

# 3

*The model minority stereotype of Asian Americans is retrospectively analyzed twenty-five years after the author's original study of the issue. The continuing effects of this stereotype in higher education are examined.*

## Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype: Implications for Student Affairs Practice and Higher Education

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About twenty-five years ago, I published an article titled “Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the ‘Model Minority’ Thesis” (Suzuki, 1977). The article debunked an increasingly pervasive stereotype emerging at the time of Asian Americans as a phenomenally successful, “problem-free” minority group that was, as one correspondent put it, “outwhiting whites” (“Success Story,” 1971). In this chapter, I revisit my earlier analysis of the model minority stereotype through the perspective of the past twenty-five years, discussing what its impact has been and continues to be in higher education.

### **Negative Consequences of the Model Minority Stereotype**

I was motivated to write my original article for two reasons. First, I was skeptical of the motives behind the sterling image of Asian Americans suddenly being projected by the media in the mid-1960s (Peterson, 1966; “Success Story,” 1966). During the late 1800s and well into the 1940s, Asian Americans were generally portrayed as an invading “yellow peril,” a horde of depraved, uncivilized heathens who threatened to undermine the American way of life (Miller, 1969; Ogawa, 1971). Even as recently as the early 1960s, Asian Americans were still portrayed quite negatively, either as obsequious, slavish, and subservient or as treacherous, deceitful, and untrustworthy. Even though by then many Asian Americans were third- or

fourth-generation Americans, they still were viewed, more often than not, as foreigners, not as full-fledged Americans.

I was therefore quite suspicious of the sudden change in the image of Asian Americans and did not find it fortuitous that this change was occurring at a time when the country was facing a major crisis in race relations. Indeed, I agreed with the many Asian American social activists who charged that Asian Americans were being promoted as the model minority to discredit the protests and demands for social justice of other minority groups (Uyematsu, 1971; Wake, 1970).

My second reason for challenging the model minority stereotype was my growing concern with the negative consequences of this ostensibly positive image. Although Asian Americans were still facing many discriminatory barriers, especially in the area of employment, complaints about such discrimination were often not taken seriously and dismissed by employers as baseless. In fact, Asian Americans were initially not included as a protected minority group under federal affirmative action regulations. Moreover, government agencies and nonprofit organizations were not inclined to fund programs for Asian Americans in need of assistance because of the perception that the Asian communities had few, if any, problems, were self-sufficient, and “took care of their own.”

### **Challenging the Model Minority Stereotype**

For all these reasons, I decided to carry out some preliminary research that would challenge the model minority stereotype and lead to a very different interpretation of the available socioeconomic data on Asian Americans. By aggregating data on all of the Asian subgroups, earlier researchers had shown that Asian Americans as a single group appeared to be doing relatively well in comparison with other groups (Peterson, 1971; Urban Associates, 1974). For example, their analyses showed that Asian American families had a higher median annual income than U.S. families in general and that the median years of schooling completed by Asian Americans was higher than for the U.S. population as a whole. Such global and rather simplistic analyses were the basis for the model minority concept promoted by the media.

My initial analysis and subsequent studies by other researchers showed that when the socioeconomic data on Asian Americans were disaggregated and more sophisticated analyses conducted, a very different picture emerged. Such analyses showed that the median family income of Asian Americans was higher than that of white families because Asian American families had more earners contributing to family income and were concentrated in high-cost-of-living and high-income areas. When adjustments were made for these factors, the median family income of Asian Americans actually fell below that of white families. The analyses also showed that the annual per capita income of Asian Americans was considerably less than

their white counterparts who had the same level of education, and the disparity was even greater when level of education and geographical area of residence was kept constant. And finally, they showed that the proportion of Asian Americans living below the poverty line was considerably higher than that of the white population (Cabezas, 1977; Chun, 1980; Suzuki, 1977). These findings clearly showed that Asian Americans still were struggling to achieve parity with their white counterparts.

### **Revisiting the Model Minority Stereotype**

Have there been changes in the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans since these earlier findings twenty-five years ago? Certainly one change has been that in recent years, non-Asian American social scientists have been more hesitant about invoking the model minority stereotype in studies on Asian Americans, and the media have been less prone to promoting the stereotype. I believe this is due in part to the steady stream of publications by Asian American social scientists whose research has strongly validated the earlier findings that challenged the model minority myth (Jiobu, 1988; Nee and Sanders, 1985; Suzuki, 1989; Wong, 1982).

