

Model Minority Myth Revisited

*An Interdisciplinary Approach
to Demystifying Asian American
Educational Experiences*

edited by

**Guofang Li
Lihshing Wang**

CHINESE AMERICAN EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH
AND DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION BOOK SERIES

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Educational Experiences**

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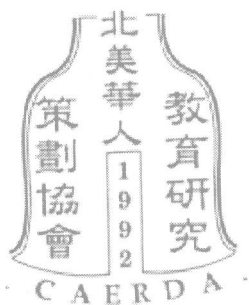
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Jinfa Cai, Editor-in-Chief



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FOREWORD

Asian Americans were first characterized as “model minorities” in the 1960s during the height of the Civil Rights movement. Almost immediately, Asian American activists and Asian American scholars representing critical perspectives challenged the stereotype for masking the diverse and complex experiences of Asian Americans, diverting attention away from the problems faced by Asian Americans, and for pitting Asian Americans against other groups of color (Chin & Chan, 1971; Osajima, 1988; Suzuki, 1977). Despite this critique, the model minority stereotype gained steam through the 1980s and 1990s as some Southeast Asian groups were characterized as the new whiz kids. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, the model minority stereotype persists into the 21st century, affecting Asian American students’ mental health, educational experiences, and their relationship with other groups.

So, why has the model minority stereotype persisted? As Guofang Li and Lihshing Wang highlight in their introduction to this volume, the reasons for the continued power of the model minority stereotype are complex. First and foremost, I would argue that the stereotype continues to serve the interest of the status quo. By pointing to the success of some Asian Americans the stereotype highlights individual achievement and merit, while simultaneously taking attention away from persistent structural inequality. Here the stereotype is used to blame racial minorities who have failed to achieve model minority success. In other words, there can be no “model minority” without the concomitant stereotype of the lazy and unintelligent Black or Brown other. Most recently, the model minority stereotype has been used in assaults against affirmative action (Robles, 2006).

Secondly, some Asian Americans have embraced the stereotype. When I published the first edition of *Unraveling the Model Minority Stereotype: Listen-*

ing to Asian American Youth (1996) I sent a copy to my mother. Although I speak with my mother on a weekly basis, months passed and she didn't comment on the book. Finally, I asked her what she thought about my first book and she responded, "It was OK. I didn't really like what you said about the model minority. I think Asians are better students than others." My mother, a second-generation Chinese American woman who was born and raised in Mississippi during the pre-Civil Rights era, remembers a time when Chinese Americans and other Asian Americans were stereotyped in overtly negative ways. For her, the model minority stereotype was a step up to acceptance. While I understand my mother's perspective, I would argue that the very fact that some Asian Americans are eager to support the stereotype is evidence that Asian American are still being denied the opportunity to be more than a monolithic stereotype.

Finally, the stereotype has persisted because there appears to be some truth to the idea that Asian Americans are academically and economically successful. Because aggregate data on Asian Americans supports the stereotype, policymakers assume that Asian Americans are all doing well. Here, the success of some Asian American ethnic groups overshadows the struggles of other Asian American groups. The diversity of Asian America and the diversity of Asian American experiences demand that researchers continue to focus on the varied experiences of Asian American students, and that policymakers use disaggregated data on Asian Americans when creating policies (Pang, Kiang, & Pak, 2003). As many of the chapters in this volume illustrate, however, researchers must also consider variation within Asian ethnic groups.

Given that the model minority stereotype continues to affect the educational experiences and opportunities of high and low-achieving Asian American students and the experiences of other groups of color, it is imperative that we focus on the ways the stereotype is evolving in response to changing political and economic conditions. This volume captures some of the latest research and thinking on the model minority stereotype in the 21st century. The chapters uncover the complexity behind Asian American experiences thereby exploding simplistic characterizations of Asian Americans as model minorities. The interdisciplinary nature of the volume provides a holistic understanding of how the stereotype operates in the lives of Asian Americans. *Model Minority Myth Revisited* pushes our thinking about this stereotype. I plan to get my mother a copy of this volume so we can continue our conversation about the model minority stereotype.

Stacey J. Lee

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PREFACE

Interdisciplinary Research in the Era of Globalization

This book is a product of passion, vision, and mission. We are driven by the passion to build a scholarly understanding of the myths surrounding the Asian success stories. We are guided by the vision that we can bring together critically acclaimed scholars from different disciplines to lend their collective wisdom. And we are committed to the mission that in the era of globalization we can claim our presence and make a difference.

