

# From Unassimilable to Exceptional: the Rise of Asian Americans and “Stereotype Promise”

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## Abstract

Less than a century ago, Asian Americans were described as illiterate, undesirable, and unassimilable immigrants, yet today, they have the highest educational outcomes, highest rates of intermarriage, and lowest rates of residential segregation. Some scholars and pundits have attributed the dramatic change in their status to Asian culture and values. Focusing on the educational attainment of 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese, we argue that there is nothing essential about Asian culture or values that promote exceptional outcomes, but, rather, a circular process unique to contemporary Asian immigrants in the United States. Contemporary Asian immigrants are, on average, highly-educated and highly-selected—what we refer to as “*hyper-selectivity*.” Because of their hyper-selectivity, Asian immigrants import class-specific cultural institutions and practices from their countries of origin, including a sophisticated system of supplementary education, which they recreate in the United States. Consequently, stereotypes about Asian Americans are positive, and become a form of symbolic capital, which result in “*stereotype promise*”—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype, which, in turn, can enhance the performance of Asian American students. This generates a self-fulfilling prophecy of “Asian American exceptionalism”, and reproduces inequalities at the high end of the educational distribution, giving Asian American students a distinct advantage in the domain of education.

**Keywords:** Asian Americans, second generation, education, stereotypes, stereotype promise

## Introduction

Asian Americans are the fastest growing group in the United States, and account for 5.5% of the U.S. population, up from 0.7% in 1965. Fueling

the growth is immigration; in 2012, the number of Asian immigrants surpassed the number of Latino immigrants in the United States. Nowhere is this more evident than in California, where Asians account for 13% of the state’s population. In 2001, 37% of the California’s immigrants were from Asia and 42% from Latin America, but in 2011, 57% of the state’s immigrants were from Asia, and only 22% from Latin America. However, state-wide percentages pale in comparison to the percentage of Asian Americans in California’s elite public universities such as the University of California (UC). At the flagship campus,

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\* The authors wish to thank the Russell Sage Foundation for generously supporting the research on which this paper is based (Grant Nos. 88-06-04 and 88-08-18). For critical and insightful comments and suggestions, we thank Aixa Cintrón-Vélez (Senior Program Officer at the Russell Sage Foundation), the anonymous reviewers, and the editors of this special issue, Jens Schneider and Maurice Crul. For invaluable research assistance, we thank Jody Agius Vallejo, Rosaura Tafoya-Estrada, Leisy Abrego, James Bany, and Kris Noam.

UC Berkeley, Asian Americans constitute 43% of the student population, and at UC Irvine and UCLA, where we teach, respectively, they comprise 54% and 40% of the student body.<sup>1</sup>

Recent admissions figures to the country's most competitive magnet high schools and elite private universities point to the same trend. Among the students offered admission to New York City's famed Stuyvesant High School in the fall of 2013, 9 were Black, 24 Latino, 177 White, and 620 Asian.<sup>2</sup> These trends have continued, and the number of Asian students admitted for fall 2014 increased, while the number of Black and Latino students admitted dropped to 7 and 21, respectively.<sup>3</sup> At Ivy League universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, Asian Americans typically comprise about one-fifth of the student body. At 5.5% of the U.S. population and 13% of California's population, Asian Americans are an undeniable presence in the country's top educational institutions.

Given their overrepresentation at elite high schools and universities, pundits and scholars have touted Asian Americans as "model minorities," whose success is attributed to their exceptional cultural values. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2006) and scholars like Charles Murray (2012) and the "Tiger Mother" Amy Chua and her husband Jed Rubenfeld (2013) have argued that Asian Americans have the right package of cultural traits and values: they are entrepreneurial, industrious, family-oriented, self-reliant, delay gratification, and persevere in the face of obstacles, which lead to success in school and the workplace.

While the cultural values associated with Asian Americans today are positive, it is worth remembering that less than a century ago, Asians were

described as illiterate, undesirable, and unassimilable immigrants, full of "filth and disease." As "marginal members of the human race," they were denied the right to naturalize, denied the right to intermarry, and were residentially segregated in crowded ethnic enclaves (Okhiro 1994; Takaki 1979). Despite decades of institutional discrimination and racial prejudice, the status of Asian Americans has risen dramatically in less than a century. Today, Asian Americans are the most highly-educated group in the country, have the highest median household incomes, the highest rates of intermarriage, and the lowest rates of residential segregation (Hsin and Xie 2014; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013; Kao 1995; Lee and Bean 2010; Massey and Denton 1993; Pew Research Center 2012; Sakamoto, Goyette and Kim 2009; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

So how did the status of Asian Americans change from unassimilable to exceptional in less than a century? Focusing on the educational outcomes of 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese, we explain the change in status by identifying the mechanisms that support the "Asian American exceptionalism" construct. Bridging research in immigration, race, and social psychology in a novel way, we debunk the argument that there is something unique about Asian culture or values that promote exceptional outcomes. We argue that Asian American exceptionalism is a result of a four-part circular process unique to contemporary Asian immigrants in the United States.

