

WHITE PAPER | APRIL 2021

# MODEL MINORITY MYTH & THE DOUBLE- EDGED SWORD

THE DANGERS, DIVISIVENESS, AND  
INCONVENIENT TRUTHS BEHIND THE MYTH

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Photo Credit: Violet Feng and Evelyn Cho

# MODEL MINORITY MYTH & THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

## THE DANGERS, DIVISIVENESS, AND INCONVENIENT TRUTHS BEHIND THE MYTH

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Model Minority label assigned to Asian Americans seems innocuous, even flattering, on the surface, but in reality, it spins a myth that has boxed Asian Americans in stereotypes that have led to a complex web of anti-Asian bias and the widespread exclusion of Asian Americans in professional advancement, leadership opportunities, as well as diversity and inclusion efforts. Against the backdrop of a global pandemic, political provocation, and scapegoating, the portrayals associated with this myth have also left Asians in America vulnerable to harassment and physical assault.

Anti-Asian COVID-19 racism has brought to the fore questions about where Asian Americans are situated in the national discourse on race.<sup>1</sup> In the popular American narrative and imagination, Asian Americans are perceived as the “Model Minority:” quiet, hardworking, and studious. This positive characterization is supported by studies showing that Asian Americans are the most educated and most affluent of any other racial groups in the U.S.<sup>2</sup>

While the Model Minority stereotype may seem flattering on the surface, it also includes the less positive attributes

of being weak, docile, complacent, and overly deferential. In reality, it is a myth that oversimplifies Asian culture and assumes all Asian Americans are successful, which masks the multiple problems and bias that Asian Americans face in the workforce, at schools, and in the communities in which they reside. This myth is especially problematic and dangerous because the anti-Asian violence and hate crimes that are currently playing out on streets across the U.S. are a direct consequence of Asian stereotyping.

<sup>1</sup> The term “Asian Americans” also applies to Pan-Asian Americans, AAPI, and Asians in this document. These terms describe people of Asian descent in the U.S.

<sup>2</sup> 2018 Nielsen Company report

# WHY THE MODEL MINORITY IS A MYTH

## ORIGIN OF THE MYTH

The term “Model Minority” was first used in 1966 by sociologist William Peterson in a New York Times Magazine article to praise the ability of Japanese Americans to gain success and capital in the United States, solidifying the stereotypes of Asian Americans as “industrious and rule-abiding” as compared to African Americans, who were still struggling against systemic bigotry and poverty.<sup>3</sup> Since then, this myth has been invoked politically to question the existence of institutionalized racism in America and manipulated to compare Asian Americans to other racial minorities. For Asian Americans, the stereotypes generated from this myth have been harmful on many levels.

## NOT A MONOLITH

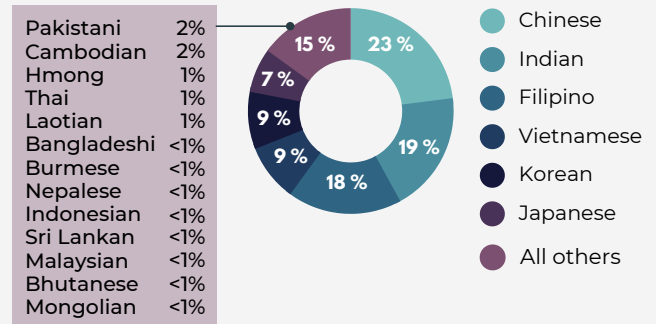
To start, this myth disregards the widespread disparities of income, education, and wealth that exist among different Asian American communities, consisting of refugees, recent immigrants, and individuals who are first generation and beyond. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Asian Americans as a diverse group that includes more than 20 different cultures and religions originating from East Asia, Southeast Asia, and South Asia, and unlike other racial minorities, numerous languages are spoken,

# Asian Americans: Diverse Communities

## ORIGIN GROUPS

% of Asian American in each origin group

**19** largest origin groups together account for 94% of the total Asian population in the U.S.



Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2015 American Community Survey 1-year estimates (American Fact Finder).

