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 COMMENTARY

# Assessing what is cultural about Asian Americans' academic advantage

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Scholars have long debated the reasons underlying Asian Americans' exceptional educational outcomes. Psychologists emphasize individual cognitive ability and the effects of stereotypes on performance (1). Culturalists point to values, beliefs, norms, and behavioral patterns unique and intrinsic to ethnicity (2). Structuralists focus on socioeconomic status within and beyond the family, including a group's position in a society's status hierarchy (3, 4). Data limitations and quantitative modeling constraints, combined with contentious ethnic politics, have rendered social scientists at an intellectual stalemate. This standstill has consequences: The lack of a strong social science voice in the debate has led pundits to liberally evoke culture to explain poor or exceptional group outcomes (5, 6); the simplistic framing of group culture has fanned fury, pitted groups against each other, and led Civil Rights activists to advocate for group interests to promote a political agenda. Meanwhile, the general public has remained deprived of knowledge generated from rigorous scientific research. However, Amy Hsin and Yu Xie propel the debate forward with their refreshing analyses and insight in their PNAS report, "Explaining Asian Americans' academic advantage over whites" (7).

## The Asian-White Achievement Gap

Based on nationally representative cohort longitudinal surveys, Hsin and Xie (7) use sophisticated statistical techniques to develop multilayer decomposition models that simultaneously test three competing hypotheses: psychological (individual cognitive ability), cultural (belief in academic effort), and structural (family socioeconomic background). The authors use Asian-white gaps in educational outcomes (rather than outcomes per se) as their dependent variable, and control for factors that differ across schools. Hsin and Xie find a persistent Asian-white gap in educational outcomes. They also find that the difference in academic effort, rather than in cognitive ability or socio-

demographic characteristics, explains the Asian-white gap.

Hsin and Xie then press forward to address why Asian American students put more effort into their schoolwork than their white peers, pointing to the significance of the cultural belief that Asian immigrant parents hold about the positive relationship between effort and outcomes. The authors also estimate the costs of Asian American students' academic achievement and effort and find a host of negative consequences: Asian Americans are significantly less likely than comparable whites to have positive feelings toward themselves, they spend less time socializing with friends, and they experience more conflict with both parents. Analyses disaggregating Asians into four main ethnic groups—East Asian, South Asian, Filipino, and Southeast Asian—and controlling for sex do not change the general patterns.

Hsin and Xie's (7) analyses have yielded powerful and conclusive evidence to confirm that culture—as measured by increased effort—accounts for Asian Americans' academic advantage. Hsin and Xie have put culture back on the map by proactively engaging in the debate about its role in explaining the Asian-white achievement gap. The authors define culture as a shared belief in the positive correlation between effort and outcomes, measure culture in terms of academic effort, and test competing hypotheses in a single empirical analysis. They clearly and convincingly find a cultural effect, which advances a classic sociological idea that cultural beliefs are associated with particular behaviors that constrain or enable particular outcomes (8–10).

## Unanswered Questions about Asian Americans' Academic Advantage

Although they empirically show that Asian Americans have an academic advantage over whites, Hsin and Xie (7) are limited by the available data and are unable to investigate how Asian immigrant parents pass on the cultural belief about effort in a way that

affects their children's behaviors and outcomes. Moreover, Hsin and Xie can only use a proximate measure of academic effort: that is, teachers' subjective ratings of students' attentiveness, task persistence, and eagerness to learn. Teachers may be biased in their ratings of students, but even if we assume that there is no bias on the part of teachers, two questions still remain. First, how and why do Asian immigrant parents pass onto their children the cultural belief that increased effort leads to more positive outcomes? Second, given the high costs associated with effort and high achievement, how have Asian Americans managed to academically excel despite the overwhelming pressure they experience, especially in a racially stratified society?

Here is where our qualitative study can help answer these lingering questions. Based on face-to-face, in-depth interviews with adult children of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants randomly drawn from the survey of Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles, we focused on their lived experiences from their perspectives, what we call a "subject-centered approach" (11, 12). We examined the ways in which immigrant parents and their children framed success, as well as the resources they used to support and reinforce the frame. We found that the differences in the cultural frame and the resources used to support it help to explain why the children of some Asian immigrant groups get ahead, despite their socioeconomic disadvantage.

## The Success Frame

Three main findings from our study are particularly relevant and effectively complement Hsin and Xie's (7) research. First, the adult children of Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees articulate a strict "success frame," which entails getting straight As in high school, attaining a degree in a prestigious university, and securing a well-paying job in one of the four coveted professions: science, engineering, medicine, and law.