First, contemporary Asian immigrants to the United States are highly educated and highly-selected from their countries of origin. Those who immigrate are more highly-educated than their coethnics who stayed behind, and are also more highly educated than the U.S. average. The combination of these two types of positive selectivity is what we refer to as "hyper-selectivity."

Second, because of their hyper-selectivity, Asian immigrants import middle-class cultural institutions and practices from their countries of origin—including a sophisticated system of supplementary education—and recreate those that

<sup>1</sup> [http://www.nbcnews.com/id/30393117/ns/us\\_news-life/t/asian-americans-blast-uc-admissions-policy/#.UzGMytNOWM9](http://www.nbcnews.com/id/30393117/ns/us_news-life/t/asian-americans-blast-uc-admissions-policy/#.UzGMytNOWM9)

<sup>2</sup> See <http://www.schoolbook.org/2013/03/15/high-school-admissions>

<sup>3</sup> See [http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/12/nyregion/status-quo-at-elite-new-york-schools-few-blacks-and-hispanics.html?ref=nyregion&\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2014/03/12/nyregion/status-quo-at-elite-new-york-schools-few-blacks-and-hispanics.html?ref=nyregion&_r=0)

best suit their new host society. This system of supplementary education squarely fits into the U.S. context, which touts educational achievement as the surefire route to success (Zhou and Cho 2010).

Third, as a result of their hyper-selectivity and the transmission of class-specific cultural institutions and practices, stereotypes about Asian Americans are positive, and become a form of symbolic capital—capital that accrues benefits based reputation and legitimacy (Bourdieu 1987; Wacquant 2013). The positive stereotypes and symbolic capital result in “*stereotype promise*”—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype, which, in turn, can enhance the performance of Asian American students (Lee 2014).

Fourth, when Asian American students succeed, teachers can point to individual successes as evidence that they were correct all along in their initial assessment about Asian American exceptionalism. This leads them to favour a new cohort of Asian American students based on their experience with a prior cohort, thereby generating a new cycle of Asian American exceptionalism. All the while, both teachers and students are unmindful of their roles in creating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1948; Rist 1970). This circular process is consequential because it occurs in “gateway institutions” such as schools, where rewards and penalties are distributed, thereby reproducing group-based inequalities (Ridgeway and Fisk 2012).

### Data and Methods

The data include 82 face-to-face, life-history interviews with 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese randomly drawn from the Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles survey (IIMMLA). IIMMLA is a multi-investigator study that examines patterns of intra- and intergenerational mobility among the adult children of immigrants in the greater Los Angeles metropolitan area. It includes a telephone survey of 4,800 randomly selected respondents in five counties of metro-

politan Los Angeles (Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside and Ventura), targeting 1.5 and second-generation adults between the ages of 20 and 40. Because IIMMLA includes respondents from five counties, the respondents are drawn from socioeconomically and racially/ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in the greater LA metropolitan area.

Lasting between one and a half and two hours, the in-depth interviews were structured, but most questions were open-ended; this allowed the respondents to speak at length about their answers, and also provided the interviewers free reign to ask unanticipated follow-up questions. The interviews were tape-recorded and conducted by trained graduate research assistants, who wrote five to eight single-spaced pages of detailed field notes immediately following each interview, which helped us to identify thematic patterns before the formal coding process began. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, coded by question and by theme using ATLAS.ti software, and then analysed and re-analysed for notable and consistent patterns.

Taking advantage of the in-depth interview method, the interview schedule was designed to focus on the contexts under which the respondents made choices about their educational and occupational trajectories; such data are unavailable from the IIMMLA survey. The interviews covered a wide scope of topics related to intergenerational mobility: educational and employment decisions; high school and college experiences with teachers and peers; supplementary education; familial resources and obligations; neighbourhood and community resources; role models and reference groups; and in-group and out-group perceptions and relationships.

### *Chinese and Vietnamese in the United States: Divergent Immigrant Origins and Convergent Second-Generation Outcomes*

Los Angeles is a strategic research site to study the 1.5 and second generation because 62% of its residents are immigrants or the children of immigrants. It is also home to the largest Chi-

nese and Vietnamese American populations in the United States, accounting for 15% and 20% of U.S. Chinese and Vietnamese, respectively. While the Chinese and Vietnamese share a similar racial status in the United States, they differ with respect to migration histories and socioeconomic backgrounds.

At 23% of the Asian population in the United States, the Chinese are the largest Asian ethnic group in the country, with a population that has grown from 237,000 in 1960 to 4 million in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012). The Chinese are also the largest Asian ethnic group in the Los Angeles region. Unlike newer Asian ethnic groups who did not arrive until the passage of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, the Chinese have a migration history that dates back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they immigrated during the peak of the Gold Rush in the late 1840s. The 19<sup>th</sup> century arrivals were lowly-selected, low-skilled, uneducated, and illiterate men from the rural Canton region of South China (Zhou 1992).

