

Frank H. Wu, "The Model Minority: Asian American 'Success' as a Race Relations Failure," from Yellow: Race in America Beyond Black and White (New York: Basic Books, 2002): 39-77

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## The Model Minority

### *Asian American "Success" as a Race Relations Failure*

Student: "Asians are threatening our economic future.  
. . . We can see it right here in our own school. Who are  
getting into the best colleges, in disproportionate numbers?  
Asian kids! It's not fair."

Teacher: "Uh . . . That certainly was an unusual essay.  
. . . Unfortunately, it's racist."

Student: "Um . . . are you sure? My parents helped me."

—GARRY TRUDEAU

*Recycled Doonesbury: Second Thoughts on a Gilded Age*

### *Revenge of the Nerds*

I am not the model minority. Before I can talk about Asian American experiences at all, I have to kill off the model minority myth because the stereotype obscures many realities. I am an Asian American, but I am not good with computers. I cannot balance my checkbook, much less perform calculus in my head. I would like to fail in school, for no reason other than to cast off my freakish alter ego of geek and nerd. I am tempted to be very rude, just to

breakthroughs in biology and chemistry, and publishing papers that make the faculty envious as they strive toward a Nobel prize. If they engage in frivolous activities after hours, as they rarely do, they are betrayed by their telltale red faces, which they develop after drinking just half a glass of beer.

Eventually, they land a job at a high-tech company or they start their own. Making millions, they buy big houses in the suburbs or build monstrosities right up to the property line on vacant lots. They bring their relatives over, starting the cycle over again.

In the view of other Americans, Asian Americans vindicate the American Dream. A publicity campaign designed to secure the acceptance of Asian Americans could hardly improve perceptions. They have done better here than they ever could have dreamed of doing in their homelands. They are living proof of the power of the free market and the absence of racial discrimination. Their good fortune flows from individual self-reliance and community self-sufficiency, not civil rights activism or government welfare benefits. They believe that merit and effort pay off handsomely and justly, and so they do. Asian Americans do not whine about racial discrimination; they only try harder. If they are told that they have a weakness that prevents their social acceptance, they quickly agree and earnestly attempt to cure it. If they are subjected to mistreatment by their employer, they quit and found their own company rather than protesting or suing.

This caricature is the portrait of the model minority. It is a parody of itself.

In *The Abilities and Achievements of Orientals in North America*,<sup>17</sup> University of Calgary psychologist Philip E. Vernon perfectly captures the prevailing opinions about Asian Americans. Vernon describes Chinese and Japanese immigrants to the United States and Canada:

The experiences of oriental immigrants in the United States and Canada—Chinese and Japanese—provide a remarkable example of adverse environment *not* affecting the development of intelligence. There is no doubt that, in the past, they were subjected to great hardships, hostility, and discrimination. They were regarded as a kind of inferior species, who could be used for unskilled labor and menial jobs, but could never be accepted as equals into the white community. And yet Orientals survived and eventually flourished until they came to be regarded as even higher achievers, educationally and vocationally, than the white majority.<sup>18</sup>

Vernon's research is typical of the tradition of the model minority myth. He contrasts past discrimination against Asian Americans with the present suc-

cess of Asian Americans. He reviews copious quantities of seemingly objective data from the United States and elsewhere. He emphasizes intelligence tests suggesting that Asians outperform Caucasians both in the United States and overseas. He falls back on stereotypes about Asian behavior. Vernon explains, "Chinese people still appear to whites as being exaggeratedly humble and deferential, and as oblique or devious in their business and other communications and interactions." He notes that "because they have different ways of expressing emotions from whites, they still seem to us inscrutable and reserved."<sup>19</sup>

Avoiding the debate over whether nature or nurture is more important to human development by assuming that race and culture more or less correlate, Vernon writes that "any genetically different groups always differ too in their cultures."<sup>20</sup> In later work, Vernon published findings that Asians have larger heads than Caucasians and Africans and suggested that larger head size correlates to higher intelligence.<sup>21</sup> Whatever the root causes for individual achievement, Vernon links the status of Asian Americans to their identity as Asian Americans. By his account, Asian Americans flourish because they are Asian Americans, and they continue to thrive only to the extent that they behave as archetypal Asian Americans. Vernon summarizes the major factor in their "educational and occupational success" as "family upbringing" that stresses seven elements:

1. Adherence to accepted conventions of social behavior.
2. Cohesion not only within a family but also with kin and the family ancestors.
3. Discouragement of egocentricity and recognition of obligations to others.
4. Loyalty and obedience to the authorities, employers, and the state.
5. Motivation for educational achievement from first entering school until maturity.
6. Firm control, not permissiveness, from about three years up.
7. The need for hard work to gain success and honor the family.<sup>22</sup>

By Vernon's reckoning, these seven elements are distinctly Asian. "In spite of the important differences between Japanese and Chinese cultures . . . child upbringing is similar . . . in most respects . . . and both differ greatly from Western models," he writes. "There are also resemblances to the Puritan work ethic . . . but Orientals would probably not accept the Calvinistic view that man is responsible for the effects of his own actions, or that he is funda-

adoptive land, they hold the potential not only to add to Republican rolls but to define a bona-fide American language of civil rights."<sup>16</sup>

According to the model minority myth, Asian immigrants have followed the beacon of economic opportunity from their homes in China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, India, Vietnam, and all the other countries on the Asian continent and within the Pacific Rim. They might be fleeing despotism or Communism, backwardness or the deprivations of war and famine, but whatever the conditions of their past they know that the legend of Golden Mountain, to use the Cantonese phrase, guides their future.

They arrive in America virtually penniless. They bring barely more than the clothes on their backs. Their meager physical possessions are less important than their mental capacity and work ethic. Thanks to their selfless dedication to a small business or an advanced degree in electrical engineering—or both—they are soon achieving the American Dream.

They run a corner grocery in Manhattan, offering the freshest fruits and vegetables and serving up a take-out luncheon buffet priced by the pound. They buy a dry cleaning establishment in Los Angeles, featuring one-hour turnaround times and giving discounts to police officers. They start a motel franchise, which spreads throughout the Midwest, boasting such low rates with amenities like free cable television that other proprietors have no choice but to post signs identifying their accommodations inaccurately as "Native American Owned." They begin a computer chip manufacturing plant in the Silicon Valley, inventing the hottest miniaturized gadgets before selling their shareholdings and retiring at thirty-five. Or they open a boutique in Washington, D.C., with a display case of real-hair wigs on the wall above a bevy of manicurists chatting among themselves in another language while painting their customers' nails.

They were doctors, nurses, engineers, scientists, professors, and librarians, but they have problems pursuing their professions because the requisite license is denied to them owing to their foreign education, or they are discriminated against because they have a heavy accent. Even if they are reduced to the drudgery of jobs for which they are overqualified, they are earning what they could never have in conditions of a developing country. Although they may be sweating as a janitor despite holding a doctorate, the toil is only temporary, until they can secure the patent for their discovery. In the interim, they can save enough to send remittances home to kinfolk who want very much to come here, too.

Whatever endeavor they pursue, Asian Americans are astonishing for their gung-ho enthusiasm. They remain busy with the chores called for by their

enterprise twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, through the holidays. After they sweep out their storefront entryway, they wash down the public sidewalk.

They come to dominate their trades after less than a decade, reducing their competition to the verge of bankruptcy and then buying up their warehouse stocks. Their associations become monopolies, lending money cooperatively among their own members to preserve their collective advantage. In some cities, they hold more than half the commercial licenses and operate a majority of the downtown "mom and pop" retail outlets. Hospitals and universities have departments wholly staffed by Asian immigrants. Private industries ranging from automobile manufacturers to software developers to government agencies, such as the Defense Department, depend on them for research and development.

In turn, their American-born progeny continue the tradition with their staggering academic prowess. They start off speaking pidgin, some of them even being held back a grade to adjust. They are willing to do as they are told, changing their given names to Anglicized Christian names chosen with the help of their teachers and their friends and told matter of factly to their parents. Above all, they study, study, study.

They are brought up under the strict tutelage of parents who have sacrificed everything in the hopes that their children will garner more than what they themselves have lost. The parents defer everything for themselves and invest it in their young, giving them the mission of redeeming the family. They maintain that anything less than a straight-A report card will shame the ancestors, and they beat their children for receiving a single B-plus. The elders have faith in the school system. They instill respect for educators. They take their children to weekend language lessons instead of allowing them to watch Saturday morning cartoons on television.

The no-nonsense regimen works wonders. A parade of prodigies named Chang, Nguyen, and Patel takes the prizes at piano recitals and proceeds to graduate from high school with honors as valedictorian, salutatorian, and the rest of the top ten of the class, receiving full scholarships to the Ivy League colleges en route to graduate school and advanced professional training.

In any course on campus, Asian Americans are the best (or worst) classmates. In a physics class, they wreck the grade curve, idly twirling their pens back and forth with thumb and forefinger during lectures, solving problem sets late into the night with their peers, breaking for fried rice seasoned with pungent fish sauce and accompanied by smelly kim chee. In the laboratory, they are polishing up projects begun when they were adolescents, making

demonstrate once and for all that I will not be excessively polite, bowing, smiling, and deferring. I am lazy and a loner, who would rather reform the law than obey it and who has no business skills. I yearn to be an artist, an athlete, a rebel, and, above all, an ordinary person.

I am fascinated by the imperviousness of the model minority myth against all efforts at debunking it. I am often told by nice people who are bewildered by the fuss, "You Asians are all doing well. What could you have to complain about anyway? Why would you object to a positive image?" To my frustration, many people who say with the utmost conviction that they would like to be color blind revert to being color conscious as soon as they look at Asian Americans, but then shrug off the contradiction. They are nonchalant about the racial generalization, "You Asians are all doing well," dismissive in asking "What could you have to complain about anyway?," and indifferent to the negative consequences of "a positive image."

Even people who are sympathetic to civil rights in general, including other people of color, sometimes resist mentioning civil rights and Asian Americans together in the same sentence. It is as if Asian American civil rights concerns can be ruled out categorically without the need for serious consideration of the facts, because everyone knows that Asian Americans are prospering.

