

“Asians Are Doing Great, so That Proves Race Really Doesn’t Matter Anymore”

The Model Minority Myth and the Sociological Reality

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I never asked to be white. I am not literally white. That is, I do not have white skin or white ancestors. I have yellow skin and yellow ancestors, hundreds of generations of them. But like so many other Asian Americans of the second generation, I find myself now the bearer of a strange new status: white, by acclamation. Thus it is that I have been described as an “honorary white,” by other whites, and as a “banana” by other Asians . . . to the extent that I have moved away from the periphery and toward the center of American life, I have become white inside.

—Eric Liu (1999, p. 34)

The “model minority” image of Asian Americans appeared in the mid-1960s, at the peak of the civil rights movement and the ethnic consciousness movements, but *before* the rising waves of immigration and refugee influx from Asia. Two articles in 1966—“Success Story, Japanese-American Style” by William Petersen in the *New York Times Magazine*, and “Success of One Minority Group in U.S.” by the *US News and World Report* staff—marked a significant departure from how Asian immigrants and their descendants had been traditionally depicted in the media. Both articles extolled Japanese and Chinese Americans for their persistence in

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overcoming extreme hardships and discrimination to achieve success, unmatched even by U.S.-born Whites, with "their own almost totally unaided effort" and "no help from anyone else."

Since then, Asian Americans have been celebrated as a "model minority" for their "superior" cultures that encourage a strong work ethic, a respect for elders, and a reverence for family. More important, they have been celebrated for their high rates of educational, occupational, and income attainment and low high school dropout rates, as well as low rates of teen pregnancy and incarceration. They are declared to be on their way to becoming "White." These expectations are a burden and the predictions surely premature given the "foreigner" image Americans still have of Asians. In classrooms, as well as in society at large, the apparent success story of Asian Americans is often used to justify that race is no longer a determining factor in American life. This essay speaks to the actual existing realities of the diverse range of communities encompassed by the panethnic "Asian American" label and also considers the power and role of the model minority myth in the overall discourse of race and equality.

Issues of Terminology and Classification

Asian Americans have occupied an in-between status in America's racial hierarchy. They are often distinguished from other underrepresented racial groups, such as Blacks and Latinos, and are classified with Whites for equal opportunity programs. Although Asian Americans as a group have attained levels of education, occupation, and income equated with or even surpassing those of Whites,¹ and although many have moved near to or even married Whites, they still remain culturally distinct and suspect in society.

At issue is how to define Asian American and White. The term *Asian American* was coined by the late historian and activist Yuji Ichioka during the ethnic consciousness movements of the late 1960s. To adopt this identity is to reject the Western-imposed label of *Oriental*. Today, "Asian American" is an umbrella category that includes both U.S. citizens and immigrants whose ancestors came from Asia east of Pakistan. Although widely used in public discussions, most Asian-origin Americans are ambivalent about this label, reflecting the difficulty of being American and still keeping some ethnic identity: Is one, for example, Asian American or Japanese American?

Similarly, "White" is an arbitrary label having more to do with privilege than biology. In the United States, groups initially considered non-White such as Irish and Jews have attained White membership by acquiring status and wealth. It is hardly surprising, then, that people of color would aspire to become "White" as a mark of and a tool for material success. However, becoming White can mean distancing oneself from people of color or selling out one's ethnicity. Panethnic identities—Asian American, African American, Latino—are one way the politically vocal in any group try to stem defections; these collective identities may restrain aspirations for individual mobility.

Varieties of Asian Americans

Privately, few Americans of Asian ancestry would spontaneously identify themselves as Asian, and fewer still as Asian American. They instead link their identities to specific countries of origin, such as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, and so on. In a study of Vietnamese youth in San Diego, for example, I found that 53% identified themselves as Vietnamese, 32% as Vietnamese American, and only 14% as Asian American, and that nearly 60% of these youth considered their chosen identity as very important to them (Zhou, 2001).

Some Americans of Asian origin have family histories in the United States longer than many Americans of eastern or southern European origins. However, they became numerous only after 1970, rising from 1.4 million to 17.3 million (including multiracials), or nearly 5.6% of the total U.S. population, in 2010. Before 1970, the Asian-origin population was largely made up of Japanese, Chinese, and Filipinos. Now Americans of Chinese, Filipino, and Indian origin are the largest subgroups (at 3.8 million, 3.4 million, and 3.2 million, respectively), followed by Vietnamese (1.7 million), Koreans (1.7 million), and Japanese (1.3 million). Some 20 other national-origin groups such as Cambodians, Pakistanis, Lao, Thai, Indonesians, and Bangladeshis were officially counted in government statistics only after 1980, and together amounted to more than 2.2 million in 2010.