The post-1965 wave of Chinese immigrants differs from their 19<sup>th</sup> century predecessors in two critical ways. First, contemporary Chinese immigrants hail from diverse national origins and regions, including China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. Second, they also hail from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and include low-skilled urban workers and uneducated rural peasants, as well as highly-educated professionals whose human and economic capital surpasses that of native-born Whites (Zhou 1992). Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles reflect the broader diversity of Chinese immigrants in the United States (even among those who hail from mainland China alone).

Unlike the long history of Chinese immigration to the United States, Vietnamese immigration is of a much more recent vintage. And unlike their Chinese immigrant counterparts, the Vietnamese first entered the country as refugees after the fall of Saigon in 1975 (Bloemraad 2006; Zhou and Bankston 1998). The largest non-European refugee group in the United States, the Vietnamese have grown exponentially in four decades,

from a near negligible size in the early 1970s to 615,000 in 1990. Since 1990, the Vietnamese population nearly tripled to 1.74 million in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau 2012).

Most distinctive about Vietnamese migration is the circumstances under which they exited their home country and the context of reception they received in United States as political refugees. Fleeing a war-torn country under extremely adverse conditions, they left without preparation and without control over their final destination. The initial wave of refugees who fled Vietnam to the United States included members of the elite and middle-class whose evacuation was orchestrated by the U.S. military or through personal means. With the exception of this elite group who evacuated before the fall of Saigon, most refugees had low levels of human and financial capital; they had minimal formal education, few marketable skills, little English-language proficiency, and scant knowledge of the norms of an advanced Western society.

Compounding their class disadvantage was their emotional distress, anxiety, and trauma experienced during their precarious exit from their home country, which was exacerbated by their often uncertain, lengthy stays in refugee camps (Rumbaut 2005). Moreover, lacking a pre-existing ethnic community that could assist their incorporation, the Vietnamese relied exclusively on the U.S. government and individual or institutional sponsors who determined where they would settle and the resources they would receive (Zhou and Bankston 1998).

Despite the stark differences in the political, educational, and socioeconomic backgrounds of Vietnamese refugees and Chinese immigrants, their children converge in their educational outcomes—a pattern that we refer to as “*second-generation convergence*.” Even more remarkable is that within one generation, the educational outcomes of 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese surpass those of native-born Whites and Blacks, and move closer to the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese. Unable to explain the pattern of “*second generation convergence*,” some

**Table 1: Selected Characteristics of Los Angeles' New Second Generation**

Characteristics	1.5 & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation		3 <sup>rd</sup> -Plus Generation	
	Chinese	Vietnamese	Black	White
<i>Female</i>	43.5	49.9	53.7	50.6
<i>Median age</i>	27.0	25.0	31.0	30.0
<i>Citizenship status</i>				
Citizen by birth	45.3	29.4	100.0	100.0
Citizen through naturalization	49.8	64.3	--	--
Permanent resident	4.4	6.1	--	--
Undocumented status	0.5	0.2	--	--
<i>Parental SES</i>				
Father with no English proficiency	7.0	7.9	--	--
Mother with no English proficiency	7.8	12.0	--	--
Father with no high school diploma	7.5	15.6	10.9	3.5
Mother with no high school diploma	12.2	30.5	9.0	4.4
Father with a bachelor's degree or more	61.3	31.9	35.0	46.5
Mother with a bachelor's degree or more	42.3	16.1	28.0	36.3
Parent ever been undocumented	1.0	0.6	--	--
Parent owning a home	86.5	58.8	67.5	89.2
<i>Family Situation</i>				
Both parents married	85.5	83.6	43.3	51.9
Grew up living with both parents	85.6	83.1	45.4	64.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>400</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>401</b>	<b>402</b>

Source: IIMMLA.

scholars and pundits point to Asian culture, and advance an argument about "Asian American exceptionalism." Below, we unveil the mechanisms that support the "Asian American exceptionalism" construct by highlighting the circular process unique to contemporary Asian immigrants in the United States.