Consider the term "overachiever." I am reluctant to accept the title for myself, and not out of Asian modesty. To be called an "overachiever" begs the question: What, exactly, is it that individuals have achieved over—what others expected of them or what they deserve?

In either case, overachievers have surprised observers by surpassing the benchmark, and their exploits are not quite right. They will get their comeuppance sooner or later. Applied to an entire racial group, as "overachiever" is to Asian Americans, the implications are troubling. Asian Americans, often thought of as intellectuals, will be consigned to the same fate as intellectuals. As Columbia University historian Richard Hofstadter stated in the opening pages of his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*, "The resentment from which the intellectual has suffered in our time is a manifestation not of a decline in his position but of his increasing prominence."<sup>1</sup>

And so it is with Asian Americans. "You Asians are all doing well anyway" summarizes the model minority myth. This is the dominant image of Asians in the United States. Ever since immigration reforms in 1965 led to a great influx of Asian peoples, we have enjoyed an excellent reputation. As a group, we are said to be intelligent, gifted in math and science, polite, hard working, family oriented, law abiding, and successfully entrepreneurial. We revere

our elders and show fidelity to tradition. The nation has become familiar with the turn-of-the-century Horatio Alger tales of “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps” updated for the new millennium with an “Oriental” face and imbued with Asian values.

This miracle is the standard depiction of Asian Americans in fact and fiction, from the news media to scholarly books to Hollywood movies. From the 1960s to the 1990s, profiles of whiz kid Asian Americans became so common as to be clichés. In 1971, *Newsweek* magazine observed that we were “outwhiting the whites.”<sup>2</sup> *People* magazine one year made celebrities of the five Asian American teenagers who swept the highest prizes in the annual Westinghouse science talent search in an article headlined “Brain Drain Boon for the U.S.,” and it followed up the next year by profiling an entire family of Asian American winners.<sup>3</sup> Brown University history professor Stephen Graubard wrote an op-ed for *The New York Times* asking “Why Do Asian Pupils Win Those Prizes?”<sup>4</sup> The Asian refugee who was a finalist in a spelling bee, but who lost on the word “enchilada,” has become legendary.<sup>5</sup> *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Sixty Minutes*, and other media outlets have awarded Asian Americans the title “model minority.”<sup>6</sup> *Fortune* magazine dubbed us the “superminority.”<sup>7</sup> The *New Republic* heralded, “the triumph of Asian Americans” as “America’s greatest success story” and *Commentary* magazine referred to Asian Americans as “a trophy population.”<sup>8</sup> The *New York Times* announced that we are “going to the head of the class.”<sup>9</sup> The *Washington Post* said in a headline, “Asian Americans Outperform Others at School and Work.”<sup>10</sup> Smith College sociologist Peter Rose has described Asian Americans as making a transition “from pariahs to paragons.”<sup>11</sup> Memoirist Richard Rodriguez and *Washington Post* columnist William Raspberry have wondered whether Hispanics and blacks, respectively, might be able to emulate Asian immigrants.<sup>12</sup> A minority group could become the equivalent of a white real estate developer: *Advertising Age* quoted a consultant who opined that Asian Americans were “the Donald Trumps of the 1990s.”<sup>13</sup>

Conservative politicians especially like to celebrate Asian Americans. President Ronald Reagan called Asian Americans “our exemplars of hope.”<sup>14</sup> President George Bush, California Governor Pete Wilson, House Speaker Newt Gingrich—all have been unduly awed by the model minority myth. In a brief for the *Heritage Foundation Policy Review*, California politician Ron Unz said that Asian Americans come from an “anti-liberal Confucian tradition” that “leaves them a natural constituency for conservatives.”<sup>15</sup> In the *National Review*, author William McGurn made the model minority myth a partisan parable: “Precisely because Asian Americans are making it in their



mentally evil, but can overcome this and achieve both grace and economic success," he adds. To make the point as adamantly as possible, he warns, "When the tradition has yielded to modern American fashions, it does appear that educational achievement is lowered, and that there is more delinquency, though still much below the white norm."<sup>23</sup>

With his twenty-three-page bibliography of sources spanning the twentieth century and the globe, covering the whole history of intelligence testing, Vernon looks reputable. He cannot be dismissed as a crackpot, and his work becomes troubling only upon a thorough reading. He was funded by the Pioneer Fund, which has promoted eugenics and racial separatism.<sup>24</sup> He worked with the notorious Arthur Jensen, the University of California at Berkeley physicist who claims that African Americans are genetically inferior.

However, if the message were true it would remain true regardless of the messenger, and *ad hominem* attacks would be inappropriate. Likewise, if the assertions are incorrect they remain incorrect even if espoused by other messengers, lacking the same ideological connections. Indeed, many researchers share Vernon's convictions about Asian American behavior as well as its causes. Furthermore, they have impeccable credentials and cannot be impugned as biased. Their work, however, should not be regarded as persuasive merely because it lacks an overt racial agenda. It may be imperfect because of its racial assumptions. The flaw is embedded as an integral part of the research methodology and the worldview it represents.

Julian C. Stanley, a researcher at Johns Hopkins specializing in the academically gifted, has written a single-page article posing the title question, "Do Asian Americans Tend to Reason Better Mathematically Than White Americans?" His answer is emphatic in the opening line: "The answer . . . is a resounding 'yes,' or even 'of course.'"<sup>25</sup> Stanley operates a center for mathematically precocious youth, which carries out annual nationwide searches for subjects who at the age of thirteen score 700 or higher on the math portion of the SAT. For decades, he has been finding children who, before they have entered high school, have abilities equal to the top 5 percent of seniors about to graduate from high school. His samples have been as high as one-quarter Asian American.

The same tendencies have been documented among other Asian ethnicities; it is not only Chinese and Japanese immigrants who have shown spectacular skills. A group of scholars, for example, found above-average academic achievement among Southeast Asian refugee children. Their subjects were by and large not as well-to-do as either Japanese Americans or Chinese Americans in other studies. But even among this ethnic group, the "parents had

served their stewardship well" and "for the most part, the perspectives and values embedded in the cultural heritage of the Indochinese had been carried with them to the U.S." and "played an important role in the educational achievement of the children."<sup>26</sup>

The Asian values that form the core of the model minority are inculcated early. In a report comparing Anglo-American and Korean-American preschool-aged students, the authors observed marked qualitative differences.<sup>27</sup> The Anglo-American play activities stressed "independent thinking," "imaginative problem solving," "emphasis on ability," "independence," "self-confidence," "individuality," "self-expression," an "individualistic orientation," and "relatively symmetrical egalitarian" relationships among children and adults. The Korean-American play activities stressed "memorization," "task persistence," "emphasis on effort," "interdependence," "traditional values," "group harmony," "self-control, modesty, obedience," "collectivist orientation," and a "vertical hierarchy of status difference."

If the list sounds familiar, it is because the positive representation of Asian Americans has become so well known that it can be readily recognized even if the racial references are deleted. The model minority myth singles out Asian Americans and could not refer to any other group in contemporary American culture. If you had to picture a twelve-year-old entering Harvard, you would conjure up an Asian face.

To the extent that Asian Americans are compared with anyone else at all, it is with American Jews of an earlier era. Asian immigrants are sometimes called the New Jews. (This is a reversal of the claim that Jews are Orientals.<sup>28</sup>) Asian Americans have superseded American Jews in the imagination of ethnicity. An anecdote about a striving youth from the city that would have featured a Goldberg fifty years ago stars a Park today. *New Republic* publisher Martin Peretz remembered arriving at Harvard as an instructor when "it was a white shoe town" and he taught sections full of "freshmen who had 'prepped' at Exeter and Andover" who were "made up largely of George Bush look-alikes." Back in Cambridge years later, he and his friends stood near the Yard and "played a game . . . how many minutes before 100 Asians pass before our eyes?" In less than eleven minutes, they met their goal. Like the Jews of the post-Sputnik era, Peretz contends, the Asian Americans who have made "the sudden appearance at Stanford and Yale, UCLA and Michigan" should be an "exhilarating" sight to "all Americans."<sup>29</sup>

Cartoonist Garry Trudeau satirized the model minority myth while recognizing its continuity with the earlier treatment of Jewish immigrants. In an installment of his "Doodlesbury" comic strips devoted to the subject, another

er excerpt from which serves as the epigraph to this chapter,<sup>30</sup> he portrays the following exchange between a white boy and an Asian American girl:

"Hey, good goin' on the National Merit Scholarship, Kim! Fairly awesome."

"Thanks, Sean."

"Must be easier to be a grind if you grow up in an Asian family, huh?"

"I wouldn't know."

"Huh?"

"I'm adopted. My parents are Jewish."

"Jewish? Yo! Say no more!"

"I wasn't planning to."

Non-Asian American college students have been similarly sarcastic about the model minority myth. On campuses at the end of the twentieth century, non-Asian American students joke that "MIT" stands for "Made In Taiwan" rather than "Massachusetts Institute of Technology"; "UCLA" (pronounced "UCRA" to mock the reputed Asian inability to enunciate a proper "R") means "United Caucasians Lost Among Asians"; and the initials of University of California at Irvine, "UCI," mean "University of Chinese Immigrants." The University of California-Berkeley Engineering school has been spray-painted with graffiti calling on school authorities to "Stop the Asian Hordes."

The model minority myth is daunting. The white president of Stanford University related an apocryphal story about a professor who asked a white student about a poor exam answer in an engineering course, only to receive the comeback, "What do you think I am, Chinese?" The student body president of Berkeley has said, "Some students say that if they see too many Asians in a class, they are not going to take it because the curve will be too high." A Yale student has said, "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."<sup>31</sup>

The model minority myth appears to have the twin virtues of being true and being benevolent. It seems to be more benefit than burden for its subjects. It is unlike theories that array human beings in racial hierarchies. On its face, it is neither outlandish nor objectionable. It does not depend on allegations that Asian blood is better or even different than European blood. It relies more on acquired behavior than on inborn biology. It is not presented as some sort of tortured justification for outright oppression, such as incredible stories about African Americans told to legitimize the "peculiar institution" of chattel slavery.