However, despite these findings, the perception is still widespread that Asian Americans have overcome all barriers of racial discrimination and are more successful even than whites. I believe this perception is due to several factors. First, a large proportion of Asian Americans graduate from college; in fact, the 1990 census showed that 38 percent of Asian Americans were college graduates, compared to 20 percent of the U.S. population as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993b). Moreover, the socioeconomic status of Asian Americans has also continued to rise since the 1970s. The 1990 census showed that the median family income of Asian Americans was higher than that of white families (U.S. Census Bureau, 1993b). In addition, the phenomenal rise of Japan and other Asian countries as major economic powers in the 1980s and the immigration of many wealthy Asians to the United States from these countries may contribute to the perception that Asian Americans are better off economically than whites (Stokes, 1987; Wallace, 1982). Even though such a relationship between the Asian countries and Asian Americans is tenuous at best, the public at large may find such a connection credible because of the tendency to view Asian Americans as foreigners and not as Americans (Tuan, 1998).

However, again, more in-depth analyses of the data tell a very different story. Since the late 1980s, several researchers have conducted detailed studies into the socioeconomic status of Asian Americans (Cabezas and Kawaguchi, 1988; Federal Glass Ceiling Commission, 1995; Hune and Chan, 1997; Jiobu, 1988; Wong and Nagasawa, 1991; Woo, 2000). Among many other findings, these studies showed that whites consistently gain a substantially higher return on education than any of the Asian American groups; that is, for the same level of education, whites are more likely to earn more,

on the average, than Asian Americans. In addition, the poverty rate for Asian Americans still is considerably higher than that for whites. And finally, native-born Asian American men are less likely to be in management positions than their white counterparts, and highly educated native-born Asian American men are earning less—in most cases, considerably less—than similarly qualified white men. One study suggested that although their relatively high levels of education enabled Asian American men to enter high-paying occupations and industries, they encounter a racial barrier, the so-called glass ceiling, as they try to move upward (Woo, 2000).

Despite some disparities in the findings of these researchers, they have all concluded that as a group, Asian Americans have not yet achieved full equality and participation in American society. Although they are well educated and gain relatively easy access to entry-level jobs, they continue to face inequities in income and upward job mobility. However, the model minority stereotype has had the effect of glossing over these problems, making them easy to ignore or neglect.

### **Reemergence of the Perfidious Foreigner Stereotype**

Paradoxically, even as the model minority stereotype continues to be perpetuated, the older stereotype of Asian Americans as the “perfidious foreigner” seems to be reemerging. This stereotype was reinforced strongly by U.S. propaganda during the Vietnam War. It was further reinforced in the 1980s when Japan and other Asian countries emerged as major economic powers and were viewed as a threat to U.S. dominance in the global economy. And during the past decade or so, with the end of the Cold War, China has replaced the Soviet Union as a major threat to the American way of life.

These developments may have set the stage for the most recent outbreak of xenophobia against Asian Americans. For example, in the mid-1990s, a scandal erupted over the donations made to the Clinton-Gore campaign by Asian Americans who, according to reports in the media, had close ties to various Asian countries, including Indonesia, Taiwan, and South Korea. Although such ties were never proved to exist, the matter became a major scandal, far out of proportion to the charges, and had the effect of raising suspicions about the loyalty of all Asian Americans (Lacey, 1997; Wu, 1996). Once again, Asian Americans were viewed as foreigners who could not be trusted because of their ethnic backgrounds and ties to Asian countries.

More recently, the specter of racial profiling of Asian Americans was raised by the arrest and imprisonment of Wen Ho Lee, a scientist at the Los Alamos National Laboratory, for allegedly stealing U.S. nuclear secrets and passing them on to an agent of China (Sheer, 2000). Asian American supporters of Lee, who rallied for his release, accused the government of targeting him because of his race and contended that he had been indicted and arrested on the flimsiest of evidence (Wise, 2000; Yin, 2000). Because of Lee’s treatment and the increased security measures taken at Los Alamos,

Asian American scientists and engineers there were reportedly seeking jobs elsewhere, and job applications at the laboratory from Asian American scientists and engineers all but dried up (Glanz, 2000; McFarling, 2000).