### The Hyper-Selectivity of U.S. Asian Immigration

One of the most distinctive features of contemporary Asian immigrants is its *hyper-selectivity*, which is reflected in two ways. First, Asian immigrants are more highly educated than those who stayed behind; this reflects high selectivity among those who chose to immigrate. For exam-

ple, 51% of Chinese immigrants and 26% of Vietnamese immigrants in the United States have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to only 5% of adults in China and Vietnam.<sup>4</sup> Rather than comparing average years of education between immigrants and non-migrants (Feliciano 2005), we compare the percentage with a bachelor's degree or higher since a college degree has become the minimum requirement for a professional occupation in advanced economies like that of the United States. While nearly all

<sup>4</sup> UNFPA. 2012. Factsheet - Education in Vietnam: Evidence from the 2009 Census. [http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/vietnam/shared/Factsheet/FINAL\\_Factsheet\\_Education\\_ENG.pdf](http://www.unfpa.org/webdav/site/vietnam/shared/Factsheet/FINAL_Factsheet_Education_ENG.pdf)

**Table 2: Divergent Outcomes of Los Angeles' New Second Generation**

Outcomes	1.5 & 2 <sup>nd</sup> Generation		3rd-Plus Generation	
	Chinese	Vietnamese	Black	White
<i>Education</i>				
No high school diploma	0.0	1.0	6.7	3.7
High school diploma	4.5	6.7	24.2	17.7
Some college	32.4	44.1	45.1	32.5
Bachelor's degree	41.5	37.7	18.8	31.8
Graduate degrees	21.6	10.5	5.2	14.3
<i>Labor market status*</i>				
Professional occupations	17.9	14.0	4.6	9.6
Earnings				
\$20,000 or less	43.6	53.3	73.7	60.2
\$20,001 to \$50,000	48.4	39.0	24.7	33.9
Over \$50,000	8.0	7.7	1.7	5.9
<i>Family situation</i>				
Married	26.0	24.4	25.9	44.6
Mean age when 1st child was born	30.2	27.5	22.3	25.4
Having children at teen age	0.0	2.2	12.0	2.9
<i>Incarceration</i>				
	1.8	3.2	19.3	10.6
Total	400	401	401	402

Source: IIMMLA.

immigrants to the United States are more highly educated than their counterparts who have not immigrated, Asian immigrants are the most highly selected.

Second, some Asian immigrants—including contemporary Chinese immigrants—are more highly educated than the U.S. national average (28% of Americans have a college degree or more). Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles are even more hyper-selected than Chinese immigrants in the United States; 61% of Chinese immigrant fathers and 42% of Chinese immigrant mothers have a BA degree or higher.

The children of Chinese immigrants (the 1.5- and second-generation) benefit from high parental human capital, and attain high levels of education. Nearly two-thirds of the 1.5- and sec-

ond-generation Chinese (63%) have graduated from college, and, of this group, 22% have also attained a graduated degree—figures that far surpass the levels of educational attainment for native-born Blacks and Whites. Also notable is that none of the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese students in the IIMMLA survey has dropped out of high school. While the educational attainment of the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese may appear exceptional, it is consistent with the status attainment model, in which children's educational outcomes reflect the intergenerational advantages they accrue from their highly educated parents (Blau and Duncan 1967).

While Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles are highly educated, and pass on these intergenerational advantages to their children, this is

not the case for all Asian immigrant groups. For example, Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, and Hmong immigrants have *lower* levels of educational attainment than the national average for U.S.-born Americans (Ngo and Lee 2007; Ramakrishnan and Ahmad 2014). The IIMMLA survey data reveal that 15.6% of Vietnamese immigrant fathers and 30.5% of Vietnamese immigrant mothers have not graduated from high school—placing them below native-born Whites and Blacks (see Table 1).

Yet despite the relatively low level of educational attainment among first-generation Vietnamese (especially Vietnamese mothers), their children attain levels of education that defy that which would be predicted by the status attainment model. Nearly half (48%) of 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese has attained a college degree or more, and only 1% has failed to complete high school (see Table 2). Even more remarkable is that within one generation, the educational attainment of the 1.5- and second-generation Vietnamese surpasses both native-born Blacks and Whites, and converges more closely to their highly-educated Chinese counterparts.

While both Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants to the United States are highly-selected from their countries of origin, only the Chinese are hyper-selected, that is, Chinese immigrants arrive with more education than the U.S. average. However, Vietnamese immigrants are a bifurcated group with respect to educational attainment. While many have not completed high school, nearly one-third of Vietnamese immigrant fathers (31.9%) and 16.1% of Vietnamese immigrant mothers have attained a BA degree or more. Hence, while Vietnamese immigrants exhibit lower college attainment rates, on average, than the U.S. mean, a significant portion are highly-educated. These are the elite and middle-class refugees who fled Vietnam before the fall of Saigon. This point deserves mention because the high-selectivity of both the U.S. Chinese and Vietnamese immigrant populations determines which cultural institutions and practices will be

transferred from their countries of origin, and recreated in the host society context.

### **The Hyper-Selectivity of Cultural Institutions and Practices**

Immigrants from more highly-selected backgrounds transport more highly-selected institutions and practices from their countries of origin, and recreate those that best suit their host society. In the case of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants, one of the most consequential institutions that they have transported and recreated in the United States is a sophisticated ethnic system of supplemental education (Skrentny 2008; Zhou and Cho 2010). This system is created by middle-class members of the first generation, and helps the second generation improve their academic outcomes, even in spite of low parental human capital and poor socioeconomic status in two ways.

