ASIANs AS THE MODEL MINORITY

Scholarly literature suggests that Asians or particular subgroups of Asians in the United States are often stereotyped as the model minority (Model Minority Stereotype Project, 2019). Scholars have also written about the existence of the Asian model minority stereotype outside of the United States, such as in Canada (Ho, 2015; Pon, 2000), New Zealand (Hannis, 2015), and Asian countries such as South Korea (Hartlep, 2015) and China (Fang, 2009a, 2009b). Other scholars have examined the stereotype’s existence in European countries, including Bradbury (2015), whose work examined the Asian model minority in the UK. This chapter explores the model minority stereotype vis-à-vis Asian immigrants in a different European country: Germany.

Our chapter offers new information and an international perspective when examining Asians as the model minority. We examine the Vietnamese in Germany and posit that the Vietnamese have been treated as an Asian model minority there. Acknowledged for their diligence, educational success, and inconspicuousness, they have been held up as a model of successful integration, and even called ‘Das Vietnamesische Wunder’ [The Vietnamese Miracle] (Spiewak, 2009).1

We put the stereotype of quiet, hard-working Vietnamese immigrants into a historical context and explore their strategic contributions to their collective images and impact on youth.

Model Minority

A look at public portrayals of Vietnamese immigrants and youth in Germany over the past decade indicates that something akin to a model minority stereotype may be developing in Germany.2 The stereotype of a ‘model minority’ can be harmful in at least three ways:

1 It reifies the essentialist concept of ethnicity by claiming that some aspect of the minority group’s culture allows them to succeed where other groups fail.
It vilifies minorities who do not fit the stereotype, placing blame on their culture and them as individuals for not fitting into the host society. This can deprive immigrants of resources and justify racist speech and actions against them.

It glosses over issues within the so-called ‘model minority’ group, potentially depriving people (including youth) of needed services.

It’s important and urgent to sound the alarm about a nascent model minority stereotype in Germany because the country is in the midst of integrating a million new immigrants from Syria and Africa. Migration is one of the hottest topics in public debate in Germany and Europe. The debate about how to respond to the dramatic migration unleashed after the Syrian Civil War has impacted national elections and contributed to the rise of far-right political parties (Galston, 2018). A model minority stereotype may harm new immigrants and youth by creating unrealistic expectations. It may hinder the chances of Germany successfully integrating them. On the other hand, a nuanced analysis of how the model minority stereotype was constructed may offer valuable lessons and pointers about how to successfully integrate immigrants into German society.

The stakes are high: the rest of Europe is watching Germany’s integration program. Chancellor Angela Merkel’s bold assertion in August 2015 that Germany is a ‘strong country’ that can provide shelter to Syrian refugees will be tested over and over again in the coming decade. The UK’s ‘Brexit’ decision to leave the EU in part because of the mandate to integrate refugees is a cautionary tale of the price of a government not being prepared for immigration. Meanwhile, violent acts committed by asylum seekers and mass killings by suspected terrorists in public spaces in Germany, France, and the UK stimulate a climate of fear and urgency for everyone in Europe, regardless of citizenship status. The extreme opposite of the model minority stereotype is the radicalized terrorist – someone so marginalized that he or she physically attacks random members of the society. When terrorist attacks occur, almost inevitably someone will comment that the failed integration of an ethnic immigrant community is to blame, or that the government should clamp down on immigration. The model minority stereotype is an indicator of a society’s tendency to suppress or even criminalize difference.

The first vivid outlines of model minority stereotype of Vietnamese youth in Germany appeared in a January 2009 article in Die Zeit, a highly regarded, national weekly newspaper known for its in-depth coverage and analysis of news, culture, and politics. The author, Martin Spiewak, is a respected reporter in the field of education. His article garnered 76 comments from registered readers, an unusually high number for articles about education at the time, which typically garnered less than 20 comments. The headline ‘Das Vietnamesische Wunder’ [The Vietnamese Miracle] and subtitle ‘Die Kinder von Einwanderern aus Vietnam fallen durch glänzende Schulnoten auf’ [The children of immigrants from Vietnam stand out due to glittering grades] highlighted the surprising accomplishments of Vietnamese high school students. The article elaborated on why these students’ educational success was so striking that it merited coverage in the premier newspaper of Germany’s progressive intellectual elite.


[No other immigrant group in Germany has more success in school than the Vietnamese: over 50 percent manage the leap into high school. That means more Vietnamese youth strive for a high school degree than German youth. Compared to their peers from Turkish or...
Italian families, the number of high school students is five times as high. ‘The accomplishments of Vietnamese students are significantly opposed to the image that we usually have of children with a migration background,’ says Karin Weiss, the Commissioner for Foreigners’ Affairs of [the state of] Brandenburg.

Education and immigration experts were very surprised to see 50% of Vietnamese youth ‘leap into’ Gymnasium, the most academically rigorous of the three types of high school education offered in Germany. Comparable to a prep school in the United States, Gymnasia grew out of humanistic movements in the 16th century, emphasizing Greek, Latin, and other classical subjects (Hammerstein and Buck, 1996). They offer advanced curricula aimed at college-bound students. Students must apply to enter, and they typically start at age 10. During the 2009–2010 school year, just 35% of high school-aged students attended Gymnasia (German Federal Statistics Office, 2011: 13). Half of the students attending Gymnasia come from the most affluent levels of German society (Ehmke et al., 2004). Thus, Gymnasia are the proving ground of the society’s elite. The percentage of Vietnamese students entering Gymnasia was especially remarkable because testing results across the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in the early 2000s had found that the children of immigrants fared less well on tests than the children of German parents. This difference was especially pronounced in Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland (Ramm et al., 2004: 257). Furthermore, the study showed that children of Turkish and Yugoslav immigrants living in Germany did worse on the tests than the children of German parents. This difference was especially pronounced in Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland (Ramm et al., 2004: 257). Furthermore, the study showed that children of Turkish and Yugoslav immigrants living in Germany did worse on the tests than the children of German parents. This difference was especially pronounced in Germany, Belgium, and Switzerland (Ramm et al., 2004: 257).

