

## **Battling Asian Hate: Asian American Students Reclaim their Place in Diversity Discourse**

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### **Abstract**

During rising anti-Asian violence and racism, Asian American students are overlooked due to stereotypes of model minority success and a focus on statistical measures of academic achievement. This commentary interrogates how Asian Americans have been excluded from discussions of diversity and minority student needs in higher education. It shows how Asian Americans have been racialized as yellow peril foreigners and model minorities and how anti-Asian racism has persisted on college campuses. Lastly, it focuses on the important ways Asian American students have raised their voices to challenge anti-Asian hate and invisibility to advocate for culturally and racially relevant curricula and support services.

### **Discourse**

Some hailed the election of Barack Obama in 2008, our country's first African American president, as a sign that racism was over. Today, we know better, white supremacy and violence against all communities of color have become fashionable again in a post-Trump era. It is egged on by Trump's inflammatory rhetoric against immigrants from "shit-hole countries," "murderers and rapists" crossing the Mexican border, Muslims so dangerous to necessitate a religious immigration ban, and Asians who spread the nefarious "China flu."

We are in a time of racial reckoning in America. The Black Lives Matter movement and smart phone video evidence allowing bystanders to record hate have made us all aware of the unrelenting violence against African Americans at the hands of police. This country was founded on the devaluation of Black lives and institutionalized through slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and anti-Black legislation. Despite gains made by the Civil Rights Movement, this legacy continues to affect Black lives and other communities of color—indigenous Native Americans, Latinxs, and Asian Americans.

In particular, the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise in anti-Asian violence that blames Asians for the virus has brought new attention to Asian American racialized experiences. For some, this realization is new. After all, aren't Asians doing well in this country? Are Asian Americans even "minorities?" Are they "people of color" in the first place? Unfortunately, stereotypes of Asian Americans as the model minority, economically and educationally successful through quiet hard work, make it difficult for anti-Asian attitudes and discriminations to be recognized. This ignorance occurs in colleges and universities where administrators do not understand Asian American experiences with racism and dismiss them from meaningful discussions about minority students or diversity writ large.

The intent of this commentary is to interrogate how Asian Americans have been excluded from higher education discussions of diversity and minority student needs. It shows how Asian Americans have been racialized as yellow peril foreigners and model minorities (and how both support White supremacy), and how Asian American students have raised their voices to challenge

anti-Asian hate. Higher education must move beyond a narrow focus on Asian American aggregate achievement, reject the model minority myth, and acknowledge the persistent ways racism affects Asian American students to understand and meet Asian American students needs fully.

### **Are Asian Americans Minorities? The Problematic Focus on Parity**

In my personal, professional, and scholarly experiences researching and working with Asian American students, I have witnessed how Asian Americans have been marginalized from discussions about racism and racial equity, often dismissed as having no issues or problems due to their high academic achievement in the aggregate and stereotypes of them as Asian American super students, the “model minority.” Of course, many scholars (Chin, Cho, Kang, & Wu, 1997; Hune & Chan, 1997; Museus, 2013) have refuted the model minority as a myth that ignores ethnic subgroups of Asians that still struggle with college access and poverty, a point to which I will return later on in this commentary.

The model minority is premised on aggregate statistics showing Asian American achievement in enrollment, retention, and graduation. Along these lines, Asian Americans as a whole do well, often achieving at higher rates than their White peers. Hence, they are often seen as White students with no racialized experiences that need addressing. Asian American racialization as a non-White community is challenging to identify, given this focus on statistical measures. One aim of minority outreach and support programs is to rectify the under-representation of a student population compared to population figures. If a group has lower percentages of representation at a university, for example, in enrollment, than their percentages in the state population, they are deemed under-represented. University administrators have focused their recruitment and support services on African American and Latinx populations, starting in the 1960s with the advent of civil rights legislation, with racial parity as a goal (Lee, 2021).

Throughout this process, Asian American inclusion in university minority support programs has shifted. In the 1960s and 1970s, Asian American students were often included in higher education’s identification of minority student populations’ needs, such as affirmative action, due to their statistical representation and federal guidelines that identified minority groups as Black, Latino, Asian, and Native American (Anderson, 2004). However, by the 1980s and 1990s, Asian Americans became the first racialized non-White group to reach and exceed parity, becoming “over-represented” on campuses concerning their state or national figures. Because of these numbers, they began to be removed from minority considerations and support, or “de-minoritized,” a process that conveys that racial equity goal for Asian Americans had been achieved (Lee, 2006).

