Between Stereotype and Self: The Role of the Model Minority Myth in Shaping Academic Decisions Among Asian American Students at an Elite University

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A. Introduction

Anti-immigrant sentiment in the United States peaked during the exclusion era, exemplified by the National Origins Act of 1924. The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act abolished this system, presenting immigration as a vital means of reuniting U.S. citizens with their family. Although the 1965 immigration reform is often celebrated as a liberal milestone, Lee (2015) offers a critical perspective, arguing that family reunification has historically functioned as an exclusionary mechanism. According to Lee, policymakers constructed an idealized concept of family and leveraged it to discriminate against immigrants based on gender, class, race, and ethnicity. For example, immigration policies excluded Chinese immigrants, portraying them as immoral and lacking respect for family. Yet, wealthy Chinese merchants were granted entry alongside their wives, as they aligned with the prevailing class and gender ideals.

My research idea was inspired by the question: “Is model minority myth a continuation of immigrant discrimination and exclusion?” The model minority myth began to dominate the narratives about Asian Americans in the media starting in the 1960s (Wong et al. 1998). It sought to explain why Asian Americans achieved higher socioeconomic and educational attainment than the White majority, despite their status as a racial and ethnic minority (Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009). The myth portrayed Asian Americans as diligent, frugal, family-oriented, and driven by a passion for education—attributing their success to cultural values that supposedly shaped these traits (Yu 2006). By presenting Asian Americans as proof that minorities can succeed without assistance, the myth reinforced the notion that the United States is a meritocratic society where racism is no longer a barrier. In doing so, it invalidated the demands for social justice from other racial and ethnic groups (Museus and Kiang 2009). This argument often manifests as: 'If Asian Americans can succeed without government support, why can’t African Americans or

other racial minority groups?' The label “model minority” thus implies that the struggles of other racial minorities stem from cultural shortcomings or a lack of ideal traits such as diligence, implicitly casting them in a negative light (Shih, Chang, and Chen 2019).

The model minority myth closely parallels the historical exploitation of family reunification as an immigration goal. Both serve exclusionary purposes: the former restricts entry of certain immigrants, while the latter invalidates systemic discrimination. Yet, whereas the idealized traits of family reunification are embedded in the definition of family itself, the model minority myth depicts these traits as innate to Asian Americans. This framing can lead to the misconception that the model minority myth does not negatively affect Asian Americans, since they become the standard against which other minorities are judged. Like family reunification, it initially appears innocuous. However, both constructs ultimately seek to regulate the behaviors of immigrants and racial minorities, thrusting them into narratives that they do not own (Shih, Chang, and Chen 2019). In the case of immigration exclusion, those who no longer aligned with the idealized concept of family faced deportation—such as when Chinese laborers were expelled from Seattle during the anti-Chinese riots of 1885 (Museum of History & Industry n.d.). Given the negative consequences of the family reunification narrative, it naturally raises the question of how the model minority myth shapes the lived experiences of Asian Americans.

One of the most frequently discussed aspects of the model minority myth is the disproportionate pursuit of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields among Asian Americans compared to other racial groups (Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009). This trend is closely tied to the myth, as the economic success associated with STEM careers reinforces the narrative that Asian Americans exemplify the ‘model’ minority. According to this framing, their pursuit of STEM is attributed to a desire for social mobility and cultural values

such as diligence. However, this explanation fails to capture the full picture. Asian Americans continue to face systemic discrimination and the lasting effects of historical exclusion, which shape their educational and career choices in ways that are often overlooked by the model minority myth.

This study explores the question: 'How do Asian American students navigate the model minority myth when making academic decisions to pursue STEM?' It seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of their motivations and experiences, particularly in response to the myth that does not align with their realities. By challenging dominant, racialized narratives that portray their pursuit of STEM as solely driven by social mobility, this research amplifies the voices of young Asian Americans and critically examines how the model minority myth influence their educational trajectories.

Additionally, this research is particularly relevant in today's political climate, as immigration tensions continue to rise—manifesting in large-scale deportations, restrictive legislation, and the criminalization of immigrants (Rivers et al. 2025). These developments echo exclusionary policies of the mid-nineteenth century, where family reunification narratives masked underlying discrimination against immigrants. While the model minority myth appears to positively depict Asian Americans as diligent and hardworking, it ultimately follows patterns of immigrant exclusion by defining idealized traits and reinforcing racial hierarchies. Understanding the broader consequences of this myth can foster deeper, critical dialogue on how racialized narratives perpetuate systemic inequalities at individual, community, and societal levels. In this study, I plan to examine the implications of the model minority myth in an academic setting, where Asian American students may feel disconnected from dominant narratives that fail to reflect their lived experiences and motivations for academic decisions.

