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BEYOND THE MODEL MINORITY
MYTH: WHY ASIAN AMERICANS
SUPPORT AFFIRMATIVE ACTION

One of the increasingly prominent fallacies in the attacks
on affirmative action is that Asian Americans somehow are the
example that defeats the rationale for race-conscious remedial
programs.¹ House Speaker Newt Gingrich and California
Governor Pete Wilson are two of the many political leaders
who point to Asian Americans and their supposed success to
assert that affirmative action is not needed.² Their views present
the latest reincarnation of the model minority myth.

No matter how frequently and thoroughly the model
minority image is debunked, it returns as a troublesome
stereotype in race relations. According to this popular portrayal
of an entire race, Asian Americans have achieved economic
success through a combination of talent, hard work, and
conservative values, and not through government entitlements,
racial preferences, or complaints of discrimination. Through the
image, which can be seen everywhere from magazine articles
to popular movies, Asian Americans are depicted as champion
entrepreneurs and collegiate whiz kids, the immigrant parents
working as urban green grocers as their American children win
graduate awards such as the annual Westinghouse science talent
search.

Contrary to the popular perception, Asian Americans
remain underrepresented in many areas and also continue to
experience discrimination. Most often, Asian Americans are
treated as if they were all foreigners getting ahead by unfair
competition. They face a "glass ceiling" that allows them to
progress only up to a point. Furthermore, opponents of
affirmative action -- including some Asian Americans -- forget
that Asian Americans have benefitted greatly from the Civil
Rights Movement.

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A. The Origins of the Model Minority Myth

As people who continue to experience racism, Asian Americans should play a role in fighting for affirmative action. The many experiences of Asian Americans show that the United States remains highly color-conscious, it has not become a color-blind meritocracy, and straightforward racial discrimination and the efforts to remedy it are not the same. Asian Americans should avoid allowing themselves and their communities to be used as a wedge by politicians whose own ideologies and ambitions explain their sudden concern for Asian Americans.\footnote{3}

Complimentary on its face, the model minority myth is disingenuous at heart. The myth has a long lineage, dating back to the arrival of Asians in this country during the nineteenth century. In the past as well as today, the praise lavished on Asian Americans has been used to denigrate other racial minority groups, primarily African Americans.\footnote{4}

After the Civil War, Southern plantation owners developed grand schemes to import Chinese laborers to compete against recently freed black slaves. As the Reconstruction Governor of Arkansas explained, "Undoubtedly the underlying motive for this effort... was to punish the Negro for having abandoned the control of his old master, and to regulate the conditions of his employment and the scale of wages to be paid him."\footnote{5}

The peculiar plans failed, but there were similar efforts throughout the country in the nineteenth century. More than 12,000 Chinese men worked on the construction crews responsible for laying the transcontinental railroad and some Chinese men were used as strikebreakers in Northeastern factories.

Almost a century later, during the civil rights era, sociologist William Peterson introduced the model minority concept by marveling at the achievements of Asian Americans in contrast to blacks.\footnote{6} He opened his New York Times article, "Success Story, Japanese American Style," with a lengthy history of official discrimination against Japanese Americans. The point of his remarks was that generally, "this kind of treatment, creates what might be termed, 'problem minorities.'" A nod and wink weren't necessary to identify those "problem minorities." The author went on to explain that Japanese Americans were model minorities, except for a few juvenile delinquents who had joined black and Mexican gangs.
Like historical accounts of Asian Americans, the contemporary casting of Asian Americans as the model minority all but asks African Americans and other racial minorities: "They made it, why can't you?" But like other Americans, Asian Americans by and large remain ignorant of their own history. Efforts to include a more multi-cultural perspective on past events are dismissed as "politically correct," censoring out the context for understanding contemporary race relations.

B. The Model Minority Myth Is a Pretext for Further Hatred and Violence

Within that context, the model minority myth can be used against Asian Americans as well. The exaggerated success of Asian Americans can be held against them leading to hatred and violence. In the nineteenth century, the backlash against Chinese immigrants made a negative out of the formerly positive trait of hard work. The result was the Chinese Exclusion Act which marked the end of an era of open immigration by suspending Chinese immigration for ten years and prohibiting Chinese from becoming citizens. This law was upheld by the courts and led to a 1902 act making permanent the restriction on immigration. The act remained in effect until 1943. In the early twentieth century, reaction against Japanese Americans was again based on the trait of hard work. The results were the Alien Land Laws, which prevented Japanese Americans from owning the very farms that had formed the basis of their modest prosperity.