Today, Asian Americans are rarely spoken of as a minority population in higher education discourse but instead described with qualifying adjectives such as “over-represented” minority (Takagi, 2011). A focus on statistical parity as a measure for racial inequity is an important place to start for under-represented student populations, as a critical mass of student numbers on a campus alleviates racial isolation and tokenism. However, its opposite, statistical parity, does not equal racial integration and instead supports colorblind racism by presuming that numerical presence is all that is needed (Chan, 2019; Park & Liu, 2014). It is thus crucial to expanding educational understandings of race beyond stale measures of enrollment, retention, and grade point average. Despite the high aggregate achievement, Asian American students report racial microaggressions, discomfort on college campuses, and a need for racially relevant curriculum and support services (Bennett & Okinaka, 1990; Loo & Rolison, 1986; Museus & Park, 2015). Research also shows that incidents of anti-Asian racism on social media platforms negatively affect Asian American students’ sense of belonging with White students and at their predominantly

White institutions (Jin, 2019). Thus, while these measures are important in identifying under-representation for communities writ large, they do not tell the whole story. Over-representation does not equate racial equity.

### **Asian American Racialization: A Critical Analysis**

Asian Americans have been racialized as a non-White population in the United States, primarily in the figures as yellow peril foreigners and model minorities, both of which stem from narratives and discourse that uphold White supremacy. The imagery of the model minority and yellow peril foreigner are intertwined and play out in higher education as racist projects (Lee, 2006). Since their earliest immigration to the United States, Asians have been racialized as non-White foreigners and culturally and racially “other.” Anti-Asian immigration restriction legislation kept Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Asian Indian, and Filipinos out of the country, and laws kept them from equal land ownership, education, and naturalization rights. (Chan, 1991; Takaki, 1998). In times of wartime crisis, Asians have been deemed the enemy and the feared “Yellow Peril,” despite U.S. citizenship such as in the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II and the rise of racial violence against South Asian Americans after September 11 (Human Rights Watch, 2002).

Asian American model minorities have also captured the national imagination, particularly in the 1960s and 1980s, with magazine cover stories of Asian American success over past discriminations (Brand, 1987; Osajima, 2000). A seemingly “positive” stereotype, upon closer inspection, the model minority works to uphold White supremacy by shaming other racialized groups (Blacks, Latinxs) for not being able to overcome discrimination and lacking the “right culture” to do so. The model minority embraces a cultural rationale for Asian American achievement—with strict “Tiger moms” and cultural “secrets” that propel Asian American success (Chua, 2011). While the Asian American model minority students are hailed for academic excellence, they are quickly prone to resentment and backlash against their “taking over” college when perceived as a threat. Such as was seen in the admissions controversy of the 1980s where activists charged prestigious universities were setting caps on the admission number of Asian American students (Takagi, 1992).

### **Asian Hate and Asian American Student Activism**

Today, Chinese and Asian Americans are blamed for the coronavirus, with an uptick in anti-Asian violence. Asian American students have been Zoom bombed with racial slurs and verbally and physically assaulted. Anti-Asian comments posted on social media express fear of catching coronavirus from other Asian students. In May 2020, data collected at San Francisco State University documented over 1,200 such incidents. Another organization, STOP AAPI HATE, collected over 1,800 reports of pandemic harassment in forty-five states in the first several months of the pandemic; by March 2021, it reported 6,603 anti-Asian hate incidents (Anti-Defamation League, 2020; Kambhampaty, 2020; Stop AAPI Hate, 2021; Weissman, 2020). The March 16, 2021 shootings in Atlanta, resulting in the tragic deaths of eight people, six of whom were Asian women, have also raised awareness of anti-Asian violence, misogyny, and hatred in this country. Asian American students have cited the Atlanta shootings as evidence for the need for Asian American studies curriculum and support centers on their campuses (Diep, 2021).

This activism is not new but part of a long history of Asian American college student movements that challenged this invisibility and presumption of model minority success. Asian and Asian American students have faced racism on campuses since their earliest presence on college

campuses, first with early Asian international students in the early twentieth century and then with U.S. born Asian American students (Hinnershitz, 2015). Despite their socioeconomic status, educational achievements, and attempts to assimilate, these students were still subject to anti-Asian racism and actively spoke out against it. In the 1960s, Asian American students were part of large multi-racial coalitions to demand ethnic studies and a more inclusive curriculum that reflected their communities' histories and experiences in higher education (Umemoto, 1989). In the 1970s, Asian American students protested their removal from minority programs based on model minority stereotypes (Lee, 2008). And in the 1980s and 1990s, a post-1965 Asian American student community formed on campuses across the country to demand Asian American studies programs and support services (Lee, 2021).

Asian American students reclaim their racialized minority experiences and advocate for their educational needs in the face of higher education's perception of them as model minorities and their focus on parity as "proof" that racial equity has been achieved. Unfortunately, Asian American students are still subject to acts of anti-Asian racism through yellow peril backlash of the model minority that keeps them from being fully integrated on campuses, despite their high enrollment numbers (or perhaps because of them). In this unprecedented time when global viruses of COVID-19 and racism run rampant, the rise in anti-Asian hate and violence cannot be denied. It is imperative that university administrators listen to these voices, recognize how race operates beyond numerical presence in higher education enrollment, and support racially and culturally relevant academic and student support services for Asian American students.

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