



TOPIC: Model Minority Myth

GRADES: 8-12

BACKGROUND ESSAY

How can being an upstanding American citizen be a double-edged sword? During the post-World War II era and after nearly a hundred years of anti-Asian sentiment and legislation, many Asian Americans hoped to be seen as more American and accepted by American society. They didn't want to be viewed as a threat to national security like Japanese Americans were when they were imprisoned during WWII. Instead, they wanted to be seen as "good Americans" and desired to assimilate and Americanize, which developed into the idea of the "model minority myth," recasting Asian Americans as prime examples of representing the quintessential American values of opportunity, meritocracy, and the American Dream. Toy Len Goon, the first ever Asian American named American Mother of the Year in 1952 was an early example of what it meant to be a "model minority."

During the 1960s, as the Civil Rights Movement continued the fight for equality of all Americans, and the federal government invested in social welfare programs such as the War on Poverty and Great Society, the concept of the "model minority" became a stereotype used to pit Asian Americans against other communities of color, particularly Black Americans. News publications ran articles extolling the ways Asian Americans capitalized on the American Dream with their work ethic and emphasis on education. By doing this, it delegitimized centuries of systemic oppression and racist policies that shaped the experiences of Black Americans.

This stereotype also hid how Asian Americans were discriminated against based on racist policies, such as being excluded from living in certain neighborhoods and from being fully accepted members of American society. It created a limited perspective on the Asian American

community, where they were seen as one monolithic group. In reality, this community has consisted of diverse ethnicities from a variety of countries and cultures, comprising over ten different languages. Thus, socio-economic success was not universal, and praising Asian Americans as a “model minority” called into question the fact that there were many within the community who did not get the services and government assistance they needed.

The “model minority myth” has persisted well after the stereotype developed. Media publications such as *Time*’s 1987 cover story “Those Asian American Whiz Kids” and articles analyzing the work ethic of Asian Americans in response to Amy Chua’s 2011 book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* illustrated that the “model minority myth” is still being perpetuated.

VOCABULARY

- **Americanization:** when a person tries to make themselves as American as possible in terms of character and culture
- **Assimilation:** to change and adapt oneself into the culture of the dominant or mainstream group
- **American Dream:** the belief that there is equal opportunity for any American to achieve his or her aspirations no matter what his or her background or identity is
- **Discrimination:** To distinguish someone as being inferior or less than, especially based on their sex, race, religion, gender, or age.
- **Stereotype:** A simplified and over-generalized understanding or image of a group of people, place, or thing; when referring to a group of people, stereotypes can lead to certain expectations/assumptions of how or what that group may act, think, talk, care about, etc.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How and why did the “model minority myth” develop?
- Why do you think it has been important for Asian Americans to be seen as “good Americans?”
- Do you think being a “good American” and Americanizing as much as possible ultimately helps one to be more accepted by American society? Why or why not?
- Asian Americans are often stereotyped as having achieved a higher level of success than other minority groups. How might this thinking be problematic?
- How does this idea of “model minority” hurt Asian Americans in their attempts to build coalitions or alliances with other groups of people?

ACTIVITIES

Activity: Asian Americans are Not a Monolithic Group

Instruct students to write a response to the following questions:

- Is there such a thing as “positive” or “good” stereotypes?
- If stereotypes are oversimplified generalizations, what impact might they have on groups of people who are stereotyped?

Pair students up to discuss their responses.

Then conduct a whole class discussion on how stereotypes impact people regardless of whether they stereotypes are positive or not.

Tell students that they will gain an understanding of the diversity of Asian Americans and that one of the more accurate ways of referring to this community is Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI). Students will research statistics on education and poverty from the website [AAPI Data: Demographic Data & Policy Research on Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders](#).

Divide students into groups of three and Instruct them to do the following:

- List 10 different Asian American and Pacific Islander groups represented in the website [AAPI Data: Demographic Data & Policy Research on Asian Americans & Pacific Islanders](#).
- Use the [AAPI Data website education page](#) for research on education. For each graph or table, summarize how different Asian American and Pacific Islander ethnic groups are doing in terms of education and how it compares to the rest of the U.S. (non-AAPIs)?
- Use the [AAPI Data website poverty page](#) for research on poverty. For each graph or table, summarize how Asian American and Pacific Islander ethnic groups are doing in terms of income level and poverty and how it compares with the rest of the U.S. (non-AAPIs).

Each student group will report their findings to the class. Assign a different part of the research for each student group to report. Each group will write their findings for their assigned part on the board or a sheet of poster paper. For example, one group can describe how Asian American and Pacific Islander groups vary in terms of reading and math test scores; another group can summarize the educational attainment of various Pacific Islander groups.

Review the reported data from student groups by discussing the following with the whole class:

- How are Asian American and Pacific Islander ethnic groups similar and different in terms of their education and economic experiences?
- Knowing that Asian Americans are not a monolithic “model minority” and that each ethnic group fares differently economically and educationally, how might policies change to be more inclusive of those groups in need in terms of jobs, services, government funding, employment, small business, education, etc?

- How might the “model minority myth” be an obstacle for advancement for Asian Americans?
- Describe how the “model minority myth” might be used to drive a wedge between Asian Americans and other communities of color in policies and services.

FURTHER INFORMATION

- Chow, Kat. [“Model Minority Myth Again Used as a Racial Wedge between Asians and Blacks”](#)
- NPR Education. [“Asian-Americans are Successful, but No Thanks to Tiger Parenting”](#)
- PBS LearningMedia. [“America By the Numbers: Model Minority Myth”](#)
- Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. [“The Danger of a Single Story”](#), TEDGlobal 2009.



[PBSLearningMedia.org/collection/asian-americans-pbs](https://www.pbslearningmedia.org/collection/asian-americans-pbs)

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