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## The Model Minority Myth and How That Affects Us

THE ASIAN COMMUNITY has always been seen as silent, well-behaved achievers and held up as “good examples” when talking about the underrepresented and immigrants in Western countries, especially the United States. While it may seem like a compliment, this stereotype has caused harm that’s rippled through the Asian community.

According to the book, *The Routledge Companion to Race and Ethnicity*: “The term ‘model minority’ refers to minority groups that have ostensibly achieved a high level of success in contemporary US society. The term has been used most often to describe Asian Americans, a group seen as having attained educational and financial success relative to other immigrant groups. The ‘model minority’ label on its surface seems to be an accolade because it appears to praise Asian Americans for their achievements.”<sup>1</sup>

And yet you rarely see Asian women (or even men) in higher leadership and management roles. In many instances, the measure of success for Asians is taken for granted. For example, how can one Asian person in a leadership position be seen as a

“success” in representation? It’s as if that person’s Asian-ness was enough to represent the more than 24 million Asian Americans who live in the United States.

You would think that if Asian Americans “achieved a high level of success,” then at the bare minimum, the community would represent at least 20% of the leadership positions in the United States, which is far from the reality.

### **History of the Term “Model Minority”**

On January 9, 1966, sociologist William Petersen wrote an article for *The New York Times Magazine* called, “Success Story: Japanese-American Style.”<sup>2</sup>

In the original article, Petersen talks about the exclusion, challenges, and discrimination that Japanese Americans had gone through and mentions how they successfully overcame their challenges by assimilating in to Western culture.

While some Japanese Americans embraced this article as a success for the community in terms of gaining visibility and validation, most of them thought the depiction of Japanese Americans as “compliant” was overly exaggerated.<sup>3</sup>

It’s amazing how one person’s article has drastically affected the way Asian Americans and Canadians were seen by the Western world. It’s taken as absolute truth, when in reality, it’s only one person’s perspective.

Japanese Americans started to be used as an example of obedience and strong work ethic compared to the “problem minority.”

If there is one word to abolish using to describe non-white people it’s the word “minority.”

In many cases, it no longer means the statistical minority, but a term for exclusion and inferiority: minor as in not important or not the preferred norm. “Minority” feels like we’re being downgraded because of differences in cultural background. It’s become

such a problematic term that needs to be dismantled in the work for equity and progress.

Since that article came out from Petersen claiming that Japanese Americans were the model minority, more articles came out claiming Asian Americans are the model minority because we are “obedient” and willing to assimilate in to Western culture.

From personal experience, I think this is especially true for Chinese Americans, as mentioned in this follow-up article titled: “Success of One Minority Group in the US.”<sup>4</sup>

The article describes Chinese Americans as hardworking and self-sufficient people who don’t need help from anyone else to achieve the American Dream. It also mentions that even with low pay and long hours building the railroad tracks, and faced with the Chinese Exclusion Act, Chinese Americans “never complained” about it. Chinese Americans were willing to take any job they could get in America. If they were a scholar in their home country and the only job they could get in America was being a waiter, then they were willing to take it. The message was that you could throw anything at Chinese Americans, and no matter how bad the situation, they would find a way to adapt.

## **The Danger of the Myth**

The Western world has always lumped the Asian community together as one race and one culture in spite of the fact that Asian culture is a very diverse community with many different ethnicities.

Even when I googled the terms “Asian Culture Facts,” the top-ranked article that popped up was “10 Interesting Facts to Help You Understand Chinese Culture” showing two white people in traditional Chinese clothing.<sup>5</sup>

It’s 2022, and the world according to Google still thinks that all Asians come from China. Hopefully, by the time you read this

book, the algorithms have changed and will rank an article that has diverse representation when you search for “Asian Culture Facts.”

This has become a huge problem, especially with the rise of Anti-Asian hate crimes in the United States and Canada. When former US President Donald Trump constantly called the COVID-19 virus the “China Virus,”<sup>6</sup> it became a call to violence, and every single Asian person inadvertently became a target of a hate crime.

