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Final Paper

The Model Minority Myth and Its Lasting Prevalence Today

The model minority myth has been perpetuated throughout history as a beneficial stereotype, or a backhanded compliment. For decades, the notion that Asians were the only non-marginalized race in America was conceived and then widespread. In today's era, people seem to have recognized that the myth is a harmful stereotype masqueraded as an advantageous one—however, there belie common microaggressions that still affect Asian-Americans. For the purposes of this assignment and my final project, I chose to interview three self-identified Asian-Americans and take field notes at an Asian-American Student Association (AASA) meeting. My interview questions asked for personal anecdotes about experiences with the model minority myth, as well as possible ostracization one may have experienced from fellow Asian-Americans. Through my research, I found that the model minority myth is indeed a harmful one to many Asian-Americans, and one that is misunderstood by people who have the privilege to turn a blind eye toward it.

Throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries, racism toward Asians unsurprisingly reached its peak; there existed an unspoken social hysteria that suggested Asian-Americans were taking jobs from white Americans. The Chinese Exclusion Acts restricted the number of Chinese (and other Asian) immigrants who could move to the United States. Following that, news articles, media outlets, and pop culture began the propagandization of Asian-Americans as, "threatening, exotic, and degenerate"[1]. Rather than responding with violent protests, Asian-Americans dissented by turning inward rather than outward: they sought white approval by transforming and

[1] Guo, Jeff. "The Real Reasons the U.S. Became Less Racist toward Asian Americans." *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 29 Nov 2016.

assimilating themselves into the ideal American citizen. By the 1960s, the racialized narrative toward Asians began to shift. Newspapers "glorified Asian-Americans as industrious, law-abiding citizens who kept their heads down and never complained". When combined with the increasing popularity of the Civil Rights movement of the 1940s, stories of Asian-American success rose to prominence, while stories of their failure were erased from the public eye.

It is common to downplay the benefits that white Americans (and white people in general) receive from developing this institutionalized racist structure. Internal structural changes throughout US power dynamics have driven the Asian-American story of success to be replicated—it then becomes easy to shift the scapegoat from Asian-Americans as the 'foreigner' to African- and other black Americans, a scapegoat race that, as today's socioeconomic sphere shows, the country has since failed to completely deconstruct.[2] It was a simple, American solution: shift the blame for black poverty instead of addressing the underlying issue. If Asians could succeed, why couldn't black people? Without downplaying the plight of another marginalized minority, the nonviolent Asian metamorphoses for white acceptance seems at least somewhat complicit in the relevance of the model minority myth.

Today, the myth itself appears to be less prominent, yet pervasive racial microaggressions remain criminally unaddressed by social justice movements, much like many other Asian-American struggles. Through my interview, I found that disturbing stories about the myth still linger. When asked about a personal anecdote about her experience with the stereotype, the interviewee instead offered a story about a friend: "One time one of my girl friends came to me crying because this group of boys heard her speaking and made up a bunch of "Chinese" [racialized slurs] and interjected them into a conversation that they weren't even [a part of]. I've never wanted

[2] Wu, Ellen D. *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority*. Princeton University Press, 2015.

to strangle people more." The insinuation here of Asian-American violence against one or more white Americans tends to also be amalgamated into nonexistence along with Asians who don't find the archetypal success story or Asians who choose to study an art rather than a STEM field. Asian violence was mentioned, albeit briefly, in Kimmel's reading for lecture: *Angry White Men*. School shooter Seung-Hui Cho made headlines, noteworthy that "after two decades of school shootings by white kids in which race was never once mentioned as a variable, suddenly the entire explanation centered on the fact that Cho was Asian American"[3]. Many asked questions: what happened to the model minority? People wondered: "Perhaps being an Asian-American came with so much pressure to perform, to be that model minority, that it was simply too much. Perhaps he simply cracked under the strain".

That seems to be the case. My interviewee stated, "Every Asian here knows about the idea that an A is the only acceptable grade for [his/her/their] parents…" If extrapolated, it could be argued that the model minority myth still exists today largely due to intergenerational (and often parental) power structures. Eric Wolf refers to this dynamic as "organizational power," wherein one "operational unit" exerts itself and its power over another, often within the same constituent parts.[4] The constituent parts here would be an older generation of Asian-Americans, the ones more likely to still abide by the assimilation of their younger selves, exerting itself over a younger generation. My interviewee seems to acknowledge the dynamic: "I still remember those times that I'd cry myself to sleep because I was so anxious about an exam the next day or crying on the walk back home because I knew that I'd gotten [a bad grade] and I'd have to see their disappointed faces looking back at me. My dad always worked late so I'd have to deal with [twice as much] disappointment throughout the day." Although it is reasonable to suggest that people of any race

[3] Kimmel, Michael. 2013. "Angry White Boys." In, *Angry White Men*, pp. 69-97.
[4] Wolf, Eric. 1990. "Facing Power—New Insights, New Questions." *American Anthropologist* 92(3): 586-588.

would like to avoid disappointing their parents via academia, my interviewee says, “Oh, man. I don’t even [want to] think about that. Like, I know I—I mean, we, are privileged enough to not be a black American today but with [white Americans]? I don’t know. People [who are] privileged enough to not experience daily stereotypes don’t understand how the “model minority” idea is bad. If you do anything less than what’s expected of you, you’re [a failure]. I hate the feeling of disappointing my parents, my friends, and especially [myself]. And that feeling only gets worse when you’re [Asian-American] and that standard for failure is already so high.”

While its past is problematic and the present worrying, what of the future of the model minority myth? I took field notes at an AASA meeting, featuring Asian-Americans of different ethnicities unaccompanied by parental guidance, to perhaps witness what the future could hold as this current generation becomes the older one. While there did seem to be an existing social atmosphere of Asian pride throughout the meeting (as seen by the speaking of people in their native tongue and the presence of Asian snack foods), there was also a disturbing consistency: much of the vernacular fringed upon African- and other black American language. Many Asian young men spoke/sang the n-word when it appeared in song or in their conversations. It was deeply uncomfortable and struck me as a means of differentiating oneself from others. I’ve heard many times in my own experience as an Asian-American that a certain person was “unlike other Asians” or “from the hood” despite being part of the economic middle class. In an attempt to stand out, many young Asian-Americans choose a problematic approach that marginalizes an already very marginalized minority.

In conclusion, the research I have done seems to suggest that the model minority myth only enforces harmful stereotypes and is a harmful notion rather than a beneficial one. Beginning from the late 18th century and extending to today, the myth was galvanized and propagandized by white

Americans as a means of shifting the scapegoat race to African- and other black Americans; it also suggests that Asian-Americans were at least somewhat complicit in their attempts to assimilate into the gold standard citizen. The myth continues to be propagated by older generations toward younger ones as an exertion of organizational power dynamics, resulting in Asian-Americans struggling in academics to achieve a high standard of performance. The future of the myth is still somewhat cloudy, as some Asian-Americans tend to use problematic black vernacular in an attempt to extricate themselves from the stereotypes.