## PREVALENCE OF ASIAN LANGUAGES

spoken at home

1	Chinese*	2,720,325
2	Tagalog	1,599,040
3	Vietnamese	1,367,910
4	Korean	1,130,727
5	Hindi	638,307
6	Japanese	449,309

**38 +**  
Languages spoken at home

Note: Among ages 5 and older. \*Of the 2.7 million Chinese speakers, about 472,000 and 454,000 specified Mandarin and Cantonese, respectively. Source: Authors' analysis of Public Use Microdata Sample from Bureau of the Census, "American Community Survey 2008-2012 American Community Survey 5-year Estimates."

which poses a challenge for the larger community in their ability to unite around common goals and address complex needs.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> "‘Model Minority’ Myth Again Used As A Racial Wedge Between Asians And Blacks," NPR CODE SWITCH, 2017

<sup>4</sup> US Census Bureau

The economic and educational challenges facing many segments of the Asian American community are generally obscured and counterbalanced by the popularized success of some Asian Americans. For example, Bhutanese and Burmese Americans have significantly higher poverty rates than the general population and fewer than 20 percent have college degrees.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the Asian American unemployment rate rose significantly during the pandemic because nearly a quarter of the Asian American workforce is found in service industries, with many in the hard-hit frontline jobs. Those job losses have

attracted less attention compared to other racial groups due in part to the Model Minority Myth.<sup>6</sup>

"The economic and educational challenges facing many segments of the Asian community are generally obscured and counterbalanced by the popularized success of some Asian Americans."

## Disparities Among Different Asian American Communities



### ASIAN AMERICANS HAVE THE GREATEST DISPARITY IN INCOME OF ALL ETHNIC GROUPS

Median annual household income (2015)

highest ↑	<b>Indian</b>	<b>\$100K</b>
	<b>Filipino</b>	<b>\$80K</b>
	<b>Japanese/Sri Lankan</b>	<b>\$74K</b>
	<b>All Asians</b>	<b>\$73K</b>
lowest ↓	<b>Hmong</b>	<b>\$48K</b>
	<b>Nepalese</b>	<b>\$44K</b>
	<b>Burmese</b>	<b>\$36K</b>

Most U.S. Asian origin groups have household incomes that fall below those of Asian Americans overall.



### BIG DIFFERENCES IN EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT

**9% vs 72%**  
of Bhutanese of Indian

About half of Asians in the U.S. ages 25 and older had a bachelor's degree or more in 2015, a higher share than other races and ethnicities, but this share varies greatly by origin group.



### POVERTY RATES VARY WIDELY AMONG ASIANS IN THE U.S.

The highest poverty rates among all Asian origin groups  
**Burmese 35.0%**  
**Bhutanese 33.3%**

**2x** U.S. Average (15.1%)  
**4x** Filipino & Indian (7.5%)

Source: Pew Research Center analysis of 2013-2015 American Community Survey (IPUMS)

<sup>5</sup> "Key facts about Asian origin groups in the U.S." Pew Research Center, May 22, 2019

<sup>6</sup> "Overlooked: Asian American Jobless Rate Surges But Few Take Notice," NPR, October 1, 2020

## MISLEADING STEREOTYPES

In more educated and prosperous quarters of the Asian American population, this myth has historically boxed Asian Americans as smart and reliable with a solid work ethic. It reinforces the narrative that Asian Americans are “competent but cold,” excelling at STEM and fields requiring strong analytical skills but lacking in some of the soft skills that are needed for leadership and advancement, such as interpersonal, communications, and advocacy skills. It also places immense stress on Asian American youths to excel academically and find careers that are known to be financially stable.<sup>7</sup> One result of the science-obsessed stereotype is that Asian Americans in the arts, media, film, and creative fields generally receive less coverage and support from mainstream establishments. This extends to Asian Americans who want to pursue a career in athletics.<sup>8</sup>

Despite the myth’s implication that Asian Americans lack the traits to be leaders, there still exists a general perception that Asian Americans are successful and therefore well represented in the corporate boardroom and at executive ranks. Ascend research shows that this inference is often erroneous and misleading. Asian Americans, on the whole, make up 12 percent of the professional workforce and yet only 4.4% of all Fortune 1000 board

Only

**4.4 %**

of all Fortune 1000 directors are Asian

**1.47 %**

are Asian women

“Asian Representation on Fortune 1000 Boards,” Ascend/KPMG, 2020

members are Asian American, with Asian American women faring the worst at just 1.47%.<sup>9</sup> Another Ascend study launched last year using the latest EEOC data (2018) across all industries also shows that while all racial minorities were underrepresented at the executive level relative to their professional levels, Asian men and women were the most likely to be hired but the least likely to advance to become executives. The study concluded that race has a greater effect on the glass ceiling than gender alone.<sup>10</sup> Another study revealed that white professionals were twice as likely to be promoted into management roles than their Asian American counterparts.<sup>11</sup>

The myth’s presumption of Asian success in corporate America and beyond often leads to the exclusion of Asian Americans from important discussions about workplace diversity and breaking the glass ceiling.