Spiewak’s article mentions that the success of Vietnamese students creates new challenges for school administrators (and impacts youth), such as figuring out how to pronounce students’ names.

For anyone familiar with the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans in the United States, the mention of Vietnamese youth being called ‘strong’ in science and math is eerily familiar. The theme of over-achieving students who have a special gift for math and science is strikingly similar to TIME Magazine’s cover strapline from August 31, 1987: ‘Those Asian-American Whiz Kids’ (Brand, 1987). The principal’s struggle to pronounce the students’ names highlights how different they are from the mainstream students. Both students’ names are misspelled in the article. When Spiewak refers to a parallel phenomenon in the United States, he points to another foreign factor: Confucian mentality. ‘Das zeigt sich seit Jahren bereits in den USA, wo überproportional viele Studenten aus asiatischen – genauer: von der konfuzianischen Mentalität geprägten – Nationen die amerikanischen Spitzenuniversitäten besuchen’ (Spiewak, 2009).

[It’s been demonstrated for years in the USA, where disproportionately many students from
Asian nations – or more precisely, nations imprinted with a Confucian mentality – are attending the top American universities. With this reference, Spiewak could easily be describing the cover photo of a special issue of *Newsweek* magazine published in April 1984 (Givins, 1984). It was inscribed: ‘On Campus – Asian-Americans, The Drive to Excel’. It depicted four young people standing around a sandstone column. Three were holding books. The fourth wore a Stanford sweatshirt. The accompanying article argued that family expectations and hard work fueled Asian American success in top colleges. This article typifies the model minority perspective in 1980s American journalism (Hartlep 2013: 240). Twenty-five years later, Spiewak virtually photocopies the image of an Asian model minority from US colleges onto German high schools.

Spiewak’s article further explains that the students are children of Vietnamese contract workers, many of whom experienced a dramatic plunge into unemployment and poverty as well as being the targets of racial hatred in the years following German reunification. And yet, the academic success of the young generation was beginning to compensate for those experiences: ‘Ihre Kinder jedoch sind nun dabei, mit ungeheurem Fleiß und Bildungsdrang die deutsche Gesellschaft zu erobern’ (Spiewak, 2009). [Their children, however, are in the process of conquering the German society with their industriousness and educational drive]. As noted by American commentator Smaran Dayal (2014), this kind of portrayal of hard-working immigrants climbing the ladder of social success in the host society is reminiscent of William Petersen’s 1966 (January 9) *New York Times Magazine* feature, ‘Success Story, Japanese-American Style’, an article that was seminal in shaping the American model minority myth.

Soon after Spiewak’s article was published, some Germans with Vietnamese ethnic backgrounds received attention for remarkable accomplishments. They seemed to be fulfilling Spiewak’s prediction that the next generation of Vietnamese youth would ‘conquer’ German society. For example, Philipp Rösler, a Vietnamese orphan who was adopted and raised in Germany, became the first person of Asian descent to serve as a cabinet minister. He served as Germany’s Minister of Health in 2009, then Federal Minister of Economy and Technology, and Vice-Chancellor in 2011. Marcel Nguyen, a biracial Vietnamese-German man, competed for Germany at the 2012 London Olympics, winning two silver medals in gymnastics. At the same time, Germans with other kinds of ethnic backgrounds were also making strides and entering cherished German institutions, such as getting elected to regional and national government positions and competing on the beloved national soccer team, which won the World Cup in 2014. The German national team included Ghanaian-German Jerome Boateng, Tunisian-German Sami Khedira, and Turkish-German Mesut Özil.

And yet, the idea that Vietnamese-Germans were special in terms of educational achievement lingered. For example, researcher and pedagogy professor Olaf Beuchling repeated the claim that the children of Vietnamese refugees were more likely to complete the Gymnasium degree than German children, or children from other immigrant groups. He attributed this difference to cultural factors including Confucianism. In another example, a 2015 study focused on parenting styles in ethnic German, Turkish, and Vietnamese families as a determining factor in educational attainment. This was part of a research project to investigate ‘why minorities of different origin are differently successful in the educational system’ (Nauck and Lotter, 2015). The study of 1,523 mother-child dyads found that 54% of Vietnamese mothers practiced an ‘authoritarian’ parenting style, whereas the predominant parenting styles for German mothers was ‘indulgent’, and for Turkish mothers was ‘neglectful’. This hierarchical reasoning and judgmental nomenclature aligns with the ‘Tiger-Mother’ trope popularized by Amy Chua in her 2011 memoir.
Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, in which fierce Asian American mothers are credited with their children’s educational success.

As experts in educational pathways for working class immigrant children, Aladin El-Mafaalani and Thomas Kemper (2017) caution against using the label ‘miracle’ to describe the large numbers of Vietnamese students attending Gymnasium despite obstacles such as low household income, lack of social capital, and lack of household knowledge about the German educational system. They suggest that a determining factor may be how well the Vietnamese parents’ belief that students must work hard to attain success matches the attitude of the German school system. Surprisingly, although they note that the percentage of Vietnamese students attending Gymnasium varies substantially by location – with three eastern German states consistently reporting rates around 70% – they do not call for research into what schools in those states are doing differently that might drive these results.

