



# American Optimism and the Tough Reality of Asian Americans

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**Abstract.** In this paper, I will explore the question: how do we interpret minor feelings when American optimism contradicts the tough reality of Asian Americans? To answer this question, I will focus on the tough realities of Asian Americans in the field of education and how the “dogma of American optimism” [1]. Creates negative emotions such as self-doubt and internal struggles about one’s Asian American identity. Asian Americans are often seen as a “model minority” as their work ethic, obedience, and stress for success are used to negative stereotypes against the community and other minorities alike. The push for higher education misleads young Asian Americans which causes identity issues and false expectations. Moreover, the lack of representation in government permits Asian American stereotypes. Finally, the combination of these issues causes feelings of self-doubt, false standards, and identity issues within the Asian American community.

**Keywords:** minor feelings · Asian American identity · stereotype

## 1 Introduction

Asian Americans are the “model minority”. They are smart, hardworking, diligent, successful and everything in between. At least, that is what many Americans believe about this group. For centuries, they have constructed racial stereotypes about minorities, specifically Asian Americans, and devised a reality different from what this group experiences. To reinforce their perceptions and stereotypes about Asian Americans, they point to people like Bruce Lee, Kamala Harris, and Sandra Oh. This American optimism, however, contradicts the tough realities that Asian Americans face and endure, which results in minor feelings of self-hatred, racial trauma, and the need to prove oneself.

## 2 Minor Feelings: What Are They?

Before diving in deeper, it is important to define what is meant by “minor feelings”. In the field of racial consciousness, “minor feelings” refers to the confusion or dissonance that results when “American optimism...contradicts your own racialized reality” [2]. Although minorities may not agree with the things they are told about their experiences and experience things differently, they endure and accept it. As a result, minor feelings

can and do lead to racial self-hatred. Minorities begin to view themselves the way Whites perceive them and thus, become their enemy.

In the case of Asian Americans, the group is often described as the “model minority”. They are compared to other minority groups such as Hispanics and African Americans and are told they are much more obedient, hardworking, and successful. Asian Americans are praised for their accomplishments and deemed as “honorary whites” [3]. They are expected to excel in school but are then ostracized by fellow students for being “too smart” and lowering the class curve. Chinese workers in the 1880s were fashioned as the model immigrant group that other groups should aspire to be [4]. Yet, they were met with the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, which suspended Chinese immigration to America for 10 years and disqualified the entire group from naturalization [5]. In such cases, Asian Americans are left to ponder why their experiences are different from their optimistic perceptions.

The reason for this can be traced back to the 1960s when the civil rights movement was in full swing in the U.S. The American mass media began to portray Asian Americans as a “model minority”, believing that Chinese and Japanese people had made outstanding contributions to the U.S. in education and other fields, and therefore all Asian Americans had become part of the white American middle class. In the 1980s, this theory was revived and expanded to include other Asian ethnic groups such as Koreans, Filipinos, and Vietnamese, so that Asians were called “model minorities” by the American mass media, meaning that they had successfully achieved the American dream and were fully integrated into mainstream America. The “model minority” has even been used to demonstrate that American society is an elite society of equal opportunity and to insinuate the inertia of the rest of the American community and its economic dependence on the federal government. However, this view obscures some of the difficulties and realities that Asians face. Not all Asians are high achievers, not all Asians live in middle class circles, not all Asians have achieved significant educational and career successes, and this generalization is then awarded to Asians in a way that masks the problems that Asians face.

### 3 American Optimism and Education

In the realm of education, American optimism fails to illustrate the adversities Asian Americans face to excel academically.

Part of the “model minority” stereotype includes the idea that Asian American students are inexplicably intelligent, and that they excel in all subjects—particularly science and math. It is believed and expected that they only get ‘As’ on all academic subjects, all while being invested in extracurriculars like clubs, sports, and volunteer work. Asian Americans are described as “competitive”, and “geniuses”, and believed that they could easily enter any elite university of their choice due to their high GPAs, SAT/ACT scores, and extracurriculars [6].