<sup>7</sup> Lowinger, Robert & Song, Hyun-a. 2017. Factors Associated with Asian American Students’ Choice of STEM Major. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice* 54:4, 415-428.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Ethan Vovan, Eric Douangdara, Huating Sun, “Why Aren’t There Asian Athletes in American Sports?” March 18, 2020

<sup>9</sup> “Asian Representation on Fortune 1000 Boards,” Ascend/KPMG, 2020.

For the 4.4% figure [total number of Asian directors (n=332) as a percentage of the total number of directors serving on Fortune 1000 Boards (n=7477)]. For 1.47% [110/7477=1.47%] (Ascend/KPMG Report, 2020)

<sup>10</sup> “Race, Gender, and the Double Glass Ceiling: An Analysis of EEOC National Workforce Data,” Ascend, 2020

<sup>11</sup> Harvard Business Review, 2017

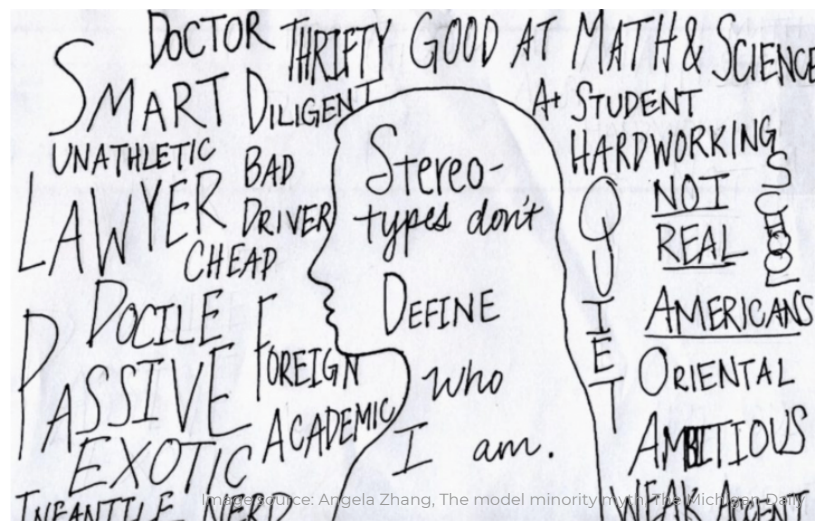


## THE MYTH AND ITS ADVERSE EFFECTS ON OTHER GROUPS

### A POLITICAL TOOL USED TO DIVIDE AND INVALIDATE

By casting Asian Americans as the “good minority” and portraying them as less likely to “rock the boat” or challenge the status quo, the Model Minority Myth perpetuates racist attitudes and stereotypes toward other minorities, namely Blacks and Latinx, and has long been used as a political tool to invalidate the struggles of other minorities. More tellingly, it has absolved racist systems from any accountability for the inequities that exist within them.<sup>12</sup> The argument is that racial bias does not exist because if it did, how then can “Asian success” be explained? This implies that other minorities have not achieved the levels of socioeconomic success that Asians enjoy because of a lack of strong family values, hard work, and appreciation for education, and handily dismisses issues like structural barriers and deep-seated racism. This assertion maintains that if Asian Americans can build themselves up with few resources and take advantage of the opportunities embodied in the American Dream narrative, other minorities should be able to do the same. Given such opportunities, Asian Americans should stay quiet, be grateful and preserve the status quo.

The act of labeling one group as the good minority possessing unique cultural qualities places this group at odds with other racial groups and obscures other factors, such as high ethnic capital and immigration status, as contributors to success. This characterization and comparison, when situated in complex circumstances such as a pandemic, positions Asian Americans as more privileged, problem-free, and passive than other racial groups and inevitably makes them easy targets of verbal and physical assault.



The myth generates stereotypes that have real-life consequences.

"The argument is that racial bias does not exist because if it did, how then can “Asian success” be explained?"

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, the studies of Richard Lee, PHD, Professor of Psychology at Univ of Minnesota

## THE INCONVENIENT TRUTH

The sad and unspoken truth is that many Asian Americans have worn the badge of the Model Minority proudly to gain acceptance into the dominant culture without realizing that there is a double-edged sword that excludes them from participating in race and equity discussions or ascending to executive ranks. The Model Minority does nothing to minimize the fact that Asian Americans become hate targets, and are scapegoated as “perpetual foreigners” during periods of international conflict, economic recession, and/or worldwide pandemic.

