

I Am Not a Model Minority

Bernadette Lim

BEFORE YOU READ: Discuss what “model minority” means.

I am a third generation Asian-American woman at Harvard, and I despise living under the impression that I belong to the “model minority.” For a label that sounds so positive in tone, living under this stereotype has been anything but ideal.

Believing that Asian Americans are the model minority diverts attention from past and existing discrimination.

In high school and at Harvard, I have encountered the consequences of living under the model minority myth constantly. My personal and academic achievements are the result of simply “being Asian.” My interests in biology and physics in high school were “typical,” and being stereotyped as “too smart” garnered unwarranted envy and competition from classmates and friends. My achievements weren’t considered the by-product of hard work; they were simply expected and representative of the Asian-American model minority stereotype.

Many believe that the model minority label allows me to ride on the coattails of my ethnicity, giving me a “one-up boost” ahead of others. Yet to me, the model minority myth has done nothing but strip me of my humanity.

The term “model minority” was first introduced to the public by sociologist William Peterson in a 1966 *New York Times* article entitled “Success Story, Japanese

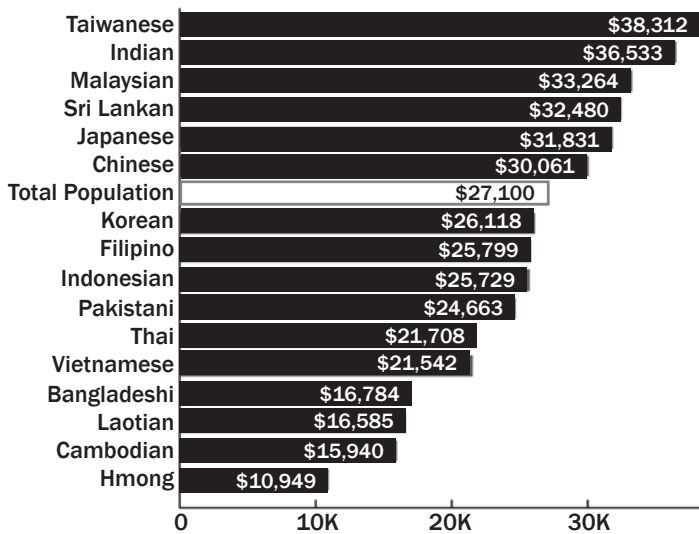
American Style.”¹ Peterson purported that the Japanese cultural emphasis on hard work was a mechanism for overcoming discrimination and achieving success post World War II. Perpetuating Peterson’s views, *U.S. News and World Report* published an article called “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.” in 1968,² and *Newsweek* published “Success Story: Outwhiting the Whites” in 1971.³ In 1987, *TIME* Magazine’s cover headlined “Those Asian-American Whiz Kids” with a smiling group of young Asian-American students.⁴ The Asian-American community has for decades been presented as a homogenous group of people who 1) work hard, 2) never complain, and 3) live with above average success and satisfaction—a dangerous myth calcified by the media and ingrained in the minds of the public.

Looking closely, one can see that the Asian-American model minority myth is simply that: a myth. While Asian Americans earn higher median household incomes than whites, blacks, and Hispanics/Latinos, these statistics obscure the fact that Asian-American families include multiple earners (white vs. Asian American per capita income is close; household income is not),⁵ likely the result of the many generations living under one roof and the retirement savings of elders. Southeast Asian Americans drop out of high school at an alarming rate; nearly 40 percent of Hmong Americans, 38 percent of Laotian Americans, and 35 percent of Cambodian Americans fail to finish high school.⁶ These Asian-American subgroups, along with Vietnamese Americans, earn below the national average.⁷



Photo from the Asian and Pacific Islander Student Alliance

Per capita income by ethnicity, 2007-2009



“Per capita” comes from the Latin and means “for each head.” We use it to mean “per person.” Study the chart above and write several true sentences based on the data. Source: See Endnote #5.

Believing that Asian Americans are the model minority diverts attention from past and existing discrimination. The stereotype renders racial inequity for Asian Americans invisible and unimportant. For example, the portrayal of the Asian-American woman as the servile “Lotus Blossom” or the domineering, deceitful “Dragon Lady” has been common for years. There’s the 1958 movie “China Doll” and Lucy Liu’s cunning character Ling Woo on the popular TV show “Ally McBeal.”⁸ Before the cancellation of Margaret Cho’s TV series “All-American Girl” in 1995, her producer hired an Asian consultant after claiming that Cho’s acting simply wasn’t “Asian enough.”⁹ Nearly 20 years later, we still see incredibly sparse representation of Asian Americans in the media, as well as in other areas like government, journalism, and high levels of business.

Perhaps the most poignant repercussion of the model minority label is the assumption that being “Asian” is an automatic guarantor of success, a mark of coming from a “privileged” racial group that has “achieved more and struggled less”

than other minority groups. The model minority myth has thus undermined the formation of positive relationships among minority groups by preventing the recognition of the intersection among racial histories. It is more than simple chance that the appearance of the “model minority” term coincided with the rise of the African-American Civil Rights Movement and Chicano Civil Rights Movement. Why don’t we acknowledge this? The model minority myth is a wedge that impedes solidarity, emphasizing differences in socioeconomic outcomes rather than commonality in the historic struggle for civil rights.

By being part of the model minority, I am expected to feel nothing less than gratitude and honor for being labeled through a “positive stereotype.” Yet focus on the upper echelons of the Asian-American population has rendered everyone else invisible. In grouping all Asian Americans as high achievers, avid students, and career climbers, society fails to acknowledge the nuance and disparity. “Asian American” encompasses a diverse range of dialects and ethnicities (and of course, a diverse umbrella of individual, personal, human experiences within those subgroups).

I am not a model minority and never will be. No such thing exists.

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1. “Success Story, Japanese American Style,” <inside.sfuhs.org/dept/history/US_History_reader/Chapter14/modelminority.pdf>
2. “Success Story of One Minority Group in U.S.,” <www.dartmouth.edu/~hist32/Hist33/US%20News%20&%20World%20Report.pdf>
3. “Outwhiting the Whites,” <depts.washington.edu/college/mce/Myth1.pdf>
4. “Those Asian-American Whiz Kids,” <content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,965326,00.html>
5. “A Community of Contrasts: Asian Americans in the United States, 2011,” <www.advancingjustice-aajc.org/sites/aajc/files/Community_of_Contrast.pdf>
6. <www.whitehouse.gov/administration/eop/aapi/data/critical-issues>
7. Ibid.
8. <www.sagepub.com/dines3estudy/articles/12_Sun_Pg656.pdf>
9. <asiasociety.org/arts/film/margaret-cho-shes-one-she-wants>

AFTER YOU READ: How does the author make her case that the myth of the model minority is indeed a myth? How is the model minority myth used against communities of color?