“All Look Same”? 
Asian-American Identity and the Visual “Truths” about Race
I grew up in a community where I was constantly surrounded by Asians, so naturally I thought that if there was anyone who could differentiate between a Chinese, Japanese, and Korean face, it was going to be me. However, I was proven wrong when www.alllooksame.com, a website that tests the reader’s ability to identify people of Asian descent through eighteen individual photographs, became popular during my high school years. The task proved to be much harder than I had ever imagined, for traits that had once seemed so clearly Japanese or Chinese or Korean now blurred and pieced themselves into a collage of faces that appeared on the screen before me. Like many others who had grown up in similar situations, at first I felt a little frustrated because I had been so convinced that there had to be some kind of way to tell the difference between such different groups of people. A couple years later, my frustrations were eased when the website came up in a dorm discussion and everyone scored incredibly low when they took the test. The tremendous number of low scores and the website’s inexplicable aura of attractiveness compelled me to revisit this website. At first, I was confounded by why any website, especially one created by an Asian, would want to spread the idea that all Asians look the same. However, I realized that while it may seem like a trivial website, alllooksame.com cleverly utilizes the visual and interactive features of cyberspace to convey a significant and complex message about the Asian-American identity. By invoking stereotypical images through graphical display, alllooksame.com not only brings into perspective the negative effects of being labeled by society, but also actively works to destabilize notions of Asian-American identity and forces people to question their ability to judge race based on appearance.

Alllooksame.com: Questions, Answers, and Connections

I have no doubts that most Asian-Americans encounter phrases such as “You look Japanese” or “Are you Korean?” or perhaps even “You Asians all look the same” with such frequency that it can be considered a part of their daily routine. Born in Japan, the website’s
creator Dyske Suematsu admitted that even he had a hard time telling the different ethnicities apart, and in response to these common assertions, he launched alllooksame.com in 2001. Because it is not intended to be a “political arena” (Suematsu) but rather a “comedic site” (Nakamura), the light-hearted nature of alllooksame.com has allowed it to evade critical attention, but the ideas behind the website provide commentary on our society’s interpretation of ethnicity, race, and culture that should not be overlooked.

With a simple layout and a gray background, website users are greeted by an animated stereotypical Asian figurine with a rice-bowl haircut and slanted eyes, politely gesturing to “Enter the Exam Room” (see fig. 1). As the centerpiece of the website, the Exam Room consists of a variety of test categories, ranging from modern art to architecture to food, that require users to determine the origin of the picture’s subject matter. This paper will focus on Exam #1 which is about faces. In this test, a series of digital photographs of Asian-looking men and women chosen randomly from the streets of New York City are presented, and users are required to click one of the three bubbles indicated as Japanese, Chinese, or Korean (see fig. 2). After all eighteen images, a score is calculated and the users are given the corrected version of the test and comprehensive score indicating that they are either “very bad” or “OK”. Other features on the website include the “Ms. Wu Archive”, an
extensive blog reflecting on the Asian-American experience written by a Chinese-American woman, as well as tabs linking to the philosophy, history, and advertisements of the page.

Alllooksame.com is mysteriously attractive. The website has had over 1.4 million visitors between its start and 2004 (Suematsu), and its immense popularity continues to skyrocket, drawing users of all races from all over the world. Most people feel an irresistible curiosity to see how they would do on the tests. Suematsu compares this to a “whether-you’re-gay-or-straight kind of thing” (Mok) in which even though one could say that it is irrelevant, people tend to go a long way to figure out one’s ethnicity simply because it feels important to know when talking to that person. Many people have suppressed feelings about whether they are able to tell Asians apart because it is usually taboo to openly discuss this in public. This website provides an outlet in which people can finally feel safe to admit what they feel, especially since this site was made by an Asian man. According to Suematsu, people who take the tests tend to fall into two main categories. The first group consists of mostly Asians and Asian-Americans like me who claim to have the “Asian sixth sense, an A-dar” (Mok) in that they think they can tell the difference but are eventually proven wrong. Asian-Americans constitute the largest proportion of the site’s visitors because they encounter such situations frequently and have a more personal connection to the website content. The other group consists mostly of non-Asians who are conversely placed in the position of an outsider trying to distinguish among the people of black hair and dark brown eyes. Most admit to not being able to tell the difference at all and are simply amused, curious, or just fascinated by the topic.

