed such as one to "suppress the expansion of Communism in Asia" – it was the "communist Yellow Peril". In the 1980's together with a context that included the Model Minority narrative (seen ahead), the image of Asian Americans was affected by the deficit in trading between the United States and Asia – the economic problems were attributed to trade practices with Japan and the "tigers" (South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore) that were considered "unfair" (KAWAI, 2005; SHIM, 1998). A survey conducted in the U.S in 1982 showed that 44 percent of Americans blamed the country's economic problems on competition from Japanese corporations (Espiritu, 1992, p. 138 apud SHIM, 1998, p. 397).

Throughout the history, the Yellow Peril was used mainly as an excuse, a political and cultural instrument, to subjugate and discriminate Asians around the World. As Shimabuko (2016) explains the Yellow Peril is a way to manipulate power and alliances in order to maintain the European-American hegemony –one of the apparatus that the State utilizes to justify imperialists policies. That's why it is mutable, as it depends on the politics conjuncture, "always aiming in favoring the West when assigning the roles of common enemy, very often racialized, to Japan, China and more recently North Korea" (SHIMABUKO, 2016, p. 7). Drawing from geopolitics, racism and the "fascination" with the "other", the Yellow Peril presents itself as paranoia, a permanent state of plot – a discourse imprisoned with fear – aiming to put the Yellow as a threat to Western (White) socialization and domination. To summarize, it is a form of control through discourse, sometimes lethal, that legitimize racial violence and hatred while maintaining the White hegemony.

3. The Model Minority - racial disputes as meritocracy

The model minority stereotype is thought to be a discourse constructed by the mainstream media, more specifically by two articles: "Success story, Japanese-American style" (Petersen, 1966) published in *New York Times Magazine* on January, 1966 and "Success Story of One Minority in U.S." published in December, 1966 in *U.S News and World Report*. The two articles celebrated Japanese and Chinese Americans as the model minority groups who were serious about education, obedient to the law and

possessed close family relations (KAWAI, 2005). According to Shim (1998), the 1965 publication of “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action” written by Moynihan and Lyndon B. Johnson ignited a controversy because attributed the economic subordination of Blacks to their lack of family values. This publication paved the way to the articles cited above. However, not only domestic U.S context contributed for the construction of the model minority stereotype, Japan’s re-emergence as a hegemonic economic power in the 60’s (PALUMBO-LIU, 1999, apud KAWAI, 2005) entered in the making of process of the stereotype.

As Moynihan’s and Johnson’s publication paved the way for the two articles, the latter brought the possibility for the model minority myth to be a counter-response for the demands of the African Americans during the civil rights protests in 1960. Utilizing the Asians as an instrument, the groups in power justified African America’s own economic “failure” with meritocracy and other family values that didn’t shed light to the racial background of both (SHIM 1998; KAWAI 2005). Ignoring the historic context that Asian immigration was not forced like African immigration and that most Asian immigrants were voluntary, the model minority stereotype functions to “[legitimate] status quo social institutions” (NAKAYAMA, 1998, p. 71 apud KAWAI, 2005, p. 114). As Kawai (2005) explains that by depicting Asian Americans as the model minority, other racial minorities are downgraded as a “problem”. This produces a colorblind ideology – a “set of norms that obscures continuing patterns of White dominance in the post-civil rights era” (KIM, 1999, p. 116) that “furthers racial power not through the direct articulation of racial differences but rather by obscuring the operation of racial power, protecting it from challenge, and permitting ongoing racialization via racially coded methods” (KIM, 2000, p. 17 apud KAWAI, 2005, p. 113) – this code being the culture. In other words, the model minority myth served a racist purpose – disguised as meritocracy, this narrative obscured historic context to subjugate and put in clash two minorities groups while maintaining the White supremacy. Hiding structural racism putting the issue as an individual one, as a lack of effort while depositing enormous pressure in Asian descendants individuals and stigmatizes them as docile, passive, etc.

