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The “Model Minority” Goes to Work

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The “Model Minority” Goes to Work

ISSUE EDITORS

Jennifer Lee, Kimberly Goyette,
Jackson G. Lu, Xi Song, and Yu Xie

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The “Model Minority” from Education to the Workplace



JENNIFER LEE^{ORCID}, KIMBERLY GOYETTE^{ORCID}, JACKSON G. LU^{ORCID},
XI SONG^{ORCID}, AND YU XIE^{ORCID}

In June 2023, the US Supreme Court struck down race-based affirmative action in university admissions—a decision largely due to allegations that elite universities had engaged in racial discrimination against Asian American applicants. Central to both sides of the affirmative action debate was the recognition that stereotypes of Asian Americans as “model minorities” in the classroom played a role in college admissions. While much attention has focused on Asian Americans in education, far less research considers whether their later careers mirror their early success. Do Asian Americans’ educational achievements translate to success in the labor market? To answer this, we examine how Asian Americans navigate the transition from school to the workplace. Beginning with a review of the research on Asian Americans’ strategic adaptation in educational contexts, we then shift the discussion to how Asian Americans’ adaptive strategies extend into the labor market. Rather than being guided by personal interests and aptitudes, many Asian Americans pursue paths they believe will offer greater social mobility in the face of societal and organizational bias. In spite of their strategic adaptation, the advantage that Asian Americans experience in education often disappears and, in some cases, reverses when the model minority goes to work.

Keywords: Asian Americans, strategic adaptation, assimilation, labor market, earnings, gender, family, bamboo ceiling, model minority

Jennifer Lee is the Julian Clarence Levi Professor of Social Sciences at Columbia University, New York, United States. **Kimberly Goyette** is professor of sociology at Temple University, Philadelphia, United States. **Jackson G. Lu** is the General Motors Professor of Work and Organization Studies, Sloan School of Management at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Cambridge, United States. **Xi Song** is professor of sociology at Columbia University, New York, United States. **Yu Xie** is the Bert G. Kerstetter ’66 University Professor of Sociology at Princeton University, New Jersey, United States.

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“Competence can be a curse.”

—Min Jin Lee, *Free Food for Millionaires*
(2007, 3)

The US Supreme Court struck down race-based affirmative action in university admissions on June 29, 2023, in large part due to allegations by Students for Fair Admissions that Harvard University and the University of North Carolina (UNC) engaged in racial discrimination against Asian Americans.¹ Amidst mixed evidence of bias against Asian American applicants in the admissions process, the Court ruled in favor of the Students for Fair Admissions. Unlike other racial minority groups, however, Asians are not underrepresented in elite universities, including Harvard and UNC; they constitute 37 percent and 26 percent of Harvard’s and UNC’s classes of 2028, respectively (Harvard College 2024; UNC Undergraduate Admissions 2024), despite making up just 7.4 percent of the US population (Krogstad and Im 2025). While considerable attention has been paid to Asian Americans in higher education, comparatively little has focused on Asian Americans in the workplace. Stereotyped as model minorities who excel in the classroom (Lee and Zhou 2015, 2017; Shi and Zhu 2023), Asians outpace other groups academically, but do they maintain their advantage in the labor market?

Asians in the United States, on average, attain higher levels of education than other major racial groups. Among Asian Americans aged 25 and older, 61 percent hold a bachelor’s degree or higher—well above the national average of 38.6 percent (US Census Bureau 2022). Moreover, while approximately one in seven Americans has obtained an advanced degree (a master’s or doctorate), the figure rises to one in four among Asian Americans (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2024). Social scientists attribute Asian Americans’ high educational attainment to factors such as the hyper-selectivity of Asian immigrants, greater investment in and access to supplemental education, cultural emphasis on effort over innate ability, and the effects of stereotype promise (Fernández-Kelly 2016; Hsin and Xie 2014; Lee and Zhou 2015, 2017; Liu and

Xie 2016; Okura 2022; Tian 2023; Warikoo 2022; Shi and Zhu 2023). Yet this narrow focus on educational achievement has helped perpetuate the belief that Asians are the model minority, thereby overlooking the challenges that they face in the labor market.

This perception is further buttressed by Asian Americans’ high median household income and earnings that exceed those of their White counterparts. In fact, recent earnings trends published by the US Department of Labor (2024) indicate that the earnings of Asian men began surpassing those of non-Hispanic White men in the early 2000s, while Asian women reached or exceeded the earnings of White women as early as the late 1980s. After 2010, Asian women’s earnings soared, and by 2024, they exceeded those of White men (US Department of Labor 2024)—a striking empirical finding that has drawn widespread public attention.

In a now-deleted post on X (formerly Twitter) that went viral on May 23, 2024, Elon Musk posted that “Asian women earn more than White men.” In the flurry of responses, some interpreted the higher earnings of Asian women as evidence that White privilege, racial bias, and gender discrimination are highly exaggerated or irrelevant—readily dismissed as fictitious narratives of a liberal “woke” agenda. Others used it as confirmation of racial stereotypes of Asian Americans as inherently smarter, more competent, and harder-working, and thus naturally outearning White Americans. Yawningly familiar, such tropes have long been weaponized to justify Asian Americans’ exceptional educational attainment, including, most recently, the campaign to dismantle race-conscious university admissions policies. Now, they are being wielded to explain Asian Americans’ higher earnings.

Behind these aggregated statistics, however, lie a myriad of factors that contribute to Asian Americans’ high earnings, including some of the most obvious explanations, such as their higher levels of education and their fields of study: Asian Americans are not only more highly educated than White Americans, but

1. *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, 600 U.S. 181 (2023). We use the terms *Asian* and *Asian American* interchangeably and make ethnic distinctions when possible.

they are also more likely to major in and pursue careers in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields, where wages are higher and accelerate more rapidly compared with other fields in the arts, humanities, and social sciences. There are also less obvious reasons for the higher incomes of Asian Americans, including decisions about household arrangements that maximize Asian women’s labor force participation after motherhood, as well as residential choices that prioritize metropolitan areas with higher-paying jobs.

Yet educational and economic attainment tell only part of the story. While national statistics point to Asian Americans’ academic and financial achievement, they reveal little about other dimensions of assimilation, including the sense of belonging. Despite their high education and earnings, Asian Americans report the lowest sense of belonging among all US racial groups: only 38 percent feel they completely belong in the United States, compared with 70 percent of White Americans (STAATUS Index 2024). When Asian Americans were asked why they do not feel they belong, six out of ten pointed to previous experiences of discrimination and violence because of their race or ethnicity (STAATUS Index 2024).

The coexistence of high educational attainment and high earnings, on the one hand, and a low sense of belonging coupled with experiences of discrimination and hate, on the other, reveals a vexing paradox—what Jennifer Lee and Dian Sheng (2024) coined the “Asian American assimilation paradox.” They argue that this paradox reflects three key tensions: the ahistorical nature of social science research on Asian American assimilation; the tautology of using educational attainment acquired from immigrants’ countries of origin as a measure of assimilation in the United States; and the disjuncture between the way social scientists normatively measure assimilation and the way Asian Americans actually experience it.

In this issue, the authors further interrogate this paradox by focusing on where we see and where we do not see Asian American advantages in the labor market. Specifically, when accounting for variations within the Asian American population—such as educational attainment, occupational field, gender, ethnicity,

immigration generation, and other attributes—researchers find that Asian American advantages are elusive: in some cases, Asian Americans maintain an advantage in the labor market; in others, that advantage disappears and even reverses.

