Streets of Gold: The Myth of the Model Minority
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According to conventional wisdom, Asian Americans offer the best evidence that the American Dream is alive and well. Publications like Time and Newsweek have celebrated Asian Americans as a "super minority" that has adopted the Puritan work ethic and outshone even the Anglo majority in terms of education and financial success. In this essay, Curtis Chang probes the data used in such media reports and questions this new embodiment of the success myth. Since the educational achievement of Asians is an important component of the myth, the essay may prompt you to take a fresh look at the status of Asian American students on your campus. Chang was born in Taiwan and immigrated to the United States in 1971. This essay was written in 1987, when he was a freshman at Harvard; since graduating in 1990 Chang has taught in Harvard's government department and traveled to Soweto, South Africa, on a Michael C. Rockefeller Fellowship for Travel Abroad.

Over 100 years ago, an American myth misled many of my ancestors. Seeking cheap labor, railroad companies convinced numerous Chinese that American streets were paved with gold. Today, the media portrays Asian-Americans as finally mining those golden streets. Major publications like Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report, Fortune, The New Republic, the Wall Street Journal, and the New York Times have all recently published congratulatory "Model Minority" headline stories with such titles:

America's Super Minority
An American Success Story
A Model Minority
Why They Succeed
The Ultimate Assimilation
The Triumph of the Asian Americans

But the Model Minority is another "Streets of Gold" tale. It distorts Asian-Americans' true status and ignores our racial handicaps. And the Model Minority's ideology is even worse than its mythology. It attempts to justify the existing system of racial inequality by blaming the victims.

The Model Minority myth introduces us as an ethnic minority that is finally "making it in America" (Time, July 8, 1985). The media consistently defines "making it" as achieving material wealth, wealth that flows from our successes in the workplace and the schoolroom. This economic achievement allegedly proves a minority can "lay claim to the American dream" (Fortune, Nov. 24, 1986).

Trying to show how "Asian-Americans present a picture of affluence and economic success" (N.Y. Times Magazine, Nov. 30, 1986), 9 out of 10 of the major Model Minority stories of the last four years relied heavily on one statistic: the family median income. The median Asian-American family income, according to the U.S. Census Survey of Income and Education data, is $22,713 compared to $20,900 for white Americans. Armed with that figure, national magazines have trumpeted our "remarkable, ever-mounting achievements" (Newsweek, Dec. 6, 1982).

Such assertions demonstrate the truth of the aphorism "Statistics are like a bikini. What they reveal is suggestive, but what they conceal is vital." The family median income statistic conceals the fact that Asian-American families generally (1) have more children and live-in relatives and thus have more mouths to feed; (2) are often forced by necessity to have everyone in the family work, averaging more than two family income earners (whites only have 1.6) (Cabezas, 1979, p. 492); and (3) live disproportionately in high cost of living areas (i.e., New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, and Honolulu) which artificially inflate income figures. Dr. Robert S. Mariano, professor of economics at the University of Pennsylvania, has calculated that when such appropriate adjustments and comparisons are made, a different and rather disturbing picture emerges, showing indeed a clearly disadvantaged group. . . . Filipino and Chinese men are no better off than black men with regard to median incomes. (Mariano, 1979, p. 55)\(^1\)

Along with other racial minorities, Asian-Americans are still scraping for the crumbs of the economic pie.

Throughout its distortion of our status, the media propagates two crucial assumptions. First, it lumps all Asian-Americans into one monolithic, homogeneous, yellow skinned mass. Such a view ignores the existence of an incredibly disadvantaged Asian-American underclass. Asians work in low income and low status jobs 2 to 3 times more than whites (Cabezas, 1979, p. 438). Recent Vietnamese refugees in California are living like the Appalachian poor. While going to his Manhattan office, multimillionaire architect I. M. Pei's car passes Chinese restaurants and laundries where

\(^1\)The picture becomes even more disturbing when one realizes that higher income figures do not necessarily equal higher quality of life. For instance, in New York Chinatown, more than 1 out of 5 residents work more than 57 hours per week, almost 1 out of 10 elderly most
people easily forget that to begin with Asians invest heavily in edu since other means of upward mobility are barred to them by race. Until recently, for instance, Asian-Americans were barred from unions and traditional lines of credit (Yun, 1986, pp. 23-24). Other "white" avenues to success, such as the "old boy network," are still closed to Asian-Americans.