The average score for the AllLookSame test is seven correct answers, or thirty-nine percent. On the surface, such a low score verifies the website’s assertion that “all Asians look the same”. Scientifically, there is even some truth behind this statement, for racial distributions (see fig. 3), cranial measurements (see fig. 4), and genetic lineages (“Japan Reference”) provide
quantitative evidence that explain the continuity and appearance of certain racial traits. However, these only account for a general distribution of what a certain race should look like, and does not account for an individual species’ phenotype. Furthermore, many people overlook the enormous diversity and racial dynamics that exist within Asia itself, for how do we account for the Thai born of Chinese descent? Or the Mongolian families that moved to North Korea many years ago? Or the fifty-five different ethnicities that exist within China? The point is that few nations can claim an ethnic monoculture or independence from outside influence. This mélange of Asian interconnections and influences testify to the low scores for the AllLookSame test and its logical conclusion that race and ethnicity are ultimately uncategorizable. By deconstructing racial categories, the test allows users to confirm that “seeing is not believing” (Nakamura) and that the “truth” about race is not a visual truth, but one that is persistently envisioned that way.

Alllooksame.com is a current manifestation and confrontation of the stereotype that Asians “all look the same”, but this has already been addressed several times in history. For example, during World War II, the US War Department released *Pocket Guide to China* because Chinese-Americans found themselves lumped together with other Asians and were worried that anti-Japanese hatred would be directed at them. This publication included a comic-book-like
insert titled “How to Spot a Jap” that taught American soldiers how to differentiate the Chinese from the Japanese by observing differences in face, feet, stride, and pronunciation of English (see fig. 5) (“How to Spot a Jap”). More recently, the movie based on Arthur Golden’s novel Memoirs of a Geisha sparked enormous controversy between China and Japan because all leading characters in the Japanese story were played by Chinese film stars (see fig. 6). As the first big budget movie ever released with Asian actors in every leading role, Hollywood egregiously assumed the synonymy of the two races, and as a result, stimulated Sino-Japanese tension to the point that the film was banned in the People’s Republic of China in February 2006. Such action was taken because to the Japanese and Chinese, their difference is not simply a “matter of physiognomy” (Edemariam), but rather a matter of history and culture that Americans did not fully grasp. For example, the Japanese felt that Geisha training was such a finely calibrated art that no Chinese could accurately portray it, while Chinese had concerns that the movie would rouse anti-Japan sentiment especially with the use of Chinese women as forced sex workers in association with atrocious World War II acts like the Rape of Nanjing.

The “How to Spot a Jap” booklet and the cast of Memoirs of a Geisha both demonstrate that Asians and Asian-Americans may all look the same, but they are most certainly not the same.

Although this paper focuses mainly on the portrayal of Asian-Americans in the United States, it is interesting to note that the highest scores were from Asia, with Koreans averaging
about forty-five percent, and the lowest scores were from Europe which averaged around thirty-three percent (Mok). Such statistics explain why many mistake me for the other Asian girl even if we look nothing alike save for our dark brown eyes and black ponytail. These statistics support the cross-race effect, which states that each different race experiences similar difficulty with recognizing faces from other races (Bruce and Young 44). The importance of such a seemingly obvious theory is evident in other contemporary contexts. For example, United States forces in Iraq sometimes mistakenly admit foreign insurgents because they can not tell Saudis or Egyptians from Iraqis, whereas an Iraqi would be able to tell from cultural cues. The Innocence Project, a clinic that tracks life imprisonment convictions, also found that white eyewitnesses misidentified innocent blacks 44% of the time, nearly twice as often as they misidentified innocent whites (Kuo).

