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Ethnic culture and social mobility among second-generation Asian Americans

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ABSTRACT
This review engages with Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou's *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* to consider how ethnic culture matters for social mobility among the immigrant second generation. It describes the strengths and contributions of the book, connects it to broader debates on culture, poverty, and mobility, and draws on my own research on the second generation in New York City. It highlights three additional cultural mechanisms that underlie the Chinese (or Asian) second-generation advantage: social class heterogeneity in the co-ethnic community, intergenerational support in the immigrant family, and the belief in achievements as redemption for parental sacrifice. While pointing out the similarities and differences between Los Angeles and New York, it also suggests possible applications of these cultural mechanisms in explaining second-generation achievements.

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*The Asian American Achievement Paradox (AAAP)* by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou is a theoretically innovative, empirically rigorous, and substantively important book that deals with the complex linkages among education, immigration, culture and inequality with clarity, complexity, compassion, and coherence. In my opinion, this book makes an important and welcoming contribution to our understanding of the state of contemporary Asian America. By tracing the lived experiences of second-generation Asian-Americans, Lee and Zhou's study not only dispels the standard myths on the 'model minority', but also reinvigorates the broader debate on how ethnic culture matters for social inequality.

The book focuses on the achievement among the Chinese, Vietnamese, and Mexican second generation (i.e. the children of immigrant parentage). It draws on both survey and interview data from the Immigration and
Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles Study (IIMMLA) – one of the only three major studies of the second generation in the United States. In the book, Lee and Zhou forcefully argue that Asian American success in the educational and professional arenas in U.S. society is not due to cultural traits and values intrinsic to being Asian. Rather, it is due to the fact that Asian immigrants in the U.S. are disproportionately highly educated as a result of U.S. immigration policies and the social consequences of such hyper-selectivity. For example, Lee and Zhou show that Asian immigrants have brought over from their home countries not only ample human capital resources, such as education and marketable skills, but also middle- and upper-middle-class-specific institutions, mindsets, and frames, and they use these tangible and intangible resources to create more cultural resources and ethnic institutions that facilitate the educational success of their children in the U.S. Even if there is a seemingly ‘Asian advantage’ upon arrival, this advantage has less to do with ethnic culture, but more to do with the hyper-selectivity of some Asian-origin groups and the interaction of ethnicity with structural circumstances in the U.S. Furthermore, the book shows the negative effects of over-achieving (i.e. the emotional cost of such achievement) and the downside of ‘positive’ stereotyping.

Theoretically, it innovatively combines different strands of research to make a compelling argument about how the cultural framing of success shapes achievement among children of Chinese and Vietnamese immigrants. It builds on previous research on the new second generation and weaves together elements from both cultural sociology and social psychology to explain how culture and ethnicity matter for second-generation outcomes. In contrast to much prior research in this tradition that often privileges a structural explanation of second-generation mobility, this book reconnects with an older theme and systematically investigates the role of culture in shaping achievement. In this sense, it builds on the robust recent research agenda on the new second generation that also emphasizes the importance of ethnic culture in explaining group outcome (Kasinitz et al. 2008), and goes deeper and further to document how culture matters – by drawing on cultural frames, ethnic institutions and resources, and social psychological processes to highlight how the Asian American second generation understand and internalize their success. Most notable is the book’s focus on the role of immigrant hyper-selectivity in shaping the cultural frames that guide the interpretations of the experiences among the immigrant second generation.

Substantively, Lee and Zhou’s study tackles key questions in the fields of immigrant incorporation and social inequality: the linkage between race and achievement, the role of ethnic culture in framing success, the role of ethnic stereotypes and its consequences, and the meaning of success by each ethnic group. Some of the main findings are fascinating – that second-generation Chinese and Vietnamese tend to not only subscribe to a
more *exact frame of success* that often involves graduate education from elite institutions within a set of high-paying professions, but also are most likely to compare themselves to a group of even more highly achieving co-ethnics. The emotional consequences are both real and tangible: they are also least likely to feel successful, despite their social mobility and achievement by conventional measures of success. While this finding alone is interesting and profound, the book goes on to trace the complex interactions of the families, the intergenerational dynamics, the role of the co-ethnic community in reinforcing the parents’ cultural expectations, the perceptions of teachers and educators, and most importantly, how the second generation adopts certain success frames.

Stylistically, the book is well-written and very accessible, and is a real joy to read. The authors not only articulated their central arguments clearly and early on, but also effectively marshalled data to support their theoretical points. The tight connection among theory, methods, and empirics is one quality that makes this book outstanding. The authors also made a concerted effort to provide a discussion of disconfirming evidence throughout the book. The inclusion of such discussion not only signals the high quality of evidentiary bases for the book, but also effectively captures the nuances and complexities of the topic. Overall, the story Lee and Zhou tell is compelling, and in many ways, surprising. *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* eschews standard accounts of the ‘model minority’ that emphasize either Confucian cultural values or ‘tiger mom’ parenting styles (Chua and Rubenfeld 2015). Instead, it provides interpretations of Asian American success through the nuanced portrayal of how cultural and structural factors intertwine to shape ethnic group success. As such, the book also contributes to an emerging research agenda that seeks to reexamine linkages between poverty, culture, and mobility, especially among minority groups in the inner-city (Patterson 2015; Small et al. 2010).

