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REJOINDER

Unravelling the link between culture and achievement

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Asian Americans are 6 per cent of the U.S. population, but make up about one-fifth of the entering classes in Ivy League universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton. At Columbia, the figure reaches 27 per cent. In prestigious public universities like the University of California, Berkeley, Asian Americans constitute more than 40 per cent of the student body, yet are only 13 per cent of the Golden State's population. These figures would be unremarkable if these students uniformly hailed from high socio-economic backgrounds, but this is not the case. Even the children of Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees with less than a high school education graduate from college at nearly the same rate as their middle-class peers, pointing to a vexing Asian American achievement paradox.

Unable to explain the achievement paradox, pundits and commentators of varying political and ideological persuasions have pointed to Asian culture: there must be something essential to Asian culture that produces such extraordinary educational outcomes. In 1987, Mike Wallace of *60 Minutes* pronounced on air, 'Why are Asian Americans doing so exceptionally well in school? They must be doing something right. Let's bottle it.' Nearly thirty years have passed, yet little has changed. In 2015, *The New York Times* Op-Ed columnist, Nicholas Kristof devoted a Sunday column to the so-called 'The Asian Advantage'. He even cited our book. But in the end, Kristof concluded that Asian American academic achievement can be explained by 'East Asia's long Confucian emphasis on education', 'hard work, strong families and passion for education'. How else could the daughter of poorly educated Chinese factory workers raised in an impoverished neighbourhood buck the odds and graduate from Harvard or Berkeley?

In *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* (Lee and Zhou 2015), we unravel the link between culture and Asian American academic achievement. Doing so first necessitates debunking the popular argument that academic outcomes can be reduced to Confucian culture. If this were the case, then

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Asian ethnic groups who share a Confucian orientation should evince similar educational outcomes, as Patricia Fernández-Kelly incisively noted, but this is not the case. Cambodians, Laotians, and Hmong have higher high school drop-out rates than African Americans and Latinos (Ramakrishnan and Ahmad 2014). Furthermore, Asian Indians exhibit the highest level of educational attainment of all Asian ethnic groups yet India has never been a stronghold of Confucian values (Wong 2015). International comparisons also prove illuminating: Koreans in Japan have abysmal educational outcomes, and the children of Chinese immigrants in Spain and Italy exhibit the lowest educational aspirations and expectations of all second-generation groups (Portes, Gomez, and Haller 2016). The disconfirming evidence is overwhelming, yet culturally essentialist explanations that point to Confucianism, Asian culture, and values thrive in popular discourse.

Social scientists, on the other hand, have steered clear of cultural explanations. As Tomás Jiménez perceptively detailed, the reluctance stemmed from the backlash against the culture of poverty thesis, in which scholars such as Lewis (1961) and Murray (1984) pointed to the values and behaviours of the poor for their plight. While social scientists expended a great deal of effort decimating the culture of poverty thesis, they paid little heed to another cultural argument that emerged in tandem – the culture of success anti-thesis to explain the rise of Asian Americans. The inattention was unsurprising since social scientists devoted little attention to the socio-economic outcomes of Asian Americans. In part, because Asian Americans are a relatively small group compared to African Americans and Latinos, and also because, on average, they exhibit stronger socio-economic outcomes than native-born Whites, Asian Americans were never on the radar of social scientists. Rather, most of the attention went to the study of poverty and inequality, with little regard to success and inequality. Given that inequality is made up of groups at both tails of the distribution, we cannot continue to ignore how inequality is reproduced at the high end.

This is not to say that social scientists ignored Asian American achievement altogether. Most studies, however, were based on the conventional status attainment model, in which outcomes are predicted by standard socio-economic and demographic variables, including family SES, race, gender, immigrant selectivity, parental educational expectations, and parenting styles. These variables, however, failed to capture why class matters less for Asian Americans than for other groups, as Amy Hsin astutely noted. In other words, while middle-class Asian Americans do only slightly better than middle-class Whites and Hispanics, poor Asians do substantially better than poor Whites and Hispanics (Liu and Xie 2016). Left unanswered was why.