While only focusing on the ‘upsides’ of Asian Americans in education, American optimism fails to acknowledge the pressure these students face to uphold their image as a “model minority”. When referring to minor feelings, Asian Americans who fail to receive ‘As’ or a perfect 4.0 GPA wonder why they are failures or if they are a “good

enough” Asian [6]. Instead of questioning the socially constructed expectations for Asian Americans, they question why they are not smart enough. They compete for who can be the ‘smartest Asian’ instead of supporting each other. As a result, Asian Americans develop poorer self-esteem, social problems, and depressive symptoms [6]. A study found that Asian American students have “lower levels of mental health and higher levels of psychological distress and depression” than students from other minority groups [7]. Why is this relevant? This is because Asian American students may be more reluctant to speak up and seek help to address their health issues and/or academic struggles for fear of having their feelings viewed as overreactions. Asian American college students are 3x less likely “to seek out professional therapy or counseling” [8]. This indicates that Asian Americans internalize the racial stereotypes positioning them as the ‘model minority.’ “You are Asian, you are so smart, why are you struggling? You should not be struggling! You should not be failing!”. In believing this, Asian Americans and their struggles are neglected and not validated, especially in the field of academics. All that is seen is how intelligent Asian Americans are, without any consideration of the emotional toll and pressures endured by this group.

#### **4 The Tough Reality of Representation**

Recent forthcoming in Asian American representation have been used as virtual signaling, where American optimism can prevail and therefore nothing meaningful is done to advance true representation. Since May 1<sup>st</sup>, 2009, Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month has been federally recognized in May of every year. Companies like Target, Facebook, and Nestlé use this time to promote inclusion, educate others on AAPI culture and community, and amplify the voices of individuals from the community. Universities, such as UCLA and UC Berkeley send out newsletters highlighting the history of AAPI community members and how they are celebrating. But what happens when the month of May is over? Companies and social media transfer their attention elsewhere and universities stop acknowledging the AAPI community. Once again, Asian Americans are put into storage where they await the next year to be acknowledged.

Although there is a whole month dedicated to honoring the Asian American community, there is still a lack of significant overall Asian American representation. In education, for instance, there is currently no national curriculum that requires students to learn Asian American history in U.S. classrooms [3]. Even for the history that is taught, Asian Americans are depicted in a negative light. For example, when learning of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act, students are taught that this legislation was necessary to prevent Chinese immigrants from causing further white unemployment and declining wages. Students, especially Asian Americans, are taught to believe that other Asian Americans were inferior because they were foreigners and posed a national security threat [9]. There is no emphasis on a curriculum that explores Asian immigration to America, the partaking of Chinese immigrants in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, the involvement of Asian Americans in great wars, or how Asian Americans were legally mistreated by legislation, such as the 1875 Page Act [10]. The issue with this is that for an entire month of each year, Asian Americans are told that they are seen, that they are heard, and that they are valued. However, by excluding their extensive history

from America's school curriculum, there is a different message is conveyed. The absence of Asian American curriculum suggests that much like in the past, Asian Americans are not viewed as true Americans and that their struggles and contributions are not worthy enough to be acknowledged. This contradicts the message they receive when the nation celebrates them; they are put on a pedestal only later to discover that their history—that they—do not matter. Thus, Asian Americans are forced to listen to their history from the lens of the majority race. They struggle with understanding whether they are truly accepted and viewed as equals or whether they remain as outcasts.

Stereotypes and racial discrimination not only lead to the neglect of the social needs of Asian groups, but also, due to the emphasis on the submissive and law-abiding, hard-working and other traits of Asians, actually create a vicious circle of reproduction of stereotypical images of ethnic groups and exert negative and even destructive pressure on ethnic individuals. It has created a strong sense of fragmentation among the Asian community, and the stereotypes sometimes make them feel proud, but the negative effects are even more significant. The Asian community wants to be widely recognized at the level of American society and truly integrated into American society, even producing extreme behaviors of total rejection of ethnic culture and symbols with any traces of ethnic culture.

## 5 Conclusion

Considering all the events impacting the Asian American community, now, more than ever, it is important to acknowledge the negative impact of American optimism. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans are being blamed for causing the event. As a result, many xenophobic slanders and misinformation have circulated, making Asian Americans the target of verbal and physical attacks [11]. Such an issue is not a direct result of racism but a reflection of the socially biased view that exists today. American optimism depicts Asian American experiences in a way that completely differs from their actual experiences, not just in the field of education. While this may be the case, Asian Americans can still have some optimism of their own if their minor feelings are acknowledged, alongside their true experiences.

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