Eating Bitterness (吃苦): Critical to Chinese Immigrant Identity or Perpetuating the Model Minority Myth?

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Abstract

This paper was originally written for Dr. Nicky Didicher, for a lower-division English course, ENGL 112W *Literature Now: Narrative Games/Gaming Narratives*. The assignment asked students to explore the concept of "eating bitterness" in *Level Up* and what it says about Yang and Pham's presentation of Chinese-American identity and values. The paper uses MLA citation style.

Chinese immigrant success in America is often attributed to their ability to work hard and endure hardships. In Chinese culture, this is called 吃苦 (eating bitterness). The term "model minority" is often used as a tool to contrast the "lack of success" of other racialized groups in America; the implication is that they could be as "successful" if they 吃苦. As a second-generation Chinese settler, the main character, Dennis, in Yang and Pham's graphic novel, *Level Up*, is also expected to 吃苦. This paper explores how Yang and Pham use Dennis' struggle to choose between becoming a doctor and playing video games, and his in/ability to 吃苦 to illuminate and critique the concept of the "model minority" myth.

In Gene Luen Yang and Thien Pham's 2011 graphic novel *Level Up*, Dennis Ouyang is a second-generation Chinese immigrant born into a family that prioritizes enduring hardships, whether it be through education or life choices, to garner future rewards. This concept of endurance is known as "eating bitterness," a direct translation from the Chinese word *chīkǔ* *(吃苦)*, acting as a major motif throughout the novel and serving as an identifier for Chinese immigrant culture and identity. The success of Chinese immigrants to North America is often attributed to the ability to endure hardships silently and independently, a theory

that is both closely related to the immigrant cultural standard of 吃苦 and the North American concept of the "model minority." Yang and Pham use the cultural standard of 吃苦 to both critique and illuminate the model minority structure that Chinese immigrants often are forced to uphold to achieve success. By using the graphic novel genre and a protagonist who simultaneously accepts and defies Chinese immigrant standards, and by extension the model minority structure, Yang and Pham use Dennis' life choices to rework the model minority myth and make room for alternative Asian narratives; through Dennis' life choices in *Level Up*, Yang and Pham use the concept of 吃苦 to reinterpret the pervasive model minority myth, criticizing the encouragement of passive self-sufficiency and active assimilation.

The ideas of a "model minority" and "problem minority" were explored by William Pettersen's 1966 New York Times article detailing the success of Japanese Americans. Another similar article about the success of Chinese Americans was later published in December of the same year by the US News and World Report. Pettersen associated Japanese American achievement with "their almost totally unaided effort . . . to succeed" and how they subverted "every [negative] generalization about ethnic minorities" (n.p.). Continuing to describe them as "exceptionally law-abiding alien residents," Pettersen argued that Japanese Americans were more successful than all other racial minorities in America because of how well they could endure their hardships (n.p.). The article by the US News and World Report uses similar vocabulary to describe Chinese American success, using the same central idea that Chinese Americans pull themselves "up from hardship and discrimination to become a model of . . . achievement . . . with no help from anyone else" ("Success Story of One Minority Group in the US" n.p.). The framework that celebrates Asian Americans' supposed success in contemporary America puts down other racialized groups, primarily Black Americans and Indigenous people, who don't fit into this model minority mold. This degradation of other racial groups serves to elevate North American Asian immigrants; at the same time, the model minority structure devalues Asian achievements by attributing this expected "success" only to ethnicity.

Parallels drawn between the model minority myth and the concept of 吃苦 are offered in *Level Up*: in flashback form, the novel shows that even when Dennis was a young child, Dennis' father justifies that providing for Dennis had forced him "to eat bitterness" and that Dennis "must learn to do the same" after Dennis expresses disappointment upon receiving a chemistry set as a Christmas gift

instead of a Nintendo (Yang and Pham 12). By instilling the notion that endurance and passive acceptance of expectations will translate to eventual success, Dennis' father reveals his subconscious bias and belief in meritocracy and the model minority myth. Even after Dennis' father passes, the concept of 吃苦 continues to haunt Dennis, made tangible by first the statues that inexplicably transform into his late father's face, then later the angels that personify the cultural standard by pushing Dennis towards his "destiny" (Yang and Pham 37).

Asian immigrant success is attributed to the ability to endure hardships silently and single-handedly; by subconsciously (or consciously) adhering to the model minority myth, Asian immigrants become an exemplar and are forced to stomach the devaluation of their Asian identity to continue to succeed. This concept of successful assimilation allows Asian immigrants to gain proximity to whiteness, while still excluding Asians from achieving true belonging within North America. As Madelaine Hron details in her text *Translating Pain: Immigrant Suffering in Literature and Culture*, qualified and educated "immigrants to Western nations" are often forced to "redo their degrees," and for those who "have a family to support . . . take up lower-paying jobs instead," as Dennis' father was forced to do (17). Immigrants who fail to succeed in Western countries are "viewed either as a social burden or as immigrants who have failed to . . . acculturate" (Hron 17). Asian immigrants, when held up to the concept of success within this framework, are seen as the model minority, accomplished "perversely through pain" (Handlin qtd. in Hron 18). Historically, Asian immigrants, focusing on Chinese immigrants in the West, have suffered through no shortage of pain and endurance.