To the average person, alllooksame.com ironically seems to promote a stereotype, for someone could “take the test, score low, and walk away thinking that all Asians do look the same” (Edemariam). However, upon deeper analysis, it becomes evident that the AllLookSame face test along with its low test scores are in fact doing the opposite. By bringing into perspective the impossibility of relying on visual cues to distinguish between Asians, the website, instead of promoting the idea that there is a visual image associated with Asian-Americans, effectively demonstrates that there should be no visual images associated with the various Asian-American ethnicities. In order to deconstruct this visual culture of race, the website relies on the fact that people have preconceived visual notions about the Asian-American identity. Such visual preconceptions facilitated the formation of Asian-American stereotypes whose effects have not only greatly shaped America’s history, but are also still prevalent today. As a result, the website critiques vision as a way of understanding race, culture, and body on two levels – online through the website, and also offline in the real world.
Asian-Americans and Cyberspace: An Unconventional Mode of Empowerment

Contrary to claiming the status of silent minority in American society, Asian-Americans are the most active internet users of any ethnic group, including whites (Spooner). As the “powerusers” (Nakamura) and majority of the digital world, Asian-Americans use cyberspace as a vector for putting forth ideas that would otherwise be overlooked in a predominantly white society. A space produced by an Asian designer for an Asian and Asian-American audience, alllooksame.com is the product of an invisible but influential group of American racial minorities. In ""Alllooksame”? Mediating Asian American Visual Cultures of Race on the Web", Lisa Nakamura argues that the success of alllooksame.com stems from the imagistic and interactive online devices that provide an excellent infrastructure to “debate ethnic identities, rather than simply affirming them” (Nakamura).

Much of alllooksame.com’s success in conveying its message can be attributed to its visual rather than textual methods of engaging the audience. Through an interesting layout of images and text along with a visually stimulating test, the website “detour[s] around the written word” (Nakamura) and engages users in ways literary texts cannot. Putting the phrase “a picture is worth a thousand words” into action, the website recognizes that images can be just as powerful as words in challenging notions of racial and cultural identity. The stereotypical digital graphics along with the succession of eighteen distinct, Asian faces staring back at you from the computer create a unique experience that undoubtedly leaves one with a stronger, longer lasting impression than any block of text.

Interactivity is a powerful stimulus that is unique to the internet. By placing the test taker in the position of judging race by actively viewing, clicking, and thinking, the test transforms the user into a conscious “racial profiler” and produces a “mixture of guilt, fascination, and a lingering feeling of discomfort” (Nakamura). Such interactivity forces users to confront the
inadequacy of the face as visual evidence of race, thereby challenging the basis upon which racial identity is built.

On a larger scale, the vast expanse of the internet allows people from all over the world to access the site and communicate with each other. In this case, by uniting Asians, Asian-Americans, and non-Asians in the act of deconstructing and questioning their own visual notions of race, alllooksame.com has catalyzed the creation of numerous blogs that facilitate interaction through community building and diverse exchange of ideas. Interaction through these blogs and discussions are based on shared self-reflection and form a nexus for Asians and Asian Americans to actively consider race as an act of seeing. Such interactivity has elicited a spectrum of thought provoking ideas and reactions to the site, including scientific explanations attempting to differentiate among Asian phenotypes, accusations of the site being racist, and reflections on personal experiences.

The Model Minority Stereotype: When “Good” is Bad

Complementing the AllLookSame test’s message that people have envisioned “truths” about racial identity, the website’s display of stereotypical graphics provide actual manifestations of these visions. Doing so makes the viewer cognizant that Asian-Americans are subject to the labels that society has placed upon them and brings into perspective the effects of being socially labeled.

Upon entering the website, the user first encounters a classic stereotypical image of an Asian figurine that seems to come straight from Asia (see fig. 7). Positioned right above the title of the website, the Asian figurine with his rice-bowl haircut, small narrow eyes, static half-smile, and the polite hand gesture, seems to greet each user to with a heavily accented “all look same?” The quiet, obedient, and polite disposition of the boy alludes to the
stereotype most commonly associated with Asian-Americans – the model minority. Coined in 1966 by sociologist William Peterson in his article “Success Story, Japanese-American Style” for the *New York Times Magazine*, the term “model minority” was used to dispel the notions that the American dream was a mirage by citing the success of Japanese-Americans who had overcome adversity by working hard, valuing education, and building community (McGowan 333). Praised for not being the “problem minority” (McGowan 332), this stereotype portrays Asian-Americans as ideal examples of hard work, patience, family values, economic success, musical talent, and brilliant mathematical ability that other minorities should follow. While the defining characteristics of such a stereotype may seem positive and complimentary, its effects on the Asian-American population have actually been quite the opposite.

