

# Hyper-Selectivity and the Remaking of Culture: Understanding the Asian American Achievement Paradox

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Asian Americans are frequently deployed as racial mascots by pundits who fixate on their extraordinary levels of educational attainment. They comprise only 5.5% of the U.S. population, yet about one fifth of the entering classes in Ivy League universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. Pundits have attributed these educational outcomes to cultural factors, underpinned by values or traits that are innately Asian. However, this cultural explanation fails to consider the pivotal role of U.S. immigration law which has ushered in a new stream of highly educated, highly skilled Asian immigrants. Based on a qualitative study of adult children of immigrants in metropolitan Los Angeles, we find that *hyper-selectivity* (as opposed to *hypo-selectivity*) of contemporary immigration significantly influences the educational trajectories and outcomes in the members of the 1.5 and second generation beyond individual family or parental socioeconomic characteristics, leading to group-based advantages (or disadvantages) that are consequential. Our analysis of qualitative data shows that the children of hyper-selected immigrant groups begin their quest to get ahead from more favorable *starting points*, are guided by a more constricting *success frame*, and have greater access to *ethnic capital* than those of other immigrant groups. In turn, hyper-selectivity gives rise to *stereotype promise* — the boost in performance that comes with being favorably perceived and treated as smart, high-achieving, hardworking, and deserving students—that benefits members of the group so stereotyped. Our analysis also suggests that, while the so-called positive stereotype enhances the academic performance of Asian American students, the same stereotype reproduces new stereotypes that hinder them as they pursue leadership positions in the workplace. We suggest that Asian American professionals face a *bamboo ceiling*—an invisible barrier that impedes their upward mobility much like the glass ceiling does for women.

### *What is the public significance of this article?*

Pundits often attribute the extraordinary academic achievement of Asian Americans to their cultural values or traits. The authors show, however, that Asian culture is not innate, but is remade from selective Asian immigration. Children of highly educated immigrants begin their quest to get ahead from more favorable starting points, have greater access to ethnic capital, and benefit from positive societal perceptions and stereotypes. But their achievement also reproduces new stereotypes that hinder them as they advance in the workplace.

*Keywords:* immigrant selectivity, hyper-selectivity, hypo-selectivity, ethnic capital, stereotype promise

The rapid growth of the Asian American population has generated both scholarly and media interest, including from the Pew Research Center, a nonpartisan American think tank. In 2012, Pew released a report, titled, “The Rise of Asian Americans” (Pew Research Center, 2012) based on the 2010 U.S. census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The title referred, in part, to the changing demographic and socioeconomic trends. In

1960, Asian Americans comprised less than one percent of the U.S. population, but account for 5.5% today—becoming the fastest growing group in the country. Immigration is driving much of this demographic change (Alba & Nee, 2003; Lee & Bean, 2010). China and India have now surpassed Mexico as the leading sources of new immigrants to the United States. Demographers project that, by 2065, immigrants from Asia will comprise 38% of all immigrants to the country. As a result, Asian Americans will nearly triple in size, and constitute 14% of the U.S. population.

Asian Americans also show the highest median household income and highest level of education of all racial groups, even surpassing native-born White Americans. For example, half of Asian American adults ages 25 and older have a bachelor’s degree or more, compared with 31% of White Americans, 18% of African Americans, and 13% of Latino/a Americans. Their socioeconomic

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rise is largely due to immigration: Asian immigrants arrive in the United States with more than average levels of education, job skills, and incomes. Furthermore, the Pew report emphasized that Asian Americans place more value on hard work, career success, marriage, and parenthood than other Americans, and that they are also more satisfied with their lives, their finances, and the direction of the country.

The release of the Pew report immediately sparked controversy among Asian American scholars and community leaders, who criticized the way in which Pew presented and interpreted findings from their quantitative analyses. By selectively pointing to Asian Americans' outcomes such as educational attainment and median household income, and then highlighting that Asian Americans place greater value on hard work for success than other Americans, Pew led readers to make a causal argument—that is, Asian Americans' values about hard work drive their socioeconomic outcomes.

It may be tempting to think that Asian Americans' educational outcomes are a direct result of individual effort, or to believe that there is something essential about Asian values or traits that produce such exceptional outcomes. This is a popular argument often made by pundits and journalists, as well as some scholars, who claim that certain groups are successful because they possess the right kind of cultural traits and values (Chua & Rubinfeld, 2014). By reducing success to cultural traits, however, these pundits simply reframed the “culture of poverty” thesis into a “culture of success” antithesis.