I remember reading articles of Asian elderly men and women, whether it was Chinese, Thai, Filipino, or Indian, being attacked. Each time, I couldn’t help thinking that it could’ve been my mother, grandmother, or aunt who was attacked. Even people in the Latinx community were being attacked whenever they were mistaken for an Asian person. I remember reading an article about a 70-year-old Mexican woman who was brutally beaten up while riding the bus for that reason.<sup>7</sup>

In 2020, mainstream media started publishing and televising news of the COVID-19 virus, mentioning its origin in Wuhan, China, and sensationalizing speculations instead of focusing on facts. Whether I wanted to or not, I felt even more afraid for my safety every time I had to go out:

- One look at me, and it’s an instant assumption that I was the cause of COVID-19.
- People might assume I was a bat eater even though I have never eaten a bat, and I haven’t eaten meat for more than 5 years.
- People might tell me to “Go back to China!” even though I have never been to China and was born in the Philippines.
- I was constantly afraid my family might become a target of all the misplaced anger and hate over the pandemic.

And when I reflect on it now, I realize this was the same fear and paranoia that our community has dealt with for being the scapegoat for the COVID-19 pandemic.

It's difficult to be seen as a community of diverse backgrounds when physical appearance and stereotypes lump Asians as a monolith culture. But here's the truth:

- Forty-nine sovereign countries make up Asia.<sup>8</sup>
- As of 2022, more than 4.7 billion people live in Asia, which is considered the most populous continent in the world.
- Asia has more than 2,300 recognized languages.

The model minority myth started the ball rolling on reducing Asians to one or two cultures. The mindset that how one or a few behave represents the whole culture has negatively affected generations of the Asian community, especially Asian women.

An article from the *Epoch Times* talks about taking a closer look behind the rise of Anti-Asian hate crimes. I was a contributor to that article, and I mentioned that the model minority was a big reason for this rise, especially for Asian women. I mentioned how the model minority myth dehumanizes Asian women, even today:

*Women are less likely to report a crime due to our upbringing. When something traumatic happens, we usually keep it to ourselves or ignore that it happened. Also, growing up in an Asian culture, we want to save face and never tarnish the family name even when we know that traumatic experience wasn't our fault.... We end up being the easy target.<sup>9</sup>*

The perception that Asians are achievers, model citizens, and self-sufficient can hurt rather than help. As an Asian, if you're seen to ask for help from our peers or failed to live to a certain standard, you'd end up becoming a "failure" to our culture

according to the standards of the Western world. The pressure is high when you have to live by these unrealistic standards.

If you end up speaking up or talking back, you become the problematic Asian woman, and you're not living by the standards of our cultural upbringing. You end up being penalized for not living up to the expected stereotype. You're supposed to be the model citizen who should never complain about any injustice that you face because the older generation never complained about anything when they migrated to the United States and Canada.

Even asking a question feels like you've failed as a human being because you're supposed to be the high achiever who knows everything and should never have to ask for help. How many times have you wanted to raise your hand up in school or at work to ask a question but are too embarrassed to do it, because you fear that you will get laughed at or someone might call you stupid? Been there, done that many times in my life.

Even as we saw a rise of anti-Asian hate crimes during the pandemic, it didn't start there. There's a long history of racism against Asians, which I will explain in the next chapters.

Mainstream media hardly ever covered the racist attacks that happened to our community in the beginning of the Stop Asian Hate Movement. Social media platforms like Twitter and Instagram were the source of most of the news about the attacks against the Asian community.

The Atlanta shooting that happened on March 16, 2021, which took the lives of six Asian women, was the moment that mainstream media started to talk about the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes.