The model minority myth also looks modern. It seems to be the product of scientific research rather than reflexive superstition. It cancels out prejudices of only a generation ago. It is ostensibly founded on empirical findings of social science, primarily Census tabulations. Since the 1980s, the figures have suggested that some Asian ethnic groups, notably Japanese Americans, have attained household incomes equal to or greater than those of white Americans. The numbers are averages, but they seem about as adequate a foundation as could be found for a racial proposition.

For all these reasons, it is a considerable challenge to explain how an apparent tribute can be a dangerous stereotype and why it presents a problem to be overcome. A person who demurs to praise seems to be "politically correct." Yet declining the laudatory title of model minority is fundamental to gaining Asian American autonomy. The model minority myth deserves a thoughtful critique. It would be foolish to condemn it as wrong or racist, without discussion. It is too complex, as well as too common.

Regrettably, the model minority myth embraced by the pundits and the public alike is neither true nor truly flattering. Instead, it is a stock character that plays multiple roles in our racial drama. Like any other myth forming our collective narrative of race, it is ultimately more revealing than reassuring. Complimentary on its face, the model minority myth is disingenuous at its heart.

As well-meaning as it may be, the model minority myth ought to be rejected for three reasons. First, the myth is a gross simplification that is not accurate enough to be seriously used for understanding 10 million people. Second, it conceals within it an invidious statement about African Americans along the lines of the inflammatory taunt: "They made it; why can't you?" Third, the myth is abused both to deny that Asian Americans experience racial discrimination and to turn Asian Americans into a racial threat.

### *Germ of Truth Within the Myth*

Like many racial stereotypes, the model minority myth has a germ of truth. The problem, however, is that the germ becomes exaggerated and distorted. On its own terms, the myth is not even persuasive as a description of the status of Asian Americans. In earning power, for example, the evidence points toward a disparity between what individual white Americans and what individual Asian Americans are paid—and not for lack of trying on the part of Asian Americans.

To figure out the facts, University of Hawaii sociology professor Herbert Barringer led a team that conducted the most comprehensive review of the research literature ever done. Barringer concludes that with respect to income, "in almost every category . . . whites showed advantages over most Asian Americans."<sup>32</sup>

Barringer proceeds cautiously because he is contesting the model minority myth. Even controlling for nativity—that is, native-born versus foreign-born—Barringer finds that Asian Americans who are native-born earn less money than white Americans who are native-born and possibly even than white Americans who are foreign-born. That means that Asians without cultural and language difficulties may earn less than white Americans who may have such difficulties. Barringer observes that "there seems to be no compelling reason to argue for parity" between Asian Americans and white Americans, but he does agree that Asian Americans "have certainly done much better with incomes than have blacks and Hispanics." He states that Asian Americans, including such ethnic groups as Vietnamese immigrants, might show "decided improvements" over time. He prefers "the most favorable interpretation," that "most Asian Americans are overeducated compared to whites for the incomes they earn."<sup>33</sup>

That interpretation, however, is most favorable to white Americans and not Asian Americans. Translated into practical terms, it means that white Americans are paid more than Asian Americans who are equally qualified. Either Asian Americans are not hired for the higher-paying jobs, or they are hired but are still paid less.

According to the 1995 U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission, a blue-ribbon corporate panel chosen by Congress and chaired by Cabinet Secretary Elizabeth Dole, individual Asian Americans make less money than individual white Americans do in many occupational categories: 10 percent to 17 percent less for Asian American men and as much as 40 percent less for Asian American women. This lack of parity appears even between Asian Americans and white Americans who have the same qualifications. Controlling for other factors, the sole explanation for the inequalities is race.

The fact that Asian Americans are better educated than white Americans on average undermines rather than supports the model minority myth. The gap between Asian Americans and white Americans that appears with income reverses itself with education. It was consistent throughout the 1980s and 1990s. In 1980, approximately 36 percent of foreign-born Asian Americans had finished college compared with 16 percent of native-born citizens. In 1990, about 42 percent of Asian Americans had finished college compared

with 25 percent of the general population. Every Asian American ethnic group, except Filipinos, attends college at higher rates than do white Americans. Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, and Korean Americans attend college at about twice the rate of white Americans. The entering classes of Ivy League schools are now as high as 20 percent Asian American, California schools such as University of California-Berkeley and UCLA as much as twice that percentage as Asian Americans become a plurality on campuses with no majority. Considering all educational institutions, Asian American overrepresentation is much lower but still significant: As of 1993, Asian Americans made up 5.3 percent of the college student body but approximately 2.9 percent of the general population. Their desire for education is increasing even as that of other groups is decreasing. Between 1979 and 1989, Asian Americans increased their numbers of Ph.D. recipients by 46 percent while whites and blacks decreased their numbers by 6 and 23 percent, respectively. By 1997, Asian Americans were receiving 12 percent of the doctorates conferred by U.S. universities, and they received more than one-quarter of the doctorates in engineering disciplines.

Although the average educational levels of Asian Americans might be taken as substantiating the model minority myth, the more plausible reading is that Asian Americans have had to overcompensate. Asian Americans receive a lower return on their investment in education. They gain less money than white Americans on average for each additional degree. They are underrepresented in management, and those who are managers earn less than white Americans in comparable positions. The excuse most often voiced for the situation emanates from the stereotype itself, namely that Asian Americans would rather make less money in research and development than be promoted to management positions. The only research on the subject refutes this pretext, showing that Asian Americans are no different than whites in desiring career advancement.<sup>34</sup> Even though Asian Americans are associated with education, they remain underrepresented even in higher education at all levels beyond students and entry-level teaching positions in a few departments. Asian American women are granted academic tenure at rates lower than any other demographic group. Asian Americans generally are severely underrepresented throughout administrative ranks, from department chairs and deans to provosts and presidents.

The educational levels of Asian Americans verify the importance of cultural capital. Other than luck and individual attributes that cannot be generalized meaningfully, one of the most salient determinants of likely educational accomplishment of any individual is the highest degree held by

her parents.<sup>35</sup> Having a grandfather who was a lawyer, a father who is an engineer, and a mother who is a doctor constitutes inherited assets. Researcher Stanley found in another study of his group of high-achieving Asian Americans that within the group 85 percent of the children had fathers who had earned graduate degrees, 71 percent of them doctorates; 21 percent of the mothers also held doctorates.<sup>36</sup> This increases the chances that a person will obtain an undergraduate degree and acquire post-graduate education. The educational success of Asian Americans is the educational success of any set of people who have well-educated parents.

Moreover, Asian immigrants start off relatively privileged. This admission must be made gingerly, so that it will not be taken as corroboration of the model minority myth. In actuality, it undercuts the myth. Most Asian Americans are not rich. But some Asian immigrants are relatively fortunate compared to the many Asians who reside in Asia, and some of them are relatively fortunate compared to native-born Americans (including, incidentally, native-born Asian Americans), even though they have not had an easy time of it in coming to the United States and even though they experience prejudice. A major study of diversity in the power elite found that almost none of the Chinese Americans who served on the boards of directors for Fortune 1000 companies were "authentic bootstrappers."<sup>37</sup> Almost all of them had come from well-to-do families in China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

University of California at Santa Cruz sociologist Deborah Woo examined more closely the media coverage of "a Korean-born immigrant who once worked the night shift at 7-Eleven to put himself through school" and who sold his company for \$1 billion, as well as another Korean-born immigrant, a Silicon Valley entrepreneur who lived on ramen noodles and had to pawn his belongings to pay his phone bill, but gave \$15 million to the San Francisco Asian Art Museum, "mak[ing] Horatio Alger look like a slacker."<sup>38</sup> Woo delved into the backgrounds of these examples of the model minority myth. In the former instance, the individual was able to start his company because he had received a government contract through a minority set-aside program. In the latter, the man was descended from the royal family that ruled Korea until the Japanese takeover of 1905, and he had been a university professor and an executive in the family business in Korea before emigrating. They are still impressive people, but they have not come from the ghetto. The sheen comes off the model minority myth once the real stories are revealed.

Asian immigrants personify "brain drain": the selective nature of immigration. More than half of the professional immigrants to the United States are Asian; Asian men are well over a majority of the professional immigrants

in technical occupations. Indian doctors are the single largest ethnic group in the medical profession in this country, at about 4 percent of the total number of physicians; 11 percent of Indian men in the United States and 7 percent of Indian women hold medical degrees. Filipina women are over half the total number of registered nurses who were trained abroad; thousands more come every year. In 1990, 20 percent of all Filipino Americans listed their area of employment as health care. For many Asian ethnicities in the United States, such as Indians, the earliest cohort of immigrants following immigration policy reforms are the most qualified, and the continuing stream is less elite. Among some Asian ethnicities, such as Filipinos, the foreign-born generally make more money than the native-born. Under restrictive immigration policies, individuals who have skills that are in high demand in the United States have greater opportunities to acquire a green card. In their homelands, doctors and nurses are not nearly as common. One of nine Indian men in India is not a doctor, and Filipinas are not half the nurses worldwide. In Asia, there are millions of urban and rural poor who do not have the means to travel out of the city or the village, much less to the United States.

The gathering of Asian Americans in particular occupations is the product of circumstances beyond their control as much as of racial purposefulness. Asian immigrants often have had no choice about their field of work because of discrimination, and they are encouraged to take up jobs in industries where they have family and friends. Chinese men in China are not laundrymen, but washing clothes—a chore that in China, as in the United States, was thought to be “women’s work”—was open to them in the nineteenth century when they were not permitted to compete in pursuits that were both lucrative and masculine. Southeast Asians are not donut shop proprietors by instinct, but once there are a few Southeast Asians in the business it becomes easier for others to join them, until the ethnic group becomes identified with it.

Other factors affecting Asian American income also inflate it. It is convenient to look at household income rather than individual income, but calibrating individual income causes the Asian American edge to vanish. In 1997, the latest year for which figures are available, Asian Americans made \$18,569 per person; white Americans, \$20,093. Like other people of color, Asian Americans on average live in larger households than do white Americans. They may have two spouses, children, grandchildren, and even cousins living under a single roof and sharing their earnings. In 1997, the average Asian American household had 3.17 people, the average white household 2.58. In 1990, among all American households, 4.9 percent had members



aged fifteen or older who were related but not spouses, children, parents, or in-laws; among Asian Americans, more than twice as many—11.8 percent—had such arrangements. A slightly higher proportion of Asian American women work compared with white American women. It is not an apt comparison to match an Asian American family that earns \$50,000 per year by pooling the wages of a husband, a wife, a grandparent, a child, and a cousin with a white family that earns the same amount through the salary of a single breadwinner.