The culture of poverty thesis and the culture of success antithesis go hand in hand, in part, because both became prominent in the American mainstream simultaneously. The first—developed by Oscar Lewis (1965) and made popular by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965)—posits that the poor react and adapt to their circumstance of being poor by promoting a set of values and norms, such as single parenthood, nonmarital child rearing, and welfare dependency, which traps their children in poverty. The culture of poverty became the dominant framework to explain the persistent, intergenerational poverty among African and Puerto Rican Americans. The second—introduced by *U.S. News and World Report* and *The New York Times Magazine*—was invoked to celebrate the achievement of Asian Americans as a model minority, despite their experience of harsh racism and discrimination (*U.S. News and World Report*, 1966). The model minority antithesis attributes Asian Americans' quiet rise to their family solidarity, work ethic, discipline, and delayed gratification. Both theses invoked group-based cultural values and behaviors to explain mobility outcomes. While the culture of poverty thesis has long been discredited by social scientists, its antithesis continues to be employed by pundits to account for varied socioeconomic outcomes of both immigrants and the new second generation (the U.S.-born or U.S.-raised children of contemporary immigrants).

In this paper, we challenge the culture of success antithesis, and argue that culture has structural roots and that cultural patterns emerge from structural circumstances of contemporary immigration. We consider several critical elements that underpin Asian Americans' extraordinary educational achievement, which proponents of the cultural perspective fail to consider:

hyper-selectivity; starting points, success frame, ethnic capital, and stereotype promise.

### Hyper-Selectivity: The Structural Roots of Culture

Observing the patterns of educational attainment among the children of immigrants (the 1.5 and second generation), we contend that culture matters, but not in the way that it is popularly employed and understood. To underscore, there is nothing essentialist about being Asian that accounts for the extraordinary academic success of Asian Americans. Asian American achievement and its cultural manifestations have deep structural roots—namely, the change in U.S. immigration law in 1965 that altered the socioeconomic profiles of Asian immigrants.

Positive immigrant selectivity characterizes contemporary immigration to the United States. Research shows that most national-origin groups who arrived in the past four decades are positively selected, which refers to the higher years of education of an immigrant compared with their nonmigrant counterparts in their country of origin (Feliciano, 2005). Building on the notion of positive selectivity, we develop the new concept of hyper-selectivity. This concept benchmarks the percentage of college graduates (rather than the average of schooling) of a particular national-origin or ethnic group. Moreover, it takes into account the *dual* positive immigrant selectivity, in which an immigrant group boasts not only a higher percentage of college graduates compared with nonmigrants from their country of origin but also a higher percentage of college graduates compared with the general population in the host country (Lee & Zhou, 2015). This is germane in the U.S. context following the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, which led to the tremendous diversity of newcomers in ethnonational origins and socioeconomic backgrounds (Neckerman, Carter, & Lee, 1999; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Today's immigrants arrive in the United States with varying levels of educational attainment and labor market skills. Some are armed with levels of education and job skills that exceed native-born Americans, while others fall far below (Lee, 2002; Lee, Carling, & Orrenius, 2014; Zhou & Bankston, 1998).

Asian Americans are tremendously diverse, encompassing more than 24 nationalities, with Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Japanese as the largest national-origin groups. Except for the Japanese, most Asian national-origin or ethnic groups are first-generation immigrants. While most are positively selected, some are hyper-selected. Take Vietnamese and Chinese, the two of the largest Asian immigrant groups in the United States, as an illustration. Both groups are positively selected from its country of origin, meaning that they are more likely to have graduated from college than their compatriots who do not immigrate. Among Vietnamese immigrants, more than one quarter (26%) had at least a bachelor's degree, while the comparable figure among adults in Vietnam was only 5%. Among Chinese immigrants, 51% had graduated from college, compared with only 4% of adults in China, meaning that Chinese immigrants in the United States are more than 12 times as likely to have graduated from college as Chinese adults who did not immigrate. While both groups are highly selected, Chinese are hyper-selected, as they are also more highly educated than the general U.S. population (51% vs. 28%).

The opposite of hyper-selectivity is hypo-selectivity, which refers to an immigrant group's dual negative selectivity—having a

lower percentage of college graduates compared with their compatriots in the country of origin and to the general population in the host country (Lee & Zhou, 2015). Mexican immigrants to the United States are a case in point. Only 5% of Mexican immigrants have graduated from college compared with 17% of adults in Mexico and to 28% in the general U.S. population, indicating their dual negative selectivity.

Hyper-selectivity and hypo-selectivity lead to drastically different starting points for group members in their quest for upward social mobility, and both have cultural, institutional, and social psychological consequences for the educational attainment of the children of immigrants. One such consequence is the construction of a success frame. This cultural frame, for Asians in particular, entails earning straight A's, graduating as the high school valedictorian, earning a degree from an elite university, attaining an advanced degree, and working in one of four high status professional fields: medicine, law, engineering, and science. But it is important to note that this success frame is not intrinsically Asian; rather, it has been constructed and promoted by hyper-selected Asian immigrant subgroups, which, in turn, can affect other Asian subgroups as the U.S. society homogenizes Asians (Lee & Zhou, 2015).