Repeatedly, during difficult economic circumstances accompanied by trade tensions with Asian nations, Asian Americans have been and are seen as part of an economic juggernaut: Japan, Inc., the Pacific Century, the rise of the East and the decline of the West are all concepts that update the "Yellow Peril" of the past. The blaming of Asian Americans can lead to violence, as during the recession of the 1980s in Detroit when two unemployed white autoworkers murdered Vincent Chin, mistaking the Chinese American for a Japanese foreign national.

On college campuses across the country, the model minority myth has developed into a powerful expression of anxiety over the assumed accomplishments of Asian Americans. Non-Asian Americans sarcastically suggest that U.C.L.A. (the University of California at Los Angeles) means "United Caucasians Lost among Asians" and that M.I.T. (Massachusetts
Institute of Technology) means "Made In Taiwan." At the peak of the controversy over Asian Americans and quotas in college admissions, a white Yale student stated, "If you are weak in math or science and find yourself assigned to a class with a majority of Asian kids, the only thing to do is transfer to a different section." The white president of the University of California at Berkeley explained, "Some students say if they see too many Asians in a class, they are not going to take it because the curve will be too high." The white president of Stanford repeated an apocryphal story about a professor who asked a student about a poor exam result in an engineering course, and was asked in return, "What do you think I am, Chinese?"

C. The Truth Behind the Stereotype

The model minority myth is based on poor social science. It reveals the risk of relying on racial generalizations.

It is inappropriate to compare Asian Americans and African Americans because no matter how much racial discrimination Asian Americans have faced -- and Asian Americans have faced racial discrimination -- they have never been enslaved, and even during an era of official discrimination, they sometimes were treated as honorary whites. By any socioeconomic measure, from housing segregation to employment discrimination, Asian Americans enjoy advantages over African Americans. Even the selective nature of immigration ensures that Asian immigrants arrive with significant educational and professional advantages; interestingly, contemporary African immigrants also possess similar traits.

Nevertheless, Asian Americans are at a major disadvantage compared to Caucasian Americans. The frequently cited statistic that the average Asian American family income is equal to or higher than the average white family income obscures many facts: Asian Americans, on average, have reached a higher level of formal education than whites; more Asian American individuals contribute to family income; and Asian Americans are concentrated in the high-income, high-cost states of California, New York and Hawaii. Comparing equally qualified individuals, and controlling for immigrant status, Asian Americans consistently earn less than whites.

The "glass ceiling" barrier faced by Asians has been documented repeatedly, including most recently in the bipartisan "Glass Ceiling" Commission Report. That study
shows that though there are many Asians in engineering, science and technical professions, they are significantly underrepresented in higher administrative, sales and managerial positions, as well as in law, education, social services and the media. Asian American males earn between 10 and 17 percent less than their white counterparts; Asian American women earn as much as 40 percent less than white males with the same credentials.

D. Asian Students' Achievements Are Exaggerated--Many Groups Are Impoverished

Even in higher education where Asian Americans as a group have been successful, Asian students’ achievements have been exaggerated. When the University of California Regents were debating whether to eliminate affirmative action, the media widely reported that Asian Americans would greatly benefit because they had the best credentials. A recent study by the university itself, however, revealed that Asian American applicants had slightly lower high school grades and test scores than white applicants. In other words, whites and not Asian Americans would be the primary beneficiaries of an admissions policy without affirmative action.

At best, labeling Asian Americans model minorities is inaccurate. The Census Bureau’s definition of Asian American is problematic. It includes individuals from 16 countries of origin and more than 20 Pacific Island cultures. Within the category that has been lumped together as Asian American, there are tremendous differences between specific ethnic groups. The fastest growing Asian American ethnic group is Vietnamese Americans. More than a quarter of Vietnamese Americans live in poverty compared to 13 percent of the general population. The percentages are even higher for other groups, including Laotians (35 percent below the poverty line) and Cambodians (43 percent below the poverty line). Southeast Asian groups are not unique; a higher than average portion of Chinese, Pakistani, Korean, Thai and Indonesian Americans also live in poverty. For most Asian American ethnic groups, ironically, the average income of native-born individuals is lower than the average income of immigrants. This suggests that Asian Americans are proof of selective immigration policies rather than modern-day examples of a Horatio Alger hero.