The positive model minority label “one-dimensionalizes Asian-Americans as having those traits and no other human qualities, such as vocal leadership, negative emotions, or intolerance towards oppression” (Chang 212). Such a phenomenon can explain why Asian-Americans are still underrepresented in political leadership and also why they still bump into glass ceilings in the corporate world (Woo). In addition to multiple reports showing that highly educated Asian men earn less than comparable white males in similar industries and occupations, a study conducted by Dr. Clifford Cheng (1997) found that only 0.3% of senior level executives in the Fortune 500 were of Asian descent. A 2001 press release by the Committee of 100, a national non-partisan organization composed of Chinese-Americans, surveyed the American public and reported that 23% of Americans would be uncomfortable voting for an Asian-American President; 25% of Americans indicated strong negative attitudes and stereotypes towards Chinese-Americans; and 24% of Americans would not approve of intermarriage with an Asian-American (Committee of 100). These startling statistics show that Asian-Americans, as
model minorities, face negative stereotyping and experience a major bias that works against equal opportunity and rights.

The website’s motif of “testing” is reflected by the opening image of the scantron, the multiple choice format of the AllLookSame face test, and the overall score cards. Such images allude to part of the model minority stereotype that Asian-Americans value education and are excellent test takers. This has actually proven quite true, for statistics show that Asian-Americans outperform other minority and white peers by scoring high on SATs, enrolling in numerous Advanced Placement classes, and enrolling in prestigious universities in disproportionately large numbers (Lee). Articles have even appeared on the covers of Newsweek’s “The Drive to Excel” (April 1984) and Time’s “The New Whiz Kids” (August 1987) (see fig. 8) in response to Asian-American successes in schools. However, this image that Asian-Americans are a monolithic group of “whiz kids” who don’t need attention has taken its toll on Asian-American students who do not achieve at those levels, and as a result, are often overlooked and left behind. Such publicity of the stereotype that Asian-Americans do well in school also gave society a reason to attack affirmative action (Maxwell). Further demonstrating a direct correlation between the model minority stereotype and its negative effects, a study at Northwestern University reported that Asian-Americans performed more poorly on math tests when made aware of their ethnicity. In this case, the focus on ethnicity

![Fig. 8. Articles that focus on Asian-American success in school appear on the covers of Newsweek's "The Drive to Excel" (April 1984) and Time's "The New Whiz Kids" (August 1987). This publicized success was later used to attack affirmative action in schools.](image)
stimulated fears of failing to meet the high expectations of the being the Asian “mathematical genius”, thus providing grounds for “choking under pressure” (Cheryan).

On the AllLookSame face test, the presence of only three scantron bubbles limiting choice to Chinese, Japanese, or Korean promotes a common misconception that Asian-Americans come only from China, Japan, or Korea. This stereotypical notion masks the wide disparities of Asian immigrants, but most greatly afflicts the Southeast Asian population. Contrary to the model minority myth that Asians succeed because they “escaped from the ravages of war and communism and are highly motivated to take advantage of opportunities in America” (McGowan 336), Southeast Asians have shown that the American dream is not necessarily true for all. Usually arriving in America as refugees, many Southeast Asians are on welfare and have high poverty rates that are often overlooked because the model minority stereotype portrays Asians as economically successful (Lee).

The test’s format of the mugshot and the lineup of the Asian faces connect visually with the legal and judicial system, serving as a reminder of the “forever foreign” status of Asian-Americans propagated by the model minority stereotype. By praising Asian-Americans as “honorary white” citizens whose success should serve as an example for other groups, the model minority stereotype not only implicates the distinct separation between Asians and whites, but also “pits one racial group against another by singling out Asians as the model” (Lee 34). As a result, Asian-Americans are placed in a vulnerable