First, immigrants and their children (especially those who hail from poor and working-class backgrounds) benefit from *tangible resources* that the middle-class coethnics create. For example, the first generation benefits from jobs, housing, and opportunities for self-employment in the ethnic economy, while the second-generation children benefit from after-school tutoring, college preparation classes, summer school, and enrichment programs (Lee 2002; Lee and Zhou 2013, 2014; Lu 2013; Zhou 1992, 2009).

Second, coethnics also benefit from *intangible resources* that they acquire through ethnic networks. Through these networks, ethnic group members gain relevant information about high school rankings, neighbourhoods with strong school districts, after-school programs and tutors, and the college admissions process. The information circulates formally through ethnic newspapers and ethnic television media, and also informally through kin and coethnic friendship circles. Most critically, tangible and intangible ethnic resources cut across class lines, thereby making once class-specific practices and institutions from countries of origin available to coethnics across class in the host society. In this

way, class resources become ethnic resources and ethnic capital, thereby becoming available to 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese from working-class backgrounds. In turn, working-class coethnics benefit from “cross-class learning” (Lareau and Calarco 2012), which help them override their class disadvantage, and expand their opportunity horizon in ways that defy the status attainment model (Borjas 2006; Kasinitz et al. 2009; Lee and Zhou 2013, 2014).

### *Supplementary Education*

To illustrate how tangible and intangible ethnic resources enhance the educational outcomes of the children of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants from working-class backgrounds, we provide a portrait of Jason. Jason is a 25 year-old second-generation Chinese male who grew up in a working-class neighbourhood in Long Beach with parents who did not graduate from high school. Jason went to elementary school in a neighbourhood 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 because they learned from the “*Chinese Yellow Book*” that Cerritos High School “ranks in the teens” for academics. The *Chinese Yellow Book* is a 3½ inch thick, 2,500-page directory that provides a list of the area’s ethnic businesses, as well as the rankings of southern California’s public high schools and the country’s best universities. Unable to speak English, Jason’s Chinese parents relied on ethnic resources that they could understand and trust when deciding which neighbourhood 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 an after-school Chinese 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 Advanced Placement (AP) track, which prepares students for university. Jason’s supplementary education did not stop there; it also included a Scholastic Aptitude Test (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 that is required for university admission in the United States, which most students 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.

His parents’ investment in supplemental education, along with Jason’s hard work paid off; Jason graduated in the top 10% of his class with a grade point average (GPA) of 3.6 on a 4.0 scale, and later graduated from a top University of California school. Jason is now in his third year of law school, and along with his Juris Doctor (JD), he is working toward his Master’s in Business Administration (MBA) and Master’s in Law, which he will 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 expects to earn “a nice salary of 200k or so”—a figure that far exceeds his parents’ combined earnings.

What is remarkable about Jason’s educational attainment and occupational aspirations is that his parents did not graduate from high school, 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. Yet in spite of Jason's parents' poor human and economic capital, they were able to tap into tangible and intangible ethnic resources to provide Jason with a tool kit of resources; they enrolled Jason in the after-school Chinese academy and SAT prep courses, and they also bought a home in Cerritos because of its strong public school—information they acquired from the Chinese Yellow Book. As working-class immigrants who held high aspirations for their son, Jason's parents relied on tangible and intangible ethnic resources to help him override his class disadvantage, buttress his academic performance, and widen his opportunity horizon of what he could achieve (Böhme 2012).

Jason's parents were not alone in insisting upon supplemental education; supplemental education was such an integral part of the Chinese and Vietnamese respondents' adolescence that they hardly characterized it as "supplemental." Most had engaged in some form of supplemental education such as after-school academies, taking classes ahead of schedule, summer school, tutoring, and SAT prep classes. For example, Hannah, a 25-year-old, second-generation Vietnamese woman who graduated third in her class with a 4.2 GPA (which exceeds the 4.0 scale because AP classes are given extra weight) explained that her summers were scheduled with summer school and tutoring:

*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.*

By taking a class the summer before having to take it during the academic year, students repeat the subject during the following school year, thereby providing an insurance policy that they will receive excellent grades and remain a step ahead of their peers.

### *Supplemental Education from a Global, Comparative Perspective*

To understand why Chinese and Vietnamese immigrant parents insist on providing supplemental education for their children, it is useful to adopt a global, comparative perspective, and consider the institutions and practices in immigrants' countries of origin (Skrentny 2008). In both China and Vietnam, high school students prepare for years to take a nationwide, comprehensive, standardized exam, which is the sole basis of university admission. Because one's career is closely tied to one's educational background, the stakes and rewards of doing well on the exam are extremely high, which are heightened by the low odds of being accepted into a university. In China, only three in five high school students who take the test make the cut. The odds of making into a Vietnamese college are worse: only one in six. Given the high stakes and poor odds of university admission, Chinese and Vietnamese parents who can afford to do so enroll their children in supplementary education classes as early as elementary school.

