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### **Asian Americans and Affirmative Action**

In recent years the Asian American community has served as the face of opposition to affirmative action in higher education. However, support for the race-conscious policy has remained steady in most Asian American communities since 2008; there has only been fluctuations in support among Chinese Americans. The media has depicted the Asian American community as a monolith, when in fact there is a diverse range of opinions surrounding affirmative action informed by racialization, individual ethnic ties, media, class and immigration status.

This misguided representation is partly a result of *Chinese exceptionalism*, or the erroneous substitution of the Chinese American community with the entire Asian American racial category. Yet, even among Chinese Americans, there is no unilateral opposition to affirmative action. Often Chinese Americans acknowledge that Black and brown communities are disadvantaged and there should be some interventionist policy to aid them. Furthermore, as a majority immigrant community, Asian Americans have a unique experience with identity. They are connected to and identify with their ethnicity which in turn provides the structure for them to experience the Asian American panethnic category. Thus to fully understand the interests of the Asian American community, the interaction between ethnic and panethnic ties must be fully explored. This heterogeneity is ignored in favor of a narrative that better fits with racial stereotypes of Asian Americans.

The model minority myth is crucial to understanding actual Asian American opposition to affirmative action and why Asian Americans are the perfect faces for opposition to affirmative action. Asian Americans are valorized relative to other communities of color, giving them an “honorary white” status. However, this valorization is dependent upon the so-called hard-

working culture that Asian Americans inherit from their country of origin, emphasizing their foreignness. Internalizing the model minority myth among Asian Americans predicts anti-Black attitudes and colorblindness; indirectly predicting opposition to affirmative action. Meanwhile, immigration laws have furthered the *hyper-selectivity* of immigrants from Asian countries. As highly educated Asian immigrants flow into the US, the model minority myth becomes more and more entrenched in mainstream opinion. Consequently, Asian Americans are used as stand-ins for white people, to fight their battles against race conscious policies on the basis of hard work and individual merit.

It is true, however, that Asian Americans do face barriers when it comes to higher education, but due to *negative action*, not affirmative action. The SFFA v. Harvard case is the best example of the misguided fight against affirmative action. The Asian penalty, as defined in the SFFA case, does not benefit Black and brown applicants. It actually becomes a bonus for white applicants. An Asian American applicant with the same test scores and personality scores as a white applicant is less likely to be admitted; the textbook definition of negative action. Despite this evidence, which SFFA put forward itself, they request that Harvard adjust its affirmative action policies in its admissions decisions. The motivations behind negative action generally have to do with racist notions of “yellow peril” or an “Asian invasion.” This suggests that more race-conscious policies, not less, would be beneficial for Asian Americans.

In short, the debate around affirmative action is marred by a monolithic representation of the Asian American community and a poor understanding of affirmative action itself; greater attention to the heterogenous Asian American identity and racial formation may shed light on the issue, revealing the part that white supremacy plays through the model minority myth and negative action.

## Sources:

1. Museus, Samuel D., Amy C. Wang, Hannah Hyun White, Vanessa S. Na. "A Critical Analysis of Media Discourse on Affirmative Action and Asian Americans." *New Directions for Higher Education* 2019, No. 186 (Summer, 2019): 11-24

Museus et. all provide a brief history of affirmative action in higher education before diving into popular misconceptions about Asian Americans and affirmative action. They focus on five major misunderstandings that the mainstream media perpetuates among the general public. First, affirmative action is equated with discrimination against Asian Americans, or *negative action*. The second misconception is that Asian Americans are inherently more meritorious than other communities of color and their test scores prove it. Third, the conversation is often framed as diversity (Black and brown communities) versus merit (Asian American communities) and that the two are mutually exclusive. This leads into the fourth misconception: Asian Americans are directly competing against other communities of color for the same spots in college admissions. Finally, the media often paints the Asian American community as monolithic and always more qualified than another person of color. All of these misconceptions characterize the current debate surrounding affirmative action and are informed by the model minority myth; demonstrating an obvious need for a more accurate analysis that addresses the racial formation of Asian Americans rather than perpetuates it.

2. Wong, Janelle, Jennifer Lee, Van Tran. "Asian Americans' Attitudes toward Affirmative Action: Framing Matters." *AAPIData*, October 1, 2018.  
<http://aapidata.com/blog/aa-attitudes-affirmative-action/>

Wong et. all attempt to go beyond media headlines surrounding the affirmative action debate by investigating Asian American attitudes based on three surveys from 2016 (AAPIData Survey, Collaborative Multiracial Post-Election Survey and National Asian American Survey). They found that no matter how the question was asked, Asian Americans are more likely to support affirmative action; framing only affects the rate of that support. When questions include "increasing numbers of" black and minority students, versus a more neutral question of "increasing access to" higher education, support drops. Additionally, Wong et. all also found that a large number of respondents selected "I don't know" or "neutral" responses which suggests that the Asian American community might benefit from more information on affirmative action policies. Finally, they discovered that support for affirmative action among most Asian Americans has remained relatively stable since 2008; only support amongst Chinese Americans dropped significantly. These numbers reveal the diverse reality behind the opinion of Asian Americans on affirmative action and discredits the idea that all Asian Americans oppose affirmative action.