One reason that the Asian American labor market advantage is elusive stems from the geographic clustering of the US Asian population. Unlike the US White population, Asian Americans are unevenly distributed across the country. As Robert Manduca and Jane Furey (2026, this issue) illustrate, half of the US Asian population is clustered in just ten metropolitan areas—including Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Washington, DC—where the local median levels of education and earnings far exceed national averages. Given their geographic concentration in metropolitan areas with high wages, Manduca and Furey (2026) and Andrew Taeho Kim and ChangHwan Kim (2026, this issue) examine how incomes of Asian Americans compare to those of White Americans within the same metropolitan area. Does the national advantage that Asians exhibit still hold at the regional level? The authors find that within the high-earnings metropolitan areas where Asian Americans are concentrated, they earn less than their White counterparts. Manduca and Furey propose that the Asian American assimilation paradox is an example of Simpson’s paradox, where aggregated national data not only mask but also run in the opposite direction at the local level.

Other authors in this issue approach the Asian American assimilation paradox by focusing on the roles of gender and family, as well as the economic penalties and premiums associated with marriage and motherhood. Given Asian women’s high earnings, Phoebe Ho and Hyunjoon Park (2026, this issue) question whether the incomes of college-educated Asian American women are the driving force behind the Asian–White income gap. Sharon Sassler and Gabrielle Sorresso (2026, this issue) zoom in on the computer science industry to assess racial and ethnic differences in the gender wage gap. While Chinese and Asian Indian women in computer science out-earn White women in the field, the authors find that Asian women—and particularly Asian In-

dian women—experience higher economic penalties for marriage and motherhood that are veiled by their higher earnings.

Sojung Lim and Wonjeong Jeong (2026, this issue) tackle another dimension of the paradox by focusing on the role of extended family in supporting women’s continued labor force participation after motherhood. Coresidence with family members—including parents and parents-in-law—enables Asian women to remain in the workforce, but these multigenerational household arrangements may also come at a price for working women (Howard et al. 2023; Olivieri et al. 2024). Fumiya Uchikoshi and Airan Liu (2026, this issue) remind us that while class matters, it matters less for Asian American than White families. In part, this is because Asian American children are more likely than White children to live in two-parent households, and this is the case even among Asian parents with low levels of education. The authors suggest that Asian American family behavior is a form of strategic adaptation that is geared toward supporting children’s academic attainment and mobility.

Other authors in this issue unveil novel ways that Asian Americans strategically adapt to the labor market. Angelina Grigoryeva (2026, this issue) posits that Asian Americans may deliberately choose occupations and firms that offer company stock on top of wages, thereby enhancing their opportunities for higher compensation, wealth accumulation, and social mobility. Jody Agius Vallejo and Lisa A. Keister (2026, this issue) reveal yet another variant of strategic adaptation: self-employment. Drawing on family wealth, transnational networks, and new economic opportunities emerging from the marketization of China and Taiwan, college-educated second-generation Chinese Americans are pursuing paths largely unavailable to their immigrant parents. As they weigh a steady paycheck and the prospect of hitting a “bamboo ceiling” (Hyun 2005) against the possibilities of self-employment, the authors find that one in ten second-generation Chinese bet on business.

Strategic adaptation does not always result in labor market advantages, as Shih-Chun “Steven” Chien and colleagues (2026, this issue) underscore in their study of Asian Americans in

the legal profession. The authors show that Asian American professionals recognize that they are perceived by their partners and peers as hardworking, responsible, logical, and careful, but lacking creativity, vision, and assertiveness. The presumption of competence without assertiveness can be a curse for Asian Americans in law, where they face few barriers to entry but encounter roadblocks when they seek to move up the professional ladder. Their findings contribute to a growing body of research on the bamboo ceiling, which has been partly propelled by the work of Jackson G. Lu and colleagues (see Lu et al. 2020, 2022, 2025; Lu 2022, 2023, 2024a, 2024b).

The growing evidence of a bamboo ceiling in professions like law and business challenges the widely touted labor market advantages of Asian Americans. In addition, the predominant focus on these advantages obscures the ways in which Asian Americans strategically adapt to achieve high earnings well before entering the workplace and even despite encountering bias in it. Their strategic adaptation begins with parental decisions about neighborhood selection, educational expenditures, and school choice, followed by students’ decisions about declaring majors and fields of study. Following Yu Xie and Kimberly Goyette (2003), we detail how Asian Americans plan their educational trajectories around career paths that promise high earnings and upward mobility—reversing the traditional notion that educational aptitudes and interests guide career choices.

In the following sections of this introduction, we first review the literature and theories that have guided the research on Asian Americans in the labor market. We then turn to the applicability of the concept of strategic adaptation to Asian Americans’ labor market outcomes, and point to the challenges involved in using this framework. While crafting the review, we discovered a glaring gap in empirical research: the lack of a dynamic view of Asians’ career development over the life course. Absent are transition and trajectory models that explain the patterns of Asians’ intragenerational mobility, including their successful and unsuccessful mobility strategies. This gap is especially notable given the extensive body of research on the long-term earnings and wage

gaps between non-Hispanic White, Black, and Hispanic Americans (Cheng 2016; Cheng et al. 2019; Chetty et al. 2020; Collins and Wana-maker 2022; Killewald et al. 2017; Song et al. 2022; Tomaskovic-Devey et al. 2005).

Limitations that stem from the lack of longitudinal data of the US Asian population have hampered the empirical and theoretical progress in the study of Asian Americans. In light of these data limitations and literature gaps, we present this introduction and journal issue as a starting point for social scientists to study the career development of Asian Americans from education to the labor market. The authors in this volume creatively tackle the Asian American assimilation paradox and the vexing labor market patterns that depart from those of White Americans, while acknowledging the missing links that would enable them to make causal claims. Some do so by drawing on existing data while others have collected original data to provide more diverse measures of labor market experiences and outcomes. Their findings are multifaceted and context-specific, yet all authors agree that relying on the model minority stereotype to interpret their results leads to gross oversights, omissions, and errors. Furthermore, nearly all authors concur that even in spite of strategic adaptation, the advantage that Asian Americans experience in education often disappears and, in some cases, reverses in the labor market.

THE EARNINGS (DIS)ADVANTAGE OF ASIANS IN THE US LABOR MARKET

Asian Americans' educational achievement, on average, exceeds that of other US racial groups. While most studies attest to Asian Americans' academic advantage (see Lu et al. 2022 for an exception), research on how their educational achievement translates to labor market outcomes has yielded mixed evidence.

The “Overachievement in Education” Hypothesis

In their seminal article on the socioeconomic attainment of Asian Americans, Charles Hirschman and Morrison G. Wong (1984) argued that while Asian Americans have reached socioeconomic parity with White Americans, this parity is largely the result of Asian Ameri-

cans' “overachievement in education.” Building on Peter M. Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan's (1967) classic status attainment model and Duncan's (1961) Socioeconomic Index (SEI), the authors calculated socioeconomic status using a weighted composite of occupation-level average education and income—a methodological approach prevalent in research on social stratification and mobility during the 1960s–1980s (Ganzeboom et al. 1991; Treiman and Ganzeboom 2000). Hirschman and Wong (1984) found that Asian Americans experienced lower economic returns to their educational investments compared with their White counterparts. They then concluded that, had Asian Americans been subject to the same stratification process as White Americans, their educational qualifications would have resulted in significantly higher occupational attainment and earnings, exceeding those of White workers.

Since Hirschman and Wong (1984) proposed the overachievement in education hypothesis, it has been extensively tested with updated data, alternative methodologies, and a broader range of outcomes beyond the Socioeconomic Index measure (Barringer et al. 1990; Greenman 2011; Iceland 1999; Sakamoto et al. 2009, 2012; Snipp and Hirschman 2005; Xie and Goyette 2003; Zeng and Xie 2004). New strands of research on Asian Americans in the labor market examine additional factors such as nativity, place of education, field of study, and gender to broaden and enrich our understanding of Asians' earnings and career mobility in the United States.

