

“Model Minority: Submission Rather Than Success,” by Luke Kim

In the Spring of 2020, the spread of COVID-19 has heightened racial tension in the U.S., American xenophobia towards Asian Americans has grown, leading to countless instances of verbal and physical harassment. Additionally, Anti-Asian hate crimes have skyrocketed, reaching approximately 100 per day by April 7, 2020 (Kelley).

In response to these events, former presidential candidate Andrew Yang published an op-ed entitled “We Asian Americans Are Not the Virus, but We Can Be Part of the Cure,” in which he argues that Asian Americans should “embrace and show [their] ‘American-ness’” in order to “demonstrate that [they] are part of the solution.” Examining what Yang’s suggestion alongside an analysis of the construction of the model minority — and its repercussions in terms of socioeconomic opportunity and mental health — highlights how the model minority status is conditioned on submission rather than success.

To begin with, where does the idea of the model minority originate? From the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act to the mid-twentieth century, Asian Americans were labelled the “yellow peril,” perceived as a foreign threat to the U.S. economy and well-being (Wu 99). This ideology was confirmed when the Roosevelt administration implemented an executive order that called for the internment of “all people of Japanese descent” and incarcerated over 110,000 Japanese-Americans. Because these racist acts damaged the U.S. image among China, the U.S. government repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act, and attempted to recast the Asian community as notable for its strong “work ethic” and “family structure” (Wu 99). As a result, societal perceptions had shifted from viewing Asian Americans as a threat to viewing them as a peaceful and docile race.

Andrew Yang’s op-ed is significant as it highlights the model minority’s alienation from society, failing to be fully “American.” As the first Asian American democratic candidate to run for the presidency, Yang was an inspiration, showing the Asian American community that one of them could become President. Yet in his op-ed, he victim-blames Asians for the hate during the coronavirus, claiming that dwelling on it will not solve the problem. In other words, Yang argues that the best way to dispel racism is to submissively adhere to the model minority by becoming more “American.”

Not only does this express the idea that Asians are not American enough, but it also underscores the common societal perception that being an American and having “American-ness,” which Yang describes as helping others (donating resources, volunteering, and funding aid agencies), are the same. In fact, the xenophobia towards Asian Americans during the pandemic highlights the Asian community’s true standing in society: foreigners living among Americans.

Some might argue that Yang’s op-ed merely suggests that Asian Americans should engage more in society to reduce stigmatization of being “foreign.” Unfortunately, such an argument would fail to consider that the model minority label distracts from the racism present to Asian Americans in society. For example, in a study examining the implicit associations when evaluating positive traits of Asians, a large number of the respondents rated Asian Americans as more intelligent than whites (McGowan and Lindgren 30). However, 63% of this number rated

them as less patriotic (McGowan and Lindgren 33). Moreover, those who have a positive view of Asians (as hardworking and intelligent) “tend to believe that there is less discrimination against Asian Americans in jobs and housing” (McGowan and Linden 9). Although many Asians living in the U.S. are living the American Dream, serving as the government’s proof that minorities can succeed, income inequality amongst Asian Americans has reached a new high, displacing blacks as the “most economically divided racial or ethnic group in the U.S” (Kochhar and Cilluffo). With regards to this economic issue, impoverished Asians around the U.S. are overlooked. One example is New York, where Asians experience “the highest poverty rates of any immigrant group” (“The Model Minority Myth”). In recent years, when Mayor de Blasio sought to remove electric bicycles, he disregarded how e-bikes were essential to Chinese delivery workers’ livelihoods, many of whom live in poverty (Chen). Because the model minority status portrays a general sense of economic success, Asian Americans’ socioeconomic struggles are often neglected, and sometimes even invalidated.

Another group of Asian Americans that is alienated from the model minority is students with mental health issues. Asian American are three times less likely to receive mental health assistance than whites (Lee et al. 10). In a study evaluating the mental health issues in 1.5 and 2nd generation Asian Americans, Asian males were found to have a suicide rate of 12.7%, while females have a rate of 14.1% (Lee et al. 2).

One reason for this is racial discrimination, resulting in lowered self-esteem. This can cause Asian students to overcompensate and cope by further internalizing the model minority stereotype. However, internalizing the stereotype exacerbates racism’s negative effects on mental health.

When Yang shared his experience with racism at the grocery store, he describes feeling “self-conscious—even a bit ashamed—of being Asian.” This sense of vulnerability—a feeling like of not belonging—is how thousands of Asian-Americans feel today, especially in light of the coronavirus. Instead of speaking out, many Asians remain silent, hoping to avoid calling attention to them. As a result, parents teach their children that in order to fully integrate into America is to integrate submissively and silently.

The question that Americans should be trying to answer is this: How will the coronavirus be remembered? This moment needs to serve as a reminder of the injustices to Asian Americans or else they will continue to live subject to the model minority racism. Will the coronavirus be mainly remembered for the pandemic or the racism that resulted from it?

If it is the latter, hopefully this will change the way Asian Americans are perceived. For non-Asian Americans, it is crucial to reflect on the fact that thinking Asians are successful or that they did not cause the coronavirus doesn’t change society’s skewed racial perceptions of the Asian American community. For Asian Americans, it is important to understand that no culture should serve as an universal standard, whether American or Asian. Even if that culture has perceived benefits, it often can create unreasonable standards.

For society as a whole: Any actions taken (helping neighbors and funding aid organizations) should not be an attempt to prove one’s patriotism. Instead, the broader message is that

Americans should be willing to help others simply because it is the right thing to do. After all, contributing to the well-being of society means “caring for those whom we do and do not know, inside and outside our national communities” (De Leon).

Will this period in time be remembered solely as a global pandemic that quarantined all of America? Or can it also be remembered as the moment society realized the shortcomings and engrained racism of the model minority status.

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