

Asian Americans speak out against a decades-old ‘model minority’ myth

By [Yanan Wang](#)

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A [column](#) published over a week ago in the New York Times began with what the writer calls “an awkward question”: “Why are Asian Americans so successful in America?”

Nicholas Kristof is no stranger to controversy, and the framing of his first sentence indicates that he knew he would be wading straight into it with a piece titled “The Asian Advantage.” But perhaps even Kristof did not expect the magnitude of the pushback from the Asian American community to be so great that it would prompt him to post a [follow-up](#) on Facebook this Saturday.

“My column last weekend on Asian-Americans sparked lots of conversation and criticism,” he wrote, addressing at length the various objections to and interpretations of the column. “Thanks for joining the conversation, whether you were patting me on the back or whacking me over the head.”

While many Asian American commenters said they appreciated Kristof’s attempt to clarify his points, the post likely befuddled others. What could be objectionable, after all, about a column representing as fact the achievements of Asian immigrants in America?

But to many Asian Americans, the column’s opening gambit isn’t just awkward. It’s offensive — and dangerous.

“Angry!” one [tweet](#) said. “What a way to wake up. Thanks @NickKristof for feeling the need to perpetuate a sustained, damaging myth.”

“Someone pls make Nicholas Kristof’s hack race analysis go away,” [read](#) another from Vulture editor E. Alex Jung.

While Kristof's intent with the column was to confront past responses from readers who had pointed to the Asian American community as proof that "white privilege" doesn't exist, many felt that he has done so by perpetuating a harmful, decades-old "model minority" myth about the supposedly universally accepted notion that all Asian Americans are successful.

The column cited psychology and sociology research noting that while Asian immigrants are "disproportionately doctors, research scientists and other highly educated professionals" and their children have in turn achieved academic success, there is no evidence to show that Asian Americans are inherently smarter than other racial groups. Kristof instead credited their success to "East Asia's long Confucian emphasis on education," familial sacrifices and positive stereotypes.

Just as African Americans can be impaired by anxiety from negative stereotypes, Kristof noted, Asian American students are bolstered by a "stereotype promise" that assumes they are smart and hard working by default.

Though Kristof acknowledged that these burdens of expectation are themselves a kind of discrimination, he then wrote, "To me, the success of Asian-Americans is a tribute to hard work, strong families and passion for education." He went on to say that it's unfair to measure "the success of the children of Asian doctors, nurtured by teachers" against the circumstances of "a black boy in Baltimore who is raised by a struggling single mom, whom society regards as a potential menace."

Kristof's conclusion — that discrimination is still alive and well in America — is decidedly uncontroversial. But how he arrived at it drew ire from the Asian American community.

The response essays came nearly as quickly as the tweets. Writers accused Kristof of treating all Asian Americans the same; they lambasted him for unfairly pitting Asian Americans against African Americans; they ironically pointed out that Kristof was embodying the title of a series he published last year, "When Whites Just Don't Get It."

Though Kristof did not use the term "model minority," many pointed out that the foundation of his piece resembled a stereotype first presented in the New York Times in 1966. For decades since, Asian Americans have been working towards dispelling the notion that success is a given for all of them, pointing out the challenges facing Southeast Asian communities and the pitfalls of ostensibly positive biases.

The idea that Asian Americans are distinct among minority groups and immune to the challenges faced by other people of color is a particularly sensitive issue for the community, which has recently fought to reclaim its place in social justice conversations with movements like #ModelMinorityMutiny.

"We're not monolithically doing well," Christopher Kang, director of the National Council of Asian Pacific Americans, told The Washington Post. "Some Asian groups have a high education attainment and median household income, while others are struggling." The latter, Kang said, are largely overlooked in conversations about Asian Americans.

Last Wednesday, the Asian Americans Advancing Justice center (AAJC) published the final report in their series “[A Community of Contrasts](#),” which presents disaggregated data about achievement disparities between different Asian American groups.

While many discussions about Asian Americans center on East Asians, South Asian communities are in fact the fastest growing Asian immigrant group, the series found. Meanwhile, the experience of refugee populations such as Hmong, Lao, Cambodian and Khmer groups continue to fall below standard markers of achievement.

“This data is a revelation for a lot of people who aren’t well-versed in our communities,” Marita Etcubañez, AAJC’s director of programs, told The Washington Post.

She said the misperception that Asian Americans are doing fine on their own has serious policy implications. While the [Pew Research Center](#) has found that Asian Americans are on track to outpace Hispanics as the country’s largest immigrant group by 2065, “it’s not a given that we will have more political power,” Etcubañez said. “Politicians won’t talk about our community’s needs if they assume people don’t require assistance.”

These politicians may be missing out on key political opportunities. In several of the state and local elections that AAJC analyzed, the Asian American population was larger than the margin of victory.