About 10 months after the publication of Martin Spiewak’s seminal ‘Das Vietnamesische Wunder’ article (2009), Germany plunged into what is now called the ‘Sarrazin Debate’ (Goebel, 2018). Thilo Sarrazin was an economist whose career encompassed positions at the state and national levels. In a long-form interview published in the culture magazine Lettre International, Sarrazin made blatantly derogatory remarks that earned him condemnation across the political spectrum, and eventually forced him to resign from his position at Germany’s central bank. Demanding that Sarrazin apologize for his comments, Zeit Online (2009) published an excerpt of the interview. Stern magazine (Schönfeld, 2009) also published an excerpt, arguing that Sarrazin was right.

This comment demonstrates that Sarrazin was aware of the relatively high rates of second-generation Vietnamese immigrants attending Gymnasium. He was also aware of some of the struggles of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants. Following Sarrazin’s ouster from the central bank, he toned down his comments only slightly. By August 2010, he published his theories as a book, ‘Deutschland Schafft Sich Ab’ [Germany Does Away with Itself]. It claims that Germany’s population is shrinking and dumbing down due to a declining birthrate in the upper classes, failed schools, and an increasing population of poor, mostly Muslim immigrants whose culture drives them to refuse to integrate, while living off the largesse of the welfare state. Based on financial and demographic data drawn from Berlin, he projected that Germany would be majority Muslim within 80 years. The book sold 1.5 million copies in 2010. As of 2018, it is in its 9th printing. It has more than 900 reviews on Amazon’s German-language website. Some of the reviews are essay-length, showing the deep resonance of the debate on Sarrazin’s assertions. Various editions of the book occupy places #1, #2, and

[I don’t need to recognize anyone who lives off of the State, rejects the State, doesn’t take sensible care of the education of their children, and constantly produces new little headscarf girls. That’s true of 70 percent of the Turkish and 90 percent of the Arabic population of Berlin.]
Vietnamese students and the emerging model minority myth in Germany

Thilo Sarrazin has been accused of making radical racist ideas palatable, contributing more to the rise of far-right parties than even the Nazi underground. In 2013, the United Nations’ Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reprimanded Germany for failing to carry out an effective investigation against Sarrazin (Keilani, 2013).

The Sarrazin debate raged on for months in mainstream media and in political forums, with critics decrying his statistical methods, his racist, elitist, and eugenicist beliefs, his incendiary and alienating remarks. Meanwhile, Vietnamese-German intellectuals grappled with suddenly and unwittingly finding the contours of their collective experience highlighted against the backdrop of what Sarrazin called people who are ‘unwilling and incapable of integration’. The influential Vietnamese-German author and cultural commentator Pham Thi Hoai points out that the relatively small population of Vietnamese immigrants (and youth) in Germany only became noticeable in mainstream German discourse ‘because we don’t wear headscarves and we’re better at school’ (Cicero, 2014). Khue Pham (2010), a young Vietnamese-German woman, explained that the so-called Vietnamese success story is a story of sacrifice and estrangement.

With dazzling irony, Khue Pham illuminates just how Sarrazin’s spotlight on Vietnamese immigrant students blindsides them, masks their struggles, and casts a shadow on both them and other immigrants. Sarrazin’s praise for the Vietnamese immigrants does not mean he knows any of them or understands anything about who they are. Instead, this kind of praise distances all immigrants, Vietnamese and otherwise. The Vietnamese immigrants are used like a pawn in a game that plays marginalized members of the society off against each other in order to uphold an oppressive racist hierarchy. Later in her essay, Pham mentions that it’s not just Sarrazin who offers praise in this manner: ‘The Germans often praise me, because I speak perfect German. These words of praise imply that I will remain different, no matter how much I try’ (2010). Back-handed praise is not the work of one notorious racist, but rather a common norm, an indicator of widely held race-based assumptions.
The themes of diligence, hard work, sacrifice, and guilt thread throughout Pham’s essay, for example, when her parents tell her that a ‘good’ grade is not good enough. Unlike some of the Germans Pham encounters, her parents withhold praise. Their ensuing explanation is an opportunity to perpetuate internalized alienation and oppression. Their solution to the problem: work harder! This resonates with the point made by the education researchers El-Mafaalani and Kemper (2017): Vietnamese parents’ attitude that hard work is the path to success aligns well with the value that the German higher education system places on diligence. In fact, diligence turns out to be a pivotal theme for both first- and second-generation Vietnamese immigrant students in Germany.

Without actually using the term ‘model minority’, Pham’s essay describes the contours of what could be considered a model-minoritizing dynamic. She notes that the supposedly successful Vietnamese model of integration is far from perfect. She says it cannot necessarily be replicated by other immigrant groups. It comes at a huge price in terms of stress, and it does not guarantee parity or closeness with mainstream society. In her discussion of the perils of positive stereotypes, journalist Tran Quynh (2017) deliberately uses the term ‘model minority’. She points out that in the United States, the term is often used to highlight immigrants who seem to have achieved above-average socioeconomic success. For Vietnamese immigrant youth in Germany, successful integration has been defined as academic success in the second generation. Any mention of economic success is very modest – remember Sarrazin’s words: ‘They sold cigarettes or owned a kiosk’ (Schönfeld, 2009: 522). Instead, successful integration is demonstrated by the inconspicuousness of first-generation Vietnamese immigrants, the ‘unremarkableness that is presumed to accompany adaptation’ (Tran, 2017: 229). In other words, it is acceptable, and even commendable, for some immigrants to be visible, to stand out – for example, when they are achieving greater academic success than German students. It’s even possible that their success is being highlighted to goad German youngsters into working harder. On the other hand, it is commendable for their parents to not stand out, to blend in with their surroundings. Tran’s article appears in a compendium that aims to bring grass-roots ‘Vietnamese-German Realities’ into the mainstream discourse. It is aptly entitled ‘UnSichtbar’ or ‘InVisible’, a reference to the inconspicuousness of Vietnamese immigrant youth in German society.

