

### The Golden Standard: How the “Model Minority” Stereotype Harms Asian Americans

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Process Note

My paper titled “The Golden Standard: How the “Model Minority” Stereotype Harms Asian Americans,” was a research paper I wrote for my Writing 101 class. When creating this essay, I started by identifying an issue or fact I learned about while reading and having discussions surrounding Asian American history. Specifically, I tried to find an issue that could tie into Asian American foodways along with how those foodways have impacted Asian American survival and assimilation into the United States. I ended up settling on the model minority myth, since I felt that it remains a prevalent term in today’s society that undermines many of the struggles Asian Americans have faced in this country (especially with regards to certain foodways). Once I found the issue my paper was going to address, I began examining potential sources I could use that my class referenced (such as films like *Minari* and the book, *Seventeen Syllables*) before branching off using the library’s website to search for more sources. The articles I found were of great help, as they provided me with an opportunity to expand my essay and discuss the consequences of the model minority myth and how its effects reach far beyond the Asian American community. After this, I printed out and annotated each article using different colors and tried to find common threads between each. This made it easier for me to synthesize my essay’s argument later, and it allowed me to visualize my initial thesis. During this time, an outline of the essay’s structure was already forming in my head, and possible quotes had already been sectioned out of their respective sources. The hardest

part was the actual writing process. Because I am a slow writer, the page limit felt daunting at times, and it would often take me over an hour to simply write a paragraph. However, I still thoroughly enjoyed the process of working on the essay and found great joy in watching its structure and flow take shape. The revision process (for this publication), went smoothly and presented me with a great opportunity to revise and polish my work. After a leave of absence from the paper, reading it again from beginning to end, as well as meeting with an editor to determine its strengths and weaknesses, helped me pinpoint places in need of edits. I specified my thesis, making sure to emphasize more clearly what the paper argued for. In addition, I created new topic sentences that aligned better with the arguments of each paragraph, as well as combined paragraphs so that the lengths of each appeared more uniform. Overall, the creation of this essay familiarized me with the longer essay format, which has come in handy in other classes. And, most importantly, this piece, along with its research components, helped acquaint me with a topic I felt passionate about.

*The Golden Standard: How the “Model Minority” Stereotype Harms Asian Americans*

*By Natalie Isberg*

The term model minority, first introduced into American society in the 1960's by a man named William Petersen, is responsible for the designation of certain Asian American subgroups, particularly Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans, as having achieved a higher level of social and monetary success (among other things) due to their supposed work ethics and morals, making them the “model” group for other minorities within the United States. The term, despite being over sixty years old, still holds prominence in American society through media portrayals, advertisements, and perpetual stereotyping. One way of analyzing the effects this stereotype has had on Asian Americans is through food and through both successful and declining foodways and food industries such as restaurants and agricultural businesses. As primarily analyzed through food and food related industries (as well as other means such as income), the stereotype of the model minority, when used in reference to Asian Americans, warps the perception of Asian American identity, painting them only in the eyes of European American perceptions. Despite positive surface level connotations, this essay argues that the model minority myth undermines the severity of ongoing economic and social struggles of Asian Americans within American society while over glamorizing success stories, all of which has been done through racial stratification, cultural assimilation, economic hegemonization, and the perpetuation of harmful stereotypes<sup>1</sup>.

The model minority myth perpetuates that Asian Americans are inherently wealthier and therefore more successful than other groups, however, the individual earnings of most Asian Americans do not fall within the average income range in the United States; essentially, the “socioeconomic success of Asian Americans has been exaggerated” (Xu and Lee 1367). In

addition, the poverty rate of Asian Americans is “higher than that of whites” (1367). A more recent study written by Jennifer Y. Kim et al. called “Debunking the ‘model minority’ myth,” maintained that the same information is relevant today, stating that “...they [Asian Americans] have the largest growing income divide among any group, displacing African Americans as the most economically divided group in America” (Kim et al. 2). Xu’s and Lee’s article was written in 2013, while Kim et al.’s article was made only a few years ago. The fact that the data relating to economic disparity among Asian Americans has trended the same way shows that the economic displacement experienced by Asian Americans is a continuing struggle. Yet, the model minority myth continues to be exalted, despite persistent trends in data that suggest the economic prosperity of Asian Americans is not what it is made up to be. This misconception surrounding the wealth of Asian Americans continues to damage and alienate Asian Americans from sources of aid due to the view that their supposed income has been glorified, the effect presenting itself as a lack of support from other groups in the United States and a lack of research on the subject of Asian American poverty.

On a much broader scale, the model minority myth automatically suggests that those who are specifically Japanese, Korean, and Chinese Americans exhibit lifestyles that constitute as inherently wealthy, and yet, Asian American literature and film debunk this by providing examples of Asian American lifestyles that do not exude wealth, specifically in the realm of agriculture. One such example that highlights the struggles of Asian American poverty is through the live action film *Minari* directed by Lee Isaac Chung. One notable quality of the film is its portrayal of the status of the main Korean American family. Rather than showcase a well-off family that resides in the city, the film follows a needy family living as farmers in rural Arkansas. The mother and father are poor and struggle to make ends meet, and they both take up

chicken sexing jobs that pay them little. All the while, they attempt to find a food market that will sell their produce. The very context of the film defies what it means to be a member of the model minority group; two integral traits (monetary autonomy and a middle income status) are clearly missing within the film, as the family struggles to afford healthcare for their son with a heart condition while maintaining the small amount of property that they own.