Culture was the black box that social scientists were reluctant to open, and, as a result, we remained silent about *how* culture matters (Patterson 2015; Skrentny 2008). Reluctance and silence have consequences. The door was

left wide open for pundits like Kristof (2015) and scholars like Chua (2011) - more popularly known as the Tiger Mother - and Chua and Rubenfeld (2014) to advance culturally essentialist arguments about the superiority of Asian cultural values, traits, and behaviours. By failing to engage with culture, social scientists failed to offer an alternate, more compelling, and more complete explanation of Asian American achievement. For this and many other reasons, we tackled the thorny question: what is *cultural* about Asian American academic achievement?

Inspired by a new generation of social scientists who placed culture front and centre of poverty and inequality research (see Carter 2005; Small, Harding, and Lamont 2010), we sought to understand how culture affects second-generation educational outcomes. Jettisoning the essentialist, all-encompassing definition of culture, these researchers defined culture in analytically fruitful ways: as frames, repertoires, toolkits, narratives, scripts, and cultural capital. This body of literature was pivotal in paving the way for our analyses.

At the outset, we assert that here is nothing essential about Asian culture or values that promote exceptional academic outcomes. Rather, the cultural manifestations of Asian American achievement have legal and structural roots – namely the change in U.S. immigration law in 1965 that altered the socio-economic profiles of Asian immigrants. Contemporary Asian immigrants are, on average, highly educated and highly selected. For example, 51 per cent of U.S. Chinese immigrants has a college degree compared to only 4 per cent of adults in China, meaning that Chinese immigrants in the United States are more than twelve times as likely to have graduated from college than their non-migrant counterparts. In addition, they are more highly educated than the general U.S. population, 28 per cent of whom are college-educated. We refer to this dual positive immigrant selectivity as 'hyper-selectivity'.

Because of their hyper-selectivity, Chinese (and other Asian) immigrants import class-specific cultural frames, institutions, and mindsets from their countries of origin, including a strict 'success frame'. This entails earning straight As, graduating as the high school valedictorian, getting into a top school (defined as a University of California campus or the Ivy League), and then working in one of four professions – medicine, law, science, or engineering. In metropolitan areas like Los Angeles and San Francisco that have witnessed a steady influx of hyper-selected Asian immigrants, academic achievement has become ethnoracially coded as 'the Asian thing', and grades, recalibrated on an 'Asian scale' such that an A minus is an 'Asian F' (see also Drake 2016; Jiménez and Horowitz 2013). So closely linked is ethnoracial status and achievement that Asian Americans who do not meet the perceived norm feel like outliers or failures who choose to distance themselves from coethnics and their ethnic identities. A second-generation Chinese male we interviewed, for example, described himself as 'the Whitest

Chinese guy you'll ever meet' because he chose to pursue a career in art, thereby falling far outside of the success frame.

We find, however, that it is not enough to simply adopt the success frame. For a frame to be effective, it needs to be supported by reinforcement mechanisms, in the absence of which it can change. The success frame is buttressed by a sophisticated system of supplementary education that hyper-selected Asian immigrants import from their countries of origin and recreate in the United States. Because Asian immigrants like the Chinese are hyper-selected, the institutions and practices they import are not just ethnic specific, but, rather, middle-class ethnic institutions and practices. Hence, what may be perceived to outsiders as ethnic or cultural institutions are, in fact, structural in origin.

To provide a broader context, it is worth mentioning that in countries like China, Vietnam, and Korea, entrance into a top university is determined based solely on a student's performance on a national exam, which is offered only once a year. In Korea, only 1 per cent who take the test make it into a top university. This gruelling university admissions system has spawned a booming industry of supplementary education courses to bolster students' test scores. For middle-class children in these countries, supplementary education is the norm, and students can spend an additional seven hours a day in after-school classes. Immigrants import these institutions and practices from their countries of origin, and recreate them to fit the U.S. context. Stroll through the Chinese ethnoburb in San Gabriel Valley, Koreatown in Los Angeles, or Little Saigon in Orange County, and one will easily spot advertisements for SAT prep courses, tutoring services, academic seminars, and summer school classes.

