

# The Making of a Model: Praise and the Asian American Community

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## Introduction

Rhetoric has long been divided into three categories: deliberative (to move to or dissuade from action), forensic (to accuse or defend), and epideictic (to praise or blame). The classic conception of epideictic rhetoric as the speech of praise and blame may not be entirely accurate<sup>1</sup>, but usually an act of epideictic does have components of praise or blame. It would be premature, then, to ignore completely the effect of praise or blame as it operates in societal discourse. Given the uses of the “model minority” label for Asian Americans, the label can be easily seen as an act of praise. Asian Americans are told by the label that they are an exemplary group who typify American virtues and values. Wong, for example, argued that “rather than blaming the victim, the ‘model minority’ thesis sets its own unique structural trait, namely, praising the victim” (p.63). The “model minority” thesis has not been accepted without controversy, though. There has been a long standing attempt to reject the image of the “model minority.” However, the function of praise in communication tends to make objections by the Asian American community sound ungrateful.

## Faint Praise

It is, perhaps a given that different people and different groups will have different perspectives of the things that they encounter. Praise is no exception. What can be high praise to one group may be condescending to another. Before examining the role of the praise in the “model minority” label in social discourse, it would make sense to understand how the different audiences viewed it. As will be illustrated by the descriptions of Asian Americans in the following pages, the larger society in the United States clearly perceived the words “model minority” as positive ones. As a result, the general public would have been likely to react to the “model

minority” label as if it were praise. They expected the social discourse surrounding the label to follow the rules and norms for praise. Their acceptance of the positive aspects of the image did not mean, however, that the Asian American community felt the same way.

In order to understand the Asian American reaction to the “model minority” label, one must remember the history of Asians in the United States. For most of their time in America, Asians were portrayed as “coolies” or “gooks”--a “yellow peril.” The sudden shift in the larger society’s perception of Asians following the end of World War II meant that there was little time to erase the old stereotypes. Indeed, since Asian Americans had endured such a long period of negative stereotyping and the change to the seemingly positive “model minority” label had come so quickly, some argued that the older stereotypes were still active. The New York Times article “Sense, and Sensitivity, about Asians” printed in the Minneapolis Star-Tribune in 1992, for example, argued that the larger society continued to hold two different images of Asians. It contended that “Asian-Americans suffer from two equally unfair stereotypes. They’re considered a ‘model minority,’ industrious and resourceful. They’re also seen as insular and threatening--and not quite American” (p.A124).

Other commentators were not so quick to separate the two stereotypes. Some have argued that the positive and negative stereotypes of Asian Americans have been captured in the “model minority” stereotype, but the label attempted to project them all in a positive light. To these writers, it was not that the “model minority” and “yellow peril” images coexisted, but rather that the “model minority” label was composed of the descriptions as the “yellow peril” image. Lyman, for example, contended that “interestingly, analyses of Japanese-American achievement lay stress on those very same character traits which once made up the notorious stereotype” (p.56). He continued his argument by presenting some of the common descriptions made by both stereotypes. He noted that both the “model minority” and the “yellow peril” images “included patience, cleanliness, courtesy and minding one’s own business--the same ideals that could be distorted into the negative characteristics of unwarranted aloofness” (p.56). Wong concurred with Lyman’s contention that the “model minority” and the “yellow peril” labels contained similar characteristics and extended the discussion of the descriptions found in both stereotypes.

Group characteristics such as thrift, industriousness, perseverance, delayed gratification, and investment and expenditure of hard work and long hours were viewed at undesirable racial and cultural peculiarities of the Chinese and

Japanese immigrants. These social characteristics were not hailed as parallel cultural values of the Protestant Ethic. Rather they were considered unconscionable liabilities and views of race contact with Asians that must impact retrogressively on White Americans. (p.64)

In the minds of some Asian Americans, then, the "yellow peril" image still lurked behind the "model minority" label. The Minneapolis Star Tribune article "Asian Americans in Minnesota" illustrated that mistrust when it argued that "beneath the surface of the admiration are some lingering traces from a time when patronizing and critical stereotypes of Asians and Asian-Americans were more openly expressed" (p.12E).