A second consequence is ethnic capital formation. A hyper-selected immigrant group has greater human capital resources within the group, measured by a higher proportion of coethnics with a college education. Groups with high levels of human capital can convert this into ethnic community resources, or ethnic capital, via entrepreneurship (Zhou, 2008; Zhou & Cho, 2010). These group-based resources support and facilitate the actualization of the success frame. It is the access to ethnic capital—in the form of tangible and intangible ethnic resources—that makes the success frame tenable, even for working-class coethnics. In the Chinese immigrant community, for example, ethnic capital comes in the form of academic tutoring centers, test cram schools, and Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) preparatory courses—all of which are run by ethnic entrepreneurs to support the success frame (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Zhou, 2008; Zhou & Cho, 2010). These ethnic resources are accessible and affordable to working-class immigrant families, which help overcome their disadvantaged class status in order to effectively navigate the U.S. educational system and achieve desirable outcomes.

A third consequence is stereotyping. The stereotype of Asian Americans as a hyper-selected group can result in "stereotype promise"—the boost in performance that comes with being perceived by teachers, guidance counselors, and peers as smart, high achieving, hardworking, and deserving (Lee, 2014). These so-called positive stereotypes, however, are a double-edged sword. The same stereotypes that can enhance Asian Americans' academic performance can also work against them as they vie for managerial and leadership positions in the labor market. Research shows that both Asian American students and professionals are burdened by a model minority stereotype, which holds them to higher standards than other groups, including native-born Whites. As a result, they may face a "bamboo ceiling"—an invisible barrier that impedes their mobility in the labor market much like the glass ceiling does for women (Kim & Zhao, 2014; Sakamoto, Goyette, & Kim, 2009; Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999; Thompson, Kiang, & Witkow, 2016).

In this paper, we detail the ways in which hyper-selectivity affects the remaking of culture and the educational outcomes of 1.5- and second-generation Asian Americans, based on a qualitative study of Chinese Americans in Los Angeles. In particular, we explain how hyper-selectivity leads to the formation of a cultural frame of success and the ethnic capital to support it, resulting in high educational outcomes and positive stereotypes of Asian Americans. Because of the racialization of Asian-origin groups in the U.S. context, stereotyping affects all Asian Americans, despite the tremendous ethnic and socioeconomic diversity of this group.

## Data and Method

We draw on data from the Immigrant and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles Study (IIMMLA), which has two components: a telephone survey and a qualitative study. The survey is comprised of 4,800 randomly selected 1.5- and second-generation residents in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area between the ages of 20 and 40. It includes a number of different ethnic groups such as Mexicans, Chinese, Vietnamese, Filipinos, Koreans, Guatemalans, and Salvadorans, as well as native-born White Americans and African Americans in Los Angeles. For the aim of this paper, we only use the descriptive statistics from IIMMLA to illustrate our points about hyper- and hypo-selectivity and starting points.

The qualitative study includes in-depth interviews with respondents selected from those who indicated in the IIMMLA telephone survey that they would be willing to participate in a follow-up study. Thus, our sample is not a random sample of all IIMMLA survey respondents, but, rather, a random sample of those who were willing to participate. We purposely focused on three immigrant groups: Chinese (41), Vietnamese (41), and Mexicans (56).<sup>1</sup>

Chinese are the largest Asian ethnic group in the United States and Los Angeles, with the longest history of immigration to the United States. They are also among the most hyper-selected of Asian immigrant groups. Vietnamese are the largest Asian refugee group in the United States. Although they arrived with severe structural disadvantages, the Vietnamese are nonetheless highly selected, rather than hyper-selected. We chose Mexicans because they are the largest immigrant group in the country (accounting for 30% of U.S. immigrants), and are also the largest immigrant group in Los Angeles. Their sheer size—combined with their disadvantaged status—often puts them in the spotlight of policy debates about immigration and comprehensive immigration reform (Rumbaut et al., 2004).

Our interviewees spread across five counties of the Los Angeles metropolitan region, spanned in age between 20 and 42 (with a mean age of 28), and were evenly split across gender and generational status (1.5 and second generation). All interviews were conducted based on an interview schedule containing a set of open-ended questions. Data collection began in Fall 2006 and ended in 2009 (Lee & Zhou, 2015). To empirically examine the structural roots and sociocultural consequences of hyper-

<sup>1</sup> We also include 12 native-born Blacks, and 12 Whites for reference in our study (Lee and Zhou, 2015), and 400 3rd-plus generation Mexicans from IIMMLA, conducted by a team of researchers, including the authors, and funded by the Russell Sage Foundation. For detail, see <http://www.russellsage.org/research/Immigration/IIMMLA>

selectivity, our analysis for this paper is based on the interviews of forty-one 1.5- and second-generation Chinese. We include findings from interviews with Vietnamese and Mexican respondents to provide some fruitful points of reference.

