Typical American

1) Saul Bellow, *Herzog* (1964)
   “[T]he story of my life—how I rose from humble origins to complete disaster.”

   At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation’s 300,000 Chinese-Americans are moving ahead on their own—with little help from anyone else. . . In crime-ridden cities, Chinese districts turn up as islands of peace and stability.

   The popular contemporary image of Asian Americans as the “model minority” is of relatively recent vintage and the result of an amazingly rapid transformation in the American public’s consciousness that has taken place over the last decade or so. Paradoxically, during some 150 years preceding this period, Asians in this country were usually depicted by dehumanizing stereotypes that conjured up visions of invading “yellow hordes.” [...] The change toward a more positive image became particularly noticeable in the mid-1960s in the wake of the Watts riot and among growing discontent among blacks and other minorities.

   -Ting de jian in Mandarin means, one listens and hear. Ting bu jian means, one listens but fails to hear. People hear what they can, see what they can, do what they can; that’s the understanding. It’s an old culture talking. Everywhere there are limits. (4)

   -Xiang banfa. An essential Chinese idea—he had to think of a way. In a world full of obstacles, a person needed to know how to go around. What banfa did he have, though? (27)

   -Entertainment: Ralph took to imitating Pete’s walk. He’d slump, a finger cleaning his ear, only to have Theresa gamely cry out, “No, no like this,” and add a shuffle. . . They studied the way Pete blew his nose. . . the self-important way he flipped through his calendar. “Well, now, let me have a look-see,” growled Theresa. “Typical Pete!” Ralph roared in approval. . . And pretty soon, no one knew quite how, “typical Pete” turned “typical American” turned typical American this, typical American that. “Typical American no-good,” Ralph would say; Theresa, “typical American don’t-know-how-to-get-along”; and Helen, wistfully, “typical American just-want-to-be-the-center-of-things.” They were sure, of course, that they wouldn’t “become wild” here in America, where there was “no one to control them.” (67)

   -It was very mysterious. Every night he rang, rang, rang, making a new register tape to replace the tape for the day. (201)

   -What escape was possible? It seemed to him at that moment, as he stood waiting and waiting, trapped in his coat, that a man was as doomed here as he was in China. Kan bu jian. Ting bu jian. He could not always see, could not always hear. He was not what he made up his mind to be. A man was the sum of his limits; freedom only made him see how much so. America was no America. Ralph swallowed. (296)

**Keywords:** “model minority”; “yellow peril”; Sinophobia; orientalism; Asian American