This is the first in the book series on educational research sponsored by Chinese American Educational Research and Development Association¹ (CAERDA, www.caerda.org). Since its inception in 1992, CAERDA has dedicated itself to the advancement of educational research and development of Chinese in North America and around the globe. In 2006, CAERDA launched its landmark project to start a book series on critical issues and contemporary trends in the educational landscape of Chinese and Chinese Americans. The purpose of this book series is to promote excellence and equity for all, with research and educational implications from studies on Chinese and Chinese American education as well as studies by Chinese and Chinese American scholars and practitioners.

The CAERDA book series has three unique features. First, each book has a focused theme with multidisciplinary perspectives structured in an integrated framework. This interdisciplinary approach encourages participation and collaboration across disciplinary boundaries. Second, each book addresses educational issues not only within its focus on Chinese and Chinese Americans but also in relation to a larger context or environment where Chinese and Chinese Americans are only a part of it. As such, the book series provides both insider's and outsider's perspectives on the educational challenges we face today and in the years to come. Third, each

book aims to provide research-based information in our collective efforts to achieve educational excellence and equity for all. As such, the book series appeals to both international and domestic audiences who share a common vision of a better future in global education.

Of many pressing issues facing us, the *Model Minority Myth Revisited* was selected as the first theme book of the CAERDA book series. This theme was inspired by a research study by Professor Deanna Kuhn of Columbia University and her colleagues ("Epistemological understanding and development of intellectual values," *International Journal of Educational Research*, Vol. 43, Issue 3, pp. 111–124) in a series of similar attempts by other researchers to demystify the "Asian Success Formula." Although the study points out some sobering views on the downside of the Asian success stories, it also raises some thought-provoking questions about the methodological confounding in multicultural and cross-cultural research (see Wang and To in this volume).

With the rise of the post-World-War II Japan in the 1970s, Asia's Four Little Dragons (Hong Kong, South Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan) in the 1980s, and the super economic powers of China and India in the late 1990s and continuing on to the 21st century, the world started to turn to the Asian powers for educational implications.² As global competition intensifies, the pressure to learn from the economic rivals continues to mount.³ This larger political context gave a further push to the birth of this book.

As a prelude to this book, CAERDA held its 2007 Annual International Conference in Chicago dedicated to the theme "Demystifying Model Minority's Academic Achievement: Implications of Chinese/Asian Educational Experiences for a Global Learning Community." It was a rare and heartwarming opportunity to see so many accomplished scholars putting their heads together to "demystify" the Model Minority Myth. Encouraged by this initial success, we were able to march forward with the first theme book of the CAERDA book series.

Instead of celebrating the Asian glories and sharing the tips for success, a majority of the conference presenters and authors of this book painted a grave picture of the Asian and Asian minority students' educational experiences. An in-depth probe into the literature also revealed a dark side of the surface glory (see Introduction of this volume). In the hindsight of the Virginia Technology Institute massacre, with the mass killer being an Asian American student living in the shadows of the Model Minority Myth (see S. S. Kim and G. Duckson, "Revisiting mental health issues in young immigrants: A lesson learned from the Virginia Tech massacre," *Issues in Mental Health Nursing*, 2007, Volume 28, Issue 9, pp. 939–942), this theme book seems eerily timely and sadly opportune.

It is with these mixed feelings of pride and humbleness that we present this book to the global learning community.

Lihshing “Leigh” Wang (University of Cincinnati)
2007 CAERDA Conference Chair
Vice President and President

Duc-Le To (U.S. Department of Education)
2007–2008 CAERDA President

Jinfa Cai (University of Delaware)
CAERDA Book Series Editor-in-Chief

NOTES

1. Any opinions expressed herein are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the views of the Chinese American Educational Research and Development Association.
2. Asian Society (2006). *Math and Science Education in a Global Age: What the U.S. Can Learn from China*. (Available at www.internationaled.org/mathsciencereport.htm)
3. Committee on Prospering in the Global Economy of the 21st Century (2007). *Rising Above the Gathering Storm: Energizing and Employing America for a Brighter Economic Future*. The National Academies Press.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The Old Myth in a New Time

Guofang Li and Lihshing Wang

We stand on the threshold and the eve. We have before us an opportunity and a challenge . . . We must give voice to our many views.

—Frank H. Wu (2002, pp. 36–38)

In the era of accountability and globalization, the stellar achievement of Asian and Asian American students continues to intrigue and inspire educational researchers and practitioners. With evidence from both domestic assessments (U.S. Department of Education, 2006a-c) and international competitions (Lemke & Gonzales, 2006; OECD, 2007), the United States and the world began to recognize the competitive edge of Asian and Asian American students even among industrialized countries. Increasingly, business leaders (e.g., Asia Society, the Business Roundtable, & the Council of Chief State School Officers, 2006) and educational researchers (e.g., Cai, 2005; Schmidt et al., 2007; Wang & Lin, 2005) are turning to Asian success stories for inspirations of education reforms to better prepare their students for the challenges of the new millennium.