## Findings and Discussion

### Immigrant Selectivity and Starting Points

Based on analyses from the IIMMLA survey, several notable patterns emerge regarding the educational attainment of the first-generation generation parents and their second-generation children as Table 1 shows. First, the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese Americans are much more highly educated than their Mexican counterparts and third-plus generation Mexican Americans (those of U.S.-born parentage). Second, among immigrant parents, the Chinese are also the most highly educated. More than three-fifths of Chinese immigrant fathers (61%) and more than two-fifths of Chinese immigrant mothers (42%) have a bachelor's degree or higher. On the other end of the educational attainment distribution are Mexican immigrant parents, nearly three-fifths of whom have not graduated from high school: 55% of Mexican immigrant fathers and 58% of Mexican immigrant mothers have less than a high school education. These figures resemble those in the United States census, indicating hyper- versus hypo-selectivity of these two largest immigrant groups.

The educational outcomes of the 1.5 and second generation reflect the parental advantages and disadvantages of their immigrant parents. The 1.5- and second-generation Chinese Americans boast the highest levels of education, and their Mexican counterparts, the lowest. Among the second-generation Chinese, 63%

graduated from college—nearly identical to the percentage of college graduates of their immigrant fathers—and of this group, 22% have attained graduate degrees. Moreover, none of the second-generation Chinese has dropped out of high school.

The patterns differ starkly for 1.5- and second-generation Mexican Americans, who occupy the other end of the educational spectrum, and exhibit the lowest educational outcomes of the second-generation groups. However, what gets lost by presenting the data as a cross-sectional comparison is the enormous intergenerational mobility that the children of Mexican immigrants have achieved in just one generation. While close to 60% of Mexican immigrant parents did not graduate from high school, this figure drops to 14% by the second generation, meaning that the children of Mexican immigrants nearly double the high school graduation rates of their immigrant parents.

Moreover, the percentage of Mexicans who have attained a bachelor's degree or more reaches 17%. In just one generation, the children of Mexican immigrants more than double the college graduation rate of their fathers (7%), and more than triple that of their mothers (5%). So while the second-generation Chinese have the highest educational outcomes, they have made virtually no intergenerational gains. By contrast, while the second-generation Mexican Americans exhibit the lowest educational outcomes, they have attained the most intergenerational mobility. Determining which group is more successful depends on how one measures success: as outcomes or as intergenerational mobility. If we take into account their different starting points, the children of Mexican immigrants are more successful than those of Chinese immigrants.

Despite the different measures of success, the outcomes of both the children of Chinese and Mexican immigrants are consistent with the status attainment model, that is, the strongest predictor of

Table 1  
*Selected Characteristics of the Children of Chinese and Mexican Immigrants in Los Angeles*

Characteristics	1.5 and 2nd generation		3rd-plus generation
	Chinese	Mexican	Mexican
Demographic characteristics (%)			
Female	43.5	49.7	52.0
Mean age (years)	27.0	28.0	29.0
1.5 generation	54.7	34.4	
2nd generation	45.3	65.6	
Educational attainment (%)			
Less than high school	0	13.8	9.5
Some college	36.9	68.6	71.7
Bachelor's degree to higher	63.1	17.6	18.8
Parental characteristics (%)			
Father with no English proficiency	7.0	15.2	
Mother with no English proficiency	7.8	19.1	
Father with no high school diploma	7.5	54.5	17.2
Mother with no high school diploma	12.2	58.0	22.4
Father with a bachelor's degree or more	61.3	7.3	14.7
Mother with a bachelor's degree or more	42.3	5.3	11.3
Parent ever been undocumented	1.0	10.4	
Family situation			
Parents own a home	86.5	62.8	73.1
Both parents married	85.5	72.0	53.8
Grew up living with both parents	85.6	72.2	62.2
Had college-educated siblings	76.4	30.0	35.6
Total in sample	400	844	400

*Note.* Source: IIMMLA data (see Rumbaut et al., 2004).

a child's educational attainment is his or her parents' level of educational attainment (Blau & Duncan, 1967; Duncan, Featherman, & Duncan, 1972; Haller & Portes, 1973). Because Chinese immigrant parents are highly educated, the status attainment model holds that their 1.5- and second-generation children would be not only highly educated, but also more highly educated than other second-generation groups, especially Mexican Americans.