Asian Men's Earnings: Place of Education, Nativity, and Field of Study

Zhen Zeng and Yu Xie (2004) directly challenged Hirschman and Wong's (1984) conclusion that Asians need to overachieve in education to reach parity with Whites by pointing to the significance of the country in which one is educated—what they refer to as “place of education.” Drawing on individual-level data from the 1990 US Census and the 1993 National Survey of College Graduates, Zeng and Xie (2004) found no differences in earnings among US-born White men, US-born Asian men, and US-educated Asian male immigrants. The only group that experienced an earnings disadvan-

tage was foreign-educated Asian male immigrants, who earned approximately 16 percent less than the other three groups of workers. Given that four in five Asian adults in the United States are foreign-born and a large proportion of these immigrants are foreign-educated, Zeng and Xie (2004) argued that previous studies that attributed an earnings disadvantage to being either Asian American or foreign-born may have, in fact, picked up the effect of being educated outside the United States.

They concluded that once place of education is taken into account, race and nativity are no longer consequential for the earnings of Asian men in the United States: “The identification of foreign-educated immigrants as the only disadvantaged group among Asian Americans in this study suggests that Asian Americans’ earnings disadvantage is rooted in human capital differences between US-educated workers and foreign-educated workers, rather than in race-based discrimination” (Zeng and Xie 2004, 1106). Furthermore, pointing to the diversity among Asian immigrants, they highlighted that the degree of disadvantage varies by country of origin. At one extreme are foreign-educated Japanese immigrants who earned 39 percent more than US-born White workers. At the other end of the spectrum are foreign-educated Filipino immigrants who earned 23 percent less than US-born White workers. Considering the stratification within Asian Americans by both national origin and place of education, Zeng and Xie (2004, 1106) called for “a new theoretical interpretation of the earnings disadvantage of Asian Americans.”

Subsequent research has further validated the significance of place of education in determining workplace outcomes (Arbeit and Warren 2013; Lu and Li 2021; Tong 2010). Among immigrant scientists and engineers, Yuying Tong (2010) found that attending college or pre-college in the United States played a substantial role in closing the earnings gap with their native-born counterparts. US-educated individuals not only earn more but they also experience faster earnings growth compared with foreign-educated individuals. More recently, Di Shao (2023) demonstrated that foreign-born

college-educated Asians who received either no US education or only postsecondary education in the United States were less likely to hold managerial positions compared with native-born Whites, suggesting occupational sorting as a possible mechanism through which place of education affects earnings.

The place of education effect also helps to explain why hyper-selected and professionally skilled Asian immigrants often pursue self-employment, including small business ownership. Faced with linguistic and cultural barriers, as well as challenges in transferring their foreign educational credentials and work experience to the US labor market, many college-educated, professionally trained Korean immigrants, for example, turn to small business ownership as a mobility strategy (Lee 2002; Min 1990; Yoon 2010). For Korean immigrants, self-employment is not only a more certain path to intragenerational economic stability, but it also serves as a launching pad for intergenerational mobility, enabling the second generation to pursue professional opportunities denied to their immigrant parents (Lee 2002).

Other research, however, has pointed to an earnings disadvantage among US-born Asian Americans, even after controlling for place of education. Analyzing cross-sectional data from the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates, ChangHwan Kim and Arthur Sakamoto (2010) found that native-born, college-educated Asian men earn less than their White counterparts after controlling for place of education, field of study, years of schooling, region of residence, parents’ education, and other demographic characteristics. Interestingly, they also found that 1.5-generation Asian males (foreign-born Asians who immigrated before the age of thirteen and were educated in the United States) achieved full earnings parity with White males after controlling for these covariates. While field of study plays a key role in the earnings gap between Asian and White college-educated men, the reasons why 1.5-generation Asian men earn more than their US-born counterparts remain unclear.

Asian Women’s Earnings

While most studies of Asian Americans’ labor market earnings have centered on men and fo-

cused on the gap between Asian and White men, an emerging strand of research has turned to Asian women. This body of research shows that net of education, Asian–White differences in earnings are more favorable for Asian women than Asian men, including immigrant women (Browne and Misra 2003; Tong 2010; Greenman and Xie 2008). Research shows that US-born Asian women are, in fact, unique among non-White women in that they earn as much as, or even more than, their White counterparts with similar levels of education (Greenman 2011; Iceland 1999). More recent earnings trends show that Asian women reached or exceeded the earnings of their White peers in the late 1980s, if not earlier (US Department of Labor 2024).

Emily Greenman’s (2011) pioneering research unveils some of the reasons behind Asian women’s earning advantage. Analyzing data from the Scientists and Engineers Statistical Data System (SESTAT), she compared the career trajectories of Asian American and White female scientists and engineers after transitioning to motherhood. Her longitudinal analyses revealed that motherhood differently affects the labor market outcomes of these women in ways that give Asian American women a competitive edge. First, compared with White women, Asian women were not only less likely to take time out of the labor force after having a child, but they also made smaller reductions in their weekly work hours afterward. Second, while White women’s chances of dropping out of the labor force increased after having their first and subsequent children, Asian women’s labor force participation remained relatively stable. Finally, because Asian women were less likely to reduce their labor supply, they accumulated more work experience than did White women, resulting in higher earnings growth over time.

Based on these patterns, Greenman (2011) proposed a “family investment” model to explain the earnings gap between Asian and White women. According to this model, Asian American women’s earnings are viewed by the family as a necessary part of their long-term strategy for achieving intergenerational mobility, particularly through supporting their children’s education. So rather than perceiving

work as conflicting with family obligations, Asian American women perceive employment as an integral part of fulfilling their familial responsibilities. Thus, in contrast to the common “work versus family” dilemma faced by professional White women, Asian American women view their employment as “work for family.” Greenman’s family investment model highlights the importance of understanding how different groups culturally conceptualize the relationship between work and family obligations, which in turn influences the allocation of time, labor, and resources.

Challenges to Asian Americans’ Labor Market Advantage

While native-born, college-educated Asian women may not experience an earnings disadvantage vis-à-vis White women, other research highlights different forms of labor market disadvantages. For example, drawing on analyses of the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates, ChangHwan Kim and Yang Zhao (2014) found that Asian American women were more likely to be unemployed than White women after controlling for their field of study, college type, region of residence, and other demographic variables. And when employed, even US-born Asian women were less likely to attain managerial positions involving the supervision of a large number of employees.

An immigrant disadvantage among foreign-born Asian women emerged regardless of whether they immigrated after high school and earned their highest degree at a US institution, thereby challenging Zeng and Xie’s (2004) place of education thesis (Kim and Zhao 2014). For the 1.5 generation—the foreign-born who immigrated to the US before the age of thirteen—US education helps these Asian women achieve earnings and employment parity with White women. Yet, even they remain underrepresented in leadership roles and occupy less influential roles within their organizations. At the same time, another strand of research shows that with the exception of South Asian men, Asian Americans are less likely than their White counterparts to ascend to managerial and executive positions in the United States (Kalleberg and Mouw 2018; Hollister 2011; Lu 2022, 2024b; Lu et al. 2020; Rosenfeld 1992; Shao 2023;

Zhu 2024). These findings highlight the heterogeneity within the Asian American population and indicate that there are no uniform advantages shared by all Asian American groups.