Ultimately, the consistency between the two stereotypes led to some downplaying of the characteristics contained within them. Wong, for example, reminded his readers that the "model minority" label was a relatively new stereotype and that before it, the same people viewed as having the same characteristics were not treated kindly. He argued that "not until the creation of the 'model minority' thesis were these intensely despised deficits--and the people who possessed and practiced them--transformed into commendable, laudable ethnic virtues" (p.64).

It must be realized, then, that to the Asian American community, the "model minority" label represented a reassessment of the pre-existing stereotype rather than the establishment of a new, positive image. Further, given the constant economic posturing between the United States and most of Asia during the 1980s and early 1990s, any stereotype of Asians by the larger society would have seemed unstable. Since the same descriptions were used for both the positive and negative labels, the general society's stereotype of Asian Americans appeared as though it could easily shift from the "model minority" back to the "yellow peril." Asian American rhetors, then, may have been reluctant to speak out concerning the "model minority" label because it seemed risky to do so. It is also assumed that the Asian American community was not so rhetorically insensitive as to be unaware of the general prohibition against self-praise.

Consequently, the use of praise to circumscribe a group which had traditionally been condemned presented the Asian American community with some unique obstacles to participation in the dialog. Since, on one axis, the stereotypes were essentially the same, there was some fear the "yellow peril" image could return as quickly as it had gone. On the other hand, the larger society seemed to be evaluating Asians positively. Asian Americans, then, were faced with a label which seemed to the larger society to be praise. As a result, the audience for much of the

Asian community's response would expect Asian Americans to treat the label as praise despite their inability to fully accept the accolades.

### Humility

Most societies throughout time have looked down on self-praise. The larger society in the United States is no exception. There is something uncomfortable and unacceptable about a person or group which is willing to praise itself openly in front of others. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, for example, noted that "today self-praise by a speaker would appear to us more often than not as out of place and ridiculous" (p.320). It is, and has been, simply beyond the pale to be willing to engage in self-praise.

As a result of the common censure of self-praise, Asian Americans really did not have the option of accepting the "model minority" thesis. If they had argued that the claims made by the label were true, then the Asian American community would have been engaging in self-praise. They would have been promoting themselves as a group worthy of emulation.

On the rare occasions where an Asian American accepted and repeated the label, the results were disconcerting. One can sense with discomfort the boastfulness in Ueda's claim that Asians are truly an inspiring "success story."

Moreover, any open-minded historical inquiry uncovers an irreducible fact. Many ordinary Asian Americans have embraced the model image not out of any desire to placate whites, but because they believe it. Large numbers of Korean-Americans and Chinese-Americans are enthusiastic Republicans who think the "success story" of hard work, and patient self-help reflects their own lives. Liberal Japanese-American Democrats find it relevant as well. It's hard to see the new ideology providing comparable political or economic inspiration. The model minority image may be imperfect, but many Asian Americans feel that it's not a bad place to start. (Ueda p.17)

The idea that any group of people would tout themselves as an "economic inspiration" seems both boastful and vain. Most listeners would probably also balk at the notion of a group openly agreeing with such praise. An additional problem for listeners encountering the praise of Asians is the threat of ethnic group superiority. Because of the history of movements like the Ku Klux Klan and Nazi Germany, arguments for the natural prowess of any ethnic group are likely to be met with a hostile response. Such discomfort was expressed openly by Frank Wu.

Unfortunately, some Asian-American students repeat the dubious compliments paid them. They explain that there is some truth to the stereotypes and they, indeed, do work harder than white students and those from other minority groups. The bragging not only comes close to claims of racial superiority, but also reduces Asian Americans to an indistinguishable mass. (p.B2)

As a result of the unacceptability of openly accepting praise and the discomfort it creates for the audience, arguers who chose to accept or repeat the praise given them would, in all likelihood, be rejected as unworthy of emulation. Given the negative portrayal of those Asian Americans who would accept and proclaim their status as a "model minority," the Asian American response was effectively limited to either denying or saying nothing about the claims of their "model" status.

Saying nothing to the larger society may have been the choice of most Asian Americans. As they sought no outlet, the numbers who made such a choice would have been difficult to determine. Not all Asian Americans chose to accept the praise or remain silent, however. Some took exception with the seemingly constant "good mouthing" of Asian Americans. Chiu, for example, complained that the media were portraying Asian Americans as nearly perfect superhumans. He called, instead, for reporters to show Asians as humans who were capable of both great deeds and misdeeds. He argued that "it is about time for the media to report on Chinese Americans the way they are. Some are superachievers, most are average citizens, and a few are criminals. They are only human--no more and no less" (p.7).

