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# Asian Americans and the Pursuit of Unhappiness

How the model minority trap can turn the American dream into a nightmare.

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**Reginald C. Oh**  
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A debate rages about Asian American students and affirmative action in higher education. A group called the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) has sued Harvard, alleging that the university's race-conscious admissions policy discriminates against highly qualified Asian American applicants. It does this, they say, by holding these students to a higher standard compared to all other racial groups and rejecting them at a disproportionate rate.

What remedy do they seek? The end of affirmative action.

While Asian Americans are being hailed as a model minority and the embodiment of the American Dream, young Asian Americans are silently suffering. The source of that suffering? The very things that people are touting about Asian Americans—their academic and career achievements. For many Asian Americans, the pursuit of the American Dream is a nightmare.

Katherine Xie, a Chinese American, seemed to be doing it all: She excelled in high school, won national writing awards, graduated with a 4.0 GPA, and got admitted to Cornell University. Four days before her high school graduation, however, she overdosed on pills and was hospitalized for risk of suicide. It turns out that, during her high school years, she had suffered from depression, routinely cut herself, and become dependent on pills.

Young Asian Americans are killing themselves in startling numbers. In 2019, suicide was the number one cause of death among Asian Americans ages 15 to 24. That was true for no other racial group in America. Suicide was the number two cause of death for Asian Americans from 25 to 29. A study conducted by Professor Y. Joel Wong found that for Asian Americans under 25 who killed themselves from 2003 to 2013, "school problems were 2.2 times as likely to have been identified as a contributing factor to suicide for [Asian Americans] than for White Americans."

Eric Lu, a Taiwanese American, did everything to fulfill his immigrant parents' dreams. He played the violin, aced the SAT tests, got into Harvard University and then into Harvard Medical School. Then things turned ugly with his parents. The

problem? Eric realized that he wanted to become a filmmaker. So he took a leave of absence from school and moved to Los Angeles to pursue his dream.

His parents did not approve, and Eric fought with them over the phone nearly every day. They threatened to disown him and cut off all financial support if he didn't return to medical school. After two years in LA, Eric capitulated to his parents' demands, and in 2014 went back to Harvard. Eric quickly fell into a deep depression, began failing his classes, and routinely thought about leaping off his 17th-floor balcony to his death.

Let's put the affirmative action debate about Asian Americans in context. When I speak of Asian American students in relation to the affirmative action debate, I am mainly referring to East and Southeast Asians, with a focus on Korean and Chinese Americans, since those two groups are at the heart of the affirmative action debate. I'll discuss the reality of anti-Asian bias but suggest that Asian Americans who claim that affirmative action is the greatest obstacle to their pursuit of happiness are overstating the problem. Instead, I argue, the greatest obstacle to happiness and fulfillment for Asian Americans might be a hyper-focus on achievement to the detriment of their mental health and well-being. The relentless drive to get into Harvard, in other words, might be the pursuit of unhappiness.

Discrimination against Asian Americans is a real problem. The upsurge of bias and violence against Asians during the pandemic destroyed any notion that Asian Americans are "honorary whites" who do not suffer from racism. Instead, as I pointed out in an article written shortly after a white man murdered six Asian women in Georgia, the recent violence just highlights the long history of racism and dehumanization that Asian Americans have experienced in America.

So far, litigation against elite universities claiming discriminating against Asian American applicants have not been successful. On September 30, 2019, a federal district judge rejected the SFFA's claim; Harvard, the judge held, does not unfairly discriminate against Asian American applicants. That ruling was upheld by the First Circuit Court of Appeals. The SFFA then appealed to the Supreme Court, where the case is currently pending. Meanwhile, the FFA lost another lawsuit; in October 2021, another federal judge ruled that the University of North Carolina did not discriminate against Asian Americans.

In the Harvard case, the district court might have understated the danger that anti-Asian bias, explicit or implicit, might be infecting admissions decisions. In Harvard's case, Asian Americans received the highest scores for academics and extracurricular activities among all racial groups, but received the lowest personal rating. The personal rating considers the applicant's "character" based on such qualities as humor, sensitivity, grit, leadership, and kindness. If a candidate does not stand out, Harvard marks them as "bland." Does the low personal rating for Asian Americans reflect stereotypes that Asians are quiet, passive, and think and act alike? Are Asian Americans really too "bland?" The district court judge raised the possibility that implicit bias might explain the lower personal scores, but ultimately concluded that the evidence was insufficient to prove bias.

