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### COVID-19 and the Symbolic Violence of the Model Minority Myth

*"It's not racist at all"* was the only response that the standing U.S. President Donald Trump had to face challenges regarding his racist remarks in labelling COVID-19 the "Chinese Virus". While Trump may not have intended to be racist in labelling it this term, the results of such action definitely were. The clear dismissal of the racist undertones of such a label and the blindness to the weight that these words carry is a clear result of a history of structural and racial violence against Asian Americans. Symbolic violence, through the idea of the Model Minority Myth, has forced the Asian American community to divide itself through the idea of economic success and thus subdue their own voice. There has been a shift away from Asian Americans viewing themselves as a solidified community based on race and culture, but rather towards economic status. We see in our current state of pandemic, a steep rise in racist attacks against Asian Americans in our country, as well as an inability for that community to speak up against these actions.

COVID-19 has brought with it an array of challenges for every American to face. Inaccessibility to certain medical supplies, job loss and social isolation is something that the common American fears and is at great risk of during this pandemic. However, a heightened sense of fear in the COVID-19 environment has revealed how centuries of racism and structural violence has affected Asian Americans. The president's words are a reflection to the rising, yet

historic racism against Asian Americans and negligence of government officials in addressing and denouncing such acts. Rather, the president chose to support these racist actions by associating COVID-19 with the Chinese, and refusing to denounce racism against Asian Americans. This racism against Asian Americans has its origins in structural violence that can trace itself to the legal exclusion of Chinese through the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which prohibited the immigration of Chinese laborers. This created a great sentiment against Asian people who were seeking a better life in America. They were viewed as stealing jobs and taking advantage of the American Dream that was promised to everyone. Structural violence, Janet Yang, the producer of *The Joy Luck Club* (1996), said in an interview regarding Asian Americans during COVID-19, *“I have seen this incredible seesaw effect. We can go back to the turn of the century, when Chinese were the only people to be legally excluded from this country because people were so fearful of the jobs they were taking. That was seemingly a place that we would never go to anymore, that level of vitriol. We’ve seen it, though, in waves since then: World War II, we had an Asian enemy; Korean War, we had an Asian enemy; Vietnam War, we had an Asian enemy. And then we had Asian enemies that were economic in nature.”* (Janet Yang 2020). Asians have historically been perceived as adversaries and rivals in the eyes of America. Through the history of wars against Japan and Vietnam as well as the current economic and political tensions between the U.S. and China, anti-Asian sentiment has been present in American history.

This structural violence in the form of westernization perhaps, was a response in fear of globalization and clashes of civilizations. In the turn of the century, Americans feared losing their way of life and identity to the growing rest of the world. This fear is highlighted in Samuel P. Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations?*, in which he writes, “A West at the peak of its power

confronts non-Wests that increasingly have the desire, the will and the resources to shape the world in non-Western ways” (Huntington 1993). Huntington alludes to the desire that the West has in maintaining and spreading their way of life, and in turn, their fear of losing that way of life. This mentality reflects on a history of strong anti-immigration laws against Asians and those looking to start a life in the United States.

Possibly as a response or a survival measure against this structural racism and pressure of westernization, Asian Americans created a symbol of the “Model Minority”. This “Model Minority” fit in perfectly with the idea of the American Dream and western ideals. Model Minorities are law-abiding, hard working citizens who do not speak up against the injustices that they faced. They are cookie-cutter, and ultimately the ideal immigrant American. While the symbol of the Model Minority is a reflection of the success of some Asian Americans and the possibility of the American Dream, a large issue with it is the loss of the individual. The Model Minority Myth has no room for diversity, differences in individuals or culture. It was developed to fit only into American culture and suggests a loss of individuality and one’s own culture. Furthermore, this idea of the Model Minority strengthens a divide between Asian American communities based on success. Groups such as the Hmong (26%), Bangladeshi (20%), Cambodian (18%) and Pakistani (15%) faced poverty rates of over 15% from 2007 to 2009 in the United States (Obama White House Archives). Hmong Americans faced poverty rates greater than those of African Americans from 2007 to 2011 (25.8%) (census.gov). When compared to more successful groups in the Asian American community, Filipino, Indian and Japanese ethnic groups faced under 8% poverty rates, even lower than those of white Americans at 11.6% from 2007 to 2011 (Obama White House Archives and census.gov). A 2017 snapshot from the JEC Senate committee showed a further disparity in education, with one in two Asian Americans over