Despite protestations like Chiu's, the "model minority" label has persisted. Indeed, there has been little actual debate over the acceptability of the label in the general society. In part this lack of discussion stems from the ability of the "model minority" thesis to resolve the rhetorical crises surrounding Asian Americans and its reliance on myth. Winnick, for example, echoed Horatio Alger as he brushed aside complaints like Chiu's when he argued that a few normal or criminal elements within a community does not make the entire community criminal--or normal.

Multitudes of Jewish doctors and lawyers can be matched with multitudes of Jewish workers whose capacities or even aspirations never rose above the taxi wheel, the lunch counter, or the press iron. Albert Einstein and Vladimir Horowitz were contemporaries of Abe Reles and Meyer Lansky. But neither fact remotely refutes the conclusion that the Jewish immigrant experience in America has been a chronicle of extraordinary progress. So too with the Asians. (p.24)

While this exchange was neither intentional nor the only one to occur over the

labeling of Asian Americans as a “model minority,” it revealed the ease with which proponents of the label could dismiss attempts to refute the image because of its component of praise and reliance on the Alger success myth.

Compounding the cultural beliefs about the acceptability of various responses to praise was the very image that described Asians in American. Given the “model minority” image of a disciplined, devoted, decent, uncomplaining worker it is not surprising that Asian Americans were not allowed to be outspoken. Peacock, for example, noted that “socially, Asians are expected to be humble and polite” (p.23).

As a result, Asian Americans who accepted and argued in favor of the “model minority” label fell outside of the image and any attempt to refute the “model minority” label as untrue would more than likely have been interpreted as humility and modesty. In other words, if an attempt was made to argue that Asian Americans were not a “model minority”—that they did not work harder, love their families more, suffer fewer mental problems, overcome all barriers—it could, and in all likelihood would, have been interpreted as motivated by humility rather than honesty. Since the statistics displaying Asian American success had already been accepted and the subject of praise was not expected to accept it openly, the general society was more likely to accept humility as the explanation for any negative response to the “model minority” thesis. An example of the downplaying of any dissent was Ueda’s claim that

Asian Americans are everyone’s favorite minority but their own. They have the highest average household income of any ethnic group, one of the broadest occupational bases, and a disproportionately high representation at the nation’s best universities. Yet many Asian Americans like nothing less than to be called “the nation’s model minority.” (Ueda p.16)

Indeed, he characterized the attempts to reject the “model minority label as “the self-conscious downplaying of Asian American success” (p.17). The interplay between humility and the “model minority” label effectively disqualified any attempt to accept or reject the image. The use of praise, then, to resolve the rhetorical crises served to heighten the possibility of the acceptance of the “model minority” thesis. Rhetorical crises call for the foreclosure of debate and that is exactly the opportunity afforded by praise.

As a result of this foreclosing of the options for discourse about the “model minority” label, Asian Americans have been noticeably silent (or rather unheard). Suzuki contended that the media, in fact, ignored Asian American scholars who attempted to question the image.

As positive as the model minority image may seem, Asian Americans have suffered significant negative fallout from this stereotype. It is, in fact, a liability, as Asian scholars have been saying for years. Yet the media rarely consults these scholars and continues to promote the model minority stereotype by quoting the same few experts outside of the Asian communities. (p.19)

Suzuki noted the lack of Asian American input in the discussion. Others concurred, crediting the silence to the image projected onto Asians by the “model minority” label. They also claimed that the problem was not a lack of Asian American voices but rather a lack of attention paid to those voices. Indeed, this lack of input led some Asians, like Henry Mui, to complain that “A few years ago we were called in the media the ‘silent minority’ because we didn’t make any noise. Now it seems like we’re perhaps making a lot of noise and the stereotype is being used against us” (Leepson p.44).

Moon Jo, similarly argued that Asian Americans slowly increased their willingness to talk about the “model minority” image, but their complaints were largely ignored.