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**Fig. 9.** Fu Manchu (left) is a fictional character featured as an evil Chinese genius in a series of popular novels first published in 1913. Yellow Peril (right) is a color metaphor for race derived from the immigration of Chinese laborers to America during the late nineteenth century.
racial position, ostracized from both the white majority and causing racial tensions with other minorities. In an effort to disprove this foreignness, Asian-Americans have actively participated in the American legal and judicial systems throughout history; a well-known example of this is the Japanese American internment court cases during World War II. Historical stereotypes such as the “yellow peril” and “Fu Manchu” (see fig. 9) have even found their way into contemporary American life, as revealed in such highly publicized incidents as the trial of Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear scientist suspected of spying for the Chinese government in the mid 1990s; the 1996 presidential campaign finance scandal which implicated Asian Americans in funneling foreign contributions to the Clinton campaign; and most recently, in 2001, the lawsuit against Abercrombie & Fitch t-shirts that depicted Asian cartoon characters in stereotypically negative ways – slanted eyes, thick glasses, and heavy Asian accents (see fig. 10) (Ng).

In all of these cases, Asian-Americans are constantly forced to turn to legal and judicial strategies in order to assert their identity as Americans.

Can Yellow Become White?: Asian-American Response to the Model Minority Label

A closer examination of the faces on the AllLookSame test reveals that some these Asian faces appear strikingly American. Aside from the piercings, use of cosmetics, and hair styles, many of the faces have a distinctly American look that would be conspicuous in any Asian country (see fig.11). These Americanized features blur the boundary between different ethnicities by introducing an American element, providing yet another factor to explain the low scores. More importantly, however, these Americanized Asians display physical evidence of how Asian-Americans have responded to American society and the model minority label.
A study at Stanford University quantitatively demonstrated that Asian-Americans often recognize that they are not seen as American as whites, and often try to assert their American identity when possible so they can assimilate more easily into society (Cheryan). Indeed, Asian-Americans as well as other ethnic minorities seem to accept that “white is mainstream, average and normal” (Lee), and look to whites as their frame of reference for attaining higher social positions. As a result, Asians have actually taken great strides in assimilating themselves into American culture. The model minority stereotype portrays Asian-Americans as successfully assimilating into American culture, but as demonstrated numerous times, the stereotype is not necessarily true. The real question now is how successful have they really been?

Asian-American assimilation has demonstrated progress in numerous ways. For example, many equal opportunity programs classify Asian-Americans with European-Americans as opposed to Blacks, Latinos, and Indians. Studies also show that most second generation Asian-Americans have lost fluency in their parents’ native languages; more than three-quarters of second generation Asian-Americans as opposed to one-quarter of second generation Mexicans speak only English at home. Asian-Americans also intermarry extensively with whites; more than one-quarter of married Asian-Americans have a partner of a different racial background, and, of these, 87% of intermarried Asians marry whites (Ng). In addition, young women often turn to television, fashion magazines, and other forms of popular culture for instruction on Americanization to escape the burdens of being identified as model minority. A study of high school girls at the Hmong American High School showed that they
bought American music, wore name-brand clothes, and developed ideas about the ideal guy to date and the ideal body type through television in order to make themselves accepted as “authentic Americans” (Lee 459).

Relating to the website’s connection between facial features and ethnicity, it is not uncommon to find Asian women who undergo cosmetic surgery to have their eyelids restructured, nose bridges heightened, and the tips of their noses altered (Kaw 74). Whereas white women usually opt for liposuction, breast augmentation, or wrinkle removal procedures, Asian women primarily seek to alter conventional markers of racial identity. In this case, the typical Asian “small, narrow” eyes are replaced through “double-eyelid” surgery, whereby a crease above each eye is created to make the eye look wider, and consequently more American (Kaw 75). Such decisions to surgically alter the nose and eyes are an attempt to escape persisting racial prejudice that correlates to stereotyped physical features and their associations with negative behavioral characteristics such as passivity, dullness, and a lack of sociability.