While the book has many merits, one key question remaining is how generalizable these findings are beyond the Los Angeles metropolitan area. In what follows, I draw on my own work on the Chinese second generation in New York to highlight three additional cultural mechanisms that underlie the linkage between culture and achievement (Tran 2016). My work builds on Lee and Zhou’s insights on the importance of ethnic culture, but places these cultural elements in dynamic interactions with the structures of the ethnic community and family in which second-generation Chinese Americans are embedded. To provide some context, Chinese is the second largest ethnic group in New York City, and the data from the Immigrant Second Generation in Metropolitan New York (ISGMNY) study similarly show exceptional achievement among second-generation Chinese (Kasinitz et al. 2008). Lee and Zhou argue that the hyper-selectivity among first-generation immigrants is a key structural factor shaping the formation of a cultural frame of success.
among the Chinese and Vietnamese second generation. While the social class advantage among the immigrant first generation might account for the success among highly educated Asian ethnic groups, including the Chinese, hyper-selectivity is less likely to be the key explanation for the Chinese second-generation advantage in the New York metropolitan area where a significant number of Chinese Americans come from rather modest socioeconomic background (Kasinitz et al. 2008). According to the 2010 Census, Chinese in New York are less affluent and more disadvantaged compared to their counterparts in Los Angeles in terms of education and income.

My own work points to three additional sets of factors. At the community level, the social class heterogeneity within the ethnic group and cross-class social ties lead to the sharing of information such as school quality and job opportunities that are conducive to social mobility. While Chinese immigrant parents have low average levels of human capital, the range of human capital attributes within the group is unusually wide. Thus Chinese social networks link poor and working-class people to upper-middle-class professionals more often than in other groups, providing working-class and working-poor Chinese immigrant parents with access to cultural knowledge that is prevalent among upper-middle-class professionals. These direct and indirect connections through ethnic social networks facilitate the transfer of practical knowledge of the strategies necessary for educational mobility – from magnet public high schools entrance exam criteria to pre-requisites for successful applications to the nation’s selective universities. Furthermore, in part because of the role of race and high levels of residential concentration, Chinese New Yorkers do tend to function as a ‘group’. In other words, there are both institutional and informational connections between better and worse off group members. Although social class heterogeneity is a necessary condition for cross-class social ties, co-ethnic institutions such as ethnic media play an important role in facilitating the sharing of information and cultural knowledge between more successful and more disadvantaged members of the same ethnic group.

At the household level, I point to the prevalence of intergenerational living and resource pooling, which result in the stronger presence of parental figures to provide sufficient monitoring and support of the second generation. Intergenerational support provides the second-generation with a buffer against risk factors while growing up as well as tangible social resources in young adulthood. For example, the collective pooling of family resources and intergenerational living allow second-generation Chinese young adults more flexibility to pursue higher and advanced education, as well as proper launching pad for professional careers. Low levels of racial discrimination, particularly in the housing market, along with high levels of extended family living, delayed marriage and child-bearing are additional factors that allow Chinese immigrant families to live in more advantaged neighbourhoods with access to good public schools.
At the *individual level*, second-generation Chinese tend to see educational success as redemption for parental sacrifices, and they also believe they must try harder to succeed in the American context. Specifically, their parents’ experiences with prejudice and discrimination due to the lack of language and cultural familiarity often provide the second generation with the motivation to try even harder to succeed. This drive is often coupled with cultural understandings about the importance of educational achievement in order to avoid menial labour work and to redeem the sacrifices made by the parental generation. These *ethnic cultural scripts*, as I call them, serve to promote education as a route for success even though second-generation Chinese are less likely to retain the parental language or to know much about their parents’ cultural traditions and religious practices, compared to other groups.

I think these additional factors need to be more systematically integrated in Lee and Zhou’s (2015) analytical model on cultural frames (9). While Lee and Zhou point to the role of both hyper-selectivity and ethnic capital in shaping the success frame, my work expands on this model by including both household-level and individual-level factors that shape second-generation outcomes. While Lee and Zhou are deeply influenced by recent advances in social psychology, especially the ‘growth mind-set’ developed by psychologist Carol Dweck, this specific interpretation of second-generation success is limited to the individual level and does not fully take into consideration the dynamic interactions of ethnic cultural scripts with the ethnic social structures. Despite these differences and minor quibbles, my work converges with theirs on the importance of ethnic culture in shaping second-generation social mobility. In fact, both classic and contemporary accounts of immigrant assimilation have been replete with stories of cultural conflict and negotiation as well as cultural gain and loss. And yet, immigration scholars are only starting to systematically conceptualize and measure immigrant or mainstream culture. Looking forward, a crucial task for immigration scholars is to understand how the cultural scripts among immigrant groups are being refreshed, expanded and diffused as they come into contact with the American mainstream. Resolving these empirical questions would require a clear conception of how cultural models are gained, lost, and negotiated from home to host country, from immigrant culture to the mainstream, and from one generation to the next. This understanding would conceptualize assimilation as a ‘two-way street’ since the distinctiveness of the second-generation experience derives from the fact that its members occupy an in-between position in the social structure of American society.

It is indeed striking that ethnic culture has not been more central to the understanding of linkage between ethnicity and achievement among the new second generation, because cultural differences between immigrant and native groups are both real and consequential. First-generation immigrants do bring with them a set of *ethnic cultural scripts* that provide specific
guidelines for actions and behaviours that are different from ‘American ways’ as Lee and Zhou clearly show. In other words, these cultural differences are both meaningful and exogenous to the American social structure. By pointing out that immigrants bring with them specific cultural frames, however, I am not suggesting that the cultural scripts they reference are the same as those which are prevalent in their home countries, because immigrants are a self-selected group of individuals and are not representative of the sending society. Quite the contrary, the cultural frames of any immigrant group is a specific model that has been adapted to the ethnic group’s experiences and to the context of reception that it faces in the U.S. More importantly, the cultural scripts that ethnic groups possess must also intersect and work well with the social structure of the American society. As the Chinese second generation enters middle adulthood in the coming decade, whether this Chinese second-generation advantage in education will translate into earnings and future leadership positions, along with the social influence and power that such positions confer, remains an open empirical question that awaits future research (Chin 2016).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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