Asian Americans are more likely than white Americans to be self-employed. Self-employed individuals with the same income as corporate employees tend to put in longer hours, with fewer benefits and increased risks of bankruptcy and other setbacks. The average employee of an Asian-owned enterprise is paid less than \$10,000 per year.

Asian Americans also are geographically concentrated in states such as Hawaii, California and New York, all of which have incomes that on average are higher than the national average, with costs of living also higher than the national average. In 1990, 60 percent of Asian Americans resided in those three states (since then, Asian Americans have started to disperse). Furthermore, Asian Americans are much more urbanized than any other racial group, including white Americans. In 1990, 94 percent of Asian Americans lived within metropolitan areas. Asian American income is distributed unevenly. There are large numbers of Asian Americans at the top and at the bottom, rather than in the middle. Asian Americans have poverty rates higher than white Americans, 13 percent compared to 9 percent.

The model minority myth also masks great disparities among Asian ethnic groups. Japanese Americans and Chinese Americans are closest to equality with whites, but Vietnamese Americans and other Southeast Asian refugees languish at the bottom of the economic pyramid, along with blacks. In the 1980 Census, for example, Vietnamese Americans were below African Americans on average. According to the 1990 Census, 25 percent of Vietnamese Americans and 45 percent of other Southeast Asians lived in poverty. Those poverty rates were higher than the rates for Africans (21 percent) and Hispanics (23 percent).

Finally, the figures for Asian Americans are rendered unreliable by the careless inclusion of Asians who reside in the United States but who are not Asian Americans at all.<sup>39</sup> Hundreds of business executives with Japanese-based multinational companies spend stints of up to a few years here. Their upper-management salaries add to the average Asian American income, but they are no more representative of either Asians overseas or Asian immigrants

than a white American vice-president of a Fortune 500 company who was an expatriate manager in Europe would be either average of Americans or of Europeans themselves. They are part of a transnational overclass.

To be scrupulous, the latest research must be mentioned. Arthur Sakamoto, a sociologist at the University of Texas, has done important statistical work on the wages of Asian Americans. He has revisited the leading studies by Barringer and others. Looking at data as recent as 1998 and controlling for a greater range of factors other than race than had been the case in other research (but considering only native-born persons), Sakamoto and a colleague, Satomi Furuichi, find no statistically significant support for the contention that Asian Americans "are underpaid relative to whites who are comparable in terms of gender, experience, education, and place of residence."<sup>40</sup>

According to Sakamoto and Furuichi, the only exceptions are for men with advanced degrees, who represent a fraction of the workforce. Among men with a master's degree, who are only about 7 percent of male workers, Asian Americans appear to be paid more than white Americans by about 20 percent. Among men with a doctorate, who are only about 4 percent of male workers, Asian Americans appear to be paid less than white Americans by about 18 percent. One-fifth of one's salary is not a small sum, and Asian American men are heavily overrepresented among recipients of doctoral degrees, but Sakamoto and Furuichi note that the racial discrepancies between Asian American and white income are smaller than class differences, characterized as the net effect of having finished high school versus having dropped out.

Assuming that Sakamoto and Furuichi are right and that native-born Asian Americans need not worry too much about racial discrimination, except at the top echelons of the labor market, they have identified a reason for all of us to rejoice about racial progress. Sakamoto and Furuichi "do not contest the view that many people may have an exaggerated image of the socioeconomic attainments of Asian Americans, nor that this image may serve to legitimate inequality in some people's eyes," but the model minority myth would have us do considerably more than believe that Asian Americans have attained income parity with white Americans. It asks us to believe that Asian Americans make more money than white Americans because of unique racial factors. It also asks us to believe that what is said of Asian Americans can be applied to other people of color without regard for racial discrimination.

Upon anything more than cursory reflection, the model minority myth becomes mystifying. The model minority myth is misleading not only

because it takes for granted that racial groups rather than individual persons are the best basis for thinking about human lives, but also because it equates status and conduct. These most pernicious qualities of the myth are hidden in the open. Whatever else might be said about the myth, it cannot be disputed that it is a racial generalization. As such, it contains the premise that people can be arranged by racial group, and, furthermore, that the differences between racial groups are more significant than either the similarities between racial groups or the differences within them. It makes race the main feature of an individual as well as the leading division among people.

People who realized their stated ideal of color blindness would not be aware—and would not want others to be aware—of Asian Americans as Asian Americans, as a distinct racial group. They could not differentiate Asian Americans from whites or blacks, using racial classifications that refer to status. They could notice, for example, people who did their homework and people who did not do their homework, using nonracial categories that referred to conduct. For this reason alone, the myth is an aberration.

Ironically, the less race matters for Asian Americans, the less—not more—the model minority myth holds true. As Asian Americans approach whites, the less special we are. An Asian American is successful for the reasons any person is successful, such as doing one's homework, rather than successful because of race. The model minority myth gives the opposite impression. It turns some activities into Asian activities. It gives them racial connotations. At an extreme, to study is no longer to study but to be Asian American. Study makes a person Asian American; Asian Americans as a group are defined by study. Making study the racial activity of Asian Americans does not serve to encourage it among others. If anything, it is likely to be counterproductive.

Numerous observers have written that many African Americans already shun interest in school as "acting white," to their own detriment, without noting the origins of the attitude. There is a difference between the comments made by University of Texas law professor Lino Graglia in 1997 that blacks and Hispanics could not compete with whites academically because "these cultures are not conducive to high academic standards" and "failure is not looked upon with disgrace," and the research of University of California at Berkeley anthropologist John Ogbu on immigrants compared with involuntary minorities. Whereas Graglia attributes anti-academic attitudes to African Americans themselves, Ogbu suggests that the attitudes developed as a response to white oppression.<sup>41</sup> The Asian American example should make us realize that it comes from stereotypes about African Americans rather than among African Americans. As the idea becomes established that it is Asian

American to attend class and do your homework, whites too may start to shirk it because of its racial overtones. It would be uncool to become too Asian.

Researchers have tried to discern the relationship between studying and being Asian American. They have used sophisticated statistical analysis of the many factors that come together in the model minority myth in an attempt to figure out how Asian Americans have done as well as we have. Technically, the empirical work confirms only faint correlations between race itself and academic success. The Asian-ness of Asian Americans offers only sketchy explanations of the data. Its influence is scarcely more than the effects of random chance.

Asian Americans would be racially striking if and only if we engaged in the same activities as whites (or others) and somehow produced divergent results. Otherwise, what Asian Americans do is generic rather than genetic. Picture two groups of students, one Asian American and one white. They are identical except for race, the children being raised by two parents who are college graduates with modest incomes in communities that supported scholarship and have teachers who esteem them as good pupils, with role models, a support network, and positive feedback.

If both did their homework, but Asian Americans scored high on exams while whites did not, then we would have a real model minority. Or if Asian Americans did no homework while whites did, but the Asian Americans out-paced the whites on exams, again we would have a real model minority. Such a scenario being nonexistent, what we find is not inimitable: Children who are raised by two parents who are college graduates do better, independent of race. The children could be Asian American, white American, or African American, but what is important are other, nonracial criteria.

The hands-on work of mathematics professor Uri Treisman indicates that anybody who sets her mind to it and finds friends to help can do what Asian Americans do.<sup>42</sup> Formerly at the University of California-Berkeley and now at the University of Texas, Treisman has spent years working with Asian American, African American, and Hispanic undergraduates in intensive programs at both schools. Before teaching them, Treisman studied them. He lived with them in dormitories for months at a time to see life from their perspectives. Treisman came to realize that Asian American students who were high performers in his courses belonged to peer groups that reinforced their classwork by collaborating on their homework. When he transferred the pedagogical technique to African American and Hispanic students, including those whose performance would have been predicted to be deficient, they were able to equal the Asian American students in every respect. The expe-

rience of seeing Asian American students struggle and African American and Hispanic students succeed also benefited all groups by giving the lie to stereotypes.

The model minority myth persists, despite violating our societal norms against racial stereotyping and even though it is not accurate. Dozens of amply documented and heavily annotated government studies and scholarly papers, along with a handful of better magazine and newspaper articles supplemented by television segments and public speeches, all intended to destroy the myth, have had negligible effect on popular culture. In the latest college textbook on Asian Americans, professors Lucie Cheng and Philip Q. Yang comment, "despite an unending barrage of attacks, the model minority image has persisted into the 1990s, quite alive if not entirely unscathed."<sup>43</sup>

The myth has not succumbed to individualism or facts because it serves a purpose in reinforcing racial hierarchies. Asian Americans are as much a "middleman minority" as we are a model minority. We are placed in the awkward position of buffer or intermediary, elevated as the preferred racial minority at the expense of denigrating African Americans. Asian American writers and scholars have not hesitated to call the phenomenon what it is. Novelist Frank Chin has described it as "racist love," contrasting it with "racist hate" of other people of color. DePaul University law professor Sumi Cho has explained that Asian Americans are turned into "racial mascots," giving right-wing causes a novel messenger, camouflaging arguments that would look unconscionably self-interested if made by whites about themselves. University of California at Irvine political scientist Claire Kim has argued that Asian Americans are positioned through "racial triangulation," much as a Machiavellian would engage in political triangulation for maximum advantage. Law professor Mari Matsuda famously declared, "we will not be used" in repudiating the model minority myth.<sup>44</sup>

Whatever the effects are called, Asian Americans become pawns. We are not recognized in our own right but advanced for ulterior motives. Michael S. Greve, a leading advocate against racial remedies, said that the controversy over anti-Asian discrimination could be used to attack affirmative action: It presented "an opportunity to call, on behalf of a racial minority (i.e., the Asian applicants), for an end to discrimination. It was an appeal that, when made on behalf of whites, is politically hopeless and, perhaps, no longer entirely respectable."<sup>45</sup>

The model minority myth is resilient because it is a "meme." Scientist Richard Dawkins's concept of a "meme"—a piece of cultural material that can be passed on from person to person, society to society, and generation to

generation—advises us that any information and any image can survive and evolve.<sup>46</sup> Dawkins posits that memes are to culture what genes are to biology, replicating themselves in an evolutionary process that selects the bits most likely to survive. Whether they are information or rumor, stereotypes take on their own social life. The longevity and propagation of information depends on its usefulness, not necessarily its truth. The myth is useful, even if it is not true. Its content assuages the conscience and assigns blame, a function that is psychologically needed and socially desired. It tells a comforting narrative of America as having progressed to become a place where race does not matter anymore, and it offers a cautionary parable about the good minority and the bad minority. Author Michael Lind has written that “in addition to fulfilling their immediate functions—selling egg rolls, measuring blood sugar—Vietnamese vendors and Filipino lab technicians serve an additional function for the white overclass: they relieve it of guilt about the squalor of millions of native-born Americans, not only ghetto blacks and poor Hispanics but poor whites.”<sup>47</sup> To condemn the myth is not the same as to condemn the individual who has lived it or repeated it. We all like fables with happy endings, especially when we are the actors in the story.