The status attainment model, however, falls short in explaining how even the children of poorly educated Chinese immigrants attain high educational outcomes. The IIMMLA data also show that low parental education does not impede the educational attainment of the second-generation Chinese, as it does for other groups. In fact, the children of Chinese immigrants whose parents did not graduate from high school are more likely to have earned a bachelor's degree than all children of Chinese immigrants (71% vs. 63%). This vexing finding is not unique to the IIMMLA data. Prior research by Portes and Hao (2004); Hsin and Xie (2014); and Tran (2016) confirms that ethnicity matters, even after controlling for all measurable demographic and socioeconomic variables. Group differences persist, and being Asian positively affects educational outcomes.

The educational attainment even among children of working-class Asian immigrants have led pundits and journalists, as well as some scholars, to resort to culturally essentialist explanations. Most recently, *The New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2015) offered the following explanations of "The Asian Advantage": "East Asia's long Confucian emphasis on education," "hard work," "strong families," and a "passion for education." What has been missing from the debate, as we show in the following analysis, is the manifold consequences of hyper-selectivity.

### The Consequences of Hyper-Selectivity

**The success frame and racialization of achievement.** Hyper-selectivity affects the educational attainment of the children of immigrants in ways that defy conventional wisdom of status attainment. First, it results in a large and highly educated middle class, who selectively imports middle-class-specific cultural frames, institutions, and mindsets from their countries of origin, and recreates those that are most useful in their host society. Based on our interviews, we learned that one of the most notable cultural frames that Chinese immigrants import is a strict definition of success and a singular pathway to achieve it—what we refer to as "the success frame"—which they pass onto their U.S.-born and U.S.-raised children. This frame dictates that a *good* education is imperative for success. Caroline, a 35-year-old, second-generation Chinese woman explained:

The idea of graduating from high school for my mother was not a great, congratulatory day. I was happy, but you know what? My mother was very blunt, she said, "This is a good day, but it's not that special." . . . She finds it absurd that graduating from high school is made into a big deal because you should graduate high school; everyone should. It's not necessarily a privilege; it's an obligation. You must go to high school, and you must finish. It's a further obligation that you go to college and get a bachelor's degree. Thereafter, if you get a Ph.D. or a Master's, that's the big thing; that's the icing on the cake with a cherry on top, and that's what she values.

So integral is college to the success frame that Daniel, a 38 year-old 1.5-generation Chinese male described not going to college as tantamount to "blasphemy." He said, "Any Asian that

doesn't go to college, that's like blasphemy. We're kind of brain-washed to the point that almost every single Asian kid thinks college is a necessity. Only after that can you start pursuing other options."

Tony, a 37-year-old, second-generation Chinese male, specified further, it was not simply a question of going to any college, but, rather, going to an elite college. When we asked how his parents would have felt had he chosen not to go to college, Tony answered with amusement,

I would have been disowned or something like that [laughs] . . . honestly, by then it was very well ingrained value-wise that that was probably just going to happen. I mean, it was assumed or understood that [I would go to] college, and a really good college at that. Any college would have been a disappointment.

The 1.5- and second-generation Chinese interviewees—regardless of parental education—recounted a constricting success frame that entailed graduating as the high school valedictorian, getting into a "top school" such as "UCLA, Berkeley, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, or Columbia," going to graduate school, and then working in one of four "top professions"—defined as medicine, law, science, or engineering. So exacting is the success frame that the interviewees described grades on an "Asian scale" in which an A-minus is an "Asian F." The "Asian scale," we learned is even more extensive from some of our interviewees who explained, "A is for average; B is for bad; C is for crap; and F is find another a family."

In metropolitan areas like Los Angeles and San Francisco that have witnessed an influx of hyper-selected Asian immigrants, academic achievement has moved beyond the province of White Americans, and is now racially coded as "the Asian thing" or "acting Asian" (Drake, in press; Lee & Zhou, 2015). By comparison, middle-class White American students attending the same schools as the children of hyper-selected Asian immigrants are deemed as mediocre or "just alright." (Jiménez & Horowitz, 2013).

**Ethnic capital.** It is not enough to adopt a success frame; to be effective, the frame needs to be supported by institutional resources such as supplemental education. Los Angeles' ethnic communities like Chinatown and ethnic suburbs highly concentrated by Chinese immigrants, also known as ethnoburbs, are teeming with private afterschool academies that offer test prep courses, tutoring services, and other enrichment programs—all of which supplement the education that students receive in their regular schools (Louie, 2004; Zhou, 2008, 2009). Critically, because these ethnic education institutions are available in a range of prices—some of which are freely available through ethnic community centers, churches, and temples—they become affordable and accessible to not only middle-class immigrant families but also working-class families (Zhou, 2008, 2009).

