

## **The Model Minority Myth: The Erasure of Asian American Poverty**

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For numerous years, the widespread acceptance of the common “model minority” trope pushed upon society has perpetuated the idea that Asian Americans’ levels of success, intelligence, and wealth somehow correlate to their race, therefore making them serve as an ideal model for other ethnic minorities to follow. While most can acknowledge the negative stereotypes and portrayals of Asian Americans are harmful, some continue to question the harm of the model minority, since society tends to glamorize wealth, success, and intelligence as something that should be highly sought after by the masses.

The pervasive model minority trope is constructed around stereotypes and enforces a dehumanizing narrative that characterizes all Asian Americans as inherent geniuses, successful, and hard-working, which, in turn, dismisses the issues that are present in a number of Asian Americans’ lives, including the struggle of poverty that is often overlooked.

Furthermore, the lack of representation of Asian Americans is not limited solely to management positions, offices, and media, but they are also highly underrepresented when certain data is taken, due to the model minority trope enforcing the idea that they do not struggle with these issues, and thereby do not require attention or aid. This can impact Asian Americans that are struggling with poverty since most of society will not even acknowledge it as a possibility. “Although the Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) population is smaller than other racial groups (6.2 percent of the US population), undersampling or not including it in research obscures the needs of those living in poverty and perpetuates the stereotype that few Asian Americans live in poverty or need social services.” (Tran).

The experience of the main character, Willis Wu, and his family in the novel *Interior Chinatown* by Charles Yu mirrors the experience of many Asian Americans, while also exploring the achievement gap between Asian Americans and other races as poverty impacts various aspects of their lives but is erased under the beliefs of the model minority trope.

To understand the impacts of poverty on Asian Americans, the presence of Asian Americans in the U.S. must first be explored and understood. America has a highly heterogeneous societal culture, with the makeup of the population consisting of various races and cultures. One of the races that are prominent in American society, yet simultaneously overlooked is Asian Americans. Defined by the U.S. Department of Health & Human Services as “people having origins in any of the original peoples of the East Asia, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent,” Asian Americans account for 5.7 percent of America’s population, or approximately 18.9 million Asian Americans, according to the 2019 U.S. Census Bureau population estimate. On a less broad scale, approximately 5.4 million Chinese Americans reside in the U.S., making them the largest Asian-origin group in the nation, and almost a third reside in California alone (Budiman and Ruiz).

With this information, more of the data can be applied to the novel *Interior Chinatown* and further analyzed. The novel is set in the Chinatown district in present-day Los Angeles, California, and the impacts of poverty on Asian Americans residing in California can be seen through the story. In *Interior Chinatown*, Willis Wu, his family, and his friends all live in a Single Room Occupancy (SRO) directly above the “Golden Palace”.

The poor conditions of the apartment building are frequently shown to the readers through Willis Wu’s eyes, with descriptions of leaking water, noisy surroundings, and crowded rooms emphasizing the impoverished nature of the building and its occupants. One instance

depicting the conditions of the SRO is shown in the quote, “The main thing about living on eight is that the shower pan in the bathroom on nine is cracked. It was cracked when you were a kid, crammed in this room with your parents, and it’s still cracked now. They’ve repaired it a half-dozen times in the past few years but always on the cheap, caulking it with cheap stuff when what they really need to do is replace the whole damn thing. Otherwise, it will just keep cracking over and over again.” (Yu 60)

This depiction of the poor quality of the SRO can be applied to other races on a broader scale since poverty-stricken buildings are not reserved for one isolated group of people; however, in the text, the SRO is shown to have a predominately Asian American demographic. “Open a window in the SRO on a summer night and you can hear at least five dialects being spoken ... the courtyard in reality just a vertical column of interior-facing windows, also serving as the community clothes drying space, crisscrossing lines of kung fu pants for all the Generic Asian Men, and for the Nameless Asian Women, cheap knockoff quipaos, slit high up the thigh, or a bit more modest for the Matronly Asian Ladies...” (Yu 46)

Willis Wu and his parents are of Taiwanese descent, serving as an example of the difficult struggle with poverty that impacts Asian Americans living in poor conditions due to financial instability. Even for the characters in the novel who are shown to be employed and actively working, they are still not excluded from the struggle of poverty and still reside in the SRO, further dismantling the common beliefs of the model minority trope that ignores the plight of poor Asian Americans in favor of portraying them in a stereotypical manner.

According to a 2019 Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) California Workers survey, approximately twenty-three percent of AAPIs—nearly one in four—are working but still

struggling with poverty. More specifically, thirty percent of Chinese Americans account for a majority of AAPI Californians who are working, yet still struggling with poverty. (PRRI, 2019).

In *Interior Chinatown*, Willis Wu and his mother, Dorothy, are both employed. Willis Wu works as an aspiring actor for most of the novel, while Dorothy works as a hostess in the Golden Palace restaurant beneath the SRO. Despite their employment, Willis Wu and Dorothy are among the many Asian Americans that work tirelessly, yet continue to struggle to gain enough funds to live in a place beyond the SRO with more suitable living conditions. The struggle with poverty intersects with their race, as shown in the quote, “Pretty Asian Hostess is what pays the bills for them, and he knows it, and that makes it even worse. In this place, Golden Palace, Dorothy is almost a star.” (Yu 153) This also shows the experience of Asian Americans that are overlooked by the model minority trope, since they are conceived as a group who has overcome their social struggles. This idea gives Asian Americans the added disadvantage of having their struggles—in Dorothy’s case, the struggle that arises as a result of her race, gender, and economic status—ignored entirely, which ultimately makes it more difficult to advocate for awareness of these struggles.