### *Messages of the Myth*

The very phrase “model minority” suggests the problems with the concept. The term begs the questions “Model of what” and “Model for whom?” “Model minority” could have either one of two meanings, both of them condescending toward racial minorities. It could imply that Asian Americans are remarkable, given that we are a racial minority group. We are “model” at least for people of color, our performance satisfying a lesser standard. Or it could mean that Asian Americans are exemplary, serving as an ideal of some sort. We are a credit as a race as some people of color are called a credit to their race, and African Americans should mimic our behavior. When Senator Daniel Inouye, a Japanese American from Hawaii, won election to the most exclusive club in the world, he was greeted by a white legislator from the South who congratulated him and asked him why the “niggers” could not be more like the Asians.<sup>48</sup>

The model minority myth has a long lineage, however, with roots dating back to the nineteenth century. The new myth and its precursors bear more than a family resemblance. Well before modern reactions to civil rights advances, the earliest Asian arrivals had been lauded in comparative terms that could not help but provoke racial antipathy. Even progressives, having

decided that Asian immigrants endangered white workers, stopped being friendly toward them. Horace Greeley, editor of the *New York Tribune* and once a presidential candidate, remembered for purportedly having said, "Go West, young man," argued that only "Christian races" or "white races" should be allowed to settle that land.<sup>49</sup>

After the Civil War, southern plantation owners devised fantastic schemes to import millions of Chinese laborers to avoid hiring recently freed black slaves. Several thousand "Coolies" were brought over. As the Reconstruction governor of Arkansas conceded, "Undoubtedly the underlying motive for this effort . . . was to punish the Negro for having abandoned control of his old master, and to regulate the conditions of his employment and the scale of wages to be paid him." A Kentucky newspaperman opined more bluntly that with the coming of the Chinese, "the tune . . . will not be 'forty acres and a mule,' but . . . 'work nigger or starve.'"<sup>50</sup>

The brokers of Chinese immigrants argued that their laborers were more advanced than the African Americans they would replace. A Baton Rouge newspaper stated that the Chinese "are more obedient and industrious than the negro, work as well without an overseer, and at the same time are more cleanly in their habits and persons than the freedmen." It added, "The same reports come from all the sugar estates where they have been introduced, and all accounts given of them by planters in Arkansas, Alabama, and other States where they are employed in the culture of cotton."<sup>51</sup>

Meanwhile, in the Northern states when the labor movement was beginning to organize unions, industrialists experimented with deploying Chinese as strikebreakers.<sup>52</sup> In the most widely cited instance, a factory owner brought in seventy-five Chinese workers in response to a strike called by what was then the largest union in the country. He relied on the Chinese to increase his profits \$840 per week. Other capitalists instituted wage reductions soon thereafter.

The Chinese laborers who built the transcontinental railroad were arranged in crews that competed against their Irish equivalents. The robber barons for whom they worked were eager to wager with each other over whether the Chinese or the Irish would be able to lay more track on any given day. The more than 10,000 Chinese were paid less and worked under more hazardous conditions. Their contributions notwithstanding, they were not invited to the Golden Spike ceremony when the distinct lines were joined together in 1869 at Promontory Point, Utah.

Just as Chinese were compared favorably with blacks in the South, they were compared favorably with Irish in the North and West. As reported by

San Francisco State University historian Stuart Miller, the *New York Times* argued that "John Chinaman" was a better addition to [American] society than was 'Paddy.'" It "complained" that Chinese men did not drink whiskey, stab one another, or beat their wives.<sup>53</sup> As Miller noted, numerous "defensive articles on behalf of the Chinese were thinly disguised attacks on the Irish," and "needless to say, such sarcasm was not lost on the Irish."<sup>54</sup>

The rallying cry "The Chinese Must Go!" was a reaction to the same stereotypes that had previously passed as positive. Racial rivalries exacerbated economic uncertainties. Denis Kearney, the charismatic leader of the Workingman's Party, was able to leverage anti-Chinese emotions both to unite Irish immigrants and to intensify their affinity with whiteness. He managed to escalate a California concern into a national movement by maintaining that the multitude of Asian immigrants would engulf white immigrants. Even African American labor unions took the same stance. They were no more eager than white Americans to see Asians competing against them.

All along the West Coast, Chinese immigrants suffered from racial attacks. Most Chinese immigrants entered the United States at the port of San Francisco and fanned out from there. They fared no better than freed blacks at the hands of white mobs. In 1871, a lynch gang killed 19 of 172 Chinese living in the "Negro Alley" section of Los Angeles. In 1877, the Order of Caucasians tried to burn down the Chinatown of San Francisco but succeeded only in killing four Chinese farmhands on a ranch in nearby Chico. The Rock Springs, Wyoming, massacre of 1885 was the worst of the confrontations, with 29 deaths. Two hundred armed white miners drove out all 600 Chinese miners to take over a precious "room" the Chinese had found, torching their homes. Federal troops were called out to stop the carnage, but all of the whites were acquitted in subsequent trials because no individuals could be held responsible for the wholesale slaughter.

Japanese immigrants had to fight the same battles. Like Chinese immigrants, Japanese immigrants were prevented from naturalization by a racial bar. Much as the Chinese had been model workers, the Japanese offspring were called "model citizens." The status of Japanese Americans also depended on events overseas. They gained respect from the Japanese victory over the Russians in the 1905 war between those two nations. The catastrophe, unprecedented in the modern period, upset the world because an Eastern upstart had vanquished a Western power.

As soon as Japanese Americans began to flourish in agriculture, tilling acreage that had lain fallow, they began to experience the same animosity that had beset Chinese Americans. Between the world wars, state after state



passed alien land laws intended to take away the source of their income. Although the bills were neutral in their language, making no references to race, the legislative intent was clear. The statutes prohibited aliens "ineligible for citizenship"—a category that specified Asian immigrants and nobody else—from holding title to real property.

The modern model minority myth was born during the civil rights revolution, shortly after comprehensive federal laws were passed against racial discrimination. Six months after the Watts riots, on January 6, 1966, the *New York Times Sunday Magazine* printed a profile by University of California at Berkeley sociologist William Petersen entitled, "Success Story, Japanese American Style." One scholar has called it "the most influential single article ever written about an Asian-American group."<sup>55</sup>

In the article, later expanded into a book, Petersen presented a magnanimous account of Japanese Americans. In the full-length version of his accidental masterpiece,<sup>56</sup> he expresses his surprise that the single article in the popular press outside his areas of expertise had become the most renowned work he had ever produced. In fact, his arguments were directed toward the ongoing debates over the rights of African Americans.

Petersen was evenhanded in relating the historical discrimination imposed on Japanese Americans, so much so that he might reasonably be interpreted as arguing that their oppression contributed to their integration. He begins by denouncing the wartime internment when it was still considered to be justified and before Japanese Americans had begun to demand reparations. After invoking Horatio Alger as a "patron saint," he argues credibly that Japanese Americans were "a minority that has risen above even prejudiced criticism." He claims provocatively that "by any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese-Americans are better than any group in our society, including native-born whites."<sup>57</sup>

Petersen is open about his agenda: "[G]enerally, this kind of treatment,"—meaning historical racial discrimination—"as we all know these days, creates what might be termed 'problem minorities.'" The venture of studying Japanese Americans is worthwhile because the Japanese American experience was "of general interest precisely because it constitutes the outstanding exception." Their behavior "challenges every such generalization about ethnic minorities."<sup>58</sup>

Petersen did not have to be coy, giving a nod and a wink to his audience to gesture at whom he had in mind as "problem minorities." Each commendation of Asian Americans is paired off against a reprimand of African Americans. A novel about the internment by a Japanese American author

had "the hero struggl[ing] to find his way to the America that had rejected him and that he had rejected," but the works of James Baldwin could not meet that test. Japanese American adolescents were well-behaved, except for the juvenile delinquents who had fallen in with gangs comprising "Negroes or Mexicans," especially followers of Islam. As Petersen presents it, Asian Americans also are essentially Asian and not American. Japanese Americans "could climb over the highest barriers our racists were able to fashion in part because of their meaningful links to an alien culture." The "American Negro," in contrast, was "as thoroughly American as any Daughter of the American Revolution."

At the end of the same year Petersen's article was published, 1966, following another summer of urban unrest, *U.S. News & World Report* bestowed the same accolades on Chinese Americans and made the same insinuations: "At a time when it is being proposed that hundreds of billions be spent to uplift Negroes and other minorities, the nation's 300,000 Chinese Americans are moving ahead on their own, with no help from anyone else."<sup>59</sup>

The Petersen article and its historical antecedents culminated in the late Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*.<sup>60</sup> Social scientists Herrnstein and Murray attempt in their massive book to re-establish specious claims of mental deficiencies on the part of blacks, which biologists, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, and educators had disproved long before. They argue that socioeconomic status is determined by general intelligence, general intelligence is inherited, and African Americans are genetically weak in this respect. Hence blacks are properly consigned to their inferior place in modern society and might even be properly sent off to "reservations" like those of Native Americans.<sup>61</sup> Nothing is incontrovertible, but by portraying old stereotypes as dissenting viewpoints, Herrnstein and Murray have had their racial propositions accepted without skepticism. Although Herrnstein and Murray's social science has been thoroughly debunked for overstating the strength of the correlation among variables and assuming the existence of general intelligence, the reviews of their work attracted only a fraction of the attention given to their initial invective. Their book is a testament to the unshakable grip of outrageous claims of black inferiority.