The Sarrazin debate of 2009–10 seeded a thesis that grew throughout the following years, especially once hundreds of thousands of people from Syria and northern Africa began seeking refuge in Europe in 2015: the idea that Germany is being overrun by non-white immigrants. Although most German citizens support the idea of welcoming refugees and tolerating difference, expressions of outrage can flare up when non-whites break social norms. For example, when young men sexually assaulted (white) women during New Year’s Eve celebrations in Cologne and other cities in 2015; a terrorist attack on a Christmas market in Berlin in 2016; several stabbings in small towns in early 2018; and when dozens of asylum seekers battled deportation police in Ellwangen in 2018. In these cases, the perpetrators committed violent acts, and those actions made them exceedingly visible. On talk shows and town councils, people debated how to tamp down the violence: whether to stop admitting refugees into Germany; whether to isolate them in barracks outside of towns; or whether to spread out their housing so there would be less potential for conflict in one place (Goebel, 2018). Germans may not have known exactly what they were hoping for in terms of successfully integrating new immigrants, but these hyper-visible violent incidents were definitely not it. What we can learn from the Sarrazin debate and these later incidents is that there is popular consensus building around the idea that there is a ‘right way’ for immigrants to integrate into German society.
THE CURRENT MODEL FOR SUCCESSFUL INTEGRATION IN GERMANY

What follows in this section is based on comments about Vietnamese immigrants during the 2009–10 ‘Sarrazin debate’.

Diligence + Inconspicuousness = Integration

The emphasis on inconspicuousness among first-generation Vietnamese immigrants is no accident. There are very specific historical reasons why these immigrants worked hard to avoid being noticed; and when they must be visible, to show up as diligent and hard-working. In the 1990s, this representational strategy – choosing to be as invisible as possible – was the key for many Vietnamese to be able to live and work in Germany.

According to the German Federal Statistical Office, there are 167,000 people of Vietnamese descent living in Germany (2017). They outnumber people of Chinese descent (157,000) but still comprise less than 1% of Germany’s total population of more than 82 million. If you ask a person living in Germany today if they know anything about Vietnamese people in Germany, chances are, they will say no. They have never noticed them. This is especially true of western Germans, because the strategy for integrating Vietnamese immigrants into western Germany was to disperse people across many small towns in order to prevent them from forming an ethnic ghetto (Blume and Kantowsky, 1988). On the other hand, in eastern Germany and eastern Berlin, Vietnamese immigrants are one of the largest groups of migrants (German Federal Statistical Office, 2017: 129–32). In fact, due to their numbers and concentration in the hospitality and retail sector, the person-of-color you are most likely to meet in this part of the country is a Vietnamese immigrant.8

Germany – A Country of Immigrants?

Germany has not historically considered itself to be a country of immigrants. Despite a long history of small Germanic kingdoms and city-states, Germany only coalesced as a nation in the 1870s. Throughout the 19th century, thousands of people from various German-speaking states emigrated to North and South America. In other words, Germans were immigrants in other countries. After 1945, Germany was divided into two countries – East and West Germany – and remained that way throughout the Cold War.9 Allied troops occupied Germany until the 1990s, with American, British, and French troops in the west, and Russian troops in the east. Following World War II, East and West Germany shouldered the responsibility for resettling 4.5 million ethnic Germans from eastern Europe. As the Cold War continued, West Germany accepted and even encouraged political and religious refugees from East Germany and eastern Europe to immigrate. Many of these immigrants spoke some German, shared cultural traditions, and were classified as Germans rather than foreigners. For these immigrants, West Germany created free ‘integration classes’, including language instruction and information about the German legal system, culture, and history (Goebel, 2018). German citizenship was guaranteed for those who could prove that at least one grandparent was German, so nationality focused more on hereditary than geographic qualifications.

In 1965, West Germany began creating regulations to manage non-German immigrants (Gesley, 2017). Starting in the 1970s, labor shortages in both East and West Germany forced those countries to recruit foreign temporary workers, with the express intention that they would not settle in Germany. In 1990, the Act on Foreigners specifically drew on the premise that Germany was still not an immigration country, that Germany’s capacity to take in immigrants was limited and that preference had to be
given to immigrants of German heritage, foreigners fleeing political persecution, and EU citizens taking advantage of their freedom of movement. West Germany’s constitution had guaranteed asylum to any person persecuted for political reasons, but with the end of the Cold War and the breakup of Yugoslavia, a then-record high of 440,000 people applied for asylum in Germany in 1992. This led to the Asylum Compromise of 1993, which allowed Germany to expedite asylum decisions within the transit zone of airports, and to return asylum seekers to safe third countries and safe origin countries. It was not until 2005, with the adoption of the Migration Act, that the government finally recognized that Germany had become an immigration destination. For the first time, people born in Germany to immigrant parents were granted automatic German citizenship. Before 2005, people born in Germany were not automatically citizens, even if their families had resided in Germany for generations. The Integration Act of 2016 created a two-tier naturalization system, with a fast-track to citizenship for immigrants who demonstrate willingness to integrate, and reductions in benefits for those who do not cooperate with integration efforts.

The Divided History of Immigration from Vietnam to Germany

Vietnam’s divided history lay the groundwork for two different migration pathways from Vietnam to Germany in the 1990s (Bui, 2003, see also Hillmann, 2005). Ruled by feuding dynasties until the early 19th century, Vietnam was then colonized by the French. Following Japanese occupation during World War II, nationalist forces defeated French re-occupation by 1954. The peace accords divided Vietnam into northern and southern halves, with the north evolving along a Marxist–Leninist model and the south evolving through a succession of military dictators, supported by the United States and allies. A ceasefire agreement was signed in 1973. In 1975, northern Vietnamese troops invaded the southern capital of Saigon, uniting the country as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam.