Not only do ethnic afterschool academies and learning centers offer supplemental instruction, but they also provide working-class coethnic parents the opportunity to acquire the educationally relevant information about the college admissions process that would be otherwise beyond their reach. Information circulates by speaking with middle-class parents, by seeking advice from tutors and instructors, by overhearing conversations, and by reading posters that decorate the walls of the academies that offer free academic or test prep courses. It is also in these ethnic afterschool institutions that parents and children learn the relevance of getting into honors

and advanced placement (AP) classes, the type of extracurricular activities look good on college applications, and when to begin prepping for the standardized tests. But the information is not limited to the confines of these academies; it also circulates through ethnic newspapers, TV programs, and ethnic yellow pages. Ethnic media selectively circulates cases of coethnics who have attained the success frame: those who have gained admission to Harvard, and now work as doctors, lawyers, and engineers (Lee & Zhou, 2015; Zhou, 2008).

Through these ways, educationally relevant information cuts across class lines, resulting in what sociologists Lareau and Carlarco (2012) describe as “cross-class learning” and what Mario Small (2009) describes as the “unanticipated gains” of organizational or group membership (see also Tran, 2016). And because these institutions are ethnic—meaning that they are reserved for coethnics—the children of working-class parents of hyper-selected immigrant groups benefit from such ethnic capital. This is a significant consequence of hyper-selectivity that is missed by those who adopt a culturally essentialist approaches to Asian American educational achievement.

To illustrate how ethnic capital enhances the educational outcomes of the children of Chinese immigrants from working-class backgrounds, we provide a profile of Jason. Jason is a 25-year-old second-generation Chinese male who grew up in a working-class neighborhood in Long Beach, California. Neither of his parents graduated from high school and had English language proficiency. Jason went to elementary school in a neighborhood that he described as “the bad area” in Long Beach. But as soon as his parents could afford it, they moved to a modest home in Cerritos, a middle-class ethnoburb, because they learned from the “Chinese Yellow Book” that Cerritos High School “ranks in the teens” for academics. The Chinese Yellow Book is a 3[1/2] inch thick, 2,500-page directory that lists most of the area’s Chinese businesses and organizations. Most importantly, it offers detailed information about the rankings of public high schools in Los Angeles metropolitan region the best universities in the country, as well as a range of Chinese-run afterschool academies, learning centers, and enrichment programs with prominent advertisement pages. Like many other non-English speaking Chinese immigrant parents, Jason’s parents relied on and trusted the information offered in the Chinese Yellow Book and Chinese-language newspapers when deciding on which neighborhood to buy a home, with the foremost criteria being the strength of the school district.

When Jason first moved from Long Beach to Cerritos in seventh grade, he was unprepared for the rigorous academic culture of Cerritos. While he was at the top of his class in his elementary school in Long Beach, Jason was placed in the “regular” academic track in Cerritos, as a result of his average test scores. He explained, “I came out of elementary school in Long Beach, and I was below the expectation level of Cerritos. I couldn’t get in to the Honors classes.”

Concerned by Jason’s test results, his parents immediately enrolled him in a Chinese afterschool academy, which he attended for three hours every day after school. When Jason took the exam for high school, his scores boosted him into the AP track, which prepares students for college. Jason’s supplementary education did not stop there; it also included an SAT preparatory course in ninth grade, and then another in tenth grade so that he would be well-prepared to take the SAT exam in eleventh grade. The SAT is a

standardized test used for college admission by many universities in the United States, which students typically take in their eleventh grade (the year before their final year of high school). Because the Chinese Yellow Book contains numerous advertisements about SAT prep courses and tutoring services, and because Jason’s parents saw that their friends were sending their children to SAT prep, his parents followed suit and enrolled Jason in the same programs.

Jason graduated in the top 10% of his class in high school and later graduated from a top University of California school. At the time of the interview, Jason was in his third year of law school, and along with his Juris Doctor, he also worked toward his master’s in business administration and master’s in law, which he aimed to receive in the following year. Recognizing the competitiveness of the legal job market, Jason decided to earn “extra” degrees in order to maximize his chances of securing a job with a top corporate law firm in Los Angeles. When asked about the salary he would like to earn, he nonchalantly replied that he expected to earn “a nice salary of 200k or so”—a six-figure salary that far exceeds his parents’ combined earnings.

