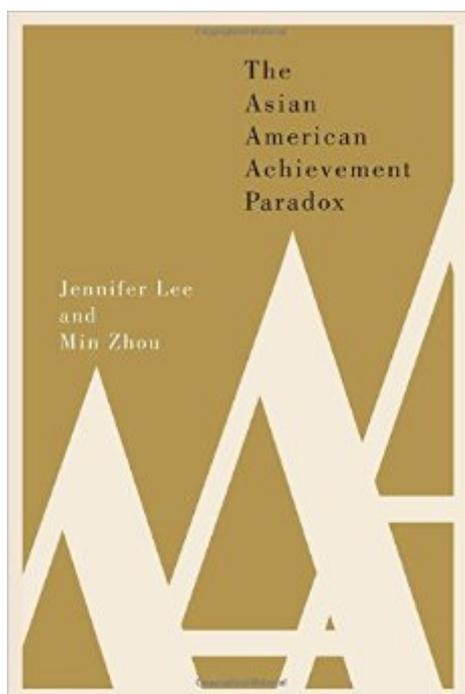


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# The Asian American Achievement Paradox



## Synopsis

Asian Americans are often stereotyped as the "model minority." Their sizeable presence at elite universities and high household incomes have helped construct the narrative of Asian American "exceptionalism." While many scholars and activists characterize this as a myth, pundits claim that Asian Americans' educational attainment is the result of unique cultural values. In *The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, sociologists Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou offer a compelling account of the academic achievement of the children of Asian immigrants. Drawing on in-depth interviews with the adult children of Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees and survey data, Lee and Zhou bridge sociology and social psychology to explain how immigration laws, institutions, and culture interact to foster high achievement among certain Asian American groups. For the Chinese and Vietnamese in Los Angeles, Lee and Zhou find that the educational attainment of the second generation is strikingly similar, despite the vastly different socioeconomic profiles of their immigrant parents. Because immigration policies after 1965 favor individuals with higher levels of education and professional skills, many Asian immigrants are highly educated when they arrive in the United States. They bring a specific "success frame," which is strictly defined as earning a degree from an elite university and working in a high-status field. This success frame is reinforced in many local Asian communities, which make resources such as college preparation courses and tutoring available to group members, including their low-income members. While the success frame accounts for part of Asian Americans' high rates of achievement, Lee and Zhou also find that institutions, such as public schools, are crucial in supporting the cycle of Asian American achievement. Teachers and guidance counselors, for example, who presume that Asian American students are smart, disciplined, and studious, provide them with extra help and steer them toward competitive academic programs. These institutional advantages, in turn, lead to better academic performance and outcomes among Asian American students. Yet the expectations of high achievement come with a cost: the notion of Asian American success creates an "achievement paradox" in which Asian Americans who do not fit the success frame feel like failures or racial outliers. While pundits ascribe Asian American success to the assumed superior traits intrinsic to Asian culture, Lee and Zhou show how historical, cultural, and institutional elements work together to confer advantages to specific populations. An insightful counter to notions of culture based on stereotypes, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* offers a deft and nuanced understanding how and why certain immigrant groups succeed.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

The Asian American Achievement Paradox by Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou is a book on the topic of the Asian American Achievement Phenomenon in the U.S. It presents the social and psychological impact of this phenomenon on the individuals and attempts to explain why this is happening. The book breaks down its argument into seven viewpoints. First, it links the 1965 U.S. immigration law with the trend. Second, it presents the evidence of large numbers of highly educated and skillful Asian immigrants taking advantage of the law and seeking jobs in the U.S. The authors use the term "hyper-selective" to describe this unique group of immigrants. Third, they show how these groups of immigrants understand the use of private and public resources in the U.S. to reinforce of their values in their children; such as, taking advantage of the diversity of the U.S. educational system by living in neighborhoods with reputable schools, establishing ethical networks to share detailed information related to upward mobility within their communities, and repetition of their narrow definition of achievement to their children, Fourth, the authors believe the Asian cultural value system, such as academic shortcomings can be overcome by individual effort, and high achievement in education opens doors to upward mobility in society, can contribute to the success of these immigrants. Fifth, they show that positive stereotyping of these children of Asian immigrants within the U.S creates self-fulfilling prophecies. Sixth, the authors compare the different cultural values between Asian immigrant parents and non-immigrant parents. Seventh, they investigate the cost of achieving the narrowly define goals by unique group of Asian American.

Asians (Koreans, Japanese, Chinese) have been publicly hailed as America's model minority. A 2012 Pew report found Asian Americans have the highest median household income and level of education of all groups, including native-born whites. Half of Asian American adults 25 and older have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 31% of whites, 18% of African Americans, and 13% of Latinos. The Pew Report ('The Rise of Asian Americans') also found that Asian Americans place more value on hard work, career success, marriage, and parenthood than other Americans and are also more satisfied with their lives, finances, and the direction of the country. Among students accepted to New York's Stuyvesant High in the fall of 2013, over 70% were Asian, 20% white, and less than 10% other groups. Similarly for those admitted to the Bronx High School of Science, Ivy League, and prestigious public universities. The authors' goal is to explain the exceptional academic achievement of Asian immigrants' children, including those whose parents were penniless immigrants and refugees when arriving in the U.S., had only an elementary school education, and did not speak English. They conclude that Asian immigrants are not representative of their countries of origin. More than half (56%) of Korean immigrants have a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to only 36% of adults in Korea. Among Vietnamese immigrants, 26% have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 5% among adults in Vietnam. And Chinese immigrants are the most highly selected - 51% have graduated from college, compared to only 4% of adults in China. Further, Chinese and Korean immigrants are also more highly educated than the general U.S. population - 28% of whom have graduated from college.

As you might be able to tell by other reviews, this book is a jargon salad of academic mumbo-jumbo. The authors are the type of academics who describe what they perceive as cultural characteristics while trying to dance around third rail issues, like "race," and various stereotypes. In the end they describe aspects of their subject at great length, without actually explaining them (this is what academics call a "nuanced" explanation). A paradox is an assertion that is apparently self-contradictory or that leads to unacceptable conclusions; thus from the start the authors paint themselves into a corner by negating the very factors and relationships that aroused their worry in the first place. They are motivated by the appearance of an achievement paradox, and then go on to essentially explain it away. It may be a paradox to them, but it exists, and there are actual explanations. One such, admittedly controversial, explanation is the rice theory advanced mainly by Thomas Talhelm. It actually acknowledges that there are differences between the achievement of southern Chinese and other immigrant groups and seeks to explain why. Google his name or "rice theory" and you'll find plenty of material, from the April 9, 2014, edition of *Science*, to *Scientific*

American, to the New York Times, to the Shanghai Daily. And there are plenty of academics who weigh in in favor of acknowledging an Asian-American achievement gap, or even an Asian cultural personality that is different from Western-European cultural personality. This can be measured, despite the efforts of academics to explain it away.

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