Thus in retrospect, as we begin the twenty-first century, I believe the model minority stereotype is still alive and well. Although it is less flaunted by the media, its effects may be more insidious because it has become an almost unconscious image embedded in the minds of the public, subliminally influencing their perceptions. Worse yet, the perfidious foreigner stereotype has reared its ugly head again and, paradoxically, is working in tandem with the model minority stereotype to influence the public's perception of Asian Americans. Together, these stereotypes are pernicious in their impact on Asian Americans and, as I will discuss, are also influencing attitudes toward Asian Americans in our institutions of higher education.

### **Asian Americans in Higher Education**

As the data presented in Chapter Two show, Asian Americans are well represented among students and faculty in higher education. In fact, in the fall of 1997, full-time Asian American faculty totaled 31,259, or 5 percent of all full-time faculty, outnumbering both African American and Hispanic full-time faculty ("Number of Full-Time Faculty Members," 2000). However, they are underrepresented severely in administrative positions and even fall far below the numbers of black and Hispanic administrators. In the fall of 1997, there were 2,736 Asian Americans in executive, administrative, or managerial positions, or about 2 percent of the total number ("Employees in Colleges and Universities," 2000). They were even more severely underrepresented among the chief executive officers of the over three thousand institutions of higher education in the United States, numbering around twenty-four, or only 0.8 percent of the total number ("Characteristics of College Presidents," 2000).

It should be noted that the aggregated data just presented conceal the tremendous diversity of the Asian American population in the United States. This population consists of at least thirty ethnic subgroups that differ enormously in cultural background, historical experience, and socioeconomic circumstances. For example, certain Southeast Asian subgroups, such as the Hmong and Cambodians, are still severely underrepresented in the student population and among the faculty of institutions of higher education and have much lower incomes and suffer much higher rates of poverty than other Asian American subgroups.

### **The Impact of Stereotyping on Asian Americans in Higher Education**

The stereotyping of Asian Americans both as the model minority and as the perfidious foreigner has had invidious consequences for them in higher education. My discussion of these consequences will be based on three

sources of information: (1) my many years of experience as a faculty member and administrator in several institutions of higher education, (2) two reports issued by the Asian Pacific American Education Advisory Committee in the California State University system in 1990 and 1994, and (3) other reports and studies on Asian Americans in higher education.

Let me begin with a personal anecdote. In the 1980s, when I was an administrator at another institution, I learned firsthand how damaging the model minority stereotype could be for Asian American students. This institution had an unusually large counseling center with around thirty professional counselors on its staff. However, not one of these counselors was Asian American, despite the fact that more than 15 percent of the student body was comprised of Asian Americans.

When I inquired into the situation, I was told that very few Asian American students used the services of the center, and the staff apparently concluded that Asian American students were so well adjusted and had so few personal problems that they had no need for psychological counseling. I questioned the validity of this conclusion and insisted that the center make greater efforts to hire an Asian American counselor.

My persistence on this matter over a two-year period finally resulted in the hiring of the first Asian American counselor by the center. In a matter of months, the new counselor was inundated with Asian American students seeking her advice on a wide range of psychological problems. By the end of the academic year, the backlog of students wishing to see her became so large that she was staying well into the evening hours to keep up with her workload. Finally, she told the center director that she was reaching a breaking point and appealed to him to either hire another Asian American counselor or allow her to cross-train a number of the other counselors.

They decided on the latter course of action, and subsequently, the Asian American counselor worked with several of the other counselors, familiarizing them with the typical problems faced by Asian American students and briefing them on how she advised these students. She then distributed her backlog to these other counselors, and much to their surprise, they discovered that they could be almost as effective in advising these students as the Asian American counselor. Although increasing the diversity of the counseling staff by only one person of Asian American background was by no means sufficient, the center was still able to improve the staff's capability, broaden the range of students they could serve, and thereby provide higher-quality service to students.

I believe that the counseling center was influenced strongly by the model minority stereotype. Asian American students have generally been stereotyped as superbright, highly motivated overachievers who come from well-to-do families. It may have been inconceivable to many of the center's staff that such students were encountering any serious psychological problems. Furthermore, the experience I have recounted is far from an isolated case. Several other Asian American counselors with whom I have talked have described similar experiences on their campuses.