More and more Asian Americans, students and scholars alike, are willing to discuss their plight openly despite the honorific title of “model Americans” imposed upon them by whites. Many organizations are formed at local and national levels to counteract the injustices applied to them. Strategies of various sort, some norm-oriented and some value-oriented, are proposed by these organizations and yet, it appears, none of the organizations has had major impact on changing attitudes of the whites toward Asians. (p.18)

Like a spiral turning in on itself, the praise of the “model minority” label continually disqualified more and more of the Asian American community from speaking out while it circumscribed their behavior. Since it represented praise to the larger society, accepting the “model minority” label would be seen as boastful and boastfulness was seen as un-Asian. The only ways to remain Asian were to say nothing and remain a “silent” minority or reject the “model minority” label and “prove” the truth of the humility of Asian Americans.

### Self-Praise

A good deal of the “silence” of the Asian American community may be due to the position epideictic praise puts the group in. Asian rhetors, faced with a situation in which they are expected neither to accept nor reject the statements made about

them, do not have the greatest flexibility. However, not all of the communication problems stemmed from the inability of Asians to speak. Some of the difficulty, as Jo and Suzuki claimed, lay in the general society's unwillingness to hear the responses of Asian Americans because of the ability of the "model minority" label to explain away any vestiges of racism in the larger society. In this way, the "model minority" thesis praises not only the Asian American community, but also the larger society.

Of course, the difficulty in accepting praise or engaging in self-praise extends beyond the Asian American community to the larger society. It is difficult even for the society as a whole to praise itself openly. However, the option for self-praise still exists. Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca explained that people could praise themselves by praising others around them. In such a situation, they explained, the rhetors could praise others who have similar characteristics. They may, in effect, praise themselves without encountering the prohibitions against self-praise.

Although a man may not praise himself directly, he can present himself as belonging to this or that political party or church and this might constitute a strong recommendation. This constitutes an application of a very effective technique, which consists in the introduction of unexpressed positive value judgements under the cover of indisputable judgments of fact. (p.323)

It might seem strange to claim that the larger society would seek to praise itself by praising an ethnic community within it. Remember, however, that communities are based on comparisons and contrasts and that there is something of a metaphoric extension going on here. A model can be, among other things, "one serving as an example to be emulated or imitated," "a design or type," or "a pattern on which something not yet produced will be based" (Webster's p.453). Each of these definitions describes a "model" as something to be followed or emulated. What remains unexplained, however, is the identity of any particular model. In one sense, a "model" minority might be a minority which follows an existing pattern. That definition may fit here. The attributes used to describe the "model" are values which had already been enshrined in the larger society. A Japanese American attorney in San Francisco, for example, was quoted by Zich as complaining that "it's the whites who are the model. We're still the minority.... The term measures us against them on their terms" (p.537).

In such a case, the term "model minority" may be understood as the minority which follows the model. Feagin paraphrasing Ogawa noted that the "model" for success may implicitly be understood as being white.



However, Ogawa [author of *From Japs to Japanese*] has argued that the “highly Americanized” and “successful citizen” stereotypes are not entirely positive, suggesting that they operate to rationalize and preserve European American dominance. The stereotypes implicitly suggest that one must become “white” in order to be a good citizen or fully human. In this “success” view, since the Japanese Americans have become English-speaking models of the Protestant ethic, they can be accepted by the European American as sterilized members of the “Oriental race.” (p.336)

It is not at all surprising that the model for success would be the dominant groups way of behaving given that success will likely also be defined in the terms of the dominant group. Indeed, Feagin summarizing Takagi argued that success is traditionally understood and looked for according to the dominant culture’s standards.

Takagi has also pointed to another bias in the traditional cultural background explanation of success: the idea that those race/ethnic groups with values closest to the dominant groups’ culture are the ones who will be, and should be, successful. In this sense, “success” is evaluated only in terms of values prized by the dominant white culture. (p.360)

Thus, the “model” in “model minority” could have been understood as the larger society’s behaviors, values, and norms. By praising a group which was believed to epitomize the dominant cultures definition of success, their values, and, by extension, the larger society itself would be praised. Further, even if the “model” was not understood to mean American behaviors and values, praising Asian Americans as a “model minority” still could have been used to implicitly praise the larger society. It may have been argued, for example, that if Asian Americans, a visually identifiable minority, could thrive competing in the larger society, any other ethnic minority group should have been capable of similar success. If all ethnic minorities were capable of success, racism in the larger society would either have been an insufficient explanation for ethnic group failure or it could have been concluded that there was no significant discrimination remaining in the United States.

