

# Does she even speak English?

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How can my peers believe that the Earth's not flat yet doubt that not all Asians are good at math? The model minority myth that Asian-American prosperity is a fruit of successful assimilation that other minority groups ought to replicate has immersed itself deeply into the American narrative, as well as my own. The stereotypical, silent success of Asian Americans has become a self-sustained, self-inflicted form of structural oppression that affects roughly 5.6% of the American population today. Originally perpetuated by the roots of the Asian community in San Francisco and repeatedly buttressed by government promotion, today it is the inheritance passed through generations of Asian-Americans. Many students like myself suffer an onus of expectation and bear it silently; this is the life of the model minority. Achieving vocational success without making a sound is trademark—and a myth to be shattered.

After years of questioning my identity, I've found myself tired of staying silent but lacking anything to say. While many argue that "positive stereotypes" such as smart and hard-working should make me feel "lucky," the very real effects of the East Asian stereotype say otherwise. While not everyone is surprised by my perfectly fine eyesight (despite the size of my eyes), nearly everyone has held expectations of who I am and what I should accomplish based on my "Asian-ness". Rather than remain complacent all my life, I wished to challenge the myth, and an opportunity to do so eventually arrived.

As an active varsity debater, the month of October often finds me at school until 9 P.M., judging novices' very first policy debates. Although rounds are characterized by anxious argumentation and weak warrantation, a few novices manage to surprise me every year. One round in particular shocked me as I was judging on the Chinese engagement topic. The resolution? *The United States federal government should substantially increase its economic and/or diplomatic engagement with the People's Republic of China.* As I walked into my round clutching my ballot in one hand and my middling hope for an intelligible debate in the other, one debater muttered under his breath, "Does she even speak English?" Perhaps unbeknownst to him, a member of the 72.4% white population at our school, he was very audible during my traipse to the back of the room. I felt the full impact of these words which, at that moment, meant more to me than my near-perfect performance in every

English class, my reputation for catching every grammatical error, and my flawless, accent-free pronunciation ever did.

I could've been quietly angry. I could've been quietly sad. I could've been quietly offended. But instead of being what I've been my entire life, I chose to be bold. This novice round, I paid special attention. I flowed every speech line-by-line, taking in-depth notes about each debater's speaking skills and argumentation. At the very end, I asked the debaters to self-evaluate their performance. The individual who had questioned my English was very confident in his win, but my flow and I happened to disagree. As I gave feedback to each individual debater, I reached him last, and began to give his feedback...in Mandarin. When he looked sufficiently confused, I asked in English, "Do you not understand Chinese? Sorry...this is the China topic."

Racism in the tiniest forms is often ignored, invisible, or as silent as its victims. Rather than continue my education as a member of the mythical model minority, I hope to challenge the expectation of silence fortified by ivory towers and glass ceilings and use my voice—as well as my English—to challenge the repressive stereotypes that underpin American democracy today.