What is remarkable about Jason’s educational attainment and occupational aspiration is that his parents did not graduate from high school, knew little English, and had little understanding of the American educational system. As poorly educated Chinese immigrants, they could not help their son with his schoolwork, nor could they help with his college or graduate school applications. Without the ethnic resources readily available to Jason’s parents, Jason may not have had the opportunity to be where he is now. For working-class immigrants who hold high aspirations for their sons and daughters, the ethnic capital offered by their middle-class coethnics becomes crucial in helping them override their class disadvantage. Jason’s case is not a lone one. In fact, nearly all our Chinese and most of the Vietnamese interviewees had attended ethnic afterschool academies with varying intensity. Hannah, a 25-year-old second-generation Vietnamese, who graduated third in her class with a 4.2 GPA, talked about her summer schedule before college,

Summertime, besides going to summer school every single year, we also did tutoring classes to get ahead. Like in junior high and stuff, we were taking a class ahead, like math classes. If we were going to take geometry, then we were doing it in the summertime, or algebra in the summertime, the summer before. In the Asian community, I think everyone does tutoring.

Hence, the hyper-selectivity of an immigrant group can assuage a child’s poor socioeconomic status and reduce class differences within an ethnic group, which, in turn, produces stronger educational outcomes than would have been predicted based on the status attainment model. More concretely, hyper-selectivity helps to explain how the child of restaurant employees or factory workers knows how to gain admission into the country’s top universities, and how to draw on ethnic capital to pave his or her pathway.

**Perceptions and stereotype promise.** A third consequence of hyper-selectivity is that it drives the general American perception that all Chinese are smart, highly educated, and high achieving. And because of the racialization process that occurs in the United States, Asian ethnic groups are homogenized into the broad racial label of Asian American, thereby eliding differences in ethnicity, class, generational status, and migration history. For example,

highly selected (but not hyper-selected) Asian immigrant groups (such as the Vietnamese) and hypo-selected Asian refugee groups (such as the Hmong) are both likely to be perceived favorably by the U.S. society and similarly affected by the positive stereotypes associated with East Asian immigrant groups with higher levels of education, such as the Chinese (Lee & Zhou, 2015).

Stereotypes—both positive and negative—are consequential. The perceptions of school teachers and counselors about Chinese and Asian American students as smart, disciplined, hardworking, and respectful positively affect the grades that these students receive and the extra help they are offered with their coursework and college applications. These stereotypes also increase the likelihood that Asian American students will be placed into academic programs like GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) and into competitive academic tracks like AP and honors. During our interviews, we learned that many Chinese as well as Vietnamese had been placed in the AP track and honors classes in high school, yet some respondents did not remember taking an AP exam in junior high or admitted that their junior high school grades were mediocre. Despite this, they were tracked in high school AP courses. By contrast, comparatively far fewer Mexican respondents reported such favorable academic experiences in high school, and some did not even know that academic fast-track programs existed in their schools.

For example, Nam—a 24 year-old second-generation Vietnamese American woman—was placed into the honors track in high school in spite of her mediocre junior high school performance. Even more surprising was that Nam did not recall having taken an exam for this, and had no idea how she was placed in honors classes. However, once Nam was on the honors track, she began taking her schoolwork more seriously, and spent more time doing her homework and studying for tests in order to keep up with her high-achieving peers. Nam graduated with a GPA above 4.0, and was admitted to all the University of California schools to which she applied.

In addition, teachers' positive perceptions, in turn, affect the way that Asian American students perceive themselves. Stereotyped as smart and high achieving and surrounded by high-achieving students on the honors track, Chinese American students also tend to work hard to excel in order to keep up with their peers. As a result, they confirm the stereotype by making sure that they do not become the outlier who disconfirms it. As Rose, a 1.5-generation Chinese woman explained,

I wanted to be part of the norm so of course the high expectations influenced me quite a bit. I didn't want to be seen as 'Hey, she's Asian, and she's not doing well, and she's just lazy.' I want to be the one that works hard and that wants to achieve a high level of education, so that made me work even harder.

Social psychologist Claude Steele and his colleagues found that the negative stereotypes of African American students can depress their performance through *stereotype threat*—the fear of performing in such a way that confirms a negative stereotype, which, in turn, depresses performance (Steele, 1998; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Their research also found that stereotype threat can also negatively affect the performance of women in science—a field dominated by men, and one in which women are perceived to be inferior to their male counterparts (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999).

We found that the positive stereotypes of Asian Americans can enhance their performance through stereotype promise—the boost in performance that comes with being anointed as smart, high achieving, and deserving (Lee, 2014; Lee & Zhou, 2015). Through stereotype promise, the exceptional educational outcomes can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, even for previously low-achieving Asian American students.

### The Double-Edged Sword of Stereotype Promise

Immigrant selectivity is consequential. We have shown the ways in which hyper-selectivity remakes cultural patterns within and beyond the Asian-origin group. An exacting success frame, ethnic capital, and stereotype promise contribute positively to the educational achievement of the children of immigrants. However, the advantages that Asian Americans have in the domain of education do not confer similar advantages in the labor market. Comparing Asian and White Americans with the same level of education, Asians earn less, after controlling for field of study, college type, region of residence, and nativity (Sakamoto, Goyette, & Kim, 2009). U.S.-born Asian women earn as much as White women, but they are less likely to be promoted to supervisory positions (Kim & Zhao, 2014).