The first step in excusing or trying to disprove racism, was to establish Asian Americans as former victims of great discrimination. In this way, Asian Americans could be classified as “legitimate” minorities. Indeed, some commentators even argued that Asian Americans faced greater discrimination in the larger society than other ethnic minority groups in recent history. A Los Angeles area social worker quoted in “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.,” for example, argued that

“it must be recognized that the Chinese and other Orientals in California were faced with even more prejudice than faces the Negro today. We haven’t stuck Negroes in concentration camps, for instance, as we did the Japanese in World War II” (p.76).

More recently, Thomas Sowell concurred with that social worker when he argued that Japanese Americans had suffered widespread and harmful discrimination. He even claimed that “the Japanese suffered more--being legally denied citizenship and land ownership for many years, and being interned with great loss of property during World War II” (p.35).

Once the legitimacy and potency of the past racism against Asian Americans had been established, the “model minority” image and the success it implied for them could be used to show that American society permitted ethnic minority success and, as a result, was no longer racist or discriminatory. Racism and discrimination were supposed to prevent success. A group which endured widespread hardship should have been destined for failure. The “model minority” thesis was able to play on these beliefs to relieve the larger society of responsibility for the effects of racism and discrimination because Asian Americans succeeded in the face of those barriers.

Asian success could have resulted from the barriers being reduced or because the effects of discrimination were not as disastrous as previously assumed. Both explanations were offered in the larger society. Some proponents of the “model minority” view argued that the more explicit barriers of racism were eliminated in the larger society. The laws against Asian immigration, ownership of land, and citizenship had been removed and the period of Japanese internment was clearly over. As such, the society could claim that it had improved its treatment of minority groups. Associate United States Commissioner on Aging, Michio Suzuki, for example, conceded that “looking back on the whole era [of internment] ... you realize American society has come a long way” (McBee p.47).

Moreover, the movement of Asian Americans into the general population was presented as evidence of the larger society’s willingness to accept Asians and, by extension, all minorities. Julian Makaroff, for example, argued that “despite their bitter prewar and war-time background of racial discriminations [sic] and persecutions [sic], they are now accepted as clean, decent and law-abiding citizens in all American communities” (p.18).

This general acceptance was critical to the argument that the less obvious forms of racism and discrimination also had been removed. Winnick, for example, argued that Asian Americans had integrated almost completely into American society. He

then contended that this balance in housing, education, and marriage was proof that American society had accepted Asian Americans and that overall tolerance had increased.

The proof of that proposition [that "Asiaphobia" has declined] is not only in the "soft" evidence of enhanced ethnic tolerance registered in the public-opinion polls. It is also, and more convincingly, to be found in the harder evidence of mainstream behavior. The American people have afforded both minorities virtually unimpeded access to most neighborhoods, to most corporate boardrooms, and to the ranks of the establishment. To the despair of their elders, both minorities have stepped up the pace of assimilation through intermarriage. The out-marriage rates of second- and third-generation Jews and Asians are exceptionally high and rising. (p.25)

Through defenses of the "model minority" thesis like these, the larger society could praise itself by declaring the United States ethnically fair. Proponents of the "model minority" label also argued that, even if all of the racism and discrimination had not been eliminated, the success of any ethnic minority group could be and was interpreted as proof that the effects of the larger society's discrimination were at least partially positive. Izawa, for example, contended that the barriers faced by Asians served only to make their resolve stronger.

Yet, these trying struggles can serve as the strength ultimately [sic]. Many Asian immigrants manage to convert these seemingly unsurmountable obstacles into their advantage. That is, they manage to generate tremendous amounts of energy and self-determination in overcoming them, and work ever harder than any other group of Americans. (p.21)

Indeed, Asian Americans were often portrayed as succeeding because of the discrimination they faced. Lyman contended that the effects of racism could be conceived of as an obstacle to be overcome when he claimed that Japanese Americans "have turned almost every adversity into a challenge and met each with courage and cool judgement. In all this their own subcultural character has been an invaluable aid and an ever-present source of pride" (p.63). Because racism and discrimination are portrayed as hurdles in this defense, once they have been "overcome" they cease to be an obstacle--they cease to exist. Lyman showed such thinking when he concluded that "as for the nisei, they have not merely survived the hatred and oppression of America's racism, but they have triumphed over it" (p.63). As a result of having cleared the hurdle of discrimination, then, Asian Americans are seen as free from all problems resulting from racism.