Additionally, because hyper-selected immigrant groups recreate these institutions in ethnic communities in a range of price points – some of which are freely available in ethnic churches, temples, and community centres – they make them accessible to the children of working-class coethnics. Thus, the accessibility of supplementary education (which is typically the province of affluent and middle-class children) makes it within reach of the children of garment workers, waiters, manicurists, and taxi drivers.

It is also in ethnic institutions where cross-class interactions unfold and cross-class learning occurs. Here, working-class children learn about the importance of enrolling in Advanced Placement and Honours classes, when to begin preparing for the SAT exam (which some begin in seventh grade so that they are fully prepared to take the exam in the eleventh grade), and how to navigate the complex college admissions process. Moreover, role models and mobility prototypes of those who have attained the success frame are lauded by parents and promoted by ethnic media, thereby making the success frame seem both attainable and normative. Organizational membership accrues gains – some of which are unanticipated – especially for the children of working-class immigrants (see also Small 2009).

Asian immigrants are not unique in creating ethnic organizations, of course. As Philip Kasinitz aptly reminded us, Jewish immigrants did the same in New York (Kasinitz et al. 2008). And in Los Angeles, Armenian immigrants have created a bevy of ethnic organizations that range from educational to social, generating ethnic capital in the Armenian community from which the second-generation benefit (Khachikian 2016). It is through the creation of ethnic capital that class resources become ethnic resources, which benefit all group members. As Hsin accurately described, these are the 'spillover' effects of hyper-selectivity that are not measured in surveys, and therefore not captured by survey data analysis. To address Kasinitz's critique about why we give primacy to hyper-selectivity in our analyses, we rebut that previously unmeasured were its spillover effects that augment second-generation educational outcomes beyond that which would be predicted by the status attainment model.

A question we often receive is how are Chinese and Vietnamese immigrant parents able to persuade (or force) their children to participate in supplementary education. Native-born White and Black parents have bemoaned that even if they were to enrol their children in supplementary education classes, their children would staunchly refuse to attend. This is where generational status matters. As children of immigrants, the second-generation view supplementary education in the United States with a dual frame of reference. They learn from their immigrant parents and relatives who have not migrated how much more arduous supplementary education is in their parents' country of origin. As for the 1.5 generation who were schooled for part of their young lives abroad, they have experienced the rigorous system first-hand, and realize that by comparison, the U.S. educational system (including supplementary education) is more lax and forgiving.

Van Tran highlights another reason that second-generation Chinese are unlikely to protest their parents' insistence on supplementary education: excelling in school is how the second-generation repay their immigrant parents for their struggle and sacrifice. In addition, they believe that they must expend more effort than their non-Hispanic White peers because they and their parents recognize that they will likely face disadvantages in the labour market as a result of their ethnoracial status. Adherence to these 'ethnic cultural scripts', as Tran defines them, is another component of second-generation Chinese and Asian American attainment.

While social scientists may readily grasp that hyper-selectivity leads to rich ethnic capital and the formation of ethnic institutions, others fail to see these as effects, and mistake them for the cause of high achievement. They point to ethnic institutions as testament that Asians value education, and wonder why other immigrant groups, like Mexicans, fail to follow suit. To address this point, we explain that, unlike Chinese immigrants, Mexican immigrants are hypo-selected: they are less likely to have

graduated from college than their non-migrant counterparts and less likely to be college-educated than the U.S. mean. Only 5 per cent of U.S. Mexican immigrants has graduated from college, compared to 17 per cent of Mexico's adult population and 28 per cent of the U.S. population. This dual negative selectivity is what we refer to as 'hypo-selectivity'.