Despite these struggles with poverty, a number of Asian Americans believe in the American Dream, which can be defined as, “A capitalist ideology associated specifically with American history and culture. According to the ideology of the American Dream, all those who have the determination to work hard enough and the persistence to work long enough can rise as far as their ability will take them—even from “rags to riches”—because America is the land of equal opportunity for all.” (Tyson 120) The American Dream ignores the impact factors such as race and socioeconomic class can have on one’s ability to achieve the “American Dream”, and

with the added beliefs of the model minority trope, Asian Americans have constraints on how far they can excel according to the American Dream.

A majority of AAPI Californians (sixty-two percent) believe that the ideology of the American Dream still holds true today, and can be used to attain an overwhelming amount of success and fortune to escape their political, economic, and social hardships. Fifty-six percent of AAPI Californians who are working and not struggling with poverty believe in the American Dream. Notably, even for the AAPI Californians working but still struggling with poverty, fifty-six percent also believe in the American Dream. However, AAPI Californians born outside the U.S. are more likely to believe the American Dream holds true than those born inside the U.S. (PRRI, 2019)

The American Dream ideology is present throughout the course of the novel *Interior Chinatown* and shows how the beliefs reflected from the data taken from AAPI Californians can impact Asian Americans' struggle with poverty. In the novel, Willis Wu's parents, Ming-Chen Wu and Dorothy, show that despite the American Dream emphasizing hard work as the key to success, it does not guarantee long-lasting wealth.

As previously stated, AAPI Californians born outside the U.S. are more likely to believe the American Dream holds true. For those born outside the U.S., America is often portrayed as a land that promises an abundance of opportunities and fortune, but this idea is upheld by various methods of propaganda. The propaganda influences many forms of media and creates a false reality that ignores the struggles of poverty that arise during the immigration process for Asian Americans.

For example, Ming-Chen Wu and Dorothy immigrated to America from Taiwan. From their initial arrival, they struggle to adapt to America. In the novel, prior to moving into the SRO,

Dorothy is described to be praying to “The minor god of immigration and prosperity in real estate transactions.” (Yu 151) Dorothy creating a shrine for the “minor god of immigration” can be an allegory that portrays her hopes for the American Dream to give her the fortune and success it often promises so that she may achieve a good place of living after immigrating.

However, for both Ming-Chen Wu and Dorothy, the American Dream did not hold true, and despite their hard work, they both found it nearly impossible to find jobs in their respective fields and purchase a home, which increased their struggle with poverty. “But despite her prayers, people do not want to sell Dorothy and Wu a house. And that’s okay, because they can’t afford one. But people also do not want to rent them an apartment. Which would also be understandable, as Dorothy and Wu have a meager income...” (Yu 152) Their low income leads them to live in the SRO in Chinatown which is “... a place they can afford”, (Yu 152) though it is mentioned that, “they don’t have to buy broken rice like many who live on the floors below.” (Yu 152) This not only shows the poor conditions of the SRO again, but it also shows how the SRO existed as a last option for Dorothy and Ming-Chen Wu, who sought better with their expectations influenced by the American Dream.

Furthermore, Ming-Chen Wu once gained the title of “Kung Fu Guy”—a role that is considered throughout the novel to be highly prestigious; however, the prestige and success that comes with the role did not exclude him from poverty, since once the glory was over, he lived in a small room in the SRO, struck by poverty like the other residents. “Until your father realizes that, despite it all, the bigger check, the honorable title, the status in the show, who he is ... Everything has changed, nothing has changed” (Yu 159). Despite how much Ming-Chen Wu dedicated himself to becoming “Kung Fu Guy”, nothing changed once he acquired this title, and he still struggled with poverty.

Poverty is not an issue limited to one member of a family but can spread through multiple generations over the course of time. In *Interior Chinatown*, poverty is shown to be passed down through generations and impacts familial relations. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, approximately seven percent of Asian American families living in the United States were living below the poverty line in 2021, and the poverty rate of Asian American families has been progressively increasing since 2019.

In the case of the novel, one example of poverty impacting a family through generations is Willis Wu with his wife, Karen, and their daughter, Phoebe. After the birth of Phoebe, there is a moment in the novel when Karen and Willis are debating where they should live so that their daughter is raised in a good environment. “You can’t raise this kid here, you think. But for the time being, until you make it, it’ll have to do. All of you in the room on eight ... The sounds of the building traveling up the central column. Hot garbage wafting up in thermal waves.” (Yu 176) Willis Wu’s parents, Dorothy and Ming-Chen Wu, struggled with poverty while he was a child, and this sadly continued onward into Willis Wu’s generation with his daughter. Again, the SRO’S condition is described in a way that emphasizes the unpleasing conditions, which are unsuitable for anyone, especially families that are trying to raise a child. Living in the SRO raises the potential for generational poverty to continue and can impact the dynamic of Asian American families.

Even in America, an affluent country that is often recognized for allowing anyone of any background to obtain freedom, wealth, and success through the idealized American Dream, poverty is still an extremely significant issue among the various races living in America. Though overlooked, Asian Americans are susceptible to the struggle of poverty and regularly have these

struggles ignored or entirely denied as plausible because American society upholds the model minority trope.

The constant erasure of Asian Americans' struggle with poverty can only do harm since issues cannot be mended if they are not first acknowledged. When the loudest conversations in America do not discuss the impact poverty has, especially when paired with the model minority myth, society is simply reinforcing the ideology of the myth and portraying Asian Americans in a dehumanizing way, which widens the gap between impoverished Asian Americans from the rest of the country, as they have their experiences essentially disregarded.

Without fully addressing the poverty Asian Americans experience and examining how the beliefs of the model minority trope add to the continual erasure of their struggles, a harmful cycle will continue portraying Asian Americans according to the model minority trope.



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