B. Literature Review

Several theories attempt to explain why a disproportionately high number of Asian American students pursue STEM fields. In this discussion, I will explore three perspectives that highlight the social, cultural, and structural forces influencing these academic choices: home influence theory, assimilation theory, and strategic adaptation theory.

The home influence theory examines the micro-level factors, particularly the expectations set by family and cultural traditions. In many Asian cultures, children are expected to care for their parents and younger siblings as they reach adulthood (Ngo and Lee 2007). This framework suggests that Asian parents impose high academic expectations on their children because their future well-being is closely tied to their children's success. Additionally, Asian parents often encourage STEM majors, viewing them as pathways to prestige, financial stability, and long-term security in contemporary society (Song and Glick 2004). This preference significantly shapes the academic trajectories of Asian American students, as cultural norms emphasize respect for elders—especially parents—and intergenerational responsibility (Wong et al. 1998). While this theory highlights the strong role of family influence, it also inadvertently reinforces the model minority myth, promoting the narrative that Asian American success stems solely from their cultural values. By framing their achievement as a product of discipline and familial expectations, it risks overlooking the systemic forces that shape academic decisions among Asian American students.

The assimilation theory attributes the success of Asian Americans to their ability to integrate into mainstream society. This perspective suggests that as Asian Americans adopt American values and distance themselves from traditional cultural practices, they achieve socioeconomic advancement, becoming more like the White majority (Shih, Chang, and Chen

2019). Unlike the model minority myth, which frames success as inherent to Asian culture, the assimilation theory argues that upward mobility stems from the deliberate adoption of dominant societal norms. However, it ultimately reaches a similar conclusion: that Asian Americans are no longer a marginalized minority. Their favorable socioeconomic attainments are presented as evidence of successful integration and positive relations with the White majority (Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009). Despite this assertion, historical patterns of exclusion and discrimination reveal that Asian Americans have long been subjected to explicit racism and systemic barriers. Furthermore, research demonstrates that not all Asian Americans experience full assimilation—particularly Southeast Asians who arrived as refugees rather than immigrants. Many remain in search of their own identity within American society, navigating cultural tensions without fully conforming to mainstream expectations (Xie and Goyette 2003; Ngo and Lee 2007). These complexities challenge the assumption that assimilation guarantees socioeconomic success, prompting a closer examination of how structural inequalities continue to shape the experiences of Asian Americans.

In contrast with the previous two theories, the strategic adaptation theory acknowledges the systemic discrimination faced by Asian Americans and argues that their pursuit of high academic attainment is not solely driven by their cultural and familial values. Instead, it serves as a strategy to navigate potential workplace discrimination. Recognizing their minority status in a racialized labor market, Asian Americans turn to academic achievement—particularly in STEM fields—as a means of securing stability and minimizing exposure to racism (Xie and Goyette 2003). By emphasizing systemic barriers, this theory directly challenges the model minority myth and rejects the notion that Asian Americans have fully escaped minority status in today's

meritocratic society. However, it does not fully address the ways in which Asian Americans' perceived worth remains tied to their pursuit of STEM majors.

Asian Americans have long been targets of exclusion, discrimination, and social control. Until the mid-twentieth century, they were labeled as 'yellow peril,' perceived as a threat to White American jobs and national security. However, following World War II, they were repositioned as an idealized labor force to meet the growing demand for STEM-specific skilled jobs. In the post-Sputnik era, many Asian migrants secured employer-sponsored permanent residency in the United States, contributing to technological advancements. Yet, this abrupt shift—from racialized threat to desirable workforce—suggested that Asian Americans were conditionally accepted, with their inclusion largely contingent on their pursuit of STEM fields. This conditional acceptance persists today. The justification for including students of color, particularly Asian Americans, in STEM often hinges on the perceived economic benefits to the state. Furthermore, immigration policies actively favor Asian individuals in STEM, reinforcing this trend. For instance, in 2014, most H-1B visas—primarily granted to STEM professionals—were issued to Asians (Chen and Buell 2017; Ransom and Winters 2016). These patterns continue to promote the idea that Asian Americans are welcomed into the U.S. not as a fully integrated community, but as contributors to the nation's STEM-driven economic and technological ambitions.