Supplementary education is not exclusive to China and Vietnam; it is also the norm in middle-class households in South Korea, Japan, and India (Skrentny 2008; Stigler, Lee and Stevenson 1987). The impending examinations and the consequences of one's performance on the exam for one's career trajectory strongly influence the educational practices of students beginning in elementary school. This means that in addition to their regular school day, students can spend as many as seven hours in after-school academies. For example, in South Korea—where after-school academies (called *hagwons*) are reputed to be the most rigorous in Asia—a typical high school student's academic schedule begins at 8:00 in the morning, and ends sometime between 10:00 p.m. and 1:00 a.m. (Ramstad 2011).

Immigrating from countries in which supplementary education is the norm for middle-class families, the 1.5-generation respondents who came to the United States in their pre-teen years recollected the long hours of studying and the

stress that this fiercely competitive educational system induced. For example, recalling her grueling schedule in Taiwan, Vivian (a 25 year-old 1.5-generation Chinese woman) described how each hour of her day was devoted to education, and the resultant toll that it took on her physical and emotional health:

Vivian: *I would wake up at like 6:00 every morning and then go to school until 6:00 at night. And then, I would eat dinner, like, every day in the car because my Dad would buy me something in the car to eat. And then after like an hour or so, I would go to another like school, like an after school thing for whatever subject, like English, Math, or Physics, or whatever you can imagine. I didn't leave after school until 11:00.*

Interviewer: *So from 6:00 in the morning until 11:00 at night?*

Vivian: *Every day. I was thirty pounds lighter than what I am. I was like a bone skinny person, just totally not healthy.*

Interviewer: *Did your friends do that too?*

Vivian: *Yeah everybody did that, starting in middle school, so it was a nightmare.*

Comparing the U.S. system of education to that of East Asian countries, the Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants and their children adopt a "dual frame of reference" (Portes and Bach 1985). The 1.5- and second generation are aware of the rigorous supplementary education system in their parents' countries of origin, and recognize that the after-school, weekend, and summer school supplementary classes in the United States pale in rigor by comparison.

The comparison of supplementary education systems in Asia and the United States also underscores three points about the relationship between culture and achievement. First, supplementary education classes (or after-school academies) exist in the United States, in part, because they are "transported cultural and institutional arrangements from sending states" (Skrentny

2008: 72). Asian immigrants transfer cultural institutions and practices from their countries of origin, and reconfigure them to fit their host society. That the United States touts education as the surefire path to achievement and mobility leads Asian immigrants to recreate, invest in, and insist upon supplemental education programs for their U.S.-born children.

Second, because of the high-selectivity of East Asian immigrants to the United States, the cultural institutions and practices that these immigrants transfer and recreate are not just ethnic-specific practices, but also class-specific practices. That a more highly-educated, middle-class stream of contemporary Asian immigrants comes to the United States means that the practices that they import them will be middle-class practices. In addition, their high immigrant selectivity means that Asian immigrants have the requisite human and economic capital to recreate these institutional arrangements in their host society (Borjas 2006; Zhou and Cho 2010).

Third, while supplemental education in East Asian countries is limited to the middle-class, it is more widely available across the class spectrum in the United States because after-school programs and SAT prep courses are offered in ethnic communities. Some of programs are freely available or available at a low cost through ethnic churches and community organizations. This places supplementary education programs within reach of working-class Chinese and Vietnamese students, thereby providing a means to help override their parents' low human capital. In these ways, class-specific practices become widely available ethnic capital for coethnics, regardless of class.

### **The Racialization of Asians and Stereotypes of Asian Americans**

Because of the racialization that occurs in the United States, Asian ethnic groups tend to be homogenized into the broad racial label of Asian American, thereby eliding differences in ethnicity, class, generational status, and migration history.

One of the consequences of the racialization is that Asian immigrant groups with relatively low levels of education (such as the Vietnamese) benefit from the positive stereotypes associated with Asian immigrant groups with higher levels of education (such as the Chinese). The process of racialization leads to positive stereotypes of Asian Americans as a group, becoming a form of symbolic capital that benefits Asian American students in institutional contexts such as schools. For example, teachers favour Asian American students because they perceive them as bright, hard-working, better-prepared, and more willing to put in effort into their schoolwork (Hsin and Xie 2014; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013). The positive perceptions on the part of teachers become a form of symbolic capital for Asian American students.