When Time (July 8, 1985) claims "as a result of their academic achievement Asians are climbing the economic ladder with remarkable speed," it glosses over an inescapable fact: there is a white ladder and then there is a yellow one. Almost all of the academic studies on the actual returns Asians receive from their education point to prevalent discrimination. A striking example of this was found in a City University of New York research project which constructed resumes with equivalent educational backgrounds. Applications were then sent to employers, one group under an Asian name and a similar group under a Caucasian name. Whites received interviews 5 times more than Asians (Nishi, 1979, p. 399). The media never headlines even more shocking data that can be easily found in the U.S. Census. For instance, Chinese and Filipino males only earned respectively 74 and 52 percent as much as their equally educated white counterparts. Asian females fared even worse. Their salaries were only 44 to 54 percent as large as equivalent white males' paychecks (Cabezas, 1979, p. 391). Blacks suffer from this same statistical disparity. We Asian-Americans are indeed a Model Minority — a perfect model of racial discrimination in America.

Yet this media myth encourages neglect of our pressing needs. "Clearly, many Asian-Americans and Pacific peoples are invisible to the governmental agencies," one state agency reported. "Discrimination against Asian-Americans and Pacific peoples is as much the result of omission as commission." (California State Advisory Committee, 1975, p. 75). In 1979, while the president praised Asian-Americans' "successful integration into American society," his administration revoked Asian-Americans' eligibility for minority small business loans, devastating thousands of struggling, newly arrived small businessmen. Hosts of other minority issues, ranging from reparations for the Japanese-American internment to the ominous rise of anti-Asian violence, are widely ignored by the general public.

The media, in fact, insist to the general populace that we are not a true racial minority. In its attack on affirmative action, the Boston Globe (Jan. 14, 1985) pointed out that universities, like many people, "obviously feel that Asian-Americans, especially those of Chinese and Japanese descent, are brilliant, privileged, and wrongly classified as minorities." Harvard Dean Henry Rosovsky remarked in the same article that "it does not seem to me..."
that as a group, they are disadvantaged. Asian-Americans appear to be in an odd category among other protected minorities."

The image that we Asians aren't like "other minorities" is fundamental to the Model Minority ideology. Any elementary school student knows that the teacher designates one student the model, the "teacher's pet," in order to set an example for others to follow. One only sets up a "model minority" in order to communicate to the other "students," the blacks and Hispanics, "Why can't you be like that?" The media, in fact, almost admit to "grading" minorities as they headline Model Minority stories, "Asian-Americans: Are They Making the Grade?" (U.S. News, April 2, 1984). And Asians have earned the highest grade by fulfilling one important assignment: identifying with the white majority, with its values and wishes.

Unlike blacks, for instance, we Asian-Americans have not vigorously asserted our ethnic identity (a.k.a. Black Power). And the American public has historically demanded assimilation over racial pluralism. Over the years, Newsweek has published titles from "Success Story: Outwitting the Whites" (Newsweek, June 21, 1971) to "Ultimate Assimilation" (Newsweek, Nov. 24, 1986), which lauded the increasing number of Asian-White marriages as evidence of Asian-Americans' "acceptance into American society."

Even more significant is the public's approval of how we have succeeded in the "American tradition" (Fortune, Nov. 24, 1986). Unlike the Blacks and Hispanics, we "Puritan-like" Asians (N.Y. Times Magazine, Nov. 30, 1986) disdain governmental assistance. A New Republic piece, "America's Greatest Success Story" (July 15, 1985), similarly applauded how "Asian-Americans pose no problems at all." The media consistently compares the crime-ridden image of other minorities with the picture of law abiding Asian parents whose "well-behaved kids" (Newsweek on Campus, April 1984) hit books and not the streets.

Some insist there is nothing terrible about whites conjuring up our "tremendous" success, divining from it model American traits, then preaching, "Why can't you blacks and Hispanics be like that?" After all, one might argue, aren't those traits desirable?

Such a view, as mentioned, neglects Asian-Americans' true and pressing needs. Moreover, this view completely misses the Model Minority image's fundamental ideology, an ideology meant to falsely grant America absolution from its racial barriers.

David O. Sears and Donald R. Kinder, two social scientists, have recently published significant empirical studies on the underpinnings of American racial attitudes. They consistently discovered that Americans'

stress on "values, such as 'individualism and self-reliance, the work ethic, obedience, and discipline' . . . can be invoked, however perversely, to feed racist appetites" (Kennedy, 1987, p. 88). In other words, the Model Minority image lets Americans' consciences rest easy. They can think: "It's not our fault those blacks and Hispanics can't make it. They're just too lazy. After all, look at the Asians." Consequently, American society never confronts the systemic racial and economic factors underlying such inequality. The victims instead bear the blame.

This ideology behind the Model Minority image is best seen when we examine one of the first Model Minority stories, which suddenly appeared in the mid 1960s. It is important to note that the period was marked by newfound, strident black demands for equality and power.