Like Vietnam, Germany has been divided and reunified within the past century. During the post-war period, German territory was divided into four quadrants administered by each of the allies (Fullbrook, 2015). The former capital, Berlin, located deep within the Russian-occupied zone, was also divided into quadrants. In 1963, East Germany built a containment wall around their sector. Known as the Berlin Wall, it symbolized the standoff between western capitalism and eastern communism. In autumn 1989, reform movements in East Germany toppled the government and introduced democratic and market economy reforms. In November 1989, the Berlin Wall was opened. The following July, the two Germanys entered into a monetary union, and by September the eastern German states joined West Germany.

Migration from Vietnam to Germany started in the 1950s, with a small number of Vietnamese citizens who participated in education and training programs in both East and West Germany (Schaland and Schmiz, 2016). Due to the Vietnam War in the 1960s, West Germans began to hear about Vietnam as a result of the worldwide student protests against American involvement in the war. East Germans, on the other hand, were urged by their schools, workplaces, and unions to gather donations and supplies to bolster the Vietnamese war effort (Spennemann, 1997). In 1973, the year of the ceasefire agreement in Vietnam, East Germany pledged to train 10,000 Vietnamese citizens within a decade, as a show of international solidarity. A few years later, West Germany offered to resettle 40,000 people (of an estimated one million) from Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia who were fleeing war as well as ethnic and political discrimination. In 1980, Vietnam signed agreements with East Germany, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, the Soviet Union, and other eastern bloc countries
to provide multi-year training for large contingents of Vietnamese workers at enterprises in Europe. In 1987, the pace of the program increased dramatically, with groups of 10,000 to 30,000 per year arriving for on-the-job training in East German factories (Spennemann, 1997). By 1990, Vietnamese contract workers constituted the second-largest group of foreign nationals residing in East Germany after the Soviet occupation troops. At the time the Berlin Wall fell, there were 60,000 Vietnamese citizens in East Germany, most of whom were enrolled in the trainee contract worker program. There were approximately 35,000 people of Vietnamese origin in West Germany, most of whom had arrived as refugees.

With impending German reunification and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, thousands of Vietnamese migrants from eastern Germany and Eastern Europe crossed into the West. From 1990 to 1993, an average of 10,000 Vietnamese citizens who had been working in Eastern Europe applied for asylum in Germany annually. The safe third countries regulation dramatically reduced asylum applications by Vietnamese citizens from 1994 onward (Spennemann, 1997). Meanwhile, enterprises in the former East Germany laid off the vast majority of Vietnamese participants in the labor training program in order to make their businesses viable for a market economy. By June 1991, a mere 4,000 Vietnamese citizens were still employed on their contracts, down from 60,000 a year and a half earlier (Spennemann, 1997; Hermann, 1992)! The bilateral agreement was amended to allow either the employee or employer to terminate the employment contract, providing financial compensation to the Vietnamese employee, and the choice of either returning to Vietnam with a bonus payment or residing and working in Germany for the remainder of their five-year contract. In 1993, a new regulation allowed people who had entered as part of the labor-training program to obtain a special work permit and extend their residency permit beyond the five-year period specified in their original contracts, provided they met certain conditions: they had to withdraw any application for asylum, demonstrate they had not returned to Vietnam with a parting bonus, and show proof of adequate earnings, living space, and a clean criminal record. These requirements were very challenging to meet, considering the massive social and economic upheaval in the early 1990s in Eastern Europe and Germany. By 1995, about 15,000 Vietnamese citizens were able to meet the requirements to become naturalized German citizens (Berger, 1996). However, about a third of the estimated 97,000 people of Vietnamese descent residing in Germany by 1995 were barred from attaining permanent residency rights and were scheduled to be deported to Vietnam (Deutscher Bundestag, 1995).

These migrants were a political hot potato, between the German and Vietnamese governments for much of the 1990s. After the massive deportations from East Germany in 1990, and up until July 1995, the Vietnamese government refused to re-admit Vietnamese citizens from Germany, including those whose asylum applications had been denied and even some who wished to return voluntarily (Bui, 2003). This stance came at a time when Vietnam was busy re-integrating 70,000 people from refugee camps in Hong Kong and Southeast Asia, and was scheduled to re-integrate tens of thousands more. Germany was also overwhelmed by migration challenges. Starting in 1989, West Germany received more asylum applications than at any time since World War II, peaking at 610,000 in 1992. This made German institutions eager to deport the 33,600 Vietnamese nationals on their deportation roster. To force a deportation agreement, Germany halted its development aid to Vietnam in 1994 and lobbied for a European aid embargo in 1995. A repatriation agreement was signed in 1995, but bureaucratic delays dragged out the deportation process through 1997 (Hillman, 2005).

In summary, the seven years from 1990 to 1997 were tumultuous and deeply disruptive for everyone in eastern Germany, and especially for the thousands of Vietnamese citizens living there.
Black Market Cigarettes

This is the specific historical moment in which the trope of the Vietnamese cigarette seller entered mainstream German discourse in the mid 1990s. State actors seized on the idea of Vietnamese people peddling smuggled cigarettes and drew links to violent crime in order to help push through the repatriation program to rid Germany of tens of thousands of ‘illegal’ migrants (am Orde, 1996). A dramatic storyline took shape in 1996 as gang violence escalated, with Vietnamese people as both perpetrators and victims, and German law enforcement struggling to get the problem under control. This narrative helped manufacture consent for the repatriation program by highlighting the program’s promise to deport Vietnamese criminals.

As an example of this discourse, a feature article in the national magazine Der Spiegel clearly drew this line of reasoning (Der Spiegel, 1996). Starting with mug shots of seven of the nine Vietnamese men who had recently been murdered in the Marzahn neighborhood of Berlin, the article explains the evolution of Vietnamese people’s involvement in the black market for cigarettes and violent crime.