#### *Positive Stereotypes and Symbolic Capital*

Stereotypes—both positive and negative—have consequences. Teachers' perceptions of Asian Americans affected the grades that the Chinese and Vietnamese students received, the extra help they were offered with their coursework and college applications, and their likelihood of being placed into academic programs like GATE (Gifted and Talented Education) and into competitive academic tracks like Advanced Placement (AP) and Honors. For example, Robert is a 36 year-old male who was born in Taiwan, migrated to the United States at the age of 7, and entered the second grade without speaking a word of English. However, by the third grade, he was placed into GATE. Initially sceptical about Robert's recollection, we inquired how this happened:

Interviewer: *How did you get into GATE? I mean, you came here in second grade and knew no English.*

Robert: *They tested me, and at first they put me in ESL (English as a Second Language), and I was like, "Why am I in ESL?" Then somebody tested me again, and they said, "Well, he's really smart." I didn't know what they were talking about.*

Interviewer: *Do you think your teachers made assumptions about your academic ability based on your ethnic background?*

Robert: *A lot of them thought because I was Asian – because I was one of the few Asians in my classes and stuff – they would think, "Oh well, he's Asian, he must be smart," or something like that. In elementary school, I was the only Asian in my class. In my whole school I think there were only two or three Asians.*

What is remarkable about Robert's placement into GATE is that he admitted that after the results of his initial test, the teachers placed him into the ESL (English as a Second Language) track, but upon his mother's insistence, Robert was re-tested and then placed into GATE. Furthermore, Robert admitted that teachers made positive assumptions about his academic ability, not only because he is Asian, but also because he was one of only two or three Asians in a predominantly Latino school.

Robert's story, while remarkable, is not unique. During the interviews with the 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese respondents, we learned that many were placed in the AP (Advanced Placement) track in high school. While some of the Chinese and Vietnamese respondents recalled that they successfully tested into these competitive tracks, others did not remember taking an AP exam in junior high or high school, and still others admitted that their junior high school grades were mediocre, yet they were tracked in high school AP courses nevertheless.

For example, Nam—a 24 year-old second-generation Vietnamese woman—was placed into the AP track in high school even though she admitted that she was an average junior high student. She recalls having received A's, B's, and C's in her classes. Despite her mediocre junior high school performance, she was placed into the Honor's track for high school. Even more surprising is that Nam does not recall having taken an exam for this, and has no idea how she was

placed in Honors classes. However, once Nam was placed into 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.

Perhaps one of the most egregious cases of the symbolic capital afforded to Asian American students is that of Ophelia, a 23 year-old second-generation Vietnamese woman who described herself as “not very intelligent” and recalls nearly failing the second grade because of her poor academic performance. By her account, “I wasn’t an exceptional student; I was a straight C student, whereas my other siblings, they were quicker than I was, and they were straight A students.” Despite her lacklustre grades in elementary and junior high schools, Ophelia took the AP exam at the end of junior high school, and failed.

Although she failed the AP exam, Ophelia was placed into the AP track in her predominantly white high school, nevertheless. Once there, something “just clicked,” and Ophelia began to excel in her classes. When we asked her to explain what she meant something “just clicked,” she explained, “I wanted to work hard and prove I was a good student.” She also added, “I think the competition kind of increases your want to do better.” She graduated from high school with a GPA of 4.2, and was admitted into a highly competitive pharmacy program.

Social psychologists have shown that individuals have powerful, largely unconscious tendencies to remember people, events, and experiences that confirm their prior expectations (Fiske, Lin and Neuberg 1999). So strong is this tendency that individuals often fail to see disconfirming evidence, or, if they do see it, they often reinterpret it in stereotypic-confirming ways, ignore it, or dismiss it altogether as the exception (Ridgeway 2011). Teachers are more likely to notice Asian American students who excel, and overlook or ignore those who do not. So even when teachers come into contact with average-performing

Asian American students, they tend to reinterpret the evidence in stereotypic-confirming ways, as Nam and Ophelia’s cases illustrate.

#### *A Self-fulfilling Prophecy*

While Nam and Ophelia admitted that they worked harder in the more competitive academic track, what is missing in their explanation is an understanding of the social psychological processes that enhanced their performance. Turning to Merton’s (1948) classic concept of the “self-fulfilling prophecy” and the literature in social psychology on stereotypes provide greater insight. A self-fulfilling prophecy begins with a false definition of the situation, evoking a new behaviour, which makes the original false conception come true.

In Nam and Ophelia’s cases, self-fulfilling prophecies are at work in the precise sense of the term, that is, that the prophecy under consideration (that all Asians are high-achieving) is *not* correct, but only becomes so when students learn of their teachers’ and peers’ high expectations, resulting in a change in the students’ behaviour, and ultimately, a change in their academic outcomes. Neither student believed at the outset that she was academically exceptional or deserving of being in the AP track. However, once anointed as exceptional and deserving by their teachers, the students changed their behaviour; they took school more seriously, put more time and effort into their homework, and changed the reference group by which they measured their performance. These actions resulted in straight A’s in high school and admission to top universities.

