

Second Place Senior Essay
Emily Chang
Albemarle High School, Mr. Brian Nagel

Life As The Model Minority

I used to be a character out of a myth. The myth portrayed me as obedient, so I never knew what it was like to talk back to my parents. The myth portrayed me as academic, so I took my school lessons at face value, never questioning whether the ones on race were sugar-coated. The myth portrayed me as shy, so I never spoke up when people offended me, allowing their arguments to become more inflammatory. I was a perfect caricature of the Asian American Model Minority Myth.

My parents were characters from the same myth. In it, they rose above the prejudice of internment camps and immigration bans to become obedient, academic, and shy Americans. In their eyes, they overcame discrimination, making them members of a model minority. If they could do it, why couldn't other minorities do so as well? I usually turned a blind eye whenever they used their myth to justify subtly bigoted statements about communities of color. But when their snide comments matured into derogatory remarks about the killings of unarmed Black men and Black Lives Matter protests, I called them racists. In turn, my mother refused to talk to me. My father called me disrespectful and demanded that I apologize. For a brief moment in time, I broke out of the myth's mold and was criticized for it.

I retreated back into my myth, seeking guidance in literature. Still, when I read of Frederick Douglass' harrowing experiences as a slave, I could only think, "If only my parents read this, maybe they'd understand why Black Lives Matter protests exist to this day." The book was also

a moment of introspection. When I accused my family of being racist, I was speaking about a cause that I didn't fully understand. Douglass' accounts aligned with what was taught in school but indicated that most of what I learned conveniently omitted the horrifying realities of slavery. Before I could educate others about race, I needed to educate myself because my parents were not alone in their myth.

Parts of the Asian community weaponize the Model Minority Myth to breed their own kinds of anti-Black racism. Some Asian mothers teach their kids to hate affirmative action because such policies allow people of color to "steal their spots" in college. Others tell their children to never befriend Black classmates because they "cause too much crime."

There was a time in history when America accused Asians of the same deeds Asians accuse Blacks. When Asians were regarded not as Americans, but as thieves who "stole American jobs." When Asians were seen as "propagators of crime" and consequently banned from immigrating to the United States under the Chinese Exclusion Act. According to the Model Minority Myth, Asian Americans overcame these prejudices but their victory was only made possible through the efforts of Black activists. Because Black educators pressured President Kennedy to sign on to affirmative action, Asian Americans could apply to jobs and gain a fair education without fear of racial discrimination. Because Martin Luther King Jr. persuaded President Johnson to sign the Immigration Act of 1965, Asian families could immigrate to America. Since civil rights movements sowed the seeds of racial equality, Asian Americans could reap the rewards.

The dismantling of this myth began with education. Others have used the same tool to reveal the injustices that existed in their societies. Elie Wiesel and his book *Night* taught millions the consequences of looking the other way as a genocide occurs in plain sight. Anne Frank and her diary served as a lesson on how totalitarianism maims childhood. John Lewis and his voter education inspired minorities to right social wrongs through the power of the ballot. Ruth Bader Ginsburg and her Harvard-Columbia education made gender discrimination illegal in the eyes of the law.

I've done the same. To stand up to my family's preconceptions about race and educate my community about the racism we perpetuate through our obedience, I've exposed the fallacies of the myth we are all part of. The Model Minority is a myth because it is only half of the true story. The parts where minorities worked as one are deleted, making it easier to blindly promote racism.

My community's success was owed in part to the heroes of the Civil Rights Movement, yet we wrote a myth that derides the suffering of these figures. The myth contradicts itself, encouraging scholarship in its characters but ignorance toward others, demanding obedience from its children but immorality in its doctrines. It has turned friend into foe and set race against race. Wanting to correct these misconceptions, I've hosted discussions about race in my household and abroad to create a community whose members can look past the twisted logic of the myth they are characters of. By promoting racial awareness, I am now a member of an Asian community that is more empathetic toward other communities.

I rewrote the myth I was once part of. It asks readers to obey their conscience and not the premeditated frenzies of their communities, so they won't perpetuate acts of hate. It asks readers to be well-educated on all aspects of their community, so the doctrines they follow aren't one-sided. It asks readers to not remain passive in the face of prejudice, because blind eyes incense bigotry. I am no longer the character; I am the repudiator of the Model Minority Myth.