Indeed, the "model minority" myth ensures that poor Asian Americans will be ignored, sometimes by their own
communities. For example, more than 44 percent of Chinese Americans who live in California lack fluency in English. With inadequate education, language and cultural skills to obtain work, these Asian Americans have needs that are overlooked, even by policymakers who are trying to help the disadvantaged.

The model minority myth also demonstrates the continuing significance of race among white Americans. A recent survey asked white Americans to compare themselves with racial minorities on a number of traits. While whites thought of Asian Americans as better than African-Americans and Latinos, they thought of Asian Americans as worse than themselves. On the whole, whites considered Asian Americans to be more lazy, more violence-prone, less intelligent, and more likely to prefer welfare. Asian American, then, may be a model, but not for white people.

E. Asian Americans Are Beneficiaries of Affirmative Action

Perhaps the most damaging impact of the model minority myth is that policymakers regularly assume that Asian Americans do not need affirmative action, and automatically exclude them without any analysis. The evidence from California strongly suggests that Asian Americans often need affirmative action, particularly in areas where they do not have the necessary social connections or political power to break into the networks that lead to jobs and business opportunities.

Public contracting is a good example. Even relatively recently many cities still awarded lucrative work based on political patronage rather than a bidder’s qualifications or price quote. When Asian American contractors raised the issue of their exclusion from San Francisco’s public contracting system in the 1980s, they pointed to solid statistical evidence to support their call for reform. While Asian American contractors made up about 20 percent of the available pool of construction firms in San Francisco, they were receiving only about five percent of the total dollars awarded for the school district’s construction contracts and fewer than one percent of the city’s total construction contracts. The contractors complained that while they were qualified to perform school district projects, many were being unfairly locked out because the district channeled contracts to people with whom district staff or prime contractors were familiar. At the request of Asian and other minority contractors, the school district undertook an
extensive study of its procurement practices which confirmed the allegations. Prime contractors, who were white, frequently rejected minority contractors who had submitted the lowest bid; there was no clear and consistent contracting process; the district staff manipulated the procedures; the staff withheld information from minority contractors; and staff had largely failed to conduct outreach to minority contractors, particularly on smaller contracts for which minority contractors were widely available.

In response to the report, the school district developed more consistent procedures for competitive bidding, including advertising and outreach. It also implemented an affirmative action program that, among other things, required prime contractors to make efforts to meet subcontracting goals for minorities and women. The result: Asian American participation in the school district’s construction contracts increased by more than 400 percent by 1993. The San Francisco experience demonstrates how affirmative action can level the playing field and break down barriers that keep Asians from competing for public contracts.

The San Francisco example is far from unique. More than 20 studies conducted by various local governments in California since 1989 have concluded that Asian American businesses still face significant discriminatory barriers in competing for government contracts. These studies have frequently recommended that Asian Americans, along with other affected minorities, be provided with remedial affirmative action to ensure that they are able to compete on an equal basis for these contracts.

Since California first adopted its civil service affirmative action program in 1977, Asian Americans have achieved labor force parity in 11 of 19 state job categories (compared with 16 of 19 for African Americans and seven out of 19 for Hispanics). Prior to a 1988 court order aimed at integrating the San Francisco Fire Department, there were virtually no Asian Americans in the department. Under the consent decree (United States v. City and County of San Francisco, 696 F. Supp. 1287 (N.D. Cal., 1988)) which sets minority and women hiring goals, Asian Americans now make up nine percent of the fire department’s workforce, which is far less than the Asian American population in San Francisco, but represents an increase of more than 500 percent in just seven years. Similar increases were also made in police and fire departments in Oakland and Los Angeles.
F. Policymakers Must Analyze the Affirmative Action Needs of Specific Asian American Groups