#### *Stereotype Threat and Stereotype Promise*

The consequences of stereotypes are relevant here. Steele and Aronson (1995) found evidence of “*stereotype threat*” in test-taking situations—the threat or the fear of performing in a certain way that would inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype of one’s group, which, in turn, decreases performance. Researchers have shown that stereotype threat depresses the

performance of high-achieving African American students on difficult verbal tests, as well as accomplished female math students on difficult math tests when these tests are presented as a measure of ability (Deaux et al. 2007; Massey and Fischer 2005; Spencer, Steele and Quinn 1999).

Building on the work of stereotype threat, Shih, Pittinsky and Ambady (1999) found that Asian American females who are strong in math performed better on a math test when experimenters cued their ethnic identity, but performed worse when they cued their gender than the control group who received neither cue. They concluded that test performance is both malleable and susceptible to implicit cues—what they refer to as “*stereotype susceptibility*.” By subtly cueing their ethnic identities, social psychologists found that Asian American women experienced a “*stereotype boost*” in their performance (Cheryan and Bodenhausen 2000; Shih et al. 2002).

Building on this literature, we found evidence of “*stereotype promise*”—the promise of being viewed through the lens of a positive stereotype that leads one to perform in such a way that confirms the positive stereotype, thereby enhancing academic performance (Lee 2014). When placed in a context where Asian American students are anointed as high-achieving—where teachers’ and peers’ expectations are elevated—Asian American students put more effort into their schoolwork in order to meet those expectations. And because of their increased effort, their academic performance increases. Critical to add is that because the students’ outcomes matched their teachers’ expectations, the teachers can point to these students’ stellar academic achievement as proof of their initial assessment about all Asian American students—that they are smart, hard-working, high-achieving, and deserving of being placed into the most competitive academic tracks—all the while unmindful of their role in generating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Teachers’ positive stereotypes of Asian American students become a form of symbolic capital. Because symbolic capital yields rewards in insti-

tutional contexts such as schools, it reproduces group based inequalities, as do other forms of capital, including economic, cultural, and social (Bourdieu 1984; Carter 2005; Ridgeway 2011; Small 2004). The symbolic capital afforded to Asian American students gives them a distinct group-based advantage, supports claims about Asian American exceptionalism, and results in the reproduction of inequalities at the high end of the educational spectrum.

### Discussion and Conclusions

Unable to explain the overrepresentation of Asian Americans in elite high schools and universities, scholars and pundits have pointed to Asian culture and Asian American exceptionalism—Asians are more hard-working, more disciplined, more focused, and value education. Even the majority of our 1.5- and second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese respondents attributed their academic outcomes to their Asian cultural values, claiming that “Asians value education more than other groups.”

However, a mere glance at the academic aspirations and outcomes of the second-generation Asians in other countries illustrates the flaws in the cultural values argument. For example, unlike Chinese immigrants to the United States, Chinese immigrants to Spain are not hyper-selected. And unlike the second-generation Chinese in the United States, their counterparts in Spain exhibit *the lowest* educational aspirations and expectations of all second-generation groups, including Ecuadorians, Central Americans, Dominicans, and Moroccans. Nearly 40% of second-generation Chinese expect to complete only basic secondary school—roughly the equivalent of tenth grade in the United States (Yiu 2013).

Given the perception of a closed opportunity structure in Spain—especially for visible minorities—Chinese immigrants have no faith that a post-secondary education or a university degree will lead to a professional job, so they have turned to entrepreneurship as the route to upward mobility, and encouraged their children to do the same. Hence, Spain’s Chinese

immigrants adopt an entirely different “success frame,” in which entrepreneurship—rather than education—is the mobility strategy (Lee and Zhou 2014). In addition, Noam (2014) finds that second-generation Chinese parents in the Netherlands have *lower* educational expectations of their third-generation children compared to their second-generation counterparts in the United States, which she attributes to differences in welfare states.

These counterfactuals illustrate that it is not something essential about Chinese or Asian culture that promotes exceptional educational outcomes, but a circular process unique to Asian immigrants in the United States: Asian immigrants to the U.S. are hyper-selected, which results in the transmission and recreation of hyper-selected cultural institutions and practices, including an ethnic system of supplementary education for the second generation, which improves academic performance. Consequently, stereotypes of Asian American students are positive, resulting in symbolic capital in schools, and leading to “stereotype promise.” Positive stereotypes, however, have a host of unintended negative consequences (Lee and Zhou 2014).

Just like inequalities at the low end of the educational spectrum—where some students are assumed to be low-achievers, are tracked into remedial classes, and then “prove” their low achievement—inequalities are reproduced at the high end of the educational distribution where students perceived to be high-achievers (regardless of actual performance) are tracked into high-level classes and rise to the occasion, thus “proving” the initial presumption of their ability. So what begins as a false definition of the situation evokes a new behaviour which makes the original false conception come true. Self-fulfilling prophecies can operate to reproduce inequalities at the high end of the educational distribution, just as they do on the low end.

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