The other reality is that Asian Americans are the invisible minority. Although some subgroups experience the highest levels of poverty in the US., Asian Americans are often stripped of the programs that are accorded to other racial minorities. At the top levels of U.S. leadership, Asian Americans are generally overlooked for cabinet

positions and Supreme Court representation.<sup>13</sup> In popular culture, before *Crazy Rich Asians*, Hollywood had overlooked Asian men as romantic leads in mainstream movies.

On the whole, Asian Americans are wedged in an uncomfortable position as white adjacent on the one hand and as people of color on the other, and the complex set of stereotypes has rendered them invisible in discussions of race and prejudice in America. Because anti-hate is not a zero-sum game, it is imperative to acknowledge that animosity may arise among minority groups advocating for their needs; and it is critical to recognize the importance of not pitting minority groups against each other. As the popular saying goes, does it make sense for these groups to fight over the crumbs when the pie should be bigger and divided equitably among all groups?

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**"On the whole, Asian Americans are wedged in an uncomfortable position as white adjacent on the one hand and as people of color on the other, and the complex set of stereotypes has rendered them invisible in discussions of race and prejudice in America."**

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<sup>13</sup> See, for example, “Senators back off vow to withhold support of Biden nominees,” AP, 2021 and “Will the U.S. Supreme Court get its first Asian American justice?” Washington Post, 2016.

# ASCEND'S MISSION TO DISPEL THE MYTH

In recent years, Ascend Foundation research has drawn attention to the systemic bias against Asians in corporate culture which stems from the Model Minority Myth.

## JOINT 5-POINT ACTION PLAN

At the height of COVID-19, the rise of anti-Asian sentiments, along with the adverse and unequal effects of this pandemic on communities of color, galvanized us to join forces with peer organizations to create a Joint 5-Point Action Plan to condemn bias and promote inclusion. This collaborative effort garnered the support of over 125 companies to date, and we are now

better positioned to use a multi-faceted approach to amplify this message and focus on constructive actions to address racial equity for all groups.

## THE ACT INITIATIVE

The ACT (Allies Coming Together) Initiative, created in 2020, was designed to support and empower the Pan-Asian community to be more race conversant to combat systemic bias and develop allyship strategies. ACT is one of many programs that support Ascend's core focus of building holistic Pan-Asian leaders and to help institutions move away from the model minority mindset and embrace the individuality of Asian professionals toward a culture of tolerance.

## Our 5-Point Action Agenda Journey





## THE ACT DIALOGS AND SURVEY

The ACT Dialogs and Survey revealed that only 57 percent of respondents in corporate felt comfortable speaking up and discussing racism in their workplace.<sup>14</sup> As a start, companies should allow a safe space for Asian Americans to voice their concerns in an honest and open manner without fear of recrimination. These concerns should then be shared with the company's leadership and other non-Asian counterparts. Overall, companies can only succeed in the long-term if their leaders foster a professional environment that promotes inclusivity and belonging, further nurturing a safe, welcoming and equitable work culture for all its members, especially for the overlooked ones.

## THE ASCEND IMPACT FUND

The Ascend Impact Fund, which will launch in April 2021, will focus on expanding our awareness raising, advocacy, thought leadership, allyship, education, and community engagement work that addresses the adverse effects of the Model Minority Myth in both the short and long term. It is set up for our corporate members and peer allies to work together in creative ways to engage with local communities toward the goal of promoting greater racial equity and harmony.

<sup>14</sup> ACT Survey, Ascend, 2020

## #AscendTogether: National Town Hall

March 22, 2021



"Overall, companies can only succeed in the long-term if their leaders foster a professional environment that promotes inclusivity and belonging, further nurturing a safe, welcoming and equitable work culture for all its members, especially for the overlooked ones."

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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## ABOUT ASCEND FOUNDATION AND ASCEND®

Ascend Foundation is a 501(c)(3) non-profit Pan-Asian organization primarily engaged in research with a mission to advocate, provide scholastic excellence and need-based scholarships, and support and assist communities in need. Established in 2005, Ascend (@AscendLeader), the largest, non-profit Pan-Asian membership organization for senior executives, business professionals and students with 60+ chapters in North America, is committed to advancing contributions of Pan-Asians across the career lifecycle to make greater impacts as leaders in the workplace and the community.

Visit [www.ascendleadership.org](http://www.ascendleadership.org) for more information.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I extend my gratitude to Anna Mok, Buck Gee, Denise Peck, Jennifer Hsu, and Peyen Fong for reviewing this piece and providing invaluable guidance.

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