The argument of the article is that a sophisticated and violent mafia is manipulating and threatening the many comparatively helpless Vietnamese people living in eastern Germany and Berlin. Although the victims of violent crimes are Vietnamese people, the article contends that the violence also undermines the German justice system. By referring to the investments in restaurants and shops, which are clearly visible to German neighbors, and by mentioning that 2,500 Vietnamese are due to be deported, the article implies that more than just a few mafia-bosses are implicated. It’s understandable that someone might shy away from a Vietnamese-run restaurant, after reading an article like this. The images and reasoning in articles like these were so powerful that they spilled over, leading virtually all Vietnamese people in Germany to feel branded by the
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Not without reason: in May 1996, Berlin’s special investigative unit assigned to stamp out black market cigarettes had been renamed ‘Vietnam’ rather than ‘Tobacco’ (am Orde, 1996).

As demonstrated in contemporary interviews and testimonials, mainstream press coverage of the black market in cigarettes made many Vietnamese people living in Germany, and especially eastern Germany, believe that their identity as Vietnamese had been tainted. Vietnamese organizations noted that Vietnamese people living and working legally in Berlin were exposed to discrimination, and Vietnamese snack bar and clothing stand owners reported decreased revenues following news of the 1996 murders (Berliner Zeitung, May 25, 1996). An interview with a Vietnamese family published in the east Berlin newspaper Berliner Zeitung shows how much they felt their reputation was harmed by the dominant image of a Vietnamese cigarette mafia (Berliner Zeitung, July 5, 1996): ‘Chu and Nguyen recount that the Mafia has brought all Vietnamese into disrepute. “Ever since they have struck terror in people’s hearts in Berlin, the Germans look at us with different eyes.” Chu observes this in glances “that are no longer friendly”’. In reaction, the family makes itself as invisible as possible, living in a small cheap apartment on a loud street. Chu works as a cleaning woman despite her degree in economics, opting not to have a second child for fear she might lose her job and thus the right to remain in Germany. In the short ethnography of this article, Chu and Nguyen demonstrate what it looks like to be law-abiding Vietnamese immigrants: they repudiate the criminals’ abhorrent behavior; they content themselves with less than what others have in terms of jobs, living quarters, dignity, and security; and they hope to earn their right to the lowest rung of society by working hard.

Vietnamese migrants and their advocates exercised agency. Against the images propagated by state actors, they tried to convey their own alternative representations. They countered the image of the cigarette-selling criminal with strategic recapitulations of collective migration history. In western Germany, immigrant advocates put forth a unified history of Vietnamese ‘boat people’ who braved the open sea on rickety boats to get to the West. One example, out of many, is the following excerpt published in September 1996 in the respected Frankfurt-based newspaper Frankfurter Rundschau. It was part of a report about a celebration organized by the German human rights organization Cap Anamur, which had rescued hundreds of Vietnamese refugees in the 1980s.

The little boy would probably not be alive if the German refugee ship Cap Anamur had not fished his parents out of the South China Sea 15 years ago and brought them to Germany. The fully overloaded fishing boat belonging to the southern Vietnamese had bobbed up and down for three days and nights before help arrived. Like this family, who lives in Bochum now, the ships of the Cap Anamur Committee rescued thousands of people by 1987 who fled from the Communist regime in their home onto the open sea … They all found a new home with their families in Germany – in West Germany. (Published in translation from the original German in Bui, 2003: 114–15)

This excerpt casts South Vietnamese as worthy due to the lengths they went to in order to find democracy and freedom. It casts West Germans as saviors and guardians of democracy and humanity. The storyline resonated with West Germans’ understanding of their own post-war struggle, rising from the ashes of a devastating war, rebuilding a society that values freedom, democracy, and anti-communism. In this way, the narrative of South Vietnamese boat-people refugees aligned with and affirmed the narrative of West German identity.

Meanwhile, immigrant advocates in eastern Germany were also hard at work creating a history of Vietnamese migration to East Germany that cast them as worthy of residency rights and respect. For example, the organization Union of Vietnamese in Berlin and Brandenburg put together an exhibit
about the experience of Vietnamese living in the eastern Berlin neighborhood of Marzahn. The exhibit consists of artifacts including press clippings, letters, photographs, copies of documents, and interpretive text, mounted on 11 large posters created between 1993 and 1998. Some of the posters have titles that sum up their content, including:

#2 Vietnamese in the GDR – For Five Years gives details about the labor contracts;

#3 Working in Berlin – Living in Berlin illuminates daily life in East German factories and dormitories which housed the workers;

#5 The New Situation – shows positive developments around the time of the fall of the Berlin Wall, but also some of the racist violence in East Germany after 1990;

#8 The Struggle for the Right to Stay shows photos of Vietnamese people protesting and documents demanding their rights;

#10 Results points to achievements including the 1997 revision to the Immigration Act granting permanent residency rights to former contract workers;

#11 Unbroken Will toward Integration highlights the enduring commitment of Vietnamese people in Marzahn to become a productive part of German society.

The titles of the posters describe the narrative arc of a story about people who came to East Germany with high hopes, who encountered heavy-handed regulations, racism, and years of active political struggle to re-gain the ability to live and work legally in Germany. It is an eloquent example of how Vietnamese people transformed themselves from migrants into immigrants, from victims of violence and repression into people who persevered through struggle to create a new space for themselves as part of German society. This story resonates with East Germans’ successful movement for reform, and transition from a socialist into a democratic model of society.

The collective histories of Vietnamese ‘boat people’ and Vietnamese ‘contract workers’ are ‘immigrant origin narratives’ that clearly delineate a trajectory from place of origin to integration in the host society (Bui, 2003: 175). They leverage the theme of overcoming nearly insurmountable challenges to explain how immigrants have earned their place in the host society. They fend off the trope of the cigarette seller, while answering the perennial question posed by members of the host society to anyone they detect as different: ‘where are you from?’. Immigrant origin narratives are an epi-national strategy that inscribes Vietnamese migrants into a German national framework, against a dominant discourse that shows Vietnamese people as roving Mafiosi outlaws and marginalized petty criminals.