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Underneath the surface glory, however, the model minority stereotype imposed on Asian American students has resulted in silenced voices and neglected needs among this racially diverse group (Lee, 1994; Lee & Kumashiro, 2005), overlooking the variation in the needs for educational resources ranging from underachieving refugees from Southeast Asia (Walker-Moffat, 1995; Yang, 2004) to high-achieving students compelled to excel (Louie, 2004). Under the federal law of *No Child Left Behind Act* (2002), which aims at bringing all students to the state proficiency standards and closing the achievement gaps, these model minority students who as a group are already performing above the standards are further marginalized and forgotten (Wang, 2007). In a very real and ironic sense, the model minority image has actually worked against Asian American students because such labeling not only impedes access to educational opportunities (Wong & Halgin, 2006) but also results in anti-Asian sentiment between the majority and other minority groups (Chang, 2003). According to Wu (2002), the laudatory title of “model minority” is “complimentary on its face” but “disingenuous at its heart” (p. 49).

It is clear that the label “model minority” has paramount significance to the well being of the soaring numbers of Asian and Asian American students in the United States, especially in the current social, cultural, political, and economic context. It is high time that we revisit this phenomenon in an effort to arrive at a better understanding of what this image entails, why this image has persisted, and how this image can shed light on the educational experiences of Asians and non-Asian groups alike. In particular, what is needed is “a more nuanced analysis taking into account the changing and complex relationship between cultural and structural factors, which can better explain varied school experiences among Asian American children” (Lew, 2006, p. 14). It is evident, therefore, that the traditional approach to studying the model minority myth from a single, isolated angle can no longer capture the complexity of the phenomenon.

This volume is an attempt to revisit the *Model Minority Myth* (MMM) from multiple angles to provide a more comprehensive picture of research and viewpoints on the myths in a contemporary landscape. Its thematic focus is on the systemic change of the model minority phenomena in a new era. We invited scholars from different disciplines to approach the model minority phenomena from multiple perspectives. We hope that their interdisciplinary investigations and the dynamic interplay among the different perspectives will shed new light on the field of MMM study characterized by multiple layers of sociocultural and sociopolitical contestations and identity struggles. Our goal is to provide valuable insight for educational researchers, policy makers, and practitioners working collaboratively to achieve excellence and equity in Asian American education and general education for all.

MODEL MINORITY MYTH AS A FIELD OF CONTESTATIONS

In 1966, when William Peterson first coined the phrase “model minority” in his article for the *New York Times Magazine* entitled, “Success Story: Japanese American Style,” he probably did not expect that he was creating something more than a linguistic term. He has, in fact, started a field of study filled with ideological, political, racial, and cultural contestations between the mainstream society (and media) and Asian American researchers and intellectuals and within the Asian American academic community itself.

Since Peterson, numerous reports published by major newspapers have served to endorse the model minority myth. These news agencies and magazines such as the *Newsweek*, *New York Times*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Time*, and *Fortune* over and over again praised Asian Americans as a super minority “outwhiting the Whites” (*Newsweek*, 1971) and their children as the new whiz kids and overachievers who top out whites and other minorities. These reports represented a major shift in the American mainstream society’s views toward the Asians or “the Orientals.” That is, these reports painted a picture that mainstream Americans no longer viewed Asians as “a yellow peril” but instead crowned them a new title, “a model minority” or “a super minority.”

But from the start, many members of the Asian American community have not felt flattered by the radical shift in attitudes among the mainstream American society. The intellectuals and researchers in particular have been extremely resistant to the new labeling on Asian Americans. During the 1970s and early 1980s, many researchers such as B. Suzuki and K. T. Chun challenged the model minority myth from different perspectives. Suzuki (1977), for example, in his article entitled, “Education and the Socialization of Asian Americans: A Revisionist Analysis of the ‘Model Minority’ Thesis,” disagreed with the media reports that Asian Americans had achieved middle class status and had been almost completely assimilated into the American mainstream. He proposed a theory which sought to explain the behavior patterns of Asian Americans within the context of sociohistorical forces and the contemporary social system. Chun (1980), in his article, “The Myth of Asian American Success and Its Educational Ramifications,” further contended that the research evidence did not warrant Asian Americans’ success image and that the image had serious negative consequences on young Asian American educational and identity development.

Despite these contentions, the mainstream media continued to reproduce the Asian success story during the 1980s and 1990s. Since the 1990s, Asian American researchers appeared to form two camps. One camp continued to contest the model minority stereotype from various perspectives. There was an emergence of research studies that explored the under-