STRATEGIC ADAPTATION FROM EDUCATION TO THE LABOR MARKET

Aware of potential barriers to career mobility, Asian Americans strategically adapt to navigate these challenges. Faced with real and perceived impediments in the labor market, Asians in the US tend to pursue career options that are most likely to shield them from or minimize exposure to societal and organizational bias. Educational attainment plays a foundational role in this strategy. Education is perceived as an institution that (should) reward individuals for ability and hard work, rather than for “functionally irrelevant” (Cole and Cole 1973) characteristics such as race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Therefore, Asian Americans often view education as the most reliable path to attaining prestigious, high-paying careers. This belief is reinforced by the contemporary emphasis on education as the single most important engine of mobility in East Asian countries like China, Japan, and Korea, as well as historical connections between educational attainment and securing socially prestigious careers in these traditionally Confucian countries (Ho 1962; Tran 2016).

Stanley Sue and Sumie Okazaki (1990) characterize the educational strategy adopted by Asian families to navigate potential barriers to social mobility as “relative functionalism.” Specifically, parents prioritize academic achievement for their children to compensate for their limited political capital, lack of mainstream social networks, and experiences with societal and institutional discrimination. The focus on education is rooted in a deep belief in the connection between hard work and success (Chen and Stevenson 1995; Hsin and Xie 2014), motivating Asian immigrant parents to invest heavily in their children’s education to overcome potential challenges to future mobility.

Xie and Goyette (2003) elaborated on the concept of relative functionalism with their framework of “strategic adaptation.” They argued that Asian Americans strategically choose careers with high educational require-

ments—such as physical sciences, medicine, engineering, and computer science—to ensure a smoother path to high earnings and career mobility. These career options have not only the highest percentages of individuals with bachelor’s degrees but they also offer higher salaries. Since this earlier work, more recent research has examined how Asian American individuals and their families strategically plan for both educational and career success (Chen 2025; Dhingra 2020; Huang 2021; Lee and Zhou 2015; Tian 2023; Warikoo 2022). While not all of this research explicitly frames Asian Americans’ choices as deliberately strategic, we argue that, collectively, these studies show how Asian American individuals and families make decisions that enhance their own and their children’s educational prospects with a focus on future career outcomes.

One key aspect of this strategic planning is the prioritization of high-performing schools by Asian families, along with their deliberate approach to educational expenditures and extracurricular activities (Goyette et al. 2023; Tian 2023). Asian students also make strategic decisions regarding college selection and field of study. They are more likely to apply to and attend selective, “reach” schools, even after adjusting for standardized test scores and grades (An 2010; Ayalon et al. 2008; Espenshade and Radford 2009; Goyette et al. 2023; Hsia 1988). Once enrolled, they are more likely to major in business, medical, and STEM fields. These strategic decisions are part of what Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015) coined as Asian Americans’ “success frame,” which leads them to aspire to gain admission to top colleges and land high-paying jobs, as we will elaborate later.

Neighborhoods, Housing, and School Selection

First, Asian American parents are strategic in selecting elementary and secondary schools for their children, often residing in neighborhoods with academically competitive, high-performing public schools (Lee and Zhou 2015; Park 2020; Warikoo 2022). To access more competitive and higher-quality schools, Asian American families with K–12-aged children spend more on housing than comparable

White families (Tian 2023). While many of these schools are located in predominantly White suburban communities, the rise of Asian American middle-class “ethnoburbs”—particularly in California, New York, and New Jersey—has led to high concentrations of Asian American students in public high schools characterized by high average test scores, universal graduation rates, and high admission rates into competitive four-year colleges (Drake 2022; Huang 2010; Kye 2018; Li 1999).

Consequently, Asian American students often find themselves in highly competitive academic environments, surrounded by other high-performing peers (Kim and Gasman 2011; Massé 2019). Among these peers are international students from upper- and middle-class East Asian families, some of whom immigrated to the US alone—often referred to as “parachute kids” (Zhou 1998). Others arrived with one parent (typically the mother) while the other parent remains in their country of origin to provide financial support, but flies across the ocean seasonally to visit their families—an arrangement known as the “wild geese fathers” (Lee and Koo 2006). The presence of these international students further intensifies the academic pressure experienced by Asian American students (Kim and Okazaki 2014).

While Asian American students are not more likely to attend private schools than other students (Goyette and Xie 1999), they are significantly more likely to attend selective public high schools. They constitute a disproportionately large share of the student body in nationally renowned public schools like Stuyvesant High School and Bronx High School of Science in New York City, Whitney High School in Los Angeles, and Lowell High School in San Francisco. For example, Asian American students comprise 72 percent of the student body at Stuyvesant High School, while Asian Americans account for only 12 percent of New York City’s population. Similarly, at Whitney High School, Asians make up 79 percent of the student body, yet account for only 12 percent of the population in Los Angeles. At Lowell High School, Asian Americans account for 57 percent of its students, yet make up only 37 percent of San Francisco’s population. The overrepresentation of Asian students coupled with the severe

underrepresentation of Black and Hispanic students in these selective public schools has spawned heated debates about the meaning of opportunity, merit, bias, and fair admissions in cities like New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Philadelphia (Allensworth and Rosenkranz 2000; Chuang 2001).

Educational Expenditures, Extracurricular Activities, and Supplemental Education

Beyond school selection, Asian American families strategically invest in their children’s education by spending more on extracurricular activities during primary and secondary school than do White families, even after adjusting for socioeconomic status. While Asian families spend less than their White counterparts on children’s sports and recreational activities, they spend more on extracurricular activities overall, particularly on supplemental academic and enrichment programs (Tian 2023). For example, East Asian students are more likely to participate in test preparation and other private supplemental academic programs, such as Kumon and Sylvan Learning Centers, compared with students from other racial backgrounds (Byun and Park 2012; Park et al. 2016). East Asian parents also enroll their children in math- and STEM-oriented extracurricular activities, music lessons such as piano and violin, and weekend heritage language schools (Zhou and Kim 2006), while South Asian parents opt to enhance their children’s skills through participation in spelling bee competitions (Dhingra 2020; Shankar 2019).

The key to supplemental education for Asian students is that rather than using it to “catch up” with school work like White, Black, and Hispanic students do, they leverage it to secure a competitive edge to “get ahead” of their peers (Ho et al. 2019). For example, Asian American students will take algebra or geometry the summer before they are required to take it during the academic year to ensure they receive an A in the course (Lee and Zhou 2015). Furthermore, compared with White families, Asian American families tend to stress the competitive aspects of education, often encouraging their children to compete with their peers in grades, test scores, honors, and extracurricular activities such as piano contests.

The emphasis on competition stems partly from the belief among Asian American parents that their children will be evaluated primarily against other high-achieving Asian American students—rather than their White American peers—during college admissions (Tian 2023; Warikoo 2022).

In addition, hyper-selected Asian immigrant groups like Chinese and Koreans often create educational services within their communities—sometimes at low or no cost in community centers, ethnic churches, and temples—making supplemental education accessible to members of their ethnic group regardless of class (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Kim 2006). Given the ready availability of ethnic-specific supplemental education resources, the significance of parental education consequently diminishes for the children of Asian immigrants compared with White or Black American children (Liu and Xie 2016). Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when large in-person classes were cancelled, Asian American students did not experience a disruption in supplemental education (Lee et al. 2023). Unlike their White peers, East Asian students continued with private tutoring, and South Asian students continued to utilize test preparation and other online supplemental services.

Paying for the Prestige

Compared with White students, Asian American high school students are not only more likely to apply to and enroll in college, but they are also more likely to aim for and enroll in selective colleges and universities (An 2010; Ayalon et al. 2008; Carnevale and Rose 2004; Fishman 2020; Goyette et al. 2023). While this racial difference could be attributed to Asian American students generally having higher GPAs and SAT or ACT scores compared with students from other racial backgrounds, Ann L. Mullen and Kimberly Goyette (2019) found that even after controlling for these indicators of academic achievement, Asian Americans are still more likely to attend selective institutions. In fact, Asian American students are more likely than White students to apply to “reach” institutions—institutions where a student’s own SAT or ACT scores are in the 25th percentile for the overall student body (Fishman 2020; Mullen

and Goyette 2019). These patterns suggest that Asian Americans are more likely to seek to maximize the prestige of their college degree relative to their qualifications compared with other groups—what Kimberly Goyette and colleagues (2023) aptly describe as “paying for the prestige.”