The ‘boat people’ and ‘contract worker’ immigrant origin narratives have allowed Vietnamese migrants in Germany to affirm a sense of belonging, activate empathy, and secure rights from the host society, and also to distance the shameful stereotype of the black market cigarette dealer. The origin narrative strategy counters the stereotype by providing explanation and facts as well as an emotional appeal for empathy based on the experience of hardship and struggle.

Partial Masking

While immigrant origin narratives seek to provide information to counter a negative stereotype that all Vietnamese migrants in Germany are implicated in the black market cigarette trade, a different strategy has taken shape among a subgroup of Vietnamese entrepreneurs: partially masking their ethnic identity by calling their businesses ‘Asian’ or ‘Chinese’, rather than ‘Vietnamese’. It is no accident that in the late 1990s, nearly every eastern German city boasted ‘Asian’ grocery stores, snack bars, and restaurants. The low-priority work permits issued to former contract workers after 1990 severely hampered them from obtaining jobs in the regular labor market, but obtaining employment was a prerequisite for maintaining a residency
permit. Starting their own businesses was the only viable option. A 1995 survey of 500 Vietnamese living in eastern Germany by the Federal Labor Ministry found that more than half were self-employed. Of those who started their own business, 68% said the reason was ‘couldn’t find any other job’. Although Asian eateries were not the most common form of self-employment for Vietnamese migrants, they were highly visible: many started out as food trucks located on public plazas. Moreover, in the eastern German landscape, ethnic cuisine was relatively rare into the late 1990s. Ethnic restaurants and grocery stores capitalize on the owners’ physical appearance of difference to market their goods. Interviews with several Vietnamese eatery owners inquired why they called their businesses ‘Asian’ or ‘Chinese’. Some responded that they thought it would be impossible to market Vietnamese food to Germans unfamiliar with that cuisine, and a few remarked that Vietnamese cuisine is too labor-intensive to be profitable. Instead, they opted for a relatively cheap menu of fried noodles and rice dishes. One interviewee explained another reason:

Because Vietnamese, here is such a, I believe that was after the Wende, with this cigarette story, because not all Vietnamese deal in cigarettes. But predominantly back then, and the illegal Vietnamese, they did trade in cigarettes. There is also the story of the Mafia dealing with cigarettes or organizations and so on, and they get short-term profits, as with drug smuggling. And so many Germans, who cannot grasp it, they think all Vietnamese deal in cigarettes. They trade in cigarettes. So assume that – look at my place for example, a guy outside thinks, ‘He certainly has dinheiro from cigarette deals and then he opens up a restaurant’. That is absolutely not at all correct! And – but for Germans, just throw all in one basket. … And if Germans think: ‘Vietnamese, that is not for real’. And: ‘A Vietnamese certainly has dealings with the Mafia. Let’s not go there’. We are afraid of such a thing. Even though that is not correct. We don’t at all trade in cigarettes! My – our people, yes, but we, we business-people, not. We have nothing to do with that. We have precisely not even contacts with those people. What should we do with those people? We get into trouble if they get into our apartment or if we have contact with them, maybe we will get into trouble some time. We are cl- not clean people, but we do have our work. We simply cannot do that.10

The vehemence of Hung’s reaction shows how much he feels the sting of the ethnic stigma resulting from the discourse around Vietnamese cigarette dealing. It also demonstrates his fear of violence, and his strategy for attracting customers despite his own and their fears. Hung believes that if he included ‘Vietnamese’ in the name of his restaurant, passers-by would suspect that he was involved in the black market cigarette trade, a suspicion that he tries hard to dispel, both in the interview and in everyday life. The strategy of substituting an Asian identity for his Vietnamese one does the double duty of explaining Hung’s otherness to prospective customers while also distancing the stereotype of the Vietnamese cigarette mafia. The partial mask that Hung dons when he calls his restaurant ‘Asian’ instead of Vietnamese is a way to ward off fear so that German strangers will dare to cross his threshold. But Hung knows that is just the first step in a long process of getting to know one another better and justifying his place in German society. Hung hopes that he can contribute a small part to debunking the cigarette-selling stereotype by demonstrating his work ethic, something that he believes the Germans closest to him will eventually notice and respect.

We must prove, I personally have to prove, so that the people think to themselves: ‘Look, he works from morning until night and every day there. And he works in the restaurant, from A to Z, he cleans up himself, cleans the windows himself, and cleans the garden himself. He goes along the street and cleans there. He does all that alone. He takes the garbage out and so on. He has worked there for years. He has nothing to do with those other people!’. … And besides, eventually some of the German people, the customers, can gradually differentiate, whether some people work sensibly or some people, who do certain deals. … I just take care of my business. And my character. And my reputation, or the reputation of all Vietnamese, yes.
Hung hopes that by conducting their businesses in this way, he and other Vietnamese entrepreneurs will be able to work off some of the stigma surrounding Vietnamese migrants. By representing themselves in their daily activities as diligent small-business owners, by going the extra mile, picking up trash on the public street in addition to cleaning their own stores, Hung and the other owners of highly visible stores and stalls are trying to change the perception of Vietnamese migrants in Germany. Another restaurant owner, Lan, commented that she believes that Germans think of her and others like her as ‘hard-working, work all the time, even more hard-working than the Germans!’11 For Lan and Hung, hard work is the pathway to earning respect and eventually integration in German society. By strategically deploying friendliness and diligence, they intentionally combat racism and negative stereotypes among their customers, neighbors, and eventually, the larger public. Twenty years later, it seems that they may have succeeded.