Just as policymakers once shaped U.S. immigration based on an idealized concept of family, contemporary narratives extend this logic by linking Asian Americans' societal acceptance to their perceived economic value in STEM occupations. Yet, the model minority myth obscures the conditional acceptance Asian Americans have faced by framing their

success—particularly in STEM—as a product of individual will rather than systemic pressures. This framework leads to negative impacts on Asian American individuals and communities.

The model minority myth promotes the perception that Asian Americans are no longer a marginalized group. This narrative leads to the assumption that they do not face significant difficulties, resulting in their exclusion from public policy discussions on civil rights, affirmative action, and access to mental and physical health care. As a result, vulnerable Asian American communities—such as low-income populations in New York City—often receive inadequate funding and services (Shih, Chang, and Chen 2019). Additionally, the myth imposes a homogenized view of Asians, overlooking the significant diversity in socioeconomic, cultural, and educational backgrounds within the Asian American community (Ngo and Lee 2007).

According to the majority-minority paradigm, minority status is defined by lower socioeconomic attainment relative to whites and limited representation in politics, the economy, and social institutions (Sakamoto, Goyette, and Kim 2009). Despite Asian Americans' relatively high socioeconomic attainment, they remain underrepresented in leadership positions—including in STEM. This discrepancy is particularly striking given the high number of Asian Americans pursuing STEM careers. For instance, although they constitute the largest racial cohort of professionals in Silicon Valley’s technology industry, they are the least likely to rise to leadership positions among all racial groups. Furthermore, research indicates that high educational attainment among most second-generation Asian Americans does not consistently translate into equitable labor market outcomes, despite a strong emphasis on education as a pathway to career success (Shih, Chang, and Chen 2019). These patterns reveal how the labor market and workplace are racialized in ways that disadvantage Asian Americans.

The persistence of the model minority myth can lead Asian Americans to internalize its expectations. This process occurs at both conscious and subconscious levels, as Asian Americans partially or fully accept the dominant discriminatory narratives imposed by the White majority against their racial and ethnic group (McGee, LaBlance, and Thakore 2016). It can lead Asian Americans to view the model minority myth positively, which can make them believe that their racial and ethnic background does not hinder their success. They can find it challenging to recognize discrimination when it occurs, because they have internalized the false notion that systemic discrimination no longer exists (Oyserman, Daphna, and Sakamoto 1997). Such rhetoric often leads to self-blame for perceived shortcomings, fostering harmful mental health effects when systemic discrimination is a significant factor (Shih, Chang, and Chen 2019). Research has shown that Asian Americans who see the model minority myth as an accurate reflection of their identity are more likely to experience psychological distress. Additionally, they are less likely to seek professional help, as they struggle to identify the underlying causes of their distress (McGee, LaBlance, and Thakore 2016).

In this literature review, I examined three theories that seek to explain the high proportion of Asian Americans pursuing STEM fields. While the home influence theory and assimilation theory reinforce misconceptions central to the model minority myth, the strategic adaptation theory offers a more comprehensive perspective, arguing that Asian Americans leverage educational achievement and STEM concentrations as a buffer against systemic workplace discrimination. However, this theory does not fully account for how historically Asian Americans' economic worth was tied to their STEM pursuits. Additionally, this review highlighted the broader consequences of the model minority myth, including the lack of policy

intervention for vulnerable Asian American communities, the invalidation of struggles stemming from systemic discrimination, and the negative psychological impact on individuals.

There is limited research on how Asian American students navigate decisions about pursuing STEM and how the model minority myth influences this process. This study prioritizes students' narratives, examining how they either reject or incorporate the myth when explaining their academic choices. The model minority myth overlooks the historical connection between Asian Americans' economic worth and STEM fields, as well as the systemic discrimination they continue to face. When confronted with the myth, some students may resist it by acknowledging what the myth disregards. In contrast, those who positively engage with the myth may be more inclined to approach STEM as a means of reinforcing their sense of belonging, reflecting patterns seen in historical efforts of immigrants and racial or ethnic minorities to fit in.

C. Research Question

I will aim to answer this research questions with my study: “How do Asian American students navigate the model minority myth when making academic decisions to pursue STEM?” This question encompasses multiple facets of their academic journey, including their motivations for choosing STEM, the stereotypes they encounter, the extent to which pursuing STEM impacts their sense of belonging, and the value they attribute to their identity as STEM pursuers.