This focus on selective school attendance leads Asian American families to save more and invest a larger amount than other racial groups in their children’s education, including college and supplemental education (Tian 2023). This financial commitment is often driven by the belief that the high cost of attending a selective university is justified by the potential returns (Dondero and Humphries 2016; Goyette et al. 2023; Ouyang et al. 2019). Prior research has confirmed the multidimensional rewards of attending a selective university: these institutions boast higher graduation rates (Long 2008), are associated with higher future earnings for graduates (Brand and Halaby 2006; Thomas and Zhang 2005; Witteveen and Attewell 2017), and garner greater esteem from students’ peers and families’ social networks (Lee and Zhou 2015).

Choosing Fields that Convey Competence

Strategic adaptation continues into the college years for Asian Americans. Once enrolled, Asian American college students are more likely to choose majors and fields of study that lead to high-paying careers, such as physical sciences, engineering, computer science, and business (Goyette and Mullen 2006; Xie and Goyette 2003). Self-stereotyping may also influence Asian American students’ choice of college majors: those who internalize stereotypes of Asians as academically talented but less proficient in English tend to gravitate toward math and science majors (Shen 2015). While the high concentration of Asian American students in STEM and medical fields tends to decline across immigrant generations, particularly among men (Min and Jang 2015), it remains consistently higher than that of White American students for both men and women across generations.

Furthermore, Asian American students tend to choose fields with higher starting salaries compared with their White peers (Alba and Bar-

bosa 2016). However, such significant differences between Asian men (except Southeast Asians) and White men disappear after accounting for potential confounders that influence their likelihood of attending college (Song and Glick 2004). The same does not hold true for women: Chinese, Filipino, and Southeast Asian women are more likely than White women to select fields associated with lucrative careers, *ceteris paribus* (Song and Glick 2004).

In sum, attending prestigious, selective undergraduate institutions and choosing specific fields of study are key components of Asian Americans’ strategic adaptation to the US workplace. STEM majors at elite institutions are perceived as more reliable pathways to high-earning, high-status careers, especially in the face of scarce social networks, limited political and cultural capital, and the persistent stereotypes that Asian Americans are competent but not visionary, creative, bold, or warm (Lee 2021; Lee et al. 2024; Lee and Fiske 2006; Lin et al. 2005; Zou and Cheryan 2017). However, recent research has brought to light the limits of strategic adaptation, which emerge in professional schools like law and business and become evident in the workplace.

THE LIMITS OF STRATEGIC ADAPTATION

Educational investments, high status degrees, and prestigious titles are no guarantees of a career free of bias. Despite their strategic adaptation, many Asian American professionals—East Asians, in particular—face the limits of these strategies, beginning in professional schools.

A Bamboo Ceiling in the Classroom and the Workplace

The educational advantage that Asian American students exhibit from elementary school through college diminishes when they enter professional graduate schools, revealing what researchers refer to as a “bamboo ceiling in the classroom” (Lu et al. 2022; Xie 2022). While prior research has pointed to obstacles to upward mobility for East Asians in the labor market (Lu 2022; Lu et al. 2020), this new line of research shows that these disadvantages emerge even before they begin professional ca-

reers. In US law and business schools, East Asian students—but not South Asian students—attain lower grades than their White peers, even after controlling for factors such as nativity, school-level characteristics, and admissions criteria, including standardized test scores.

In US business schools, East Asian students particularly struggle in courses like leadership, strategy, and marketing, where verbal assertiveness heavily influences the course grade (Lu et al. 2022). According to Jackson G. Lu and colleagues (2022), East Asian students underperform in the specific mode of verbal assertiveness—argumentative, rapid-fire classroom exchanges—that law and business schools prize. Differences in culture, rather than ability or motivation, Lu and colleagues (2022) argue, explain East Asian students’ difficulty in these courses. This pattern continues in the workplace where East Asians generally lag behind all groups in promotion to managerial and executive ranks in US organizations, even after controlling for years of work experience and performance reviews (Chung et al. 2017; Fernandez 1998; Gee and Peck 2017). This holds true even in fields where they are overrepresented, such as technology, law, medicine, natural sciences, and engineering (Mervis 2005).

Lu and colleagues (2020, 2022) point to differences between Eastern and Western cultures. In Western corporate culture, verbal assertiveness conveys competence, confidence, authority, and charisma. By contrast, East Asian Confucian culture shuns individual displays of assertiveness, placing a higher value on harmony, connectedness, and interpersonal relationships (Markus and Kitayama 1991). The clash between the individualistic US corporate culture and the collectivistic East Asian Confucian culture may contribute to the bamboo ceiling. Further supporting their argument, Lu and colleagues (2020, 2022) find that South Asians—whose cultural orientation is not Confucian—are verbally assertive in the classroom and in the workplace, and they excel in both domains. In fact, research suggests that South Asian men are more likely to attain leadership positions than White men—pointing to what Jennifer Lee and Karthick Ramakrishnan (2020) refer to as “South Asian exceptionalism.”

Yet East Asian students’ place of education or the quality of their undergraduate education may drive some of the differences in the bamboo ceiling in the classroom and beyond (Xie 2022). Specifically, Yu Xie (2022) elaborates that foreign undergraduate education—rather than cultural differences in verbal assertiveness alone—may partly account for the disadvantage experienced by East Asian law and business students, especially given the lower verbal test scores (but not quantitative scores) of East Asian international students in the pioneering study by Lu and colleagues (2022). Regardless of the source, the underperformance of East Asian students in law and business schools is a precursor to the loss of their advantage in the labor market.

Another vein of research emphasizes the role of racial, gendered, and cultural stereotypes that hinder East Asians’ career advancement (Chien et al. 2026; Chin 2020; STAATUS Index 2024; Tinkler et al. 2019). Asian American women, in particular, appear to face compounded disadvantages. They are the least likely to be perceived as suitable for leadership roles and the least likely to be promoted, regardless of their experience or behavior (Tinkler et al. 2019). Finally, job mismatch—where educational qualifications, skills, and field of study do not align with job roles—has been proposed as yet another possible contributing factor to Asian Americans’ labor market disadvantage (De Jong and Madamba 2001; Lu and Li 2021; Madamba and De Jong 1997).

While research on the bamboo ceiling consistently highlights the underrepresentation of East Asians in leadership positions in the United States, Xie (2022) observes that these studies focus narrowly on leadership attainment as the primary workplace outcome. It is possible that East Asians achieve better labor market outcomes compared with other groups over the life course when broader measures—such as lifetime earnings and wealth accumulation—are considered. Since East Asian Americans place a greater emphasis than White Americans on the role of effort in achieving exceptional educational outcomes (Hsin and Xie 2014; Liu and Xie 2016), this emphasis may extend to the workplace, potentially leading to more favorable earnings over the life course.

Future research should examine the diverse career transitions and trajectories of Asian Americans and their multifaceted definitions of career success, moving beyond a single focus on leadership roles. The articles in this issue are a groundbreaking step in this direction. The authors interrogate Asian Americans’ presumed advantages in the labor market, while also revealing the strategies individuals and families use in their careers and personal lives to secure mobility. The issue sheds much needed light on the diverse ways in which the so-called model minority navigates work, family, and careers after completing their formal education.