At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own — with no help from anyone else . . . few Chinese-Americans are getting welfare handouts — or even want them . . . they don't sit around moaning. (U.S. News, Dec. 26, 1966)

The same article then concludes that the Chinese-American history and accomplishment "would shock those now complaining about the hardships endured by today's Negroes" (U.S. News, Dec. 26, 1966).

Not surprisingly, the bunce-capped blacks and Hispanics resent us apple polishing, "well-behaved" teacher's pets. Black comedian Richard Pryor performs a revealing routine in which new Asian immigrants learn from whites their first English word: "Nigger." And Asian-Americans themselves succumb to the Model Minority's deceptive mythology and racist ideology. "I made it without help," one often hears among Asian circles, "why can't they?" In a 1986 nationwide poll, only 27 percent of Asian-American students rated "racial understanding" as "essential." The figure plunged 9 percent in the last year alone (a year marked by a torrent of Model Minority stories) (Hune, 1987). We "white-washed" Asians have simply lost our identity as a fellow, disadvantaged minority.

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4This phenomenon of blaming the victim for racial inequality is as old as America itself. For instance, Southerners once eased their consciences over slavery by labeling blacks as animals lacking humanity. Today, America does it by labeling them as inferior people lacking "desirable" traits. For an excellent further analysis of this ideology, actually widespread among American intellectuals, see Iron Cages: Race and Culture in 19th-Century America by Ronald T. Takaki. [Author's note]

5America has a long history of playing off one minority against the other. During the early 1900s, for instance, mining companies in the west often hired Asians solely as pawns against striking black miners. Black versus Asian hostility and violence usually followed. This pattern was repeated in numerous industries. In a larger historical sense, almost every immigrant
But we don't even need to look beyond the Model Minority stories themselves to realize that whites see us as "whiter" than blacks — but not quite white enough. For instance, citing that familiar median family income figure, Fortune magazine of May 17, 1982, complained that Asian-Americans are in fact "getting more than [their] share of the pie." For decades, when white Americans were leading the nation in every single economic measure, editors arguing that whites were getting more than their share of the pie were rather rare.

No matter how "well behaved" we are, Asian-Americans are still excluded from the real pie, the "positions of institutional power and political power" (Kuo, 1979, p. 289). Professor Hary Kitano of UCLA has written extensively on the plight of Asian-Americans as the "middle-minority," a minority supposedly satisfied materially but forever racially barred from a true, significant role in society. Empirical studies indicate that Asian-Americans have been channeled into lower-eclelon white-collar jobs having little or no decision making authority (Suzuki, 1977, p. 38). For example, in Fortune's 1,000 largest companies, Asian-American nameplates rest on a mere half of one percent of all officers' and directors' desks (a statistical disparity worsened by the fact that most of the Asians founded their companies) (Fortune, Nov. 24, 1986). While the education of the upper-class Asians may save them from the breadboards, their race still keeps them from the boardroom.

Our docile acceptance of such exclusion is actually one of our "model" traits. When Asian-Americans in San Francisco showed their first hint of political activism and protested Asian exclusion from city boards, The Washington Monthly (May 1986) warned in a long Asian-American article, "Watch out, here comes another group to pander to." The New Republic (July 15, 1985) praised Asian-American political movements because

unlike blacks or Hispanics, Asian-American politicians have the luxury of not having to devote the bulk of their time to an "Asian-American agenda," and thus escape becoming prisoners of such an agenda.

The most important thing for Asian-Americans . . . is simply being part of the process.

This is strikingly reminiscent of another of the first Model Minority stories:

As the Black and Brown communities push for changes in the present system, the Oriental is set forth as an example to be followed — a minority group that has achieved success through adaptation rather than confrontation. (Gidra, 1969)

But it is precisely this "present system," this system of subtle, persistent racism that we all must confront, not adapt to. For example, as Asians gained our right to vote from the 1964 Civil Rights Act that blacks marched, bled, died, and in the words of that original Model Minority story, "sat around moaning for." Unless we assert our true identity as a minority and challenge racial misconceptions and inequalities, we will be nothing more than techn-cooles — collecting our wages but silently enduring basic political and economic inequality.

This country perpetuated a myth once. Today, no one can afford to dreamily chase after that gold in the streets, oblivious to the genuine treasure of racial equality. When racism persists, can one really call any minority a "model"?

List of Sources


Kiang, Peter, professor of sociology, University of Massachusetts, Boston, personal interview, May 1, 1987.

1Techno-cooles: The original coolies were unskilled laborers from the Far East who were often paid subsistence wages in the United States.