These counselors, as well as Asian American psychologists who have conducted research in this area (Sue and Morishima, 1982; Sue and Zane, 1985), have reported that many Asian American students are experiencing extreme psychological stress and alienation. Because of the model minority stereotype, they are often subjected to unrealistically high expectations by their parents, their instructors, and even their peers. For a number of students, the pressures become so great that their academic performance suffers, forcing some of them to drop out of school. These psychological problems have been exacerbated by incidences of racial harassment and even violence against Asian American students on several campuses across the country (Asian-Pacific Advisory Committee, 1988; Clemetson, 2000). Unfortunately, because these problems go largely unrecognized by institutions of higher education, most Asian American students receive little, if any, help in coping with them.

The model minority stereotype also has other detrimental consequences for Asian Americans in higher education. A number of such consequences came to light through the work of the Asian Pacific American Education Advisory (APAEA) Committee of the California State University (CSU) system. This committee was established by the chancellor of the CSU system in 1989 to study the problems and needs of Asian Pacific Americans (APAs) on the CSU campuses. Because of the massive size of the CSU system and the fact that its APA enrollment in 1989 was about 11 percent of the total nationwide enrollment of APAs in higher education, I believe that many of the committee's findings and recommendations should have applicability beyond the CSU system.

A major unexpected finding of the committee was the dire need to provide assistance to Asian American students who did not speak English as their first language in developing their English communication skills. The CSU requires all students to pass a writing test as a requirement for graduation. During its public hearings, the committee heard from a number of Asian American English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students who recounted, some tearfully, their many attempts to pass this test, often delaying their graduation by one or two years. The committee also learned that only one or two CSU campuses provided these students with any assistance in this area. Other researchers have reported similar findings for Asian American ESL students in other parts of the country (Hsia, 1988; Tsuchida, 1982).

Asian American students and staff who appeared before the committee testified that the climate on the CSU campuses was not comfortable or inviting and that student service programs tended to exclude Asian American students and were indifferent to their problems and needs. Thus the committee found that "APA students, particularly those from underrepresented groups, are underserved by these programs and are often in dire need of assistance" (APAEA Committee, 1990, p. ix). Again, this problem is not unique to the CSU campuses but is reported on other campuses around the country as well (Greene, 1987).

Concern is also growing among Asian American students about subtle incidents of discrimination, such as derogatory remarks by instructors about the limited English proficiency of Asian American ESL students, covertly racist statements about Asian Americans by both instructors and students, and expressions of resentment by other students toward the achievement orientation of Asian American students (Loo and Rolison, 1986; APAEA Committee, 1990). Asian American students have also complained that many instructors do not trust them and unfairly accuse them of cheating on exams (APAEA Committee, 1990). What may be at work in these situations is not the model minority stereotype but the perfidious foreigner stereotype.

The committee's research showed that "although about 8 percent of the faculty and staff in the CSU were Asians, they tend to be concentrated in certain areas and are sparsely represented in other areas. APAs are especially underrepresented among . . . administrative/management employees, constituting less than 5 percent of such employees, and are practically nonexistent in higher level executive positions" (APAEA Committee, 1990, p. ix). Other studies have shown that Asian American students tend to major in science- and math-based fields and are less attracted to fields that require well-developed verbal or linguistic skills, such as education and the humanities (Hsia, 1988; Hune and Chan, 1997). Similar patterns exist among Asian American faculty (Vetter and Babco, 1987).

It is clear that Asian Americans are severely underrepresented in higher-level administrative positions in higher education. A number of studies have shown that Asian Americans are also underrepresented in management and leadership positions in all other sectors of our society (Jiobu, 1988; Kawaguchi and Cabezas, 1989; Woo, 2000). This "glass ceiling" barrier for Asian Americans is attributed primarily to racial discrimination. However, I believe that for Asian Americans, racial discrimination takes particularly subtle forms and is due to the stereotyping of them both as the model minority and as the perfidious foreigner. Because Asian American students are viewed as "problem-free" high achievers, they have not been encouraged or assisted in developing their verbal and linguistic skills. Moreover, the underdevelopment of these skills also hinders their ability to assume leadership roles in student organizations, affecting them later as they pursue professional careers. And as Asian Americans strive for upward mobility in their careers, they are viewed as lacking the requisite skills to be effective leaders and are therefore often passed up for management positions. The few who achieve management and other leadership roles are often viewed suspiciously as untrustworthy because of the stereotypical image of them as the perfidious foreigner. These stereotypes working in tandem make it doubly difficult for Asian Americans to be selected for these roles and, when selected, to succeed in these roles.