A PREVIEW OF THE ARTICLES AHEAD

Drawing on new and existing data, the authors in this issue use diverse data sources and research methods to examine facets of Asian Americans’ labor market experiences and outcomes. By leveraging evidence-based research, these social scientists expand the field of Asian American studies, which has been dominated by the humanities, while also broadening traditional social science disciplines that have long ignored or relegated the study of Asian Americans to niches.

The first set of articles shows how conclusions about Asian American advantage change when we shift the focus from national to local. Manduca and Furey begin by presenting what has become a familiar statistic: Asian Americans have the highest median household income of all US groups, earning 107 percent of White American households. However, the authors question whether national-level statistics are the optimal way of studying the Asian–White household income gap given the geographic clustering of the US Asian population. What does the income gap look like within the same metropolitan areas?

Focusing on equalized family incomes within commuting zones, Manduca and Furey analyze median income within core-based statistical areas (CBSAs), which represent metropolitan economic zones where workers are likely to commute. Within these zones, Asian Americans earn less than White Americans. Specifically, they earn only 88 percent of what White Americans earn, on average. Thus, de-

spite earning 7 percent more than White Americans nationally, Asian Americans earn an average of 12 percent less than the White residents of their metropolitan areas. By distinguishing between national and local measures—what Manduca and Furey refer to as the “national-local divergence”—the level of inequality changes by nearly 20 percentage points. Critically, they show that this gap exists across virtually all educational, nativity, and national origin subgroups and cannot be explained by differences in the cost of living. They conclude that geography is an independent and important factor contributing to Asian-White inequality in the United States.

The implications of Manduca and Furey’s striking finding are far-reaching and help to reconcile tensions that Lee and Sheng (2024) highlighted in the Asian American assimilation paradox—in particular, the way social scientists typically measure inequality and the way that Asian Americans experience it. While national-level quantitative studies point to an Asian American advantage, qualitative studies focusing on localized contexts—such as residents of a neighborhood or workers in a firm—often reveal an Asian American disadvantage. Because social scientists typically rely on national level statistics to show that Asian Americans have achieved a great deal of socioeconomic success in the aggregate, these findings mask the ways in which Asians continue to experience substantial disadvantages in their daily lives compared with White residents in the metropolitan areas where they live and the organizations in which they work.

Like Manduca and Furey, Kim and Kim (2026) zero in on commuting zones to underscore the significance of the local context. But rather than focusing on median household earnings, they shift to men’s earnings. By analyzing commuting zones as the unit of measurement—that is, the local labor market where workers are likely to commute—Kim and Kim compare the earnings of Asian American and White men between the ages of twenty-five and sixty-four. This comparison is critical, as seven out of ten Asian Americans live in the top two richest commuting zone quintiles, while less than 15 percent live in the bottom two poorest quintiles. By stark contrast, White Americans

are more evenly distributed across all commuting zone income quintiles.

While Asian men earn more than White men at the national level, Kim and Kim find that this advantage reverses at the local level, regardless of level of education and immigrant generation. The only exception is the 1.5 generation (foreign-born Asian Americans who migrated to the US at a young age) who hold advanced degrees—the most educationally selected group. Among the most highly selected, Asian Indian men are the only group with a statistically significant earnings advantage over equally educated White men—pointing again to a pattern of South Asian exceptionalism (Lee and Ramakrishnan 2020). Korean men with advanced degrees have a slight but statistically insignificant advantage, while Chinese and Vietnamese men have reached parity with equally educated White men. Kim and Kim offer an additional keen insight: when they control for occupation, all Asian American men with advanced degrees earn less than equally educated White men.

The research by Kim and Kim, as well as Manduca and Furey, raises an important question about the residential clustering of Asian Americans. Specifically, their findings beg the question of whether the choice to live in high-income communities reflects a strategic trade-off, in which Asian Americans accept lower earnings relative to White Americans to access amenities such as stronger school districts for their children or proximity to ethnic enclaves. This trade-off appears especially relevant for less-educated Asian Americans, who experience an even wider income gap in areas with a large concentration of highly educated coethnics. Kim and Kim present some evidence that these patterns partly reflect rational, calculated choices aimed at prioritizing educational opportunities for their children (see also Tian 2023). While they may sacrifice higher earnings, Asian Americans gain in other dimensions that may enhance family mobility.

The next set of articles shifts our attention to the ways gender, family, and marriage penalties and premiums influence Asian Americans’ labor force participation and earnings. Ho and Park (2026) examine the wages of prime-age workers between the ages of twenty-five and

fifty-four. Expanding their analysis to the national level, they explore earnings disparities between Asian and White workers. Controlling for factors such as gender, ethnicity, and education, they unveil some noteworthy findings. One of the most compelling is that the so-called Asian American advantage in labor market earnings is largely driven by Asian American women. College-educated Asian American women across the five largest Asian ethnic groups—Chinese, Indian, Filipino, Vietnamese, and Korean—experience an earnings advantage relative to college-educated White women. In contrast, Asian American men between the ages of twenty-five and fifty-four do not exhibit an advantage over their White male counterparts. They suggest that the wage gap among Asian American women is largely due to their increased labor force participation and occupational clustering: Asian American women tend to work more hours than White women, and they are also more concentrated in higher-paying occupations.

Among Asian Americans without a bachelor's degree—a group that Ho and Park refer to as a "minority within a minority"—gender remains significant. Asian American men experience a consistent wage disadvantage compared with White men without a college degree. The wage gap among less-educated men is, in large part, a function of their lower labor supply: Asian American men without college degrees work fewer hours annually compared with similarly educated White men. However, this wage gap does not exist for Asian American women without a college degree. Hence, according to Ho and Park, there are two separately significant ways in which the gendered wage gaps drive the Asian American–White earnings gap at the national level: college-educated Asian American women earn more than White counterparts while Asian American men without college degrees earn less than similarly educated White men.

While Asian American women in the aggregate earn more than White women, Sassler and Sorresso (2026) zero in on a specific industry to explore why Asian American women's earnings might differ from both Asian American men and White women. Drawing on data from the

American Community Survey, the authors compare the earnings of White, Chinese, and Asian Indian men and women in computer science—a rapidly growing, high-earning industry where college-educated Asian Americans cluster. They also examine differences within Asian Americans by focusing on the two largest national origin groups: Chinese and Asian Indians.

Traditional economic explanations of earnings disparities between men and women emphasize differences in human capital: men earn more than women due to their higher human capital. By contrast, sociological explanations tend to focus on how gendered expectations of partnership and parenting disproportionately affect women's labor force participation and earnings. Sassler and Sorresso bridge these two bodies of research and extend this line of inquiry by considering how gendered behaviors—such as investing in human capital and fulfilling time-consuming family roles—vary across gender, race, and ethnicity.

The authors find a gender wage gap in computer science: Asian and White women in the field earn between 17 and 18 percent less than Asian and White men, yet they also find that women are not uniformly disadvantaged. The gender wage gap is twice as large among Asian Indians than among Chinese and White women, even after controlling for human capital and family characteristics. Their analyses point to unequal marriage and parenthood penalties among women: Asian Indian women marry and become mothers earlier, and they also have more children, on average, than White and Chinese women. In addition, Asian Indian women experience a marriage penalty for occupational homogamy while White and Chinese women experience a marriage premium when their partners are also computer scientists—further widening the gender wage gap among Asian Indian women on the one hand and Chinese and White women on the other. All men, by contrast, benefit from a marriage premium compared with unmarried men. Sassler and Sorresso convincingly conclude that the gender wage gap in computer science is, in fact, a family wage gap.