It is not a myth that Asians have taken giant strides in successfully integrating into American society. Indeed, the rising popularity of fashionable oriental-style clothing, the emergence of cosmetic products for the increasingly popular “ethnic look” (Tung), and the popularity of Hollywood actresses Michelle Yeoh and Lucy Liu are all a part of the “Asian population explosion in the pop culture landscape” (Tung) that testify to this success. However, it is important to realize that despite these victories, Asian-Americans remain culturally distinct and suspect in a white society. In fact, the very existence of this website and its focus on the Asians and Asian-Americans subtly demonstrates the separation of Asian-Americans as their own entity. Just as yellow skin will never turn white, the pictures on the AllLookSame test will always have those Asian features. No matter how American you think you are or try to be, a person with almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion is a foreigner by
default. Speaking perfect English, effortlessly adopting mainstream cultural values, and even intermarrying members of the dominant group help reduce this “otherness” at the individual level, but have little effect on the group as a whole.

**Race and Ethnicity: A Biological Myth in the Real World**

The simple answer to the website’s initial question “all look same?” is yes. However, this is only a statistical representation of data provided by test scores. In actuality, the website disproves this seemingly racist answer and embodies a much more significant question pertaining to the visual “truths” of race. As an empowering device for non-Western users, alllooksame.com offers a clever, interactive experience that forces users to question and eventually discard some essential notions about what it means to be of a certain race or ethnicity. By problematizing what is biologically assumed about race, this website has not only stimulated worldwide discussion in the cyberspace community, but it also connects to many phenomena that occur in the real world. In this case, alllooksame.com invokes the model minority stereotype that has arisen in response to this perceived sameness, pointing out that even a “positive” stereotype can have pernicious effects and that Asian-Americans will forever be seen as foreigners.

By deconstructing the visual aspect of race, the website raises important issues about racial paradigms and asks what race is a function of. As demonstrated by the AllLookSame face test, most people have this notion that the principle behind race is that of common ancestry, which is concerned with physical and biological traits. However, race is not a natural category; rather it is an ideology justified through biology and genealogy. Physical characteristics such as skin color, eye shape, and color or texture of hair are merely socially defined markers of racial difference. To illustrate this, if a child with Chinese parents were to be relocated to Japan without knowing his ancestry, he would almost certainly identify himself as Japanese. In addition, while the website’s test only allows the viewer to distinguish based on the facial image,
it is important to recognize that other visual characteristics such as mannerisms, dress, and gestures are more valuable and convincing in defining race and ethnicity. However, these physical aspects alone do not define race either, for I speak Spanish but I am not Spanish, and one could put on a Chinese dress or eat Chinese food or perhaps even be born in China, but this does not make one Chinese. By showing that race is biologically, mythological, and visually misleading, Alllooksame.com essentially asserts that race is individually and socially constructed. Ultimately, race and ethnicity are ideologies justified by language, culture, and practices that depend upon what an individual sees in himself and what he identifies with through experiences, upbringing, and beliefs that are largely defined by social constructs.

This website also addresses the challenge of self-identity that many, including myself, face as Asians growing up in America. I realize that legally, I am an American. However, I have yellow skin and hundreds of generations of yellow ancestors that make me Asian at the same time, and more specifically Chinese. Just like many other second generation Asian-Americans growing up in America, these two identities seem to clash all the time. For I remember when I was little, in school they told me that I am an American, but at home they told me that I am Chinese, and in some instances people even tell me I am a banana or a Twinkie - yellow on the outside and white within. However, while my environment has actively placed labels upon me, I have discovered through experience that it is ultimately up to each individual to find a comfortable balance between being Asian, being American, and being Asian-American. One’s ethnic identity is similarly decided by the individual, for the different cultures within Asia are not as different as one would expect, as foods, clothing, festivals, and traditions easily overlap with one another.

Alllooksame.com effectively challenges people’s notions of identity, but more importantly, it also raises awareness of the stereotypes that stem from these notions. By
demonstrating the impossibility of visually categorizing race and ethnicity, this website encourages people to recognize that Asian-Americans span a wide variety of backgrounds and should not be stereotyped. It is not necessarily essential to be able to distinguish between the different ethnicities like in the face test, but it is important to be aware that it is our ignorance and uneasiness of “unfamiliar things” that promoted these notions in the first place. The best way to remediate this problem is to recognize the stereotypes and become acquainted with the “unfamiliar” through interaction to facilitate better understanding. Allolooksame.com succeeds in doing exactly this.
Works Cited