In the rancor of the ensuing debate, newspaper columnist William Safire invoked the model minority myth and called on people to look to the apex of the structure set forth by Herrnstein and Murray: "Instead of denouncing this study as roiling up feelings of black inferiority, it might be helpful to look in the other direction—toward the group that scores highest, the Asians."<sup>62</sup>

The use of the model minority myth becomes self-contradictory in its vacillation between color blindness and color consciousness. In 1988 at Vanderbilt University, for example, a white student disc jockey was censured for interviewing a Ku Klux Klan member on his radio show.<sup>63</sup> In his defense, the neophyte broadcaster argued that African Americans complained too much about discrimination and abused their racial status. He said they should imitate Asian Americans, because "Asians have a subtle approach. They go out into the community and prove themselves as individuals." His reasoning is at odds with itself. He extols Asian Americans on a group basis but also insists that he admires them for their individual behavior. By recognizing Asian Americans as a group and comparing them to African Americans, he thwarts their very attempt to distinguish themselves as individuals.

Even if the praise of the model minority myth were genuine and not feigned in a particular instance, it cannot help but send a message about African Americans. African Americans know full well what the model minority myth is all about. In Spike Lee's movie *Do The Right Thing*, a chorus of elderly African American men sitting in lawn chairs both respect and envy the Asian American shopkeeper across the street. The corner men, Sweet Dick Willie, Coconut Sid, and ML, "have no steady employment, nothing they can speak of" except that "they do, however, have the gift of gab" and with the aid of a bottle "they get philosophical." Watching the Asian American toil in his business, ML frets, "Either dem Koreans are geniuses or we Blacks are dumb."<sup>64</sup>

Were we to accept the usefulness of assessing racial groups against each other and forgo qualms about the morality of such an exercise, the model minority myth evaluation of Asian Americans vis-à-vis African Americans has been executed so poorly as to be worthless. Asian Americans and African Americans should not be compared in racial terms, but the model minority myth forces the task.

Acknowledging that African Americans in general have endured worse discrimination does not diminish the serious racial discrimination that Asian Americans as a group have faced. The adulation of Asian Americans considers only Asian Americans. Asian Americans are not as inspiring if the unique history and distinctive present circumstances of African Americans are fairly weighed—without supposing that African Americans have been so traumatized that they are damaged beyond redemption.<sup>65</sup>

We make what social psychologists call the "fundamental attribution error." We believe that other people behave as they do because of their personalities (of course, we recognize that our own failings are influenced by

factors beyond our control). We discount the importance of their role, the context, and external constraints. In a racial context, we believe that if Asian Americans receive good grades, it is because they are disposed to be studious; that if African Americans receive bad grades, it is because they prefer to be ignorant; and so forth. Yet in the educational context, studies consistently show how powerful self-fulfilling prophecies can be. For example, telling teachers that some students—who have been randomly selected—will make dramatic improvements in their IQ actually tends to produce those effects. We also do not recognize the effect of an observer. Children do not behave in the same manner when parents are present as when they are absent, nor do parents behave in the same manner when children are present as when they are absent. We do not even realize that, even with the few proven correlations between behaviors and traits, they are extraordinarily weak connections.<sup>66</sup>

The racial discrimination, institutional and individual, historical and contemporary, that has assailed African Americans is egregious and incommensurate. It has been different in kind and in degree from anything else found in our shared past. African Americans were reduced to property through the establishment of chattel slavery, which was not the same as classic forms of servitude that were neither racial in their organization nor absolute in their terms. African American families were broken up for sale, African American children were forbidden from learning to read, African American adults were whipped, African American women were systematically raped, and African culture was purged. After slavery was banned, African Americans were then subjugated under the Jim Crow system of “separate but equal,” which was as separate as it was unequal. Before the civil rights movement, even the most privileged African Americans were not in as good a situation as a majority of whites. Even if they were members of the tiny elite, they had nothing even akin to equality; in the phrase of the day, they had “no rights a white man had to respect.” They faced physical segregation connoting their lowliness and outright exclusion from educational and professional opportunities, violence in the form of lynching, no protection by and even outright hostility from the law and government, and a dearth of political power that could be exercised to alter matters. The 1921 Tulsa riot, in which a white mob killed several hundred blacks and thereby eradicated a community, may not be representative, but it is symbolic.

Asian Americans also are not like Latinos. Many Chicanos are not immigrants but individuals whose forebears were on the land before it became America. Although there are many highly educated Hispanic immigrants, the

proximity of Latin America also makes it much easier for unskilled laborers to come here. Asian Americans may be displaced from their homes due to U.S. actions abroad, but they have no sense of conquest and loss of the land where they reside. The distances from Asia that destitute individuals would have to travel reduce the flow of undocumented persons drastically, although not entirely.

Asian Americans are for the most part voluntary immigrants (although Filipinos are like Latinos in their former colonial status, and many Southeast Asians are refugees). Most of us had the luck to enter the country during an economic boom period. Many Asian Americans are well-educated, have resources, or both. We have not been held in bondage. Even the stereotypes are different. The model minority myth is generous by comparison. Asian Americans are depicted as honors students with pocket protectors who program laptop computers; African Americans are depicted as street thugs with concealed weapons who peddle coke bags. If the model minority myth is bad, it is modest next to the street thug image. If the former demoralizes, the latter must devastate. Even the Asian American gangster is a model minority of wrongdoing; as glamorized in movies such as Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* or Michael Crichton's *Rising Sun*, he is more coolly efficient in operating a criminal enterprise as if it were any other business.

Asian Americans also may benefit just by not being black. The decreasing significance of race for some Asian American ethnic groups does not mechanically correspond to the decreasing relevance of race for African Americans. It may be that the ability of Asian Americans to pass into whiteness depends on their ability to distance themselves from blackness. None of the facile examples of the model minority myth addresses the major dissimilarities in racial patterns that have produced the caste-like status of African Americans. (Although black immigrants have been praised of late as a model minority as well, their children find themselves no less black than African Americans.<sup>67</sup>)

The perception that African American public figures condone unproductive behavior patterns among African Americans—ranging from children having children, teenagers glamorizing crime, and college students overspending on credit cards to misogyny, homophobia, and even bigotry—is a misconception.<sup>68</sup> There is a strong conservative streak within African American communities that would do any critic of theirs proud. Many responsible community leaders have not hesitated to decry the misbehavior of African Americans, as Martin Luther King Jr. did in his sermon against the “drum major instinct.” They have done so with the best intentions, as King

did in criticizing the materialistic tendencies of African Americans, which are no different than those of whites except that African Americans lack the same financial means. But they have incorporated the disapproval within their attacks on racial discrimination and without suggesting that the traits are intrinsic to African Americans.

Added to that, telling African Americans they ought to be like Asian Americans does a favor for neither group. On the contrary, it only aggravates racial tensions among African Americans and Asian Americans. It is a paternalistic suggestion, as if whites were the elders telling the older siblings, African Americans, that they should be more like the younger ones, Asian Americans.

If I were African American, I would be enraged at the treatment of Asian Americans, all the more so if whites claimed, as they occasionally do, that they aren't prejudiced because they have accepted Asian Americans. The following exchange is a non sequitur: "You're discriminating against African Americans at your company." "No, we're not; look at all the Asian Americans here."<sup>69</sup> Whites and Asian Americans can like one another but dislike African Americans. There is some research that seems to show that where there are some people of color of one background, there tend to be more people of color of other backgrounds; the presence of each minority group makes it easier for the rest of them. But if the integration of Asian Americans is not to further the segregation of African Americans, our abundance cannot be used to excuse their absence.

The model minority myth becomes bittersweet through humor. Richard Pryor, one of the most successful African American comedians, joked that the first word an Asian immigrant learned was the n-word. Journalist Karl Zinsmeister reported the following comic story. A Laotian immigrant is repairing his car on the street. An African American approaches the "foreigner" and insultingly demands to know how long he has been in America, that he has a car. The immigrant answers, "Three years," and returns the question. The African American proudly answers, "All my life." The retort: "Well, then, why don't *you* have a car?"<sup>70</sup>

### *Backlash from the Myth*

The model minority myth hurts Asian Americans themselves. It is two-faced. Every attractive trait matches up neatly to its repulsive complement, and the aspects are conducive to reversal. If we acquiesced to the myth in its favorable guise, we would be precluded from rejecting its unfavorable interpretations. We would already have accepted the characteristics at issue as inherent.

The turnaround is inevitable during a military crisis or economic downturn. To be intelligent is to be calculating and too clever; to be gifted in math and science is to be mechanical and not creative, lacking interpersonal skills and leadership potential. To be polite is to be inscrutable and submissive. To be hard working is to be an unfair competitor for regular human beings and not a well-rounded, likable individual. To be family oriented is to be clannish and too ethnic. To be law abiding is to be self-righteous and rigidly rule-bound. To be successfully entrepreneurial is to be deviously aggressive and economically intimidating. To revere elders is to be an ancestor-worshipping pagan, and fidelity to tradition is reactionary ignorance.

Asian Americans cannot win by winning. We are familiar with Asian American sensations at the piano or the violin. They exhibit superlative technical prowess on the keyboard or with the bow, but nonetheless are criticized for being without passion, even bereft of a human soul. We know the notes and follow the score, but we have become too precise to be artists. We are automatons, frightening in our correctness.

A concrete example of such a spin on the model minority myth is offered by economist James Treires, who published a guest column in *Newsweek* magazine a generation after Petersen wrote his memorable essay lauding Asian Americans.<sup>71</sup> Treires's version of the model minority was an inversion of Petersen's original. Asian Americans were described with the same characteristics by Treires and Petersen, but Treires hates what Petersen had liked.

Calling the model minority myth "the dark side of the dream," Treires explains that everyone had heard "stories . . . of multitalented immigrants' children, usually Asian, who are valedictorians and superachievers in the arts and sciences," but he warns that "the downside of these upward-mobility chronicles is never discussed."<sup>72</sup>

Treires starts with doubts reminiscent of Asian Americans' own misgivings. He notes that the model minority myth was sending "the message that native-born American workers are lazy and stupid, and that black families, in particular . . . are perhaps not as American as the newcomers." He changes his tone, though, with an outlook that recalls the exclusion movement of a century earlier. He accuses Asian American parents of "using child labor in the family business" and Asian Americans as a group of "being willing to accept poor working conditions and substandard pay." He predicts that the side-effect of an Asian incursion could be to reduce "the once powerful labor movement to impotence and irrelevance." He then jumps to the conclusion that "working Americans who may want to limit immigration . . . are moti-

vated not by xenophobia or racism but by clear evidence that the new immigrants' gains are being made at their expense."<sup>73</sup>

Although Treires's thesis that the model minority myth has a "downside" could have subverted the myth, he is content to repeat the hackneyed argument that Asian immigrants impose costs on the rest of society. His "downside" is not the myth, but Asian Americans themselves. By accepting the truth of the myth, he turns it on its head. Instead of realizing that many Asian Americans agree with him that the myth sends the message "that native-born American workers are lazy and stupid," he attributes to Asian Americans a message that they would renounce. With an "us" versus "them" dichotomy, by definition Asian Americans cannot be "working Americans." Instead, we become a menace to "working Americans" and African Americans.

Upside down or right side up, the model minority myth whitewashes racial discrimination. "People don't believe it," as one Asian American leader told the *L.A. Times* in 1991,<sup>74</sup> in discussing the prevalence of anti-Asian bias. An Asian American student leader said that, like whites, other people of color doubt claims about attacks: "Some simply didn't see us as minorities. . . . They think if you're Asian you're automatically interning at Merrill Lynch and that you're never touched by racism."<sup>75</sup> The myth implies that bigotry has been brought on by the victims, who must defeat it, rather than that it is the responsibility of the perpetrators, who could be compelled to eliminate it. Senator Alan Simpson, an opponent of immigration, coined the term "compassion fatigue" to describe his sense that Americans were tired of hearing about other peoples' problems (as if those other people weren't tired of their problems). Under Simpson's concept, even if Asian Americans press complaints about bias for which they have evidence, the incidents should be treated as inconsequential or written off as the cost of being a newcomer. The reasoning seems to be that because Asian Americans have theoretically surmounted the deleterious effects of racial discrimination, we cannot be actually aggrieved even if real wrongs are done to us. Certainly Treires has hinted that he would be categorically skeptical of Asian American grievances, itself a form of selective prejudice.

When the U.S. Civil Rights Commission Report released a report on civil rights issues facing Asian Americans in 1992, *Fortune* magazine scorned the findings in an article entitled, "Up from Inscrutable." Aside from playing on a stereotype, the author asks, "What's the problem?" He concludes that the government study, which detailed offenses such as hate crimes, was "easily the strangest document produced by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights



in recent years" because "the predicament, if that is the word, which we doubt" of Asian Americans could not include civil rights violations.<sup>76</sup> If he had read thoroughly, he may have noticed that the report that he maligned mentioned that the myth was causing government agencies with a duty to serve all citizens to fail in meeting their obligations with respect to Asian Americans. Officials simply assumed that Asian Americans as a group did not qualify for anti-poverty programs, even if they were tax-paying citizens and even if many of them as individuals met the eligibility guidelines.

The model minority myth does more than cover up racial discrimination; it instigates racial discrimination as retribution. The hyperbole about Asian American affluence can lead to jealousy on the part of non-Asian Americans, who may suspect that Asian Americans are too comfortable or who are convinced by Treires and others telling them Asian American gains are their losses. Through the justification of the myth, the humiliation of Asian Americans or even physical attacks directed against Asian Americans become compensation or retaliation.

Such an attack occurred in Detroit during the recession of 1982, becoming a defining moment for Asian Americans. Two white autoworkers used a baseball bat to beat to death Vincent Chin, a twenty-seven-year-old Chinese American engineer celebrating his upcoming wedding. The father and stepson blamed Chin for their being out of work. Using racial epithets and obscenities such as "chink" and "nip" and "fucker" in exchanging words with him at a strip joint where all of them had been hanging out, they hunted him down after they'd left the bar. When they caught him, one held Chin down and the other swung a Louisville Slugger at his head repeatedly. The clubbing broke his skull and left him mortally wounded. As punishment for their crime, the two received probation and were fined \$3,780 apiece. As the Emmy-winning documentary, *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* recounted, Asian Americans in the heartland were shocked at the attack and the mild sentence. Even middle-class Asian American professionals who had a steadfast belief in conformity were shaken up.

The tensions of that time in the Motor City are hard to recall, but the context made race central to everything about the Chin case. Congressman John Dingell—whose father, also a member of the House of Representatives, had called for the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II—gave an angry speech in Congress blaming "little yellow men" for the economic woes of American automakers, whose products were facing unprecedented competition from efficient and economical Japanese imports.<sup>77</sup> Driving such an imported car meant taking a chance. Local car

dealers held raffles for the honor of taking a baseball bat to a Toyota to bash it to pieces. Owners of Hondas reported to unsympathetic police departments that their vehicles had been "keyed" in parking lots: Vandals would take a key and run it along the length of the fender, gouging the steel so that costly refinishing would be required. People who supported the "Buy America" campaign wore T-shirts with an atomic bomb mushroom cloud over the slogan, "Made with Pride in America—Tested in Japan."

"Little yellow men" is clear enough. Chin was singled out because of his race; his only connection to Japan was racial, and it was tenuous at that. His white friends were not similarly targeted, nor were his white killers penalized severely. African Americans who have committed such transgressions have received the death penalty at disproportionate rates. The judge believed that the sentence matched the people, not their actions. Although Asian Americans over time made Chin a martyr, we, too, were initially disinclined to broach the issue of race. White observers tended to disbelieve that his murder had been a hate crime; this was before the concept of a "hate crime" had become recognized. Helen Zia, an activist who later wrote *Asian American Dreams: The Emergence of an American People*,<sup>78</sup> recalls that a union official even informed her that if Chin had been Japanese in ancestry, the brutal killing would have been comprehensible. Thus, to some non-Asian observers, the Chin case was appalling only to the extent that it involved mistaken targeting. Like Michigan residents of all racial backgrounds many Asian Americans were employed by and depended on the "Big Four": Ford, General Motors, Chrysler, and AMC. Unlike foreign Asians, the Asian Americans in the Detroit area helped domestic automakers, and, like other Americans, they were harmed by foreign competition. The earliest community meetings among Asian Americans in response to the Chin case were held at Ford world headquarters.

In Stockton, California, in 1989, Patrick Purdy dressed in military fatigues, took a semiautomatic rifle, went to the elementary school he had once attended, and opened fire on the playground, spraying bullets that hit three dozen victims. Five of the students were fatally wounded. Although he had purposefully aimed at a crowd of predominantly Southeast Asian refugee children, local authorities and national media dismissed immediately any racial factor even though Purdy had expressed both his animus toward Asians and his fear that the country would be taken over by immigrants.

On the widest scale, the events of April 29, 1992, in Los Angeles were another defining moment for Asian Americans.<sup>79</sup> The acquittal by a suburban Simi Valley jury of white police officers accused of beating African American

motorist Rodney King triggered an eruption of violence, demonstrations, arson, looting, and anarchy, in which fifty-eight people died and an estimated \$1 billion in property damage was caused in a place W. E. B. Du Bois had called "wonderful" for African Americans because "nowhere in the United States is the Negro so well and beautifully housed. . . . [T]here would seem to be no limit to your opportunities."<sup>80</sup>

The immigrant families, predominantly Asian American and specifically Korean American, whose lives were consumed by their small businesses, many barely profitable and uninsured, saw everything of theirs literally broken in a moment: a brick through a window, trespassers tearing apart the inventory before torching what they could not take, the lawbreakers joyous as they ran amok, perhaps crying out a farewell that said the Asian immigrants had finally been shown their place. The popular images of Asian Americans showed them distraught, but also armed: One image captured by the *Los Angeles Times* depicted two young Asian American men defending their property, crouched behind construction equipment, ready with handguns.<sup>81</sup>

A self-published analysis of the "rebellion" by thirteen black authors opens with praise for the sleeping giant of "black, unheeded masses . . . awaken[ing] with a vengeance" and praises "a thoroughly mixed population" "chanting the war cry 'No Justice, No Peace.'"<sup>82</sup> None of the contributions even recognizes that Asian American communities were ruined, much less expresses empathy.

It was white police officers who had flagrantly violated the civil rights of King, but it was Asian Americans who paid the price. It was not exclusively African American and Latino young men who made up the roving mobs that went on a criminal rampage, but it was Asian Americans who were besieged. More Latinos than African Americans were arrested for riot-related charges in every category except firearms possession, but there were more African American older men than Latino older men who took part in the disorder. Asian immigrants may have felt powerless in predominantly African American and Latino neighborhoods, with what they perceived as a looming threat of armed violence, given their own difficulties with language and lack of familiarity with culture and without firsthand knowledge of either Asian American history or the African American civil rights struggle. Small family-owned businesses hired few employees, and even hiring an African American security officer, who worked as a subordinate protecting the boss's business, could have the effect of highlighting the racial dynamics. African Americans also felt disempowered in their own neighborhoods; they neither owned the retail stores that looked like the means of economic advancement

nor were even asked to work there. Neighborhood word-of-mouth held that Asian immigrants received special government benefits for which African Americans were racially disqualified. The rumor that Asian immigrants were given government money, although false, was widely believed.

Surveying Angelenos immediately afterward, Harvard sociologist Lawrence Bobo captured the importance of racial perspective.<sup>83</sup> Asked if the disturbances were mainly protest, mainly looting and street crime, or half and half, 42.9 percent of Asian Americans said it was protest and 50.5 said it was looting and street crime; among African Americans, the numbers were 67.5 and 22.8; among Hispanics, 38.7 and 51.9; among whites, 37.4 and 55.8. Bobo suggests that Asian American-Latino tensions also were running high in Los Angeles prior to the events. Korean sociologist In-Jin Yoon surveyed Korean immigrant business owners there and found that 80 percent preferred Latino employees to African American ones.<sup>84</sup> Sociologist Claire Kim, studying the East Coast, argues in *Bitter Fruit: The Politics of Black-Korean Conflict in New York City* that Asian American-African American conflict reproduces the model minority myth.<sup>85</sup> African Americans may be right to be angry that Asian Americans are seen as the model minority, but recurring African American anger only fortifies the saintly aura of Asian Americans as that model minority.

In 1987, in New Jersey groups of white and Latino young men began a series of assaults and batteries directed toward Indian immigrants. Calling themselves the "dot-busters" in an allusion to the *bindi* (the cosmetic mark on the forehead of Hindu women), the gangs beat up dozens. Even after they killed Navroze Mody and permanently maimed Kaushal Sharan, local police refused to characterize the attacks as race related.

In 1981, Vietnamese fishermen along the Texas Gulf coast took the Ku Klux Klan to court. Although the entire shrimp industry was suffering, the Klan made the competition racial, between native-born white Americans and Asian refugees. In one of the earliest cases won by Morris Dees and the Southern Poverty Law Center against a hate group, the Klan was forbidden to continue its violent attacks.

In 1996, outside San Diego, two white youths stabbed to death Thienh Minh Ly, a recent graduate of a biophysics master's degree program who had been out roller-blading. One of them recorded in his journal that "I killed a jap a while ago I stabbed him to Death" and recorded the details of his surprise attack on the Vietnamese Americans, stabbed forty times, throat slashed, face kicked in. As elsewhere, it was difficult to persuade authorities that the incident was racial.

The National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium, a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group, compiles an annual report listing hundreds of cases of racial violence affecting Asian Americans. It may be impossible to trace each hate crime or racial incident to a specific stereotype such as the model minority myth, but the number of race-related assaults belies the smiling image of the myth. An incident involving two sisters, Shirley Gee and Patricia Seto, and their four children, is typical. On a one-hour plane ride back home from Disneyland in 1994, the family underwent nonstop racial harassment. Twenty drunken white passengers, returning from a wedding, surrounded them. They became belligerent toward the family. Calling them "gooks" and "whores," they pretended to shoot guns in their faces. They were gleeful and relentless. The flight crew did nothing to alleviate the problem. They told Gee and Seto that they should try to get along with their tormentors. Two of Gee's children suffered asthma attacks during the crisis. The airline and its white passengers did not apologize; Gee was unable to pursue a lawsuit because of restrictive rules protecting the companies. Others can belittle the episode as frivolous or diminish it as anomalous, but neither reaction is appropriate and neither offers comfort to Asian Americans who have had such firsthand experience with casual hatred.

The critique of the model minority myth can be informed by and also inform our understanding of other racial images. The myth does not stand in isolation; it has its counterparts. "Jews are so good at making money" and "Blacks are innate athletes" can be said with good faith, but at best they reflect superficial approval and it is necessary to listen to the words that follow.

The statement "Jews are so good at making money" is properly regarded as suspect. The debatable sincerity with which it might be uttered does not make it wholly innocent, because vicious libels against usurious Jews are as ancient as they remain evocative. In Shakespeare's day, his play *The Merchant of Venice* (also known as *The Jew of Venice* to compete with Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*) was thought to have an uplifting ending. The merchant, Antonio, was the star of the comedy; Shylock, the Jew, was a despised moneylender. The outcome was all the more satisfying for its means. Portia, the royal beauty whom Antonio's friend Bassanio loves, is still the symbol for female lawyers. Beginning "the quality of mercy is not strained/it droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven," Portia issues the judicial pronouncement allowing Shylock to take his "pound of flesh" from Antonio as surety for the debt that is due. But Portia decrees that Shylock cannot do so without the loss of at least a drop of blood—he had contracted for only the flesh and not any blood—and, therefore he is guilty of attempted murder, and therefore forfeits

his wealth and will be banished. It is only in modern times that audiences have seen Shylock as the primary character and the finale as tragic. The wretched hero, played by a star such as Dustin Hoffman on Broadway, gives a plaintive cry: "If you prick us, do we not bleed?" The abiding willingness of all too many people to become anti-Semites by accepting the hoax of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* should give us pause, for it reminds us that any comments on Jewish financial acumen are unsettling. The lingering echoes about a global conspiracy of bankers resonate too loudly.

To say that "Blacks are innate athletes" is to demean their individual talent. It reduces them to brute animals. As University of Texas history professor John Hoberman dissects in *Darwin's Athletes: How Sport Has Damaged Black America and Preserved the Myth of Race*,<sup>86</sup> the racial theories that present blacks' instincts as enhanced and their hand-eye coordination as exceptional hark back to the supposition that slaveowners bred them for strength. The corollary is that they are dim-witted. African Americans become icons of brawn, bereft of brain, fostering a fetish for their physique. They are constrained by roles even within the sports arena. They can be the journeyman linebacker on a football team, but only recently have they become the starting quarterbacks because that leadership position is more cerebral. They can entertain the fans with their game, but rarely are they allowed to become the managers or the owners who develop the strategies or control the business. If an individual African American is deficient in the athletic skills of dunking or dribbling, or if he cannot at least sing, dance, or preach, that individual ceases to be authentically "black" and loses any substantial occupation in society. Such individuals disappoint expectations that are so powerful as to have become internalized.

Stereotypes that are not racial have the same effects. The celebration of the role of women within the family serves as disapproval of their role outside the home. The approbation of the deaf as pure of heart implies that they are simple of mind.

The perverse nature of racial discourse, however, has made it difficult to critique the model minority myth. The critics of the myth, most of them Asian American, come under criticism for inexplicably refusing a compliment. Tufts University historian Reed Ueda has called their critiques a form of "false modesty." He argues that they "say more about the exigencies of the American ethnic ideology than about the state of the Asian-American community" because it is "liberal and radical Asians" who have "hastened to defy the image . . . and expose it as just another means of majority oppression."<sup>87</sup> Apologists for the model minority myth, like Ueda, presume it is a favor to

Asian Americans. Ueda believes that the critique of the myth is political, but does consider that the myth itself is racial. Every stereotype deserves scrutiny, and, as far as impartiality is concerned, the analysis of the myth is more objective than the myth itself.

In any event, the individuals and families whose lives have tracked the model minority myth deserve kudos. Nothing should be taken away from them because the stereotype is discredited, and they need not downplay what they have done. Their strategies for coping may well deserve copying, but they will be easier to copy if they are not regarded as racial. The assault on a stereotype should not be confused with an assault on them, but it is understandable that the generalization of the model minority myth makes it impossible to separate the individual from the group.

It would be bad enough if the model minority myth were true. Everyone else would resent Asian Americans for what Asian Americans possess. It is worse that the model minority myth is false. Everyone else resents Asian Americans for what they believe Asian Americans possess. Other Americans say that their resentment is about riches and not race, but they assume that Asian Americans are rich on the basis of race; there is no escaping that the resentment is racial. Above all, the model minority myth is a case study in the risks of racial stereotypes of any kind. It is the stereotyping itself, not the positive or negative valence it assumes temporarily, that is dangerous. A stereotype confines its subjects. The myth was neither created by nor is it controlled by Asian Americans. It is applied to but not by Asian Americans.

The model minority myth tells us that the only good Asian American is a genius workaholic, not an average or normal man or woman. The expectations of being a supergeek can be debilitating. Asian American children are not allowed to be like other children. They must be superstudents, because their parents, their teachers, and society overall expect nothing less.<sup>88</sup> They become misfits to their classmates. Their rarified upbringing is like that of John Stuart Mill, the great utilitarian philosopher whose father was determined to produce a polymath of the first order. Mill's homeschooling routine, sitting at a desk opposite his father for the entirety of the day except during walks when he would recite his lessons, worked brilliantly, producing a formidable scholar who was publishing learned papers as an adolescent but who also underwent a grave emotional breakdown at an early age. Other than through the model minority myth, few Americans today wish to force their children to endure the box of psychologist B. F. Skinner, with its positive and negative reinforcements to condition behavior as if we were rats to be rewarded for running a maze. Asian American adults are directed into spe-

cific occupations. Yet Asian Americans cannot sustain communities in which we all are engineers, no matter how good a profession it is. If we are not to be stunted as communities, we must have artists, journalists, lawyers, craftspeople, police officers, firefighters, social workers, and the myriad others with contributions to make to our civic culture. We should have communities that contain the spectrum of human pursuits, or we will live down to our stereotype.

Perhaps the easiest means of pointing out what is corrupting about the model minority myth would be to imagine Asian Americans exalting in it. Some Asian Americans already are either optimistic or naïve in believing parts of it. The U.S. Glass Ceiling Commission found Asian Americans oblivious to the glass ceiling it had documented. Its report notes, "None of the Asian and Pacific Islander men who participated in the focus groups identified themselves as 'minority'. . . . They perceive themselves as smarter and harder working than their white counterparts and are confident that they outperform their white colleagues."<sup>89</sup>

The more convinced Asian Americans become about the message of the model minority myth as a whole, the more African Americans and whites alike will be incredulous. Foreign Asians have occasionally been chastised for articulating such offensive convictions. Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone of Japan in 1986 was pressured to retract his pronouncement that America was hampered in the global economy by the low intelligence of blacks and Hispanics. If all Asian Americans suddenly followed Nakasone and applauded themselves loudly and at length for being better than African Americans and whites, it would be downright embarrassing.

Asian Americans could brag about our numerous extraordinary deeds with suitable embellishments. We would sound like Asian supremacists of some sort, if we arrogantly told ourselves and everyone else about our brain power, our cultural superiority, our bank accounts, our prospects, and our likely global ascendancy. Our conceit would be terrible, even if we redacted the expressly racial terms so we weren't explicitly insisting that it was our Asian-ness that made us so good. If Asian Americans reveled in the model minority myth we would be insufferable, but the myth would still be false.

The model minority has a twin, the perpetual foreigner. Like the model minority myth, the perpetual foreigner syndrome haunts Asian Americans. In the next chapter, I fight it.