Even in fields like engineering where Asian Americans are overrepresented as professionals, they are underrepresented as managers and leaders. For example, in the Bay Area's leading tech companies—including Google, Hewlett-Packard, Intel, LinkedIn, and Yahoo—Asians comprise 27% of the professionals, but only 19% of managers and 14% of top executives. Research by Marilyn Fernandez (1998) shows this is not happenstance; Asian engineers are less likely to be promoted to managerial positions than their White American counterparts, even after controlling for age, education, years on the job, and performance evaluations.

The underrepresentation of Asian Americans in executive-managerial positions suggests that a bamboo ceiling—a structural barrier that targets Asian Americans—appears to impede their mobility much like the glass ceiling does for women (Hyun, 2005; Woo, 1999). Culture is again invoked to explain what causes the bamboo ceiling. Asian Americans may be perceived by employers as diligent, deferential, and respectful (traits that make them good employees), but they are also perceived as too risk-averse, quiet, uncreative, and also to lack effective communication and social skills—traits that also make them weak leaders.

Social psychologist Susan Fiske and her colleagues have shown that respondents reframe traits such as hard work, diligence, and quietude as passivity, weakness, and coldness when the outgroup is Asian (Lee & Fiske, 2006; Lin, Kwan, Cheung, & Fiske, 2005). This vein of research reveals the way that traits are differently perceived and evaluated by in-group and out-group members. We add that, if employers act on the stereotype of Asian Americans as suitable workers but not suitable leaders, they may be unlikely to hire or promote them to leadership positions. As a result, Asian Americans will have little opportunity to refute the stereotype with the disconfirming evidence, which could become a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton, 1948). The irony here is that the stereotypes that work to Asian Americans' advantage in schools hamper them as they advance in their professions—underscoring an Asian American achievement paradox which deserves further investigation.

## Conclusion

The overrepresentation of Asian Americans in elite high schools and universities has led pundits, journalists, and some scholars to point to Asian culture as the key to their success. Even the majority of our 1.5- and second-generation Chinese (as well as Vietnamese) respondents attributed their academic outcomes to their Asian culture, claiming that “Asians value education more than other groups.”

Our analysis suggests that the prevailing cultural explanation about Asian American achievement overlooks the structural roots of immigrant selectivity. To conclude, we underscore three points. First, success should be measured by more than just outcomes. It is critical to consider “starting points.” The children of hyper-selected immigrant groups perform better, on average, than other groups because they began their quest for social mobility at much more favorable starting points.

It is also important to consider the degree to which the children of immigrants attain intergenerational mobility, which is especially relevant for hypo-selected immigrant groups, like Mexican immigrants. Second-generation Mexicans more than double the high school graduation rates of their parents, more than triple the college graduation rates of their mothers, and triple that of their fathers. Their lower than average level of educational attainment is due, in large part, to their unfavorable starting points rather than their culture. Measuring success in terms of the mobility from one generation to the next, Mexican Americans are actually the most successful second-generation group as they achieve much more within one generation (Lee, 2016). This is relevant because Mexican immigrants and their children are often the focus of policy debates about immigration, so the way we present data about their progress has implications for how Americans and policymakers think about comprehensive immigration reform and the sources of racial and ethnic inequality in mobility outcomes.

Second, socioeconomic and demographic variables cannot explain why low parental human capital does not affect the children of Chinese immigrants in the same way that it does for other groups, which has led pundits and scholars to focus on Asian cultural traits and values. We posit that what has been missing from the debate is the effects of hyper-selectivity of contemporary Asian immigration, as a result of the change in United States immigration law in 1965. Hyper-selectivity remakes and reinforces a success frame, and contributes to the formation of ethnic capital to support the frame for both middle-class and working-class coethnics.

Third, hyper-selectivity also affects how second-generation Chinese are perceived by others and how they perceive themselves, which can have social psychological consequences, including stereotype promise. And because of the racialization process that occurs in the United States, biases and stereotypes about Chinese Americans extend to other East Asian groups and Asian Americans, more generally, including groups that are positively selected or even hypo-selected.

But so-called positive stereotypes are a double-edge sword. While they help boost Asian American performance and outcomes in school, they can hinder Asian Americans in the labor market. Perceived as smart, high achieving, and hardworking, Asian Americans are also perceived as quiet, uncreative, and lacking the social and leadership skills required of managers and executives. The

irony is that the same cultural explanations that are used to explain higher educational outcomes are employed to explain lower occupational achievement in the labor market relative to White Americans. Perceptions and stereotypes have costs, and even those that appear to be positive can have enduring unintended consequences.

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