3. Poon, OiYan A, Megan S. Segoshi, Lilianne Tang, Kristen L. Surla, Caressa Nguyen, Dian D. Squire. "Asian Americans, Affirmative Action and the Political Economy of Racism: A Multidimensional Model of Raceclass Frames." *Harvard Educational Review* 89, No. 2 (Summer 2019): 201-226

Poon et. all use critical race-class theory to analyze the relationship between the Asian American community and affirmative action through interviews with Asian American activists on both sides of the debate. In their framework, they equate whiteness with property and explore how Asian Americans leverage their status as honorary whites through their policy positions. The vast majority of opponents to affirmative action were first generation Chinese men, while supporters were much more diverse in both ethnicity and immigration status. Poon et. all organized the frames from which the interviewees viewed affirmative action into four categories: systemic transformation, conscious compromise, abstract liberalism and ethnocentric nationalism. Systemic transformers supported affirmative action and saw themselves as dismantling systemic racism through affirmative action. Conscious compromisers were also supporters, but they subscribed to the “diversity bargain” brand of affirmative action. Abstract liberals were anti-affirmative action and recognized the existence of economic inequality, but did not engage in any race analysis. Ethnocentric nationalists were also opposed based on the belief that it disadvantaged their ethnicity and benefitted the morally undeserving. The article illustrated some of the differences in opinion held by the Asian American community as they are influenced by individual conceptions of race and class.

4. Lien, Pei-te. “Tracing Roots of Attitudes Toward Race and Affirmative Action Among Immigrant Chinese Americans: Learning From Undergraduate International Students.” *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education* Advance Online Publication (March, 2021): 1-13, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/dhe0000319>

Lien conducted interviews with Chinese immigrants that are current undergraduate students to illuminate how Chinese American immigrants view their racial positioning in the US and affirmative action. Most students said they experienced systemic racism in college admissions, they required higher test scores to be considered and affirmative action would exacerbate that problem. Many subscribed to media-driven stereotypes about other races (i.e. African-Americans are violent). Others were also informed by their experiences in China, where reparations for minorities are scarce. Some supported affirmative action, but few did so without clear stipulations. They saw affirmative action as lowering the bar and felt that individual merit should still be the master criterion. Most who opposed affirmative action saw discrimination as a thing of the past and insisted that other minorities just needed to work harder. A few recognized the income inequality Black and Latinx communities faced, but didn’t make the connection to systemic racism and still insisted that race should not be a factor. The study found that even Chinese Americans could not be categorized as unilaterally opposed to affirmative action. In particular, the study revealed the effects of immigration status and the media on opinion.

5. Okamoto, Dina G. The Ethnic-Panethnic Dynamics of Collective Action.” In *Redefining Race: Asian American Panethnicity and Shifting Ethnic Boundaries* (2014), 85-111

The identity of Asian Americans is often organized on two levels: ethnic group ties based on national origin and panethnic group ties based on a common racialization. Okamoto uses this idea of layered group boundaries to explore the way ethnic and panethnic organizing materialized in the post-1968 era. Often, the organizing structure and institutions within ethnic groups become the basis of panethnic communities. Although Okamoto focuses on organizing,

the framework of layered group boundaries and the symbiotic relationship between ethnic and panethnic identities help illuminate the unique experiences of Asian Americans. As a mostly immigrant population, Asian Americans do not strictly identify with their racialization. Asian Americans are also Japanese, Indian or Vietnamese Americans that exist within and contribute to ethnic and panethnic structures. Incredible heterogeneity exists alongside a common Asian American identity, which requires a more nuanced study of the community, especially when it comes to opinions on public policy. Okamoto's ideas provide a framework to analyze differing opinions on affirmative action through the recognition of layered identities. Additionally, it serves as the final theoretical step in disproving the narrative of Asian Americans as a monolith.

6. Yi, Jacqueline and Nathan R. Todd. "Internalized Model Minority Myth Among Asian Americans: Links to Anti-Black Attitudes and Opposition to Affirmative Action." *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology Advance Online Publication* (February, 2021): 1-10, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/cdp0000448>

Yi and Todd conducted a path analysis of 251 Asian American college students across multiple ethnicities to explore the effects of the model minority myth as a legitimizing ideology on colorblindness, just world beliefs and opposition to affirmative action. In their analysis, the model minority myth consists of two key parts: the *achievement orientation* of Asian Americans (belief that they are hardworking and culturally equipped to succeed) and *unrestricted mobility* (belief that they do not face racial discrimination.) Looking at direct effects, the model minority myth predicted greater colorblindness, just world beliefs and anti-Black attitudes. Indirectly, the model minority myth predicted opposition to affirmative action through greater colorblindness and just world beliefs. Yi and Todd use their findings alongside previous theory to conclude that the model minority myth serves as a predictor for opposition to affirmative action due to colorblind and achievement orientation ideologies. This article demonstrates how the racial formation of Asian Americans informs their opposition to affirmative action and reveals one part that white supremacy has to play in the debate.