In Brazil, this notion functions perfectly, as Santos e Acevedo (2013) show, mainstream Brazilian media depicts Asian Brazilians as hard-working individuals, mostly in working or impersonal situations, stereotyping this group as a massive square of robotic persons without showing neither the cultural diversity among this group nor expressing their individuality. The problem aggravates when even the maximum

authority of the country legitimizes the model minority stereotype – when comparing Asians Brazilians and African Brazilians, Bolsonaro, then in presidential campaign, said: “Has someone saw a Japanese begging? This is because it is a race that is ashamed”³.

4. Racial Triangulation – White, Asian and Black

As we have seen, both Yellow Peril and Model Minority discourses were born from geopolitics and racial issues. However, they don't exist separated from one another, since its genesis, the Model Minority stereotype share a dialectic relation with the Yellow Peril one. The racial triangulation theory (KIM, 1999) helps us in seeing this relationship as well as think about the racialization process Asian individuals went in comparison with Black and White ones.

Kim (1999) proposes that Asian Americans have been racially triangulated vis-à-vis Blacks and Whites. The author explains that this process occurs with two simultaneous, linked processes: “relative valorization” and “civic ostracism”. The first tells about how the “dominant group A (Whites) valorizes subordinate group B (Asian Americans) relative to subordinate group C (Blacks) on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to dominate both groups” (KIM, 1999, p. 107); the second talks how “group A (Whites) constructs subordinate group B (Asian Americans) as immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership” (Ibid.).

Throughout this chapter, we could see diverse examples of this triangulation in action – the Chinese/Japanese Question is one of them. In the Asian immigration process during the 19th and 20th centuries the Yellow element was “praised” for being better than the Black one as well as ostracized for being unassimilable to the Western costumes and a potential invader. After the Civil Rights movement in 1960's, the logic continues coded as a cultural problem rather than a racial one – Asians Americans are praised for their heritage values and are seen as hard workers and intelligent, opposed to African Americans, seen as lazy and problematic. However, the ostracism continues as this success is linked, not on accident, to “alien” values and the supposedly apoliticalness of Asian Americans.

³ For more “enlightened” declarations of Brazil's President: <https://veja.abril.com.br/brasil/bolsonaro-e-acusado-de-racismo-por-frase-em-palestra-na-hebraica/>

This theory can be used in Brazil's context too, sharing the slavery background with the U.S., the racialization of Brazilian Asians occurred from a similar perspective. As we have seen, at the beginning of the Asian immigration process, the Yellow element was considered a transitional one – better than Blacks, but not White -, was considered a better worker – more organized and dedicated. At the same time, the notion of being unassimilable and not suited for the whitewashed project desired by the authorities. In more contemporary times, this view carries on, as we have seen by Bolsonaro's declaration, the Model Minority stereotype valorizes Brazilian Asians to the detriment of African Brazilians, in order to subjugate both, as later, the same person utilizes racism to mock an Asian by utilizing the emasculated stereotype. In that sense, the same logic is used: the clash between two ethnical groups considered inferior in order to maintain White supremacy. As Shimabuko (2018) summarizes, the process of racialization of Eastern Asian in Brazil (as well as in the U.S) is ambivalent. It can be utilized to create terror with the logic of the invader as well as utilized as the model minority to generate clash between ethnical groups.

Conclusion

When looking at the process of Asian racialization in the West, we could see that it is marked with signs of xenophobia, racism and violent discrimination. Throughout the centuries, they were put in a subaltern position that was less or more discriminatory according to the geopolitics and the needs of those in power. In this process, Asians were placed in an advantageous position in relation to Blacks, creating a false sense of security, when in reality both groups are subordinate to the Whites.

In this sense, utilizing the stereotypes of the Yellow Peril and Model Minority, the White supremacy maintained its power by putting the Asians in clash with Blacks, creating narratives that lowered both groups. So, in order to break from this chain of power, we, descendants of Asians need to question and refuse being the argument that legitimates racism, we need to see that discourses like the Model Minority stereotype are not real as it ignores historical context and standardizes every one of us. Discourses like that function as a concession that can be taken anytime and be replaced with the logic of fear and danger. Therefore, to truly subjugate racism, we have to be solidary, creating an antiracist solidarity.

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