



WHAT IS... MODEL MINORITY



DEFINITION:

IN 1966, the term [model minority was coined](#) by sociologist [William Petersen](#) in an article he wrote for New York Times Magazine, titled "[Success Story: Japanese American Style](#)." White politicians [embraced this false narrative](#) to win allies in the Cold War and rally their supporters against the Civil Rights Movement. Japanese internment was also driven by white farmer's desire to take Japanese American farmland and assets and build land equity.

The popular idea was that Asian Americans should serve as models for other minorities to achieve success in America. If the Asian-American community could "rise up" after World War II internment camps, why couldn't other communities of color do the same?

The Model Minority Myth has most directly been applied to Asians and Asian Americans. What is its effect and who does it harm? It harms Asian Americans, as well as other BIPOC people and their communities by reducing a broad section of the world's diverse and pluralistic Asian and Asian American population into a one-dimensional and functionally normative stereotype.

The Model Minority Myth as a racist action is embedded in our church and public policies in that it:

1. Projects and assigns expectations of an idealized American success story or narrative onto Asian Americans
2. Places burdens and expectations on Asian Americans as people and communities that have presumably achieved greater success than other BIPOC people and white people
3. Erases the distinctive historic struggles Asian Americans have endured in order to match the superimposed, idealized, and fetishized expectations placed on Asian Americans in our church and society
4. Suggests that Asian Americans can assimilate into white normative church and civic society so why can other racial and ethnic groups not follow their example
5. Divides Asian Americans from BIPOC and their historic struggles to secure equity, recognition, and belonging in our church and society and pits Asian Americans against their siblings
6. Effectively hides or obscures racist attitudes, practices, and policies committed against Asian Americans by claiming Asian Americans are exempt from the impact of racism and maintaining anti-BIPOC biases and policies



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EXAMPLES OF MODEL MINORITY:

THE PRESUMPTION IS that Asian Americans have assimilated and are part of our nation's success story; they are secure, innately intelligent, and highly educated; Asian American children are [whiz kids](#) or musical geniuses. Asian American moms are [Tiger Moms](#) who force children to work harder than everyone else, and Asian American men are not suitable for [leadership](#) positions except in STEM industries like medicine and finance. They are law abiding and play by the rules. They are also quiet, obedient, reserved, and submissive in their demeanor. This may be communicated through the images and stories in the media and by presumptions we make in income, school attendance, and profession. The effect is to neutralize Asian American agency to the stereotype. They have "gotten over" racism and the impact of white supremacy and racism, so can't others follow their example? Asian Americans have "pulled themselves up by their bootstraps." Other BIPOC people need to do the same.

The myth erases the legacy of oppressive history. Large-scale Asian immigration began in the 1850s and fueled the building of white wealth. [Confined to ethnic enclaves](#) and regarded with suspicion by native-born white Americans and European immigrants, people of Asian descent were soon targeted by the nation's first restrictive immigration laws. The [1875 Page Act](#) effectively prevented Asian women from entering the country by casting them as sex workers. The [1882 Chinese Exclusion Act](#) put a moratorium on incoming Chinese immigrants that ultimately remained in force until the 1940s. Other Asian immigrants faced laws that restricted naturalization as American citizens to people [categorized](#) as "free white" or of African descent. Anti-Asian. The federal government incarcerating 120,000 Japanese Americans, many American-born, in internment camps. Forced to leave behind their homes, businesses, and property, many Japanese Americans [lost everything](#).

Buried under these stereotypes, the message is clear: Asian Americans are resilient and all the same—and still different from other Americans. But this myth does significant harm. The model minority myth "overstates the success of Asian Americans in terms of resiliency, health, wisdom, and wealth," wrote a group of public health experts from the New York University School of Medicine in a [2016 commentary](#). Asian American college students have [higher rates of attempting suicide than those in other groups](#). Asian Americans have an [increased likelihood of depression](#) and anxiety to higher suicide rates and [lower likelihood of seeking mental health services](#). Asian American success stories are often attributed to [differences in family attitudes toward education](#). [Pay disparities continue to exist](#): For every dollar white men make in the United States, an Asian Indian woman makes \$1.21 and a Taiwanese woman makes \$1.16. A Samoan woman makes \$0.62. A Burmese woman makes 50 cents. The model minority myth operates alongside the myth of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners. [1 in 7 immigrants to the U.S. are Asian and undocumented under threat of deportation](#).