Another story that showcases a family in a similar economic background is Hisaye Yamamoto's "Seventeen Syllables" which, while being a work of fiction, was based on true events and further expels model minority notions. In it, the main character's family does not live an affluent life in a high income household with plenty of opportunity. Rather, Rosie and her first generation immigrant parents work on a tomato farm and do not have easy access to certain commodities such as an indoor bathroom. Rosie, whenever she is surrounded by hints of wealth, comments on it, one example being when she complains to Jesus about him having a bathroom inside while she has to go to a privy ("just because you have a bathroom *inside*") (Yamamoto 216). The fact that an indoor toilet is considered a luxury shows the degree to which the family is in a perpetual state of poverty. And while the story is a work of fiction, the piece was "based on Yamamoto's own mother's experience..." and that one theme the piece portrayed was "the restricted lives of first-generation Japanese immigrant women..." (Yamamoto 210). Both the film and literary work provide accounts of Asian Americans who fare opposite to how the model minority myth portrays them to fare, further accentuating how the myth is out of touch with the reality of some Asian American families in the United States.

This is not to say that there aren't some Asian Americans who can exhibit traits and characteristics that align within the stereotype's model and lead to success (or at least, they appear that way). One big example of an Asian American success story that correlates with

model minority notions is George Shima's economic success within the potato farming industry as referenced in Nina Ickawa's article, "Giving Credit Where It Is Due." In one section, the article cites how "Before his death in 1926, Japanese American George Shima (born Kinji Ushijima) built a multimillion-dollar fortune in potato farming and distribution" (Ichikawa 281). The story highlights a Japanese American that is economically well off, making him a "success story" of the model minority. Another example that the article brings up is Tanimura & Antle, which is "a network of fresh vegetable farms in California and Arizona between a Japanese American family and a packing company..." (Ichikawa 282) that is now "one of the largest lettuce companies in the United States" (Ichikawa 282). Other aspects of the model minority, such as educational success, can be seen when looking at acceptance into ivy league schools for minorities in comparison to the ratio of Asian Americans that comprise the United States. According to Zhou's article called "Hyper-selectivity and the remaking of culture," Asian Americans are a group that "comprise only 5.5 percent of the U.S. population, yet [make up] about one fifth of the entering classes in Ivy League universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton" (Zhou 2). This data, at first glance, provides convincing evidence for the genuineness of the model minority myth. Zhou also ends up citing the Pew Research Center and their 2010 U.S. census that favorably highlighted Asian American achievement. Within their census, Pew found that "Asian Americans also show the highest median household income and highest level of education of all racial groups, even surpassing native-born White Americans" (Zhou 3). The conclusion gleaned from the data was a promising one: "...Asian Americans' values about hard work drive their socioeconomic outcomes" (Zhou 4).

However, each article, while able to provide certain indications of Asian American superiority within certain fields, are not the result of what the model minority preaches Asian

Americans to be. The quantitative data, as concluded by Zhou's article, was not merely the product of hard work ethic. Rather, numerous other factors not relating to the model minority myth factored into the success of some Asian Americans and their education, which invalidates the conclusions drawn by Pew. Factors outside of their control, such as hyper selection bias as a result of lifted immigration laws, have favored East Asians and as a result, led to psychological biases that have "promised" success for certain Asian American groups. Thus, the idea of hard work being an inherently Asian American trait and this being directly correlated with success is not foolproof. And, despite the success of the Japanese Americans, the industry in which they grew rich (agriculture) is not directly linked to the model minority like engineering and the sciences are, making their successes "invisible" to the public eye. Overall, the problems that the stereotype poses remain too large and affect far too many groups to be overlooked, even if there are some who showcase traits that align with the myth.

In particular, the problems can be broken down even further when looking at food related histories of two groups that are omitted from the category of model minority: Cambodian Americans and a select group of Southeastern Americans (Lao, Hmong, and Iu-Mien Americans), and how their "success stories" have been mostly unnoticed. Throughout history, there remains overlooked stories of survivability as an Asian American "success story," particularly in regards to the Cambodian donut shop movement that occurred along California's coast, a history captured in Erin Curtis' article, "Cambodian Donut Shops and the Negotiation of Identity in Los Angeles." Even without government aid, Cambodian donut shop owners, through family connections and the creation of an internal loaning system, were able to create flourishing businesses that helped facilitate a unique subculture that provided refugees from Cambodia a way to assimilate into the United States. However, it is ironically success stories like these that



