



STATE OF CHINESE AMERICANS SURVEY 2025

Praise can be a prison: the negative impacts of 'positive' stereotypes

The psychological and societal costs
of the model minority stereotype

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Committee of 100



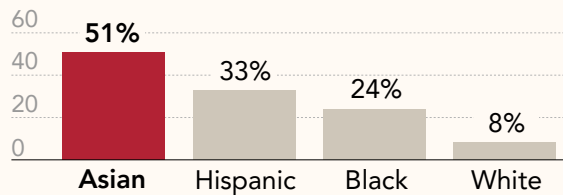
Amid the rising discourse on anti-Asian hate and overt discrimination, a more subtle but damaging dynamic persists: the psychological and societal costs of “positive” stereotyping.

Far from being benign or flattering, new data from the 2025 State of Chinese Americans (SOCA) survey conducted by Committee of 100 and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago (NORC) reveals that:

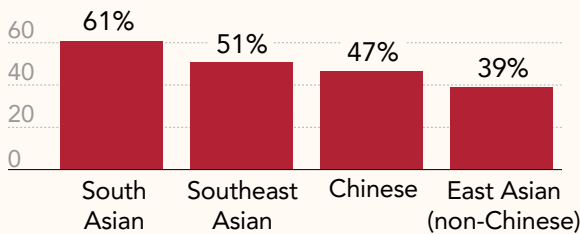
1. Asian Americans across national origin groups regularly encounter assumptions of being smart, skilled, and reserved at far higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups;
2. Regular exposure to these “positive” stereotypes is associated with significantly more psychological distress among Chinese Americans, and;
3. The general public’s endorsement of Chinese Americans as a “model minority” is associated with minimization of the extent of ongoing discrimination against Chinese Americans.

Most Asian Americans regularly experience the model minority stereotype

H Percentage within each group that experience “positive stereotypes,” such as being assumed to be skilled, intelligent, quiet, or soft-spoken



Among Asians:



Asian American national origin groups, other than Chinese Americans, are aggregated to region due to low sample sizes in some groups, though similar patterns are descriptively observed across national origin groups.

Despite decades of work reforming Asian American representation in popular media and educating the public about the harms caused by stereotyping Asian Americans as uniformly smart, reserved, and successful, a majority of Asian Americans report that they are regularly subject to several forms of the model minority stereotype by others in their day-to-day lives: assumptions that they are skilled, intelligent, soft-spoken, and quiet.

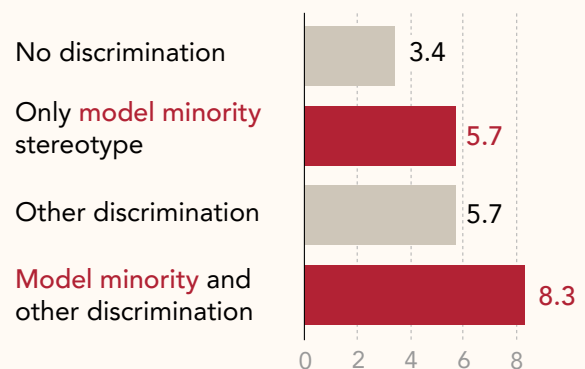
Asian Americans across national origin groups experience these assumptions at significantly higher rates than other racial and ethnic groups.

“Positive” stereotypes and negative health outcomes

While being seen as smart and reserved could be understood to be compliments that boost self-esteem and confidence, the consensus in existing research is that internalization of the model minority stereotype contributes to performance pressure, fear of falling short, emotional suppression, and negative attitudes toward seeking help among Asian Americans.¹ The present study finds that Chinese Americans that regularly experience being perceived as a model minority report significantly more psychological distress.

Using the six-item Kessler Psychological Distress scale to measure recent mental and emotional stress, the data shows that Chinese Americans who consistently experience assumptions that they are particularly skilled, intelligent, soft-spoken, or quiet report 68% more psychological distress than Chinese Americans who don’t regularly face any kind of discrimination.

H Psychological distress score (KPDS-6) of Chinese Americans who regularly encounter...



The elevated psychological distress experienced by those that typically face such assumptions is nearly identical to Chinese Americans who experience other forms of discrimination, such as harassment or assumed inability to speak English. What's more, experiencing the model minority stereotype has an additive effect on psychological distress; Chinese Americans who experience the stereotype and other forms of discrimination report 46% more psychological distress than experiencing either alone.²

Endorsement undermines action

It's well-founded that the general public's endorsement of Asian Americans as a model minority minimizes Asian Americans' mental health needs, masks the extent of racism faced by the population, and contributes to underestimation of Asian Americans' social and economic needs.³ The current study posits a novel set of questions aimed at understanding perceptions of Chinese Americans, in particular. Forty-two percent of respondents agree with both of the following statements: "the economic success of Chinese Americans sets an example that other minorities can follow to improve their conditions" and "Chinese Americans in general are law-abiding and rarely cause much trouble in society."

When respondents were asked how much discrimination Chinese Americans currently face in the United States, those who perceive Chinese Americans to be a model minority were found to say there's less ongoing discrimination against the population.

H Perceived extent of discrimination against Chinese Americans, by people who agree with...

Both model minority statements



One or neither model minority statement



These questions were not asked to Chinese American respondents.

Specifically, respondents that agree with both model minority statements about Chinese Americans were found to indicate that either "a little" discrimination or "none at all" exists against Chinese Americans at a significantly higher rate than respondents that only agree with one or neither statement.

Why it matters

These findings suggest that model minority stereotyping undermines collective recognition of discrimination and weakens efforts to fight it. Racial stereotyping is not simply a matter of hostility or kindness. Being consistently perceived through the lens of cultural stereotypes, whether positive or negative, undermines individuality, cconstrains expression, and reinforces the status quo.

Mental health frameworks too often dismiss the psychological harm of "positive" racial stereotyping, treating it as relatively harmless. But this data tells a different story: even when framed as admiration, these stereotypes are experienced as emotionally taxing and socially isolating. The patterns are clear enough to warrant urgent attention from both researchers and practitioners. They underscore the need to:

- Expand culturally competent mental health care that acknowledges both explicit discrimination and the quieter harm of stereotyping.
- Train educators, healthcare providers, and public officials to recognize the emotional cost of racialized expectations, whether "positive" or not.
- Invest in survey tools and research that disaggregate Asian American experiences and assess the impact of different forms of marginalization.

It's time to stop mistaking stereotypes for acceptance and start listening to the emotional truths behind the silence.

Notes and references

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2. These percentage differences are calculated by a simple difference in group means: e.g. $(8.3 - 5.7) / 5.7 = .46$ or 46%. Also, note that similar patterns are observed in other Asian American national origin groups.
3. Sue, D. W. (2010). *Microaggressions and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamics, and Impact*. John Wiley & Sons.

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