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BIBLICAL/SPIRITUAL/THEOLOGICAL FRAMING OR REFERENCES:

NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLAR Craig Evans says that during Jesus' life on this earth many in Israel expected the Messiah would appear as a regal warrior king who would overthrow the Romans and restore the Davidic monarchy. As a people living under occupation, they experienced life as minoritized people within a diversity of tribal identities under occupation. Some had tried to assimilate into the Hellenized culture and Roman empire while others rejected assimilation. Still, the people held an idealized, mythical perception of who the Messiah would be and how the Messiah would act. This model myth defined who Israel aspired to be and how they would measure success even under colonial rule. That dominant myth was perpetuated across class and tribal lines. But Jesus did not fit the societal stereotype of an earthly king. He didn't look the part ([Isaiah 53:2](#)), and in the eyes of his critics, he also said the wrong things ([John 10:32-33](#)), did the wrong things ([Luke 13:12-14](#)), came from the wrong place ([John 7:25-27](#), [John 7:52](#)), and associated with the wrong people ([Luke 5:29-30](#)). As a result, the only Israelites who recognized Jesus was the Messiah were those who had rejected the societal stereotype that dictated what a "real" Messiah should look like.

We are invited to reflect on the manufactured intentions behind the Model Minority Myth that for over fifty years has sought to maintain societal stability and hegemony - particularly for those who benefit from white dominant culture at the expense of Asians and Asian Americans and by association BIPOC people and to consider this in light of the incarnate and liberating Jesus who rejected the Model Minority Myth then and now.

As people of faith, can we consciously and deliberately deconstruct our myths of Asian Americans and BIPOC people and lean into acknowledging what God has gifted and graced us with for the common good



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REFLECTION:

QUESTION #1

Where have you observed the Model Minority myth used in social media, the church, our social and political life together?

QUESTION #2

In what ways do you notice the Model Minority Myth perpetuating bias and racist policies?

QUESTION #3

Who in your congregation and community benefits from maintaining the Model Minority Myth? What have been the costs to maintaining the Model Minority Myth?

QUESTION #4

When we challenge the Model Minority Myth we are engaging in a faithful act of antiracism. What are three ways my congregation and I can challenge and then dismantle the impact of the Model Minority Myth as it is manifest in our congregation and community?

QUESTION #5

Can we engage in deeper conversations with Asian Americans and listen to their diverse stories about how the Model Minority Myth has done harm to them? What steps do we need to take to begin this conversation?

QUESTION #6

What other Biblical examples guide us in challenging the expectation and assumptions that undergird the Model Minority Myth?



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ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

THE 1965 IMMIGRATION ACT AND MODEL MINORITY MYTHOLOGY (FROM IMMIGRANT HISTORY INITIATIVE)

<https://www.immigranthistory.org/1965.html>

'MODEL MINORITY' MYTH AGAIN USED AS A RACIAL WEDGE BETWEEN ASIANS AND BLACKS (FROM NPR'S "CODESWITCH")

<https://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/04/19/524571669/model-minority-myth-again-used-as-a-racial-wedge-between-asians-and-blacks>

THE BACKHANDED COMPLIMENT OF THE MODEL MINORITY MYTH (FROM LAWYERSCOMMITTEE.COM)

<https://www.lawyerscommittee.org/the-backhanded-compliment-of-the-model-minority-myth/>

THE ASIAN AMERICAN 'MODEL MINORITY' MYTH MASKS A HISTORY OF DISCRIMINATION (FROM NATIONALGEOGRAPHIC.COM)

<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/culture/article/asian-american-model-minority-myth-masks-history-discrimination>

THE 'MODEL MINORITY' MYTH PUTS ASIAN AMERICANS' HEALTH AT RISK (FROM BILL OF HEALTH)

blog.petrieflom.law.harvard.edu/2021/06/28/the-model-minority-myth-puts-asian-americans-health-at-risk/

THE TRUTH BEHIND INDIAN AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM (FROM THE ATLANTIC)

<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2021/01/the-making-of-a-model-minority/617258/>

MODEL MINORITY MYTH (FROM PBS)

<https://www.pbs.org/video/america-numbers-model-minority-myth/>

THE "MODEL MINORITY" MYTH | JENNIFER HO AND FRANK H. WU (FROM NATIONAL COMMITTEE ON U.S.-CHINA RELATIONS)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHFvEvPo5z0>

WHY DO WE CALL ASIAN AMERICANS THE MODEL MINORITY? (FROM AJ+ ON YOUTUBE)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrDbvSSbXk8>