the age of 25 having a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to a national average of one in three adults ([jec.senate.gov](http://jec.senate.gov)). While this statistic looks extremely promising for Asian Americans, it does not tell the whole truth. Like the Model Minority Myth, this statistic does not speak the same truth for the Asian American community as a whole. This statistic is largely skewed by Asian immigrants coming to the U.S with these higher education degrees already attained. A shocking statistic is that "within subgroups, 10 of 21 [of Asian Americans] have lower levels of college degree attainment than the national average" ([jec.senate.gov](http://jec.senate.gov)).

This large disparity in statistics of economic status and education level shows how inaccurate and ineffective the Model Minority myth is. Furthermore, the Model Minority myth brings about symbolic violence to Asian American communities. Symbolic violence refers to an acceptance of a subordinate's position in response to violence from the oppressor. A subject of this violence may feel shame or embarrassment from this form of violence, symbolizing acceptance of these terms. The Model Minority myth reinforces this by suggesting a way that Asians should be, and shuns those who are not such. In 2020, Andrew Yang, an Asian American democratic presidential candidate made this statement regarding Asian Americans facing racism during COVID-19. "We Asian Americans need to embrace and show our American-ness in ways we never have before. We need to step up, help our neighbors, donate gear, vote, wear red white and blue, volunteer, fund aid organizations, and do everything in our power to accelerate the end of this crisis. We should show without a shadow of a doubt that we are Americans who will do our part for our country in this time of need" (Washington Post 2020). As an Asian American who has seen the issues of the Model Minority myth firsthand, I personally disagree with Andrew Yang and see his statement as a sign of symbolic violence against Asian Americans. By stating that we have a need to show our American-ness, we prove to the oppressors that we

believe that we are not fully American. Professor Hromadzic made an interesting comment in relating symbolic violence to structural violence in her lecture. She said, “Symbolic violence, however, is simply put, an embodiment of structural violence” (Hromadzic Lecture 8 2020). Structural violence in this case, is the racism against Asian Americans regarding the pandemic. Following Yang’s statement, a response of showing “American-ness” to the centuries of structural prejudice and racism against Asian Americans would be symbolic violence. In the case of COVID-19, racism against Asian Americans regarding the spread of the virus has been rampant. From the National Center for Biotechnology Information journal, “Hate crime may be used to “other” minority racial/ethnic groups who are perceived as dangerous (i.e., belief that people of Asian descent are solely responsible for causing and spreading COVID-19) and outside their place of belonging” (Gover, et al). Showing American-ness in the face of intense racist crimes denies the injustice of racism in the first place. There should not be a need to show or prove that you are American. America, as an identity, is multifaceted and not just representative of one way of life. The Model Minority myth has prevented Asian Americans from speaking out, as the myth perpetuates that the model minority does not speak out against the injustices of the system. A problem with the Model Minority myth is that it forces Asian Americans to think of their economic success, rather than their identity as a community. Yang in this case, is wrong to suggest that Asian Americans show their American-ness in the face of explicit racism.

The structural violence facing Asian Americans has resulted in the creation of the Model Minority myth as a survival mechanism. However, in creating such a myth, Asian Americans have created a way to silence themselves behind the chase for success. In the face of racist attacks in light of COVID-19, Asian Americans should not try to prove their own American-ness, but prove that America itself has a home for Asian Americans.

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