I had the opportunity to interview my grandfather and gain insight into his experiences with 吃苦. Born during the end of WWII, my grandfather forged papers to immigrate to Canada as the paper child of my great-great-grandfather, who had stayed in Canada after working on the Canadian Pacific Railway. My grandfather learned English at age 16 in a kindergarten classroom in Trail, BC, and was the only Chinese person in his entire school. He changed his Chinese name to Victor, read *Romeo and Juliet* after only a year of learning English, endured racially-motivated harassment from his peers, graduated, and went on to reach his goal of completing post-secondary education. He later lived on the Downtown Eastside while making money to send home to his family, worked his way up to a senior position in a major communications company, and started a family. His story is an exemplary immigrant success story, a happy ending, and a payoff for all the sacrifices and hardships he endured. Within the standards of success in

Canada, his willingness to silently eat bitterness proved him a model minority of successful assimilation; his pain is celebrated, and North America holds Asian immigrants up as an exemplar.

Like my grandfather, Dennis' parents as first-generation immigrants to a Western country endured the hardships of assimilation, and had to 吃苦 "to provide [Dennis] with the life he has" (Yang and Pham 12). Dennis' family is also an example of migrant success and is successful because of the structures in place that celebrate "suffering . . . to become an individual, and thus an American citizen" (Handlin qtd. in Hron 18). First-generation Chinese immigrants to North America internalize the idea that an inability to conform to the "myth of success" is a direct result of a "lack of effort" and pass this mentality onto their children (Hron 20). Yang and Pham apply these ingrained cultural expectations to *Level Up* as a baseline for their critique of the model minority and Chinese immigrant opportunities for success.

Level Up is not a typical narrative that is considered "literature" in North America. The cultural formula of 吃苦 and success are inextricably linked to the interrogation of the model minority myth, and Asian writers have historically been very aware of this. Take Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, Sky Lee's *Disappearing Moon Cafe*, Wayson Choy's *The Jade Peony*, and Madeleine Thien's *Do Not Say We Have Nothing*: at the heart of all these traditional novels by acclaimed and distinguished Chinese novelists, the idea of 吃苦 remains central, indistinguishable from the structures that deem immigrant suffering a trait of the model minority. By using the graphic novel structure, Yang and Pham automatically deviate from the conventional expectation of Asian American literature; Asian American narratives have to be written as "literature," not "genre-fiction," to be taken seriously. This deviation alone provides commentary on the repressive nature of the model minority myth on Asian immigrants; graphic novels have historically been stigmatized as a debased form of storytelling, and the use of the graphic novel medium illustrates Yang and Pham's push for alternative Asian narratives. Within this unconventional medium, *Level Up* itself adheres to a traditional graphic novel style, with very few bleeds or splashes. One of the few bleeds in the novel consists of an entirely black spread with the words "but then, why wasn't I happy?" in a narrative box (Yang and Pham 140-141). This scene illustrates a pivotal point in the novel, where Dennis begins to step towards an amalgamation of two seemingly polarizing concepts: medical school or video games.

Dennis is a generation removed from the idea of 吃苦 and, consequently, is not as keen on enduring pain for indeterminate future reward. Dennis' father wonders "how a video game will teach [Dennis] to eat bitterness," unaware that Dennis is eavesdropping (Yang and Pham 12). Subsequently, in the next 2 panels, Dennis unboxes his chemistry set and begins to study. However, upon flipping the page, Dennis states in a narrative box that his "father died of liver cancer two weeks before [Dennis] graduated high school" and begins playing video games "that night" (Yang and Pham 13, 14). The polarizing forces of medical school or video games serve as the main source of conflict and conceptualizes the pull Dennis feels between fulfilling his "destiny" through endurance or "living the dream" (Yang and Pham 94, 107). However, 吃苦 is presented later in the novel as a Chinese immigrant cultural value rather than a divisive "model minority" Western structure: the flashback of Dennis' father giving up on his promise of becoming a doctor is presented not as a failure, but a deeply ingrained value to endure for the good of others. Dennis' father realizes that there are better sacrifices made for those still living and to allow the literal ghosts of promises to settle in the past, urging Dennis to do the same by telling him that "a better man is a happier man" (Yang and Pham 129). Yang and Pham take the concept of eating bitterness and endurance to subvert cultural standards: Dennis does not end up settling for a stoic life analogously conforming to the conventional idea of model minority success in medical school, but he also does not find true fulfillment pursuing gaming as a career. Despite deviation from the model minority structure, in the end, Dennis still achieves both cultural success and personal fulfillment. By presenting the polarizing ideas of medical school and video games as attainable equals, Yang and Pham conceptualize a subversion of this polarization and thus the structures that bind Asian immigrants to these extremes.

Yang and Pham present Dennis as a character who simultaneously accepts and defies the model minority structure; by extension, these authors use this paradox to reinterpret the North American myth through a Chinese immigrant lens of 吃苦. Yang is not afraid to be outspoken about the model minority myth, taking to Twitter to remind "Asian Americans . . . that the Model Minority Myth isn't a compliment," but rather "a pawn in an anti-black narrative that cares nothing about our welfare or our success" (Yang). The scope of harm from the model minority structure does not impact Asian Americans as an individual issue; this myth stems from institutionalized and systemic anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism that North America was established on and perpetuates the

idea that proximity to whiteness will translate to eventual tolerance and success. Although the issues of anti-Blackness and anti-Indigenous rhetoric are not overtly addressed in the novel, *Level Up* serves to subvert the power of the model minority myth in devaluing Asian identity and cultural values and carves out a new space for Asian American narratives.

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