The exponential growth of the Asian-origin population in the span of 40 years is primarily due to the accelerated immigration subsequent to the Hart–Celler Act of 1965, which ended the national origins quota system, and the historic resettlement of Southeast Asian refugees after the Vietnam War. Currently, about 60% of the Asian-origin population are foreign-born (the first generation), another 30% are U.S. born of foreign-born parentage (the second generation), and just about 10% are born to U.S.-born parents (the third generation and beyond). The only exception to this pattern is Japanese Americans who have a fourth generation and many U.S.-born elderly.

Unlike earlier immigrants from Asia or Europe at the turn of the 20th century, who were mostly low-skilled laborers looking for work, new immigrants from Asia have more varied backgrounds and come for many reasons, such as to join their families, to invest their money in the U.S. economy, to fulfill the demand for highly skilled labor, or to escape war, political or religious persecution, and economic hardship. For example, Chinese, Taiwanese, Indian, and Filipino Americans tend to be overrepresented among scientists, engineers, physicians, and other skilled professionals, but less educated, low-skilled workers are more common among Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong Americans, most of whom entered the United States as refugees. While middle-class immigrants are able to start their American lives with high-paying professional careers and comfortable suburban living, low-skilled immigrants and refugees often have to endure low-paying menial jobs and live in inner-city ghettos. Asian Americans tend to settle in large metropolitan areas and concentrate in the West. California is home to about a third of all Asian Americans. But recently, other states such as Texas, Minnesota, and Wisconsin, which historically

received few Asian immigrants, have become destinations for Asian American settlement. Traditional ethnic enclaves such as Chinatown, Little Tokyo, Manilatown, Koreatown, Little Phnom Penh, and Thaitown persist or have emerged in gateway cities, helping new arrivals cope with cultural and language difficulties in their initial stage of resettlement. However, affluent and highly skilled immigrants tend to bypass inner-city enclaves and settle in suburbs upon arrival, belying the stereotype of the "unacculturated" immigrant. Today, more than half of the Asian-origin population is spreading out in suburbs surrounding traditional gateway cities, as well as in new urban centers of Asian settlement across the country.

Differences in national origins, timing of immigration, affluence, and settlement patterns profoundly affect the formation of a panethnic identity. Recent arrivals are less likely than those born or raised in the United States to identify as Asian American. They are also so busy settling in that they have little time to think about being Asian or Asian American, or for that matter, White. Their diverse origins evoke drastic differences in languages and dialects, religions, foodways, and customs. Many nationalities also brought to America their histories of conflict (such as the Japanese colonization of Korea and Taiwan, Japanese attacks on China, and the Chinese invasion of Vietnam). Immigrants who are predominantly middle-class professionals, such as the Taiwanese and Indians, or predominantly small-business owners, such as Koreans, share few of the same concerns and priorities as those who are predominantly uneducated, low-skilled refugees, such as Cambodians and Hmong.

Finally, Asian-origin people living in San Francisco or Los Angeles, among many other Asians and self-conscious Asian Americans, develop sharper ethnic sensitivity than those living in, say, Latino-dominant Miami or White-dominant Minneapolis. A politician might get away with calling Asians "Oriental" in Miami but get into big trouble in San Francisco. All these differences can create obstacles to fostering a cohesive pan-Asian solidarity. As sociologist Yen Le Espiritu shows in her research, pan-Asianism is primarily a political ideology of U.S.-born, American-educated, and middle-class Asians rather than of Asian immigrants, who are conscious of their national origins and overburdened with their daily struggles for survival.

Underneath the Model Minority: "White" or "Other"

The model minority has become a new stereotype imposed on Americans of Asian ancestry since the 1960s. On the surface, Asian Americans seem to be on their way to becoming White, just like the offspring of earlier European immigrants. But the model minority image implicitly casts Asian Americans as different from Whites. By placing Asian Americans above Whites, the model minority image also sets them apart from other Americans, White or non-White, in the public mind.

One consequence of this new form of stereotyping is to buttress the myth that the United States is devoid of racism and accords equal opportunity to all, and that those who lag behind do so because of their own poor choices and inferior culture (see also Patel, Meanwell, & McClure in this volume). Celebrating this model minority can help

thwart other racial minorities' demands for social justice by pitting groups of color against each other. It can also pit Asian Americans against Whites.