## **The Model Minority Myth and Mental Health**

I wanted to have this as a separate topic because mental health is not talked about enough, especially in the Asian community. When it comes to mental health, the model minority myth has

definitely made it almost impossible for you to talk about how you feel or even seek help. The *Huffington Post* article titled “7 Ways ‘The Model Minority’ Myth Hurts Asian American’s Mental Health”<sup>10</sup> was one of the few examples that sheds light on what the community is going through. It listed these very real concerns:

1. **The expectations for academic and career success can feel impossible to meet.** You are always seen as hardworking, intelligent, and nice. The pressure and anxiety start to increase when you cannot live up to this standard, especially when it comes to academics. When you become a B or C student, you’ve become a failure to yourself, your family, and your culture.
2. **The myth suggests Asian Americans face less racism than other people of color.** Asian Americans have been facing racism for centuries but were told to never talk about it. Mainstream Western history also tend to erase or gloss over major events that disadvantaged Asian Americans, such as the Chinese Exclusion Act or the Japanese internment camps. Many people also assume that anti-Asian racism didn’t exist in other countries during the pandemic. I can tell you, being in Canada, that this is far from the truth.
3. **The model minority myth hides the economic realities of many Asian Americans.** Asians are often portrayed as an affluent group. Often, this harms the many others who need resources and help.
4. **They’re less likely to seek out mental health help.** This is so true; mental health has always been a taboo in the community. You are told to never share your feelings, and it’s a sign of weakness, especially if you go to a licensed therapist. Being able to express what you are feeling is healthy for you to maintain your mental well-being.

5. **Not all Asians are considered model minority enough.** If you don't live up to a certain standard, you end up being a failure, just like when I failed kindergarten in the Philippines for coloring outside the lines. I was considered a failure from the age of 5 and this mentality carried with me until my late 30s.
6. **They fall into careers and fields they're disinterested in.** I was told that getting a 9-to-5 job was the path to success. So I did what I was told and for 12 years I worked in an office thinking that was the highest level of success I was able to attain as an Asian woman. Even though something inside me knew that I couldn't picture myself working in an office until I retired, I continued to work there because that's what the meaning of success was. So many people end up working a career they hate, but they stay because of this belief.
7. **It distances people from their culture.** As a child, I wanted to have blond hair and blue eyes and change my name to Heather because I wanted to be more Caucasian. I thought that was the standard of beauty, and I was embarrassed of being Asian. Even when I lived in the Philippines, it was always about assimilating in to American culture. Everyone wanted to speak English well and follow the trends of the Western world.

As an Asian woman, it feels like your whole life is laid out for you. You go to school, graduate, get a good job, get married, have kids, and never rock the boat. Anything outside of that is considered unsuccessful or shameful. The judgments start coming out once you start doing something outside of the path that was laid out for you, and you feel like something is wrong with you because you want to forge your own path.

Even if you want to seek professional help, such as going to see a therapist, it is seen by your culture as a sign of weakness, and it means that something is wrong with you even when every



person goes through some form of mental health challenges, myself included.

Now, I am not a licensed mental health expert, and I don't claim to be. I am an advocate to normalize mental health because the taboos in the culture are hurting people, especially during the pandemic. When you had to deal with the lockdown and the anti-Asian racism at the same time, of course your mental health would be affected. It's okay to say you are not okay.

I personally was not okay in the beginning of the lockdown. I honestly thought it was the end of the world when everything shut down. It felt like there was no reason to live, and I was too afraid to tell anyone that I was going through my own mental health challenges. It's never healthy to keep in your struggles and feelings. You are like a ticking time bomb that is ready to explode, and that's never a good thing.

Interviewing more than 700 Asian women on my podcast, it was a breath of fresh air to hear that I wasn't the only one dealing with mental health issues. Knowing that they found different outlets to express their true feelings made me feel like I was not alone in my journey and that we are all in this together.

It's so important to have healthy ways to express what you are feeling, even if it means sharing your struggles, because it's a way of taking care of your mental well-being. I was fortunate that the right people came into my life during the pandemic when I was feeling at my worst. Without them, I wouldn't be here today sharing this with you.

If you're going through something right now, have the courage to take care of your mental well-being. It's okay to seek out professional help, and there's no shame in that. If you're on the journey to healing yourself, you do what works for you.

So many mental health resources are now available. Don't take it for granted. If it's available to you, take the opportunity to use it. Your future self will thank you for it.