7. Lee, Jennifer. "Asian Americans, Affirmative Action & the Rise in Anti-Asian Hate." *Daedalus* 150, No. 2 (Spring 2021): 180-198

Lee uses immigration theory and stereotypes to analyze the positioning of Asian Americans in the SFFA vs. Harvard case. First, she explains why Asian Americans are presented as the main opposition to affirmative action through what she deems the *hyper-selectivity* of Asian Americans. Of the United States' five largest Asian immigrant groups (Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese and Korean), all are more likely than their nonmigrant counterparts to have attended college. This has led to greater social and economic mobility but racialized Asian Americans as cold and socially incompetent, making them perfect candidates in the war waged against affirmative action by SFFA. Then, Lee clarifies the actual position of the Asian American community which has been marred by *Chinese exceptionalism*. The drop in support for affirmative amongst Asian Americans from 2012-2016 was the result of a drop in support amongst Chinese Americans. In general, Chinese Americans have been used as a synonym for Asian Americans; thus Chinese American opinions are synonymous with Asian American opinions. *Hyper-selectivity* and *Chinese exceptionalism* are key to understanding the current state

of opposition to affirmative action, enumerating why Asian Americans are perfectly positioned to act as the sole opposition.

8. Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics and Society* 27, No. 1 (1999): 105-138.

Through historical analysis Kim attempts to create a different picture of race in America by conceptualizing the racialization of Asian Americans as a triangulation vis-à-vis Blacks and whites. This occurs through two main processes: *relative valorization* (dominant group valorizes one subordinate group in relation to another) and *civic ostracism* (the dominant group constructs the subordinate group as immutably foreign). Both processes worked in tandem to produce the model minority myth. Kim claims that this racial triangulation has allowed whites to use Asian Americans as a stand-in for themselves, especially in battles surrounding minority rights, i.e. affirmative action, without appearing racist. Asian Americans are considered far too meritorious to benefit from affirmative action; thus they are barred from its programs. Then by using Asian Americans, they flip the script on affirmative action and make it look like "reverse discrimination." A strong understanding of the model minority myth is necessary to engage with the debate around affirmative action and better understand the Asian American community. Additionally, a thorough analysis of the racial triangulation of Asian Americans makes the role of white supremacy in the fight against affirmative action even clearer.

9. Feingold, Jonathan P. "SFFA v. Harvard: How Affirmative Action Myths Mask White Bonus." *California Law Review* 107 (2019): 707-735.

Feingold presents a critical analysis of the claims of SFFA against Harvard in an attempt to debunk the myth that Harvard's "Asian penalty" arises from affirmative action. That "penalty" actually benefits white applicants. Affirmative action is generally viewed as a zero sum game; one benefits as the other loses. Whites were the purported victims in most litigation, but in recent years there has been a shift toward using Asian Americans in the battle against affirmative action. The model minority myth has facilitated this shift, shaping the discourse on who does and does not belong in the higher education system. This narrative shift has also obscured the role of white applicants. SFFA itself found that Harvard may engage in *negative action* and that Asian American applicants with the same overall score are 6.7% less likely to be selected for admission compared to white applicants. SFFA requests that Harvard eliminate race conscious policy to remedy this disparate impact. This case is a perfect example of the misguided fight against affirmative action, while shedding light on the actual source of discrimination against Asian Americans.

10. Ho, Shawn. "A Critique of the Motivations Behind Negative Action Against Asian Americans in U.S. Universities: The Model Victims." *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* 5 (2015): 79-99

Ho describes the intentional and unintentional motivations behind negative action against Asian Americans in higher education (denying admission to an Asian American who would have been admitted if that person was white instead). Historically, Asian Americans and other marginalized groups have experienced negative action through racial quotas, comparison within

racial groups, redirection, testing cutoffs and legacy preference. Openly racist motivations behind negative action generally involve yellow peril sentiments; the false belief that Asian Americans are unfair competitors and will soon take over. More subtle racist motivations behind negative action involve three aspects of the model minority myth: Asian Americans are only good at STEM, are not well-rounded students and below whites. Low admission of Asian American students is then blamed on too many STEM applicants or “one dimensional” Asian American applicants. Often, colleges and universities believe negative action against Asian Americans will result in greater diversity which will benefit everyone. They also think that rejecting Asian Americans and limiting representation will spare them from discrimination by whites. All these motivations behind negative action illustrate clearly discriminatory policy that could be remedied by race conscious measures. Ultimately, negative action is the source of discriminatory admissions, not affirmative action.