The [“model minority”] thesis depicts the Chinese and Japanese Americans as being ethnic groups that are socially, culturally, and economically insular from the vestiges of past discrimination. It has also instituted the belief that today the two groups are free from racial discrimination and the social devastation that accompanies it. (Wong p.63)

Taken to its extreme, the belief that an ethnic minority can overcome discrimination ultimately led to a reversal of the presumptions of guilt and responsibility on the larger society’s racism and made success or failure dependent solely on the group’s willingness and ability to overcome discrimination.

More important, however, is the intrinsic conviction that the burden of proof for eliminating racism and discrimination should not be placed upon the shoulders of those who practice them. On the contrary, it is the express purpose of the victims of racism and discrimination to overcome them. (Wong p.63)

As Crystal argued, the existence of a “model minority” praised the larger society by indicating that its system--democracy--worked. This reversal, again, served to absolve the larger society of responsibility for the presumed effects of racism and discrimination. He claimed that “the existence of a ‘model minority’ supports the belief that democracy ‘works’ and that the racism about which some ethnic groups complain is a product of their own shortcomings and is not inherent in the society” (p.407).

Ultimately, then, regardless of how Asian American success was explained it served to justify a continued belief in the larger society’s values. This ability of the “model minority” image to praise the larger society for showing fairness to ethnic minority groups made it difficult to refute because the society did not want to hear that it could be racist--that a “model minority” might not exist.

As the media is well aware, the model minority story is a popular one, not only among our political leaders, but with the general public as well. It helps many people absolve themselves from the charges of benign neglect and racism being hurled at them by other minority groups. Moreover, Americans love to hear success stories, particularly those involving an underdog, so this one was an easy sell. The model minority angle was a spin that was relatively easy, then, to put on the story of Asian Americans. (Suzuki p.19)

The potential of the “model minority” thesis to excuse racism and discrimination did not go unnoticed by Asian commentators, of course. However, even when Asian Americans attempted to point out the potential of the “model minority” label to

justify existing power relations, the larger society could explain those arguments away as merely political statements attempting to preserve interethnic relations.

Suzuki provided a synthesis of the responses from Asian Americans who claimed that the "model minority" label was being used to justify the behaviors of the larger society when he argued that "they [Asian activists] charged that Asians were being promoted as a model minority to discredit the protests and demands for social justice of other minority groups and were being 'used' to hold up a 'shining example' to other groups" (p.13).

As a result, if the rejection of the label was not characterized as humility, it could often have been explained in terms of political agenda.

Larger political forces also helped undermine the image of the model minority. It was out of step with a post-Great Society liberalism that supported the cause of racial justice, and it threatened the new political ties that Asian Americans were forging with blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans. (Ueda p.17)

It is important to remember here that a good deal of the praise inherent in the "model minority" label was conservative. The values of hard work, delayed gratification, and family have long been conservative icons. Thus, the audience most attuned to the "model minority" thesis would be the most willing to listen to argument that attempts to reject the thesis were based in politics rather than the "truth."

## Conclusions

The "model minority" thesis was capable of enshrining certain values for both the Asian American community and the larger society as a whole. In doing so, however, it effectively took away the voice of the Asian American community in the larger society. Most remained silent. Those who did speak out risked losing their status as "true" Asians or having their response muted by their Asian American status. Further, the larger society was deafened to any challenges made to the "model minority" label because it praised them. It would seem, then, that those who simply decry the "bad mouthing" of groups may miss some of the impact of "goodmouthing." In bits and pieces it may accomplish what denigration could not. Derogatory terms may leave open the option for rebuttal or reclamation, praise does not. It is certainly important to acknowledge the fearsome acts justified by the negative labels applied to some ethnic groups and the wounds inflicted when

such names are internalized. However, just because praise seems congratulatory does not mean that it is always benevolent.

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1 See Lanham's (1991) discussion of the three parts of rhetoric for a discussion of the potential problems associated with the classical divisions of rhetoric.