Like the authors in this issue, Greenman (2011) similarly found that Asian American

women tend to out-earn their White counterparts, and attributed this advantage to their stronger attachment to the labor force after motherhood. How do Asian American women achieve this? One possibility is their reliance on extended family members—particularly their parents and parents-in-law—for childcare support. A large body of sociological literature has documented the importance of extended families in Asian households (Cheng and Xie 2023; Zeng and Xie 2014). Within an extended family, Asian grandparents often view child-rearing as their responsibility in addition to that of the parents and, as such, they actively contribute to the well-being of their grandchildren. This cultural perspective differs from mainstream American societal norms, as Zeng and Xie (2014, 603) noted: “In contrast to the US pattern, where grandparents tend to substitute for parents, Chinese grandparents tend to supplement parental presence.” By supplementing parents’ childcare, grandparents not only add to childcare support but also alleviate some of the responsibilities of Asian mothers, thereby enabling their fuller participation in the labor force.

To test the effect of extended family support on women’s labor force participation, Lim and Jeong (2026) analyze data from the 1990 and 2000 US Censuses and the 2001–2022 American Community Survey. They assess whether coresidence with parents and parents-in-law contributes to Asian–White differences in women’s labor force participation. For coresidence to contribute to higher labor force participation among Asian women relative to White American women, two conditions must hold: First, Asian Americans must have significantly higher rates of coresidence with parents or parents-in-law than White Americans; and second, women’s labor force participation must be higher when living with parents or parents-in-law.

The authors find support for both conditions. First, Asian American women are much more likely to live with parents or parents-in-law than White women—a trend that holds across all Asian ethnic groups and immigration generations. Second, Asian American women’s labor force participation is higher when they live with parents or parents-in-law, particularly

among Asian immigrant women and those with young children. Hence, coresidence with extended families appears to enable Asian American women to be more likely to remain in the labor force compared with White women, even when they have young children. Lim and Jeong document this critical role of family structure and investments in contributing to Asian American women’s greater attachment to the labor force compared with similarly educated White women.

Uchikoshi and Liu (2026) add to the body of literature by examining the effects of mothers’ educational level on the likelihood of a non-marital birth and the prevalence of married households with children under twelve. The authors compare the patterns of Asian Americans to other racial groups as well as within Asian American ethnic groups. Using 2015–2019 data from the National Vital Statistics System and the 2013–2023 Current Population Surveys, Uchikoshi and Liu (2026) find that educational gradients in the likelihood of a nonmarital birth are weaker among Asian Americans than White Americans. In addition, they find that young Asian American children are more likely to reside in households headed by a married couple, and especially so among foreign-born and racially endogamous Asians. That the educational gradient is stronger among native-born and interracial married Asians emphasizes the diversity in family inequality among Asian Americans.

The implication of Uchikoshi and Liu’s findings aligns with the views of other authors in this issue: Asian Americans consider the family unit when making decisions about their children’s well-being. This research provides suggestive evidence that Asian American family behavior—particularly among those who are foreign-born and racially endogamous—departs from that of White Americans in ways that may create more favorable family environments for their children’s achievement. Their findings support the notion that family behavior and environments may be strategically employed to enhance children’s opportunities for mobility.

The final set of papers explores new ways in which Asian Americans strategically adapt to

the labor market in response to its increasing financialization, while also acknowledging the limitations of the strategy. Grigoryeva (2026) charts new territory in how social scientists measure wages and compensation. In addition to wages, Grigoryeva highlights the rise of stock-based compensation—an increasingly common form of compensation in which employees receive company stock. The growth of stock-based compensation in the past four decades is astounding: In the early 1980s, fewer than one in eight American workers in the private sector received stock-based compensation, but today, nearly one in four workers do. Moreover, stock options are offered not only to engineers in Silicon Valley start-ups and executives of Fortune 500 companies but also to baristas at Starbucks. Grigoryeva examines the implications of this surge in the shift toward stock-based compensation for Asian Americans.

Analyses of the General Social Survey and the Survey of Consumer Finances show that Asian Americans are more likely than White Americans to receive stock-based compensation. Grigoryeva finds, however, that this is because Asian Americans are more likely to work in occupations in which stock options are offered. After controlling for occupation and adding sociodemographic controls, she concludes that the Asian–White gap in the likelihood of receiving stock-based compensation disappears. She also finds no significant difference in the amount of stock-based compensation received by Asian and White employees.

Given Asian Americans' higher likelihood of working in occupations where stock options are offered, and the finding that this type of compensation is at parity with White workers, Grigoryeva proposes that Asian Americans' selection into these jobs may reflect a form of strategic adaptation. Choosing jobs that offer stock options may help assuage the local labor market earnings disadvantages identified by Manduca and Furey and Kim and Kim. Grigoryeva's innovative work introduces a novel dimension to the literature on racial inequality, emphasizing how corporate wage-setting practices and the availability of stock options may close economic disparities between Asian and White workers. Her study paves the way for more comprehensive scholarly and policy dis-

cussions on the diversification of income sources and its broader implications for racial inequality in an increasingly financialized labor market.

In yet another variant of strategic adaptation, Agius Vallejo and Keister (2026) shift the focus to self-employment and explore why college-educated, second-generation Chinese in Los Angeles choose to bet on business over the professional labor market. Their research fills a theoretical gap in the literature on Asian American entrepreneurship, which has mainly focused on the first generation. Previous literature painted self-employment as a last resort option for hyper-selected, college-educated immigrants who are unable to transfer their human and cultural capital from their countries of origin to the United States. Yet Agius Vallejo and Keister find that entrepreneurship does not cease after the first generation. Among second-generation Chinese, 11 percent are self-employed, and among this group, an astonishing 91 percent have a college degree or higher. Drawing on in-depth interviews with second-generation Chinese business owners, the authors find that family wealth, ethnic capital, transnational connections, and the marketization of mainland China and Taiwan lead one in ten to buck professional careers and bet on business.

While some—particularly firstborn sons—inherit lucrative family businesses, other second-generation Chinese strategically adapt to the labor market by drawing on family wealth as a financial launching pad to seize opportunities in an increasingly globalized economy. Agius Vallejo and Keister also show that self-employment is a rational and calculated choice among these college-educated second-generation Chinese, thereby reframing entrepreneurship as a mobility strategy among the US-born. Their findings challenge and expand the success frame for second-generation Asians, which had been narrowly defined as entry into one of the four coveted professions: medicine, law, science, and engineering (Lee and Zhou 2015). Entrepreneurship is not only a viable pathway for mobility among second-generation Chinese, but it can also be a highly lucrative one.

The limits of strategic adaptation become

painfully evident in Chien and colleagues’ (2026) portrait of Asian Americans in the law. While gaining entry into top law schools and elite law firms is not a problem for Asian Americans, advancing and attaining leadership positions in these institutions is. Unlike other US minority groups, Asian Americans are not underrepresented in the field. They comprise nearly 9 percent of graduates from the top 30 law schools in the country and have high rates of entry into major US law firms. Despite this, they exit private practice at a higher rate than any other group and are rarely promoted to the ranks of equity partners. In the public sphere, they make up less than 6 percent of all federal judicial clerks, and in 2017, they comprised a mere 0.3 percent of elected prosecutors and Senate-confirmed US attorneys. For reference, 94.8 percent were White.

While Asian Americans in the legal profession have attained the success frame, their experiences point to troubling patterns that hinder their career mobility. Adopting a subject-centered approach that focuses on the experiences, sense of belonging, and group position of Asian American attorneys, Chien and colleagues examine how these professionals perceive their workplace experiences. The authors identify some disquieting and persistent patterns: perceptions of racial and gendered bias, lack of formal leadership training, insufficient mentorship, and work that goes unrecognized. In their focus group interviews, the authors learned that Asian American lawyers acknowledged that they are perceived as hard-working, responsible, logical, and careful by their partners and associates, but are also deemed to lack the traits necessary for leadership. For Asian American women, the intersection of race and gender produces a unique stereotype of passivity, meekness, and submissiveness—a death knell in the legal profession.