The APAEA Committee (1990) made special note in its report of the fact that "although APA students as a group appear to be well represented on all CSU campuses, particular subpopulations of APAs, such as Southeast



Asians and Pacific Islanders, are still underrepresented. These students are underserved by campus outreach and admissions programs and are generally not included as a targeted group by these programs” (p. ix). Moreover, these groups are even more severely underrepresented among the faculty and staff.

The committee’s most general overall finding was that the CSU campuses had “largely overlooked the problems and needs of APA students due in part to the widespread acceptance of the model minority stereotype” and had not “adequately responded to their growing presence and diversity” (p. ix). If this situation exists in the state with the largest APA population, it can likely be generalized to other institutions throughout the country.

### **Summary and Recommendations**

The model minority and perfidious foreigner stereotypes have had detrimental consequences for Asian Americans in higher education. On the one hand, because Asian American students are stereotyped as “problem-free” high achievers, institutions of higher education have tended to neglect and ignore the many serious problems and needs they have. On the other hand, because Asian Americans also are stereotyped as untrustworthy “foreigners,” Asian American students often encounter racial harassment or are suspected of cheating. Through similar stereotyping, Asian American faculty and administrators are viewed as unsuited for higher-level leadership roles. In the face of such stereotyping, what can student affairs practitioners do to help address the problems and needs of Asian Americans in higher education? I suggest the following concrete steps.

- Conduct workshops, retreats, and other activities for students, faculty, administrators, and staff on diversity and multiculturalism, including segments on the stereotyping of Asian Americans and its damaging effects. Because attitudes and behaviors change very slowly, these activities should not be one-shot efforts but should be conducted on an ongoing basis.
- Establish a campuswide committee to monitor incidents of racial harassment, with particular attention given to Asian American students, who are often not perceived as victims of such harassment and may not speak out about it. This committee should also work with institutional leaders to develop and implement strategies for improving the campus climate.
- Support efforts to diversify the staffs of student affairs units, including efforts to recruit Asian Americans for such positions, especially on campuses with significant numbers of Asian American students, and provide training to student affairs practitioners on effective approaches to working with Asian American students.
- Provide assistance to Asian American and other ESL students to enable them to develop their English communication skills to a level necessary for college work.

- Offer workshops, conferences, and other activities to develop the leadership skills of Asian American and other minority students who tend not to be involved in mainstream student organizations and to increase their involvement in these organizations.
- Provide opportunities for Asian American student affairs staff to develop their leadership skills by assigning them leadership roles, supporting their attendance at seminars and conferences,<sup>1</sup> and offering other professional development activities. Because they perceive that a glass ceiling blocks their advancement, these Asian American staff members are often reluctant to apply for higher-level administrative positions but should be encouraged to do so.
- Include certain Asian American subpopulations, such as the various Southeast Asian groups who are still underrepresented in higher education, in outreach and admissions efforts to recruit a more diverse student body and in educational equity programs to provide them with financial aid and other supportive services to help them succeed academically.

## Conclusion

Due to limitations of space, this retrospective review of the model minority stereotype and the issues facing Asian Americans in higher education was not meant to be exhaustive. I have tried to cover only the issues that I thought would be of greatest interest to student affairs practitioners and have not included others, such as those related to curriculum and instruction, which are not in the direct purview of student affairs. Nevertheless, I hope that a sufficiently comprehensive overview was provided to stimulate the further thought and discussion needed to develop and implement student affairs programs that address the problems and needs of Asian Americans and other minorities in higher education.

## Note

1. A seminar on leadership development for Asian American faculty and administrators, many of them in the area of student affairs, has been offered at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, for about four years. This seminar has been conducted by an organization called Leadership Education for Asian Pacifics (LEAP), headquartered in Los Angeles.

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