Northwestern University's recent treatment of Asian American faculty, staff, and students highlights the uneasy relationship between elite colleges and Asian Americans. When Northwestern's Office of Institutional Diversity held an event to show appreciation for employees of color, they did not invite Asian American staff to the event. According to the Northwestern professor Ji-Yeon Yuh, the OID told Asian American staff and faculty that "there wasn't a venue big enough, or enough funds, to host all staff of color, so the Asian Americans were left out. They also said that Asian Americans are not underrepresented minorities, so including them didn't seem necessary." With respect to how Northwestern thinks of Asian American students, in its fall 2021 welcome letter, "in a paragraph boasting about increased diversity among incoming students, they conspicuously said nothing about Asian American students."

What are Asian Americans to think about Northwestern's views about them? Their treatment renders them ignored and invisible. At best, it reflects indifference; at worst, racial antipathy.

There are, however, several problems with depicting Asian Americans as victims of affirmative action. First, it is necessary to distinguish between affirmative action and negative action. Affirmative action refers to admissions policies that use the race of an underrepresented racial group as a "plus factor" in admissions. According to the law professor Vinay Harpalani, negative action "refers to policies or practices which disadvantage Asian Americans" in comparison to whites. If schools like Harvard covertly impose a higher standard for Asian Americans than for whites, the problem is negative action, not affirmative action. And if Harvard's admissions decisions are infected by implicit bias against Asian American applicants, then that is just straightforward racial discrimination. It has nothing to do with the "plus factor" given to underrepresented racial groups.

Second, if any admissions policies harm Asian American applicants, it is through the preferential treatment elite colleges give privileged applicants like children of alumni, so-called legacies. While Harvard's overall acceptance rate is about 5.5 percent, athletes, legacies, those on the dean's interest list, and children of alumni and faculty—"ALDCs"—are accepted at a rate of 30 percent or higher. (The dean's interest list includes applicants who are related to donors and other prominent people.) White ALDC students have an even easier time getting chosen—they are accepted at a rate of 42 percent. As a result, 43 percent of white students admitted to Harvard are ALDC admits. If those white ALDC admits had been evaluated based only on their other qualifications, 70 to 75 percent of them would have been rejected.

Preferential treatment for legacies, then, operates as affirmative action for lower-qualified, privileged, white students. It is negative action against Asian Americans. Yet Asian Americans and their allies who oppose affirmative action for disadvantaged groups don't seem to feel the same anger about affirmative action for privileged whites.

If anything operates as a significant obstacle to the Asian American pursuit of happiness, it is the crushing self, parental, and peer pressure to achieve academic

and career perfection. And by academic success, Asian American parents and students often mean nothing less than “straight A grades [in high school] and going to an Ivy-league university.”

Asian American students have told researchers that their parents yell at them if they get an A- instead of an A; that their parents would “freak” if they got a B; that a B is an “Asian F.” One Korean American student told a researcher that, because he got a B on his report card, his parents made him quit playing soccer, something he loved, presumably so he could focus on his studies.

While Amy Chua popularized the notion of Asian “tiger parenting,” her second-generation Asian American perspective is not squarely relevant to the discussion of first-generation Asian parenting. Why do first-generation Asian parents care so much if their child gets into Harvard? Asian parents pressure their children to achieve because their children’s success bestows honor, status, and prestige on themselves. If their child gets into Harvard, it is as if they themselves got into Harvard. Some commercial schools provide supplemental education geared toward Chinese and Korean American students. These schools advertise by playing up the parents’ hopes and dreams: “Escort your child into your dream school.”

Moreover, the Asian parents’ expectations are highly specific. As in Eric Lu’s case, it’s not just about getting into Harvard; it’s about majoring in STEM, going on to graduate school, and then becoming a doctor or engineer. Anything less or different is failure. Asian American medical students told researchers that their “decision to pursue medicine was a response to parental expectations that they enter a field that brought prestige . . . to establish their credentials in the host society.”