While policymakers need not automatically include Asian Americans in all affirmative action plans, they do need to reconsider the assumption that Asian Americans, across the board, do not need affirmative action. Instead, inclusion in an affirmative action policy should depend on careful empirical analysis. Whether the policy is aimed at addressing underrepresentation, remedying the effects of discrimination, increasing diversity, or simply providing equal opportunity, policymakers should apply consistent criteria to all racial groups to determine which should be included in their affirmative action plans. Policymakers must also be sensitive to the tremendous diversity within the Asian American category. The inclusion of some but not all Asian American groups may be justified under certain circumstances. Policymakers may legitimately consider the differences in economic, immigration, and historical background between Asian groups in determining whether they should be included in an affirmative action policy. For instance, despite the growing Asian American population in higher education, universities may still want to provide affirmative action to members of Asian ethnic groups that generally have lower-incomes and are less assimilated. The inclusion of these groups can bring more cultural and economic diversity even to campuses that otherwise have a strong Asian American presence.

G. Asian Americans as Pawns in the Debate

One of the most galling developments in race relations are the appeals to certain racial minority groups at the expense of other people of color. While there are many problems among communities of color which ought to be addressed meaningfully, these tensions should not be exacerbated or exaggerated for Machiavellian political purposes.

The campaign for Proposition 187, the 1994 anti-immigrant ballot proposal in California, contained the false promise to African-Americans that they would benefit directly from its passage because Asian and Latino immigrants were taking jobs from blacks or using government services intended for underprivileged citizens. The campaign for the 1996 California Civil Rights Initiative accomplishes a perfect reversal of the tactic by targeting the rapidly growing and increasingly powerful Asian American community with a similarly misleading suggestion that its upward mobility will be enhanced.
by eliminating affirmative action for African Americans. Liberal immigration policies and liberal affirmative action policies, however, need not be in opposition to one another.

Equally egregious is the tendency to transform the debate about discrimination against Asian Americans into discrimination against whites. As it has become less acceptable to openly compliment Asian Americans in order to condemn African-Americans, it has become more acceptable to come to the defense of Asian Americans as a means of casting doubt on the advances of the Civil Rights Movement. The politicians who have used Asian Americans to attack affirmative action claim to be concerned about racial minorities. Again and again, however, the politicians have shown that their genuine concern is with whites. While they suggest that Asian Americans suffer disadvantages as a consequence of affirmative action, they also focus on white males as the "innocent victims" of the programs. One of the conservative congressmen leading the fight against affirmative action, allegedly on behalf of Asian Americans, delivered a speech explaining his position: "So in a way, we want to help Asian Americans, but at the same time we’re using it as a vehicle to correct what we consider to be a societal mistake on the part of the United States."15

Another commentator writing in The Wall Street Journal acknowledged that discrimination against Asian Americans offered "an opportunity to call, on behalf of a racial minority, for an end to discrimination." This was important, in the eyes of the commentator, because "it was an appeal that, when made on behalf of whites, is politically hopeless and, perhaps, no longer entirely respectable."16

H. Asian Americans Are Hurt by Affirmative Action for Whites -- Not for African Americans

Ironically, if Asian Americans are hurt by affirmative action, they are hurt by affirmative action for whites -- not for African Americans. In the 1980s, Asian American high school students displayed rising grades and test scores, but their rate of admissions to prestigious universities hit a plateau and actually declined at some institutions. Abusing the concept of meritocracy, admissions officials changed the standards. They explained that Asian American applicants, despite their impressive records, were too bookish and not well-rounded enough for the Ivy League and other top schools.17

The government investigations into the matter concluded that if Asian Americans were constrained by quotas, it was only
for the permissible reason of admitting more "legacies" -- alumni children -- a group that was predominantly white. This form of racial preference, whatever its justification, is a deviation from meritocracy; but it has faced surprisingly little organized opposition.

Indeed, the only justification put forth for treating Asian Americans worse than whites is affirmative action for African Americans -- a type of tit for tat scenario. The point of the effort seems to protect whites from losing in a meritocracy, rather than to shield Asian Americans from affirmative action. Officials of the University of California at Berkeley stated, "If we keep getting extremely well-prepared Asians, and we are, we may get to the point when whites will become an affirmative action group." Officials at the University of California campus at Los Angeles echoed these views, stating "[We] will endeavor to curb the decline of Caucasian students."

Whatever the outcome, Asian Americans lose. At times, they are perceived as beneficiaries of affirmative action, even when they are not. They sometimes are promoted as victims of affirmative action, even when they need not be. Never considered is the possibility that, entirely independent of affirmative action, Asian Americans might face regular discrimination.