Let me point to two less obvious effects. The model minority stereotype holds Asian Americans to higher standards, distinguishing them from average Americans. "What's wrong with being a model minority?" asked a Black student in a class I taught on race. "I'd rather be in the model minority than in the downtrodden minority that nobody respects." Whether people are in a model minority or a downtrodden minority, they are judged by standards *different* from average Americans. Also, the model minority stereotype places particular expectations on members of the group so labeled, channeling them to specific avenues of success, such as science and engineering, which in turn unintentionally reinforces barriers for Asian Americans in pursuing careers outside these designated fields. Falling into this trap, a Chinese immigrant father might be upset if his son told him that he had decided to change his major from engineering to English. Disregarding his son's passion and talent for creative writing, the father would rationalize his concern by saying, "You have a 90% chance of getting a decent job with an engineering degree, but what chance would you have of earning income as a writer?" This rationale reflects more than simple parental concern over career choices typical of middle-class families; it constitutes the self-fulfilling prophecy of a stereotype.

In the end, the celebration of Asian Americans as a model minority is based on the judgment that many Asian Americans perform at levels above the American average, which sets them apart not only from other people of color but also from Whites. The truth of the matter is that the larger-than-average size of the middle and upper-middle class in some Asian-origin groups, such as the Chinese, Indians, and Koreans, paves a much smoother path for the immigrants and their offspring to regain their middle-class status in the new homeland. The financial resources that immigrants brought with them to this country also help build viable ethnic economies and institutions, such as private after-school programs, for the less fortunate group members to move ahead in society at a much faster pace than they would if they did not have access to these ethnic resources.

"It's Not So Much Being White as Being American"

In everyday reality, most Asian Americans seem to accept that "White" is mainstream, average, and "normal," and look to Whites as their frame of reference for attaining higher social positions. Similarly, researchers often use non-Hispanic Whites as the standard against which other groups are compared, even though there is great diversity among Whites, too. Like most other immigrants to the United States, many Asian immigrants tend to believe in the American dream and measure their achievements materially. As a Chinese immigrant said to me in an interview, "I hope to accomplish nothing but three things: to own a home, to be my own boss, and to send my children to the Ivy League." Those with sufficient education, job skills, and money manage to move into White middle-class suburban neighborhoods immediately upon arrival,

while others work intensively to accumulate enough savings to move their families up and out of inner-city ethnic enclaves. Consequently, many children of Asian ancestry have lived their entire childhood in White communities, made friends with mostly White peers, and grown up speaking only English. In fact, Asian Americans are the most acculturated non-European group in the United States. By the second generation, most have lost fluency in their parents' native languages. Sociologist David Lopez (1996) finds that in Los Angeles, more than three quarters of second-generation Asian Americans (as opposed to about one quarter of second-generation Mexicans) speak only English at home. Asian Americans also intermarry extensively with Whites and with members of other minority groups. Sociologists Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean (2010) find that more than one quarter of married Asian Americans have a partner of a different racial background, and 87% of intermarried Asians marry Whites; they also find that 12% of all Asian Americans claim a multiracial background, compared with 2% of Whites and 4% of Blacks.

Even though U.S.-born or U.S.-raised Asian Americans are relatively acculturated and often intermarry with Whites, they may be more ambivalent about becoming White than their immigrant parents. Many only cynically agree that "White" is synonymous with "American." A Vietnamese high school student in New Orleans told me in an interview, "An American is White. You often hear people say, hey, so-and-so is dating an 'American.' You know she's dating a White boy. If he were Black, then people would say he's Black." But while they recognize Whites as a frame of reference, some reject the idea of becoming White themselves. "It's not so much being White as being American," commented a Korean American student in my class on the new second generation. This aversion to becoming White is particularly common among the well-educated and privileged second-generation college student who have taken ethnic studies courses, or among Asian American community activists. However, most of the second generation continues to strive for the privileged status associated with Whiteness, just like their parents. For example, most U.S.-born or U.S.-raised Chinese American youth end up studying engineering, medicine, and law at college, believing that these areas of study will guarantee well-paying jobs and middle-class living and enhance social contact with Whites.

Second-generation Asian Americans are also more conscious of the disadvantages associated with being non-White than their parents, who as immigrants tend to be optimistic about overcoming the disadvantages. As a Chinese American woman points out from her own experience,

The truth is, no matter how American you think you are or try to be, if you have almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion, you are a foreigner by default. . . . You can certainly be as good as or even better than Whites, but you will never become accepted as White.

This remark echoes a common frustration among second-generation Asian Americans who detest being treated as immigrants or foreigners. Their experience suggests that Whitening has more to do with the beliefs of White America than with the actual

situation of Asian Americans. Speaking perfect English, effortlessly adopting mainstream cultural values, and even marrying members of the dominant group may help reduce this “otherness” at the individual level, but they have little effect on the group as a whole. New stereotypes can emerge and “un-Whiten” Asian Americans anytime and anywhere, no matter how “successful” and “assimilated” they have become.