In addition to parental pressure, Asian American students feel peer pressure to overachieve. “It’s an insane amount of [pressure] . . . Parental expectations get ingrained into your expectations. Then you see your peers, and you just want to do as good as them,” said one Chinese American college student. Parental and peer pressure are intertwined. As the sociology professor Lauren Dundes of McDaniel College found, “Certain parenting techniques were much more common among Asians, such as teaching them that academic performance is a matter of family honor and prodding academic success by comparing their accomplishments with those of children of family and friends.”

Asian American parents want the best for their children; but as one young Asian American woman put it, many “work so hard to give the kids a better life that they are ruining their kids.” Dundes found that more Asian Americans (41 percent) than whites (9 percent) prioritized prestige over happiness when selecting a college. Sixty-seven percent of white students deemed happiness as a central concern in selecting a college, while only 28 percent of Asian Americans students said the same. Literally, Asian American students might be pursuing unhappiness when selecting colleges and careers.

Of course, there’s nothing wrong with striving for excellence, with dreaming of getting into an Ivy League school and becoming a doctor. The problem arises when that dream belongs to the parents, not to the child. In Dundes’s study, 51 percent of

Asian American students said their mothers wanted them to choose prestige over happiness when selecting a college. Additionally, while only 24 percent of white students indicated that their parents had a preference about their major, a whopping 96 percent of Asian American students said their parents had a preference, with 42 percent saying that their parents wanted them to choose a pre-med major.

When young Asian Americans sacrifice personal fulfillment and happiness to fulfill their parents' dreams, their identity often fractures, split apart by two competing desires. The result, as numerous studies have shown, is depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.

Those who tout the success of Asian Americans as confirmation that America is the land of opportunity don't talk about the Asian Americans who don't excel. What about those who get Bs and Cs? Cindy Ng, an associate dean at Stanford University, observed, "When a student does not meet the expectation that she will excel, especially in math and sciences, the stress can be intense. Often the expectations have become internalized, leading to feelings of failure and worthlessness."

I understand these feelings. I came to the United States from South Korea as a five-year-old, and as early as I can remember, I understood that I needed to excel academically to satisfy my parents' hopes and wishes. I gained admission to a prestigious prep school, but, starting in the ninth grade, I struggled with math and science classes. Overall, I did well enough to get admitted to Oberlin College in Ohio, a liberal arts school with a stellar national reputation. My parents never openly expressed disappointment or disapproval, but still, during my freshman year, I felt a low-level sense that I had let my parents down because I "only" got into Oberlin.

That feeling of failure disappeared, fortunately, as I fell in love with being an Oberlin student and quickly realized that it was the right place for me. I was happy there. Today, I only feel deep pride, gratitude, and respect for my alma mater.

What is the path forward for young Asian Americans? One path could be working to end negative action and racially biased decisions against Asian Americans. But the aim should not be an end to affirmative action, which not only would frustrate the American Dream of racially integrated schools, it also would only intensify the hyper-focus on achievement, and the stress and pressure that comes along with it.

On the other side, the solution is not to ignore parental wishes and choose the path of personal happiness. Many Asian Americans have a strong sense of duty to family. They also might think that focusing on personal happiness is selfish.

The way forward requires finding creative ways to accommodate both family and self. In choosing a major at college, for example, the solution might be to major in both STEM and English. If it comes down to a hard choice between medical school or art school, between obedience or happiness, then perhaps the guiding principle for young Asian Americans should be "Do the least harm." If it's difficult to affirmatively pursue happiness, it might seem less selfish to take the path that avoids depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts.

What happened to Eric Lu, in the end? Thankfully, he did not commit suicide. After he graduated from medical school, he chose to become a filmmaker. In 2017, he released *Searching for Luke*, a short documentary about Luke Tang, a Harvard student who killed himself in his sophomore year. The documentary follows Luke's parents as they try to comprehend their son's suicide.

Currently, Eric is pursuing his happiness as an executive writer and producer for a hit FOX television show, *The Resident*, which is in its fifth season. It is about doctors.

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