CONCLUSION

Freire (2005) wrote about the importance of citizens to become critically conscious and avoiding naïve consciousness. Conscientization (or conscientização in Portuguese), according to Freire (2005) was related to achieving an in-depth understanding of the world. Although the model minority stereotype is an academic term, reading the proverbial academic word and the world, a concept developed by Freire (1985) is a necessary component to achieving critical pedagogy and also conscientization.

Violent crime and black market cigarette-selling became widely associated with Vietnamese migrants in Germany in the mid-1990s, at a time when German and Vietnamese authorities clashed over deporting thousands of Vietnamese nationals from Germany to Vietnam. Eventually, the deportations proceeded, and violent crime was tamped down, but the trope of the Vietnamese cigarette mafia remained, affecting Germans’ perceptions of Vietnamese migrants, and the migrants’ perceptions of how they were perceived. To counter their sense of ‘spoiled identity’ (Goffman, 1963: 3), rescue their dignity, and ensure their acceptance in society, Vietnamese migrants had to invent ways to deal with this ethnic stigma.

Immigrant origin narratives can function as an effective strategy for identity management in the face of ethnic stigma. The narratives of Vietnamese boat people and contract workers provided a powerful advocacy tool in securing rights and services for close to 55,000 of the estimated 97,000 Vietnamese migrants in Germany in the 1990s. They helped to distinguish ‘legitimate’ categories of immigrants, distancing them from the stereotype of the black market cigarette vendor and the discourse around deporting Vietnamese nationals. The narratives also served and continue to serve in everyday interactions between immigrants and natives to explain migrants’ differences from the host society through the lens of a legitimate, accepted, collective experience.

The practice of partial masking, that is, calling themselves or their businesses ‘Asian’ or ‘Chinese’ rather ‘Vietnamese’, was another strategy migrants wielded to deflect the cigarette vendor stereotype. This strategy bought Vietnamese migrants the time and space to make a more favorable first-hand impression through their hard work. This everyday management of their reputation, coupled with many conversations, helped start the process of breaking down ethnic stigma.

What can be learned from the apparent success story of Vietnamese migrants, especially with a new wave of refugees seeking to integrate into German society? First, it is helpful if leaders can avoid creating an ethnic stigma. In the case of recent migrants from the Middle East, leaders must continue to emphasize that the refugees are not Islamic terrorists. They must work to ensure that refugees have a clear pathway to residency rights and work permits. Housing, direct contact with German neighbors, language courses, meaningful work, and most
importantly, a way for migrants to demonstrate their eagerness to contribute to society will go a long way toward integration. The work of shaping an immigrant origin narrative for the thousands of refugees from Syria has already begun, with the stirring images of risky crossings on the Mediterranean and the hardships of crossing southern Europe. These new immigrants and their advocates should make sure to include in the narrative some of the tropes that resonate with Germans’ own experience, such as surviving the bombardment and near-total devastation of their cities, as Germans did after World War II. Resiliency, a willingness to work hard, a high value on education, and tolerance for different views are some of the things that Syrian refugees may find will provide common ground for starting empathetic relationships with their German hosts.

The phenomenon of Vietnamese Wunder in Germany today shows how the model minority stereotype of Asians is highly portable, regardless of country. As Dayal (2014) points out, the “model minority” discourse […] has begun instrumentalising certain communities of colour in Germany minoritised as “Asian” (para. 2). It is important to push against the Asian model minority myth so that culture does not become an excuse for failing to implement sensible and equitable integration policies.

Notes

1 DW-TV’s English-language video, available on YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ag2S8sd6HV0 (Accessed March 3, 2018)) highlights the Vietnamese in Germany who are academically successful.

2 It is important to bear in mind that the term ‘minority’ has a different meaning in central Europe than in the United States. It has generally referred to Indigenous ethnic minorities whose past and current living spaces do not necessarily align with current national borders, such as Roma and Sinti (Weller, 2005). Recognized minorities are guaranteed certain rights under international agreements. In this chapter, we will use ‘minority’ to refer to a group that is non-dominant in terms of population, social status, and power.


4 We use the general term ‘migrants’ to refer to people who have crossed an international border, and the more specific term ‘immigrants’ to indicate intention to stay permanently. German government demographers now use the term ‘people with a migration background’ to refer to people in Germany with at least one parent who was not born as a German citizen.

5 This was not the first national press on the topic of Vietnamese student success. Karin Weiss had advocated studying the phenomenon because she observed Vietnamese students attending Gymnasium in Brandenburg at rates up to 74%, as reported in 2008 in the news magazine Der Spiegel. Her intention was to show that immigrants could perform as well or better than ethnic Germans on tests. She noted the significant difference in academic achievement among children of immigrants in the eastern German states compared to western states and the national average. She called for more studies and pointed to factors outside of ethnic background that might impact academic success, such as widely available public preschool for children of immigrants (Mai, 2008).

6 This explanation is contrasted to historian Jochen Oltmer’s assertion that a proactive welcoming approach by the host society was the decisive factor (de Swaaf, 2016).

7 Unless otherwise noted, this and all other translations in the text are provided by Pipo Bui. Part of this passage appears in an English translation in Spiegel Online (2010).

8 With the exception of Berlin, eastern Germany’s population includes less than 7% migrants, compared to 34% in western Germany. In this part of the country, Vietnamese migrants are outnumbered only by Poles, Syrians, Russians, and Kazakhs.

9 The Federal Republic of Germany was commonly called West Germany. The German Democratic Republic was called East Germany.

10 Interview with Hung conducted in German on June 22, 2000. Author’s translation. Interviewee names have been changed to ensure privacy.
Interview with Lan conducted in German, on May 19, 2000. Author translation. Interviewee names have been changed to ensure privacy.

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Vietnamese students and the emerging model minority myth in Germany

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