The authors underscore the limits of strategic adaptation. For Asian Americans in law, even the highest badges of prestige—a pedigreed law degree, a coveted title, and a job in an elite law firm—often fail to yield professional recognition and leadership opportunities. The underrepresentation of Asian Americans—especially Asian American women—in leadership roles is worrisome given that di-

versity in the legal profession is crucial for strengthening democratic institutions.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the authors in this issue show both the strategic adaptation that Asian Americans employ to navigate the challenges they face in the labor market and the limitations of these strategies. Adaptation includes entering into self-employment, managing perceptions of discrimination in professional relationships, and, though perhaps not always consciously so, pursuing careers that provide high wages and substantial compensation through stock options. The authors also reveal the challenges Asian Americans face in achieving labor market mobility and parity with native-born White Americans.

Comparisons of earnings advantages between Asian American and White workers are highly context-dependent. For example, Asian Americans’ chosen field of study plays a significant role in explaining their earnings advantage, with variability among Asian American men depending on their education level, nativity, and place of education. Furthermore, unlike native-born Whites, Asians are geographically clustered in the United States, with the majority residing in metropolitan areas with higher earnings, higher costs of living, and a higher percentage of college-educated residents. When we shift the lens from the national to the local and control for region and local geography, the Asian American earnings advantage for men disappears, and Asian households earn less than comparable White households.

While Asian American women consistently exhibit an earnings advantage over White women, the authors delve deeply into the underlying reasons for their labor market advantage. Asian American women are more likely to remain employed after they have children, less likely to leave the workforce when their children are young, and more likely to raise children in married-family households. Co-residence with family members—including parents and parents-in-law—enables Asian American mothers to remain in the labor force and contribute to household earnings, thereby ensuring family stability and enhancing the prospects for mobility for the next generation.

While this multigenerational household arrangement may be economically beneficial, it can come with psychological costs and extra household labor burdens that often fall on women (Howard et al. 2023; Olivieri et al. 2024).

A recurring theme in the articles is the strategic management of careers and household resources undertaken not only by individuals but by families. Family strategies for mobility involve decision-making about marriage, child-rearing, and investments in Asian American women's employment. Choices such as returning to the workforce when children are young and relying on coresidence with extended family members for childcare are made with the collective well-being of the family unit at the fore. Together, the authors point to an understudied area of research: While family strategies for children's education have been widely studied, family strategies concerning career choices and trajectories—particularly those affecting mothers—have received far less attention.

Additionally, family strategies for mobility may involve decisions about choosing to live in high-cost areas where their earnings are lower compared to their White neighbors, not because they are constrained by their employment, but because they prioritize their children's education when deciding where to live. States vary in their investments in public schools, cities differ in the types of educational opportunities they offer, and neighborhoods are diverse in the levels of resources they offer children—all of which influence children's educational opportunities, resources, and peers. The within-area earnings disadvantage that Asian Americans may encounter may thus reflect parental decisions that prioritize their children's well-being and social mobility over their own careers. Ziyao Tian's (2023) research supports this interpretation.

The authors also make clear that educational investments and attaining high-status careers do not shield Asian Americans from bias and discrimination. Asian American workers often confront external perceptions that hinder their advancement, as in careers in law. Because nine in ten Asians in the US are immigrants or the children of immigrants, they may have less access to professional networks and mentorship that help to address their work-

place disadvantages, especially compared with their native-born White peers. Their limited network of relationships can also lead the second generation to buck the professional labor market altogether for self-employment or seek jobs in firms that offer stock options as compensation.

This issue builds on the growing body of research on how Asian American individuals and their families judiciously plan educational trajectories by shifting the focus from education to the labor market. Similar to the challenges faced in education, Asian Americans often contend with stereotypes that portray them as foreign overachievers who lack creativity, boldness, authority, and warmth (Lin et al. 2005; STAATUS Index 2024; Zou and Cheryan 2017). But unlike in educational institutions—which typically rely on a narrower and perhaps more objective set of criteria for judging success—workplace success is assessed by a broader range of criteria and more subjective evaluation, thereby leaving more room for stereotypes, bias, and discrimination to affect career trajectories and outcomes.

The articles in this issue focus explicitly on labor market experiences and, collectively, offer a snapshot of Asian Americans—particularly those who are college-educated—illustrating how they have largely succeeded academically but still face challenges in translating that educational success into career mobility comparable to their White American peers. This aspect of the Asian American experience remains understudied. However, this portrayal cannot and should not be the only representation of Asian Americans in the US labor market, as it overlooks many subgroups and their distinct experiences. For example, this issue does not address the experiences of recent refugees to the United States, undocumented Asian immigrants, or smaller Asian immigrant groups like Laotians, Hmong, and Bangladeshis, whose experiences differ significantly from those of the dominant Asian American ethnic groups (Hein 2006; Hsin and Aptekar 2022; Takei et al. 2013). Moreover, while much of the research on Asian Americans has focused on children and young adults, there remain notable gaps in research on Asian Americans over a longer life course, particularly middle age and old age.

In conclusion, Asian American educational achievement and high median earnings are often touted as an exception or a paradox in the United States, as reflected in terms such as “model minority” and “Asian American assimilation paradox” (Kao 1995; Lee and Sheng 2024; Wu 2013). How can a racial minority group in the US attain social mobility comparable to or exceeding that of the majority group while still experiencing discrimination? There are many potential answers to this question. This issue enriches the answers to this question by highlighting the disjuncture between national level statistics and the local contexts in which Asian Americans live and work as well as the diverse labor market outcomes among various Asian American subgroups. The authors call into question the notion of Asian Americans’ supposed workplace advantages and uncover ways they strategically adapt to achieve mobility despite the persistent challenges. As we noted at the opening, we offer this introduction and journal issue as a starting point—not an endpoint—for social scientists to study the career trajectories of Asian Americans as they navigate the transition from education to the labor market. We hope this inspires others to follow suit.

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PART I

Nationally Advantaged Yet Regionally Disadvantaged

Nationally Ahead, Locally Behind: Geographic Scale and the Asian American Income (Dis)advantage



ROBERT MANDUCA^{1D} AND JANE FUREY^{1D}

Most estimates of Asian–White inequality are calculated at the national level. We show that measures of Asian–White inequality are sensitive to the geographic scale at which they are calculated. Nationally, Asian Americans earn 107 percent of the median income of non-Hispanic White people, consistent with previous research documenting high average levels of socioeconomic attainment among Asians. However, compared to the non-Hispanic White residents of their own metropolitan areas, Asian Americans on average earn only 88 percent as much. The discrepancy between inequality estimated nationally and locally holds across most education, nativity, and national origin groups and is not accounted for by regional variation in cost of living. Examining inequality patterns at both national and local levels helps reconcile the apparent contradictions—socioeconomic achievement along with racialized exclusion and marginalization—that have emerged in previous research on Asian–White inequality. Although Asian Americans have achieved a great deal of socioeconomic success, they continue to face substantial inequality when compared to the White residents of the metropolitan areas where they live.

Keywords: Asian Americans, geographic inequality, hyper-selection, income inequality, reference groups, Simpson's Paradox

Scholarship on the social circumstances of Asian Americans has produced a tension. On the one hand, Asian Americans attain high levels of socioeconomic success, characterized by high levels of educational attainment and earnings, and have made substantial progress on

traditional markers of immigrant incorporation, including high rates of intermarriage and lower levels of residential segregation compared to other large ethnoracial groups in the United States (Sakamoto et al. 2009). On the other hand, the lived experiences of many

Robert Manduca is