do not permeate into mainstream media. The maintenance of a donut shop requires a great amount of hard work and dedication, which is stated in the three business practices the article references; “Shop owners relied on three business strategies for their success. The first, and perhaps most important, was the willingness to work hard” (Curtis 19). The characteristic of hard work is a trait of the model minority myth, however, this story was not a part of the mainstream scene and, therefore, has not helped define the overall identity of Cambodian Americans past the borders of the Los Angeles region (it has also not helped the group assimilate into the myth that promotes these very values). By comparison, other Southeastern Asian Americans have faced penalties and fines for having unpaid laborers on their farms within the same state (California), according to Jennifer Sowerwine’s article titled “The myth of the protected worker.” While Cambodian donut shop owners faced no issues with using family as manual labor for maintaining their shops (which also served as a way to preserve cultural identity), Southeast Asian Americans who used family members that were outside of their immediate family (“immediate family” as defined by the nuclear family model) were fined. Choua Lee, a Hmong micro-farmer, and his family “depended, like other Southeast Asian “micro-farmers” in California, on the unpaid but often reciprocal labor of uncles, aunts, cousins, and in-laws at critical points in the growing season” (Sowerwine 579-80). But due to the “illegal” nature of the activity, Lee was fined 14,500 dollars, “an amount that surpassed 6 months’ gross revenue from the farm” (Sowerwine 580). In all, both histories depicted in the two articles contain ethnic groups with very similar histories. The two groups are refugees and fled their homelands due to political tensions, and in order to survive in a foreign country, both employed traditions and customs (specifically related to family) in order to survive. Both groups also struggled in the late

2010's due to rising costs and inflation, a situation that puts their stories in direct contradiction to what the model minority preaches about Asian American wealth, further disproving its accuracy.

The effects of the "model minority" term have far reaching consequences that extend beyond the boundaries of the Asian American community, particularly in regards to the ostracization of other minority groups in the United States. One striking example of this ostracization comes in the form of Asian American assimilation into white culture in which Asian Americans are marginalized in order for whites to maintain the racial stratification that exists in the United States (one that unfortunately puts groups such as African Americans at the bottom and Asian Americans near the middle in relation to European Americans, according to Claire Kim's racial triangulation theory). In Yao Li's and Harvey Nicholson Jr.'s article "When "model minorities" become "yellow peril," Asian Americans are simultaneously unassimilable and able to "blend in" with white culture. This paradox has led to the promotion of pro-white behavior among Asian Americans while also helping to "...divide racial minority groups by pitting Asians and other minorities against each other...and to denigrate other racial minorities as "problem" minorities" (Li et al. 4).

Another effect of the model minority myth is that it is also responsible for homogenizing the nature of Asian Americans within their specific groups. Chinese Americans, for example, make up the largest proportion of Asian Americans in the country, yet due to the model minority, all Chinese Americans are, in its eyes, all the same and display the same traits and lifestyles that correlate with the myth. Revisiting the concept of wealth imbalances, Lisa Keister's article "Chinese Immigrant Wealth" debunks the myth of economic homogeneity that it promotes through the analysis of different groups with similar origins such as Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese groups. The conclusions drawn from the article point at major differences between

income levels for each group, however, this has not been explored due to continuing notions from the model minority that promote a homogenous viewpoint of Chinese, Hong Kong, and Taiwanese groups.

In addition, the existence of multiple other stereotypes in conjunction with the model minority myth complicates notions of Asian American identity even further. Other terms such as “outsider” and the “perpetual foreigner,” is something that “that still haunts them” (Xu and Lee 1364). When looking at the history of Asian Americans within the country, the “foreigner” stereotype was a byproduct of the nineteenth century immigration acts that excluded Asian Americans from obtaining full citizenship (particularly with regards to Chinese Americans). The stereotypes, when working in tandem with one another, deem the cultural acceptance of Asian Americans as nonexistent yet existent; the paradox is one that keeps Asian Americans glued in a realm of ethnic stagnation and perpetual poverty within each group.

One word is able to sum up the history of Asian Americans within the United States: invisibility. Asian Americans constitute one of the largest growing minority groups in the United States, however, the consequences of Asian stereotypes continue to cause harm not only to Asian American groups, but every group in the country. The model minority promotes the stereotyping of Asian Americans to such a degree that the struggle and hardships first and second generation Asian Americans had to face in food related industries have vanished from mainstream history, especially with regards to Southeast Asian Americans. This isn't to say, however, that there is no way to combat the myth. Works of literature like “Seventeen Syllables” and films like *Minari* serve a vital role in destroying it, as each is able to deliver stories to audiences in an engaging and compelling format while staying true to correct interpretations of Asian American identity. What remains most important for years to come is the restoration of proper Asian American

representation within the media and in history, something only a collaborative effort by the entire country can ultimately do.

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## Notes

1 = It should be stated beforehand that the term "model minority" focuses on three main Asian American groups, these groups being Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans. Other groups, such as Cambodian Americans, Vietnamese Americans, or any other group that is not a part of the main three do not fall under the conventional category of "model minority" Asian Americans.

2 = This was not said by Yamamoto. Instead, this quote was included on the specific version of text that was analyzed.