As hypo-selected immigrants, Mexicans lack the human and economic capital to build the ethnic institutions to assuage their children's disadvantaged starting point, including, in some cases, their parents' unauthorized legal status (Bean, Brown, and Bachmeier 2015). Another consequence of hypo-selectivity is that second-generation Mexicans adopt culturally heterogeneous success frames; they hold broader, more inclusive definitions of a good education and success. For many, most paramount is the ability to support one's family and buy a home – features of success that many of their Mexican immigrant parents struggle to attain.

Finally, we note that hyper- and hypo-selectivity affect in-group and out-group perceptions, and have social psychological consequences. For example, because Chinese immigrants are, on average, more highly educated than the general U.S. population, Chinese Americans are stereotyped as smart, hard-working, and competent. Because of the racialization that occurs in the U.S. context, ethnic stereotypes about Chinese extend to East Asians as a group, regardless of migrant selectivity and socio-economic status.

These so-called positive stereotypes affect the way that teachers and guidance counsellors perceive and treat Asian American students. The Chinese and Vietnamese interviewees consistently relayed that their teachers expected them to do well in school, and even offered extra help when they had trouble with certain subjects. They also shared examples of the generosity on the part of guidance counsellors who assisted them with college applications and helped them to fill out financial aid forms.

This type of assistance was rarely offered to the Mexican students. Those who made it to college described how they had to vie for the attention of teachers and guidance counsellors, many of whom did not take their college aspirations seriously or attempted to shepherd them to the local community college. One Mexican respondent mentioned that when he informed his teacher that he wanted to be an astronaut, his teacher suggested that he become a Spanish teacher instead. Refusing to level his aspirations, he became an engineer, and later a successful entrepreneur.

Perceptions have consequences. Asian American students benefit from 'stereotype promise' – the boost in performance that results from being perceived as smart, high-achieving, capable, and deserving. Chinese and Vietnamese students relayed experiences of having been placed into the Advanced Placement (AP) track, despite not having tested into it, and, in some cases, even after having failed the test. However, once these Asian American students were placed into the most competitive academic track, they worked

hard to meet the expectation, and also changed the reference group against whom they measured their success. Their increased effort resulted in better grades and test scores, as well as admission into elite universities. And because these Asian American students' outcomes matched their teachers' expectations, the teachers can point to these students' stellar academic achievement as proof of their initial assessment about Asian American students (that they are smart, high-achieving, and deserving of being placed into highly competitive academic tracks), all the while remaining unmindful of their role in generating a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton 1948).

In *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, we unravelled the link between culture and achievement, and dispelled the seductive argument that there is something essential about Asian culture that drives exceptional academic outcomes. Fernández-Kelly's tour de force review sheds light on why the cultural fallacy endures, even in spite of the disconfirming evidence. If there is a national ideology that embodies the United States, it is the American Dream, which purports that any individual – regardless how humble his/her origins – can make it (Hochschild 1996). The ideology is premised on America's legacy of immigration, which conveniently ignores its ugly twin legacy of slavery. Individualism, meritocracy, and grit are the pillars of the American Dream, which continue to be lauded in public discourse by popular examples of individuals who have 'made it'. The exceptions prove the rule that the American Dream works. Furthermore, the United States does not have another narrative to explain unequal group outcomes, and, as a result, it is all too easy to adopt individualistic and culturally essentialist explanations to divide the deserving from the undeserving.

We are honoured by Jiménez's forecast that '*The Asian American Achievement Paradox* may do for the understanding of immigrant assimilation what William Julius Wilson's *The Truly Disadvantaged* (1987) did for the understanding of urban poverty.' In AAAP, we refused to shy away from the debate about culture and achievement or dismiss it cavalierly without providing a counter-argument. We hope that our work proves to be a useful theoretical and empirical launching pad for others to continue the quest to understand the manifold ways that culture affects group outcomes, and reproduces inequality at both ends of the spectrum.

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