I. Developing Asian American Voices

The example of Asian Americans demonstrates that race must be evaluated in context, not in a vacuum. As an initial matter, Asian Americans continue to be perceived as members of a racial group as well as individuals. The very praise for Asian Americans as a racial group belies the cause of colorblindness.

The perception of Asian Americans as perpetual foreigners is a rationalized form of color-consciousness. There are many Asian immigrants who are recently arrived. But there are also Asian Americans whose ancestry dates back five generations in this country, from Chinese Americans who worked on the transcontinental railroad to Japanese Americans who were imprisoned during World War II because of suspicion based on race. The stereotypes are the same now as they were then -- that all Asians are sojourners in their own homeland. Most recently, Los Angeles Judge Lance Ito, himself a native-born citizen, was continually mocked for his background while he presided over the O.J. Simpson trial.
To the extent that some Asian Americans may oppose affirmative action, much of the resentment is a result of being excluded from the political process. Exclusion has been real as well as symbolic. By and large, even in California, Asian Americans have not had an opportunity to participate in determining whether affirmative action is appropriate, or what forms the programs should take. The language of some affirmative action programs omits Asian Americans without explanation. They advertise programs for "minorities" and state in fine print that Asian Americans need not apply.

As the politics and state of affirmative action become more difficult and divisive, Asian Americans will have an opportunity to make themselves heard and to help define the parameters of affirmative action. In this process, some Asian Americans may be tempted to remain neutral. Perhaps they believe that they do not have much at stake in this issue. Nothing could be further from the truth. It is unrealistic to think that Asian Americans can sit out the fight. Even if Asian Americans as a whole agreed that would be the best course, the option does not exist because others point at them to make their own arguments about affirmative action. Rather than let others use them, Asian Americans need to decide for themselves the merits of affirmative action.

J. Asian Americans Benefit from Affirmative Action and Should Support it on Principle

Equally important, Asian Americans have received and will continue to receive benefits from affirmative action. Barriers that have kept Asian Americans from participating on an equal basis are still being removed. Few Asian Americans would contend that they are treated the same as whites in this society. Asian Americans should be guided by principle rather than self-interest. Whether Asian Americans are included in any specific affirmative action, they should support the general principle of the programs. They should support affirmative action when it is applied to counteract old-fashioned regular discrimination and to promote diversity. Without a more liberal conception of merit, universities and companies will remain largely segregated.

In the past generation, our society made progress. The most blatant forms of discrimination are less common and condemned by the majority of the population. We no longer see "help wanted" ads that specify the race or gender for applicants. We do not see signs in store windows that say "whites only."
What we cannot see is still there in subtle forms. Racism and sexism have a powerful impact on the workplace and economy. Most people of color and women are relegated to lower-paying jobs, regardless of whether they are as qualified and hard-working as their white and male peers. Affirmative action is a helping hand for people who have been held back. It seeks to change the way jobs and resources are distributed. It moves toward meritocracy by redefining merit to avoid prejudicial notions of the past. It promotes diversity because the plausible explanation for the absence of minorities in certain schools, companies, and neighborhoods is that they were never welcomed there. Beyond immediate advantages that might be gained, the Asian American community has an important stake in building a better society, one where discrimination and unfairness are first recognized and then eliminated.

Race may well become less important over time. But individuals who wish to envision and achieve a color-blind society do their cause a disservice by being acutely conscious of Asian Americans for the purpose of attacking affirmative action.

The time has come to move beyond black and white, and to do so constructively and cooperatively -- regardless of the ultimate decisions that are made on affirmative action. There are many real issues that must be addressed in a society that is not only multi-racial but also multi-cultural. The dilemma of Asian Americans and affirmative action, however, should be recognized as a problem manufactured for political purposes. Opponents of affirmative action, including Asian Americans, should be prepared to answer the inquiry of what alternatives to affirmative action they might propose to achieve racial justice.


2. See, e.g., Emil Guillermo, "Asian American victimized Over-Achiever?," San Francisco Chronicle, July 31, 1995 at A19 (quoting both Governor Wilson and Speaker Gingrich as opposing affirmative action in part
because of its impact on Asian Americans).


8. Asian/Pacific Islander Date Consortium, "We the American Asians" (Sept. 1993).