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This narrow success frame contrasts with broader success frames adopted by adult children of Mexican immigrants, as well as native-born blacks and whites. However, we caution that the success frame is not innate to Asian culture or being Asian, but rather is a product of being a child of Asian immigrants in the United States.

Believing that upward social mobility is possible in the United States, but fearing that their children will face racial discrimination because of their non-white status, Asian immigrant parents shepherd their children into the path that will best predict a successful professional outcome. Fields such as science, engineering, medicine, and law require exceptional educational achievement, credentials, and “hard skills” that may obviate or lessen potential discrimination from employers, coworkers, and clients. This requirement explains why Asian immigrant parents actively work to support the success frame and pass it onto their children. For example, even when they encourage music lessons for their children, Asian immigrant parents do so because they wish their children to be more well-rounded and, therefore, more competitive applicants to elite universities, rather than because they want to nurture their children’s musical talent, *per se*.

Second, Asian immigrant parents have access to tangible and intangible resources generated in the ethnic community that not only reinforce the success frame, but also help them access institutional resources in public schools. These ethnic resources are difficult to capture in quantitative data. For example, in our study we find that the Chinese and Vietnamese immigrant communities have developed an elaborate system of supplementary education—private after-school services, such as tutoring, examination cram and drill classes, college prep courses, and enrichment programs, with a wide range of price tags—which the children of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants of different socioeconomic backgrounds can afford. The Korean community has similarly developed an elaborate ethnic system of supplementary education in the United States (13, 14).

Most of our respondents reported that they had participated in these ethnic after-school or summer school programs. Tapping into tangible ethnic resources means that Asian American students put extra effort in their schoolwork outside of school, and this extra effort may affect students’ behavior in school and may also affect teachers’ ratings of them. In addition, participation in after-school programs exposes students to an ethnic environment in which they have access to other intangible ethnic resources, such as positive

role models to show that the success frame is realistic and attainable. This approach explains how Asian immigrant parents pass on the belief of the importance of effort despite intense parent–child conflicts.

### The Hyper-Selectivity of Asian Immigration

However, tangible and intangible educational resources are not equally available in immigrant or ethnic communities, and immigrant selectivity and hyperselectivity are critical here. Immigrant selectivity refers to the phenomenon in which those who immigrate to the United States are more highly educated than their counterparts who stay behind. Whereas most immigrant groups are highly selected in this regard, there is substantial variation in the degree of educational selectivity depending on the country of origin and the timing of migration from a particular country (15). Asian immigrants to the United States are highly selected from their countries of origin, which is not happenstance; US immigration policies afford an edge to applicants with high skills.

In addition, Asian immigrants are more highly educated than average Americans, despite the tremendous heterogeneity in their countries of origin. We refer to this dual selectivity as “hyperselectivity”: a unique set of group characteristics that helps immigrants selectively import cultural practices (such as the success frame and after-school academics) from their countries of origin, fine-tune them, and then recreate those that are most useful for social mobility in their host society. The importing of specific cultural practices and institutions underscores our point that culture is not essential or fixed but, rather, a dynamic resource that is shaped by immigrant selectivity and hyperselectivity.

Furthermore, our research helps to shed light on Hsin and Xie’s (7) finding about the lower subjective well-being of Asian American students. The cultural frame comes at a cost, and is a double-edged sword for the children of Asian immigrants. Because Chinese and Vietnamese Americans use high-achieving coethnics (rather than native-born whites or the average coethnic) as their reference group, those who do not meet its strict tenets feel like ethnic outliers or failures and, as a result, they distance themselves from coethnics and from their ethnic identities (11). This finding has broader implications for theories of assimilation; today’s non-white second generation do not turn to native-born whites as their reference group or their model for success.

### Concluding Remarks

In closing, we would like to call attention to the unique ways in which qualitative data and mixed methods can help to inform the debate about culture and group outcomes. Although there is a well-established body of research driven by “hard” data, including Census and survey data, data that capture the diverse lived experiences of younger-generation Asian Americans are relatively scant. However, simply increasing the amount of data will not necessarily improve data quality, and simply combining quantitative and qualitative methodologies will not guarantee accurate representation (16). Furthermore, even the most sophisticated theoretical paradigms and ingenious empirical models will do little to advance knowledge if we fail to *a priori* critically assess our underlying assumptions about the ways in which culture may affect group outcomes. There is growing diversity among the Asian American population and their educational outcomes, signaling that the subfield will be ripe for new and informed research for years to come (17).

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