Given the complexity of the model minority myth, I anticipate a range of responses regarding the factors that influenced students' decisions to pursue STEM. Some may align with strategic adaptation theory, viewing STEM as a means to overcome workplace racism. Others may attribute their choice entirely to family and cultural influence. I also expect feelings of stress to emerge from the widespread adoption of the model minority myth in conversations within families, schools, and broader society—imposing heightened expectations on Asian American

students. In these cases, students may frame STEM as a tool for securing a stronger sense of belonging in the U.S., much like how the pursuit of STEM historically facilitated the shift in Asian American characterization from 'yellow peril' to an idealized workforce

I hypothesize that students who view the model minority myth positively are more likely to limit their academic choices to STEM, perceive their societal acceptance as conditional, and experience stress from unrealistic self-expectations. This is because the myth reinforces the idea that academic and career achievements—particularly in STEM—are necessary to prove one's worth. In contrast, students who critically engage with the myth may demonstrate greater academic freedom, exploring disciplines beyond STEM rather than dismissing fields such as the humanities. This may stem from their awareness of the myth's exclusionary nature and their rejection of its constraints, allowing them to pursue their interests as rightful members of society.

D. Methods

I will conduct semi-structured qualitative interviews with at least 25 Asian American students who have declared a STEM major at Washington University in St. Louis. Participants will be recruited through snowball sampling, beginning with my own acquaintances and expanding the sample by reaching their connections. When a participant expresses interest in joining the study, I will first send them a survey to confirm that they have a declared STEM major, identify as Asian American, and are either U.S. citizens or permanent residents. Asian international students will not be included, as they come from different backgrounds and face distinct challenges. The survey will collect participants' contact information, self-reported race and ethnicity, citizenship status, gender, age, academic year, and declared major. Once I verify that a participant meets my eligibility criteria, I provide a Calendly link to schedule an interview at their convenience. The interviews will be semi-structured, meaning I will have a set of

predetermined topics I want to address while allowing participants to give open-ended answers and guiding follow-up discussions when appropriate. The key objective of this research is to reclaim Asian American narratives, so the interview topics will focus on their lived experiences.

I will begin by asking about their academic decision-making process, including what made them choose their major, whether they considered non-STEM fields, and whether they felt pressure—such as from family, school, peers, or broader expectations—to pursue STEM. I will also explore their perceptions of stereotypes and societal expectations, asking whether they feel others assume they are naturally good at STEM or expect them to follow specific academic paths, how they respond to these expectations, and how they are impacted mentally. I will also ask how well they think Asian Americans are represented in STEM and other fields to gauge their perception of potential discrimination against Asian Americans at workplace and how they think STEM compares to other fields in that regard. Next, I will tap into their sense of belonging, asking whether there were moments when they felt disconnected or struggled to fit in. I will also ask whether, after graduation, they expect these challenges to persist or diminish in different settings to assess whether they believe pursuing STEM influences their level of social acceptance. Finally, I will discuss their future goals, asking what they hope to do with their degree and how they define success to understand how much economic worth they attribute to STEM occupations. I will also ask how they would feel if they unexpectedly had to pivot away from STEM in the future to gauge how important their pursuit of STEM is for their identity as Asian American in the United States.

I will record each interview and transcribe it using an automated transcription software. Using a qualitative data analysis software, I will code the transcriptions with a list of codes that relate to the model minority myth: family expectations and cultural norms, perceived belonging

and social identity, perception of non-STEM fields, economic security, acknowledgement of systemic discrimination, academic pressure. I will add new codes if themes arise across multiple participants that are not captured by the existing list of codes. Once the transcriptions are coded, I will examine how the responses differ for each code and if the participants' perceptions of the model minority myth influence their responses in other areas such as their sense of belonging and their acknowledgement of systemic discrimination.

E. Conclusion

This project employs qualitative interviews to explore how Asian American students navigate the model minority myth when making academic decisions to pursue STEM. While often framed as a narrative of success, the myth dismisses systemic forces that compel immigrants and racial or ethnic minorities to conform to and internalize certain expectations. Given the longstanding exclusionary practices against racial and ethnic minorities, this study is especially relevant today, as systemic barriers continue to shape pathways to societal belonging.

A key strength of this project is its focus on an underexplored intersection: the relationship between the model minority myth and major selection. Unlike existing literature that often generalizes Asian Americans' academic choices, this study prioritizes agency, allowing students to articulate their experiences and perspectives directly. However, certain limitations should be acknowledged. The use of snowball sampling and a relatively small sample size may affect the generalizability of findings across different institutions. Additionally, given that participants may interpret the model minority myth in varied ways, careful framing will be necessary to ensure analytical consistency. Despite these challenges, this research provides valuable insight into how the myth continues to shape individual academic trajectories and broader social dynamics.

F. References

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