The stereotype of the “honorary White” or model minority goes hand in hand with that of the “forever foreigner.” In the 21st century, globalization and U.S.–Asia relations, combined with continually high rates of immigration, affect how Asian Americans are perceived in American society. Many historical stereotypes, such as the “yellow peril” and “Chinese menace,” have found their way into contemporary American life, as revealed in such highly publicized incidents as the murder of Vincent Chin, a Chinese American mistaken for Japanese and beaten to death by a disgruntled Michigan auto worker in the 1980s; the trial of Wen Ho Lee, a nuclear scientist suspected of spying for the Chinese government in the mid-1990s (eventually proven innocent); and the 2001 Abercrombie & Fitch T-shirts with cartoon characters that depicted Asians in stereotypically negative ways—slanted eyes, thick glasses, and heavy Asian accents. Asian-looking Americans are still in an ambivalent position as neither White nor Black, and neither “American” nor “Asian.” Ironically, the ambivalent, conditional nature of White acceptance of Asian Americans prompts them to organize panethnically to fight back—which consequently heightens their racial distinctiveness. So becoming White or not is beside the point. Asian Americans still have to constantly prove they are truly loyal Americans, especially in times when U.S.–Asia relations are in the spotlight.

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NOTE

1. The 2010 U.S. census shows that 49.3% of Asian Americans age 25 and over had at least a college degree (20% had an advanced graduate degree), compared with 31% of non-Hispanic Whites. Also, 48% of Asian Americans age 16 and over held a professional occupation, compared with 40% of non-Hispanic Whites. Finally, the median family income for Asian American families was \$78,152, compared with \$69,531 for non-Hispanic White families.

SUGGESTED ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- Lee, J., & Zhou, M. (2015). *The Asian American achievement paradox*. New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation Press.
- Lee, W. H. (2002). *My country versus me: The first-hand account by the Los Alamos scientist who was falsely accused of being a spy*. New York, NY: Hyperion Books.
- Maira, S. M. (2009). *Missing: Youth, citizenship, and empire after 9/11*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Park, L. (2007). A letter to my sister. In M. Zhou & J. V. Gatewood (Eds.), *Contemporary Asian America: A multidisciplinary reader* (2nd ed., pp. 425–430). New York: New York University Press.
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Audio/Visual

- Choy, C., & Tajima-Pena, R. (Directors). (1987). *Who killed Vincent Chin* [Documentary]. United States: Film News Now Foundation.
- Lin, J. (Director), & Asato, J. (Producer). (2002). *Better luck tomorrow* [Motion picture]. United States: Paramount.
- Nakamura, R. A. (Director). (1996). *Looking like the enemy* [Documentary]. United States: Japanese American National Museum.
- Park, R. (Director). (2007). *Never perfect* [Documentary]. United States: Single Drop Films.
- Sakya, S., Young, D., & Yu, K. (Directors). (2003). *Searching for Asian America* [Television documentary]. Public Broadcasting Service. United States: Center for Asian American Media (CAAM), KVIE.
- Wong, C. (Director). (2010). *Whatever it takes* [Documentary]. United States: PBS Indies.

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What are the origins of the model minority stereotype? How does this compare with previous depictions of Asian Americans as “yellow peril”? What, if anything, is significant about the evolution of these stereotypes over time? What, in your opinion, has prompted these changes in the model minority myth? Is it still used with the same political agenda in mind?
2. To what extent—if any—does the model minority myth factor into contemporary debates about Asian American identity? Can you think of any ways the media continue to perpetuate this stereotype? What negative effects does it continue to perpetuate for contemporary Asian Americans?
3. What are some stereotypical representations of Asian Americans on prime-time television? What are some of the positive or neutral representations of Asian Americans that you’ve seen? How do the representations of Asian Americans compare to those of other racial groups? Why do you think there are discrepancies?
4. What do you think are the key mechanisms for stereotyping Asian Americans in American society? How would Asian Americans and the society as a whole act to counter the negative effects of stereotyping?

REACHING BEYOND THE COLOR LINE

1. Consider the blog post at the link provided below:

“Asian Americans respond to Pew: We’re not your model minority,” by Julianne Hing, http://colorlines.com/archives/2012/06/pew_asian_american_study.html

How does the controversy Hing describes connect to the issues raised in this essay? What does it add to your understanding of how and why the model minority myth is problematic?

2. Using the data provided by the American Community Survey FactFinder tool (<http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/searchresults.xhtml?refresh=t>), locate the racial composition data on your home county and compare it to the United States overall. How do they compare? What does this tell you about the in-group variation hidden by the label “Asian American”? Why is this important?

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