Emil Guillermo of the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund [shared a similar concern](#) in his critique of Kristof’s column: “When the presidential candidates square off and debate in this campaign, I hope they don’t think Asian Americans are such ‘success stories’ they can simply write us off when it comes to public policy.”

University of California Irvine sociology professor Jennifer Lee, whose research with Min Zhou is cited in the column, said Kristof’s thoughtful presentation of some of her findings was undermined by his nod to Confucianism.

“Some disagree,” Kristof wrote, “but I’m pretty sure that one factor is East Asia’s long Confucian emphasis on education.”

“When [Kristof’s] researcher told me that sentence was going to be in there,” Lee said, “I strongly suggested that he nix that. There are just too many counterfactuals.”

She noted that the most highly educated group of Asian immigrants are Indians, for whom Confucius plays practically no part in their upbringing. And if Confucian values were really so vital, Chinese immigrant children would perform well across the globe — yet second-generation Chinese immigrants have the lowest academic achievement among immigrant groups in Spain, with less than half expecting to graduate from middle school.

Writing for [NBC News](#), Janelle Wong, a professor of American Studies at the University of Maryland, responded to Kristof by pointing out that some Asian immigrants’ adherence to Confucianism has historically been to their detriment. “Asian immigrants from the mid-1800s] were despised as laborers who toiled for low wages in the harshest conditions. Confucian values were not seen as the key to success, but as a marker of racial and religious differences.”

For some Asian Americans, the “Confucian” line offered more proof that Kristof was lumping all Asians together in the same “Oriental” category.

Rather than cultural values, Wong and Lee both argue that it was an immigration law that changed the fortunes of a minority group long regarded as the “Yellow Peril.” The 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act attracted a large number of high-skilled immigrants from Asia, and these families became the bedrock of the model minority myth.

What many don’t realize, Lee said, is that these self-selecting immigrants represent neither the Asian American population as a whole nor the populations of their home countries. While more than 50 percent of Chinese immigrants in the U.S. have a bachelor’s degree, only 5 percent of the population does in their native China.

“I think this particular essay struck a nerve because in at least the past year and half, there’s been pushback against the model minority myth, more so than in the past,” Ellen Wu, a historian at Indiana University, told The Washington Post.

On the bright side, she said, Kristof’s column and an Economist piece similarly accused of subscribing to the model minority myth have offered trigger points for discussion.

Wu pointed to progressive groups like Change Lab and 18 Million Rising, organizations run by young Asian Americans focused on community-building, and recent digital movements like Suey Park’s #NotYourAsianSidekick as examples of Asian Americans actively challenging the perception that they’re simply willing to put their heads down and not have their voices heard.

This growth in activism involves engaging with social justice movements led by other racial groups, as with #AsiansForBlackLives. Some saw Kristof’s column as detracting from these efforts.

We're *still* doing this (again)? Consider if "systemic advantage", & anti-blackness intersect?
#modelminoritymyth <https://t.co/tAJZKb05g9>
— ProfBradyisWriting!!!! (@profbrady) October 19, 2015

“When a column has this sort of tenor, it sort of implies that Asian Americans are doing so well, so why can’t other communities of color?” Kang said. “I’m very troubled by the implications of that. It sort of drives a wedge between Asian Americans and other communities of color, when we’re really all in this together.”

Kristof responded to some of the criticism in his Facebook post: “One common objection was that I lumped in all people of Asian origin, an immensely diverse group, into my comments on the success of Asian-Americans, when some groups like the Hmong are struggling. That’s certainly true, but the same is true of every race or ethnic group. There’s tremendous diversity within the African-American community, and among whites and among Latinos, and it’s not obvious to me that there’s greater diversity among Asian-Americans. Just because plenty of whites are struggling in Appalachia doesn’t mean that it’s meaningless to talk about median white incomes or the black/white education gap.

“....Some readers argued that it’s just inappropriate to highlight Asian-Americans’ educational success because this can fuel precisely the stereotyping that I’m criticizing,” he wrote. “I do think there’s something to this warning, and in general I think we journalists should be wary of writing about any minority group in ways that make it easy for outsiders to compartmentalize groups. In this case, though, this stereotyping is not only already widespread but has an invidious effect on bias against African-Americans.”

If Kristof’s 681-word (over half the length of his original piece) post is any indication, the discussion surrounding achievement as it relates to race is far from over.

The columnist, at least, won’t be shying away from it anytime soon. Kristof wrote in an email to The Washington Post, “In general, I think race remains an enormously touchy issue in America, but one that we in the media have to do more to address. The problem is that whites in particular often just want to retreat from this whole messy terrain and nurse grudges in private.”

The Asian American activists and scholars interviewed all said they appreciated Kristof’s efforts to engage with the debate. But they’re also fed up with the one-size-fits-all portrait of success that they believe has been used for too long to diminish the struggles of Asian Americans.

“People are just tired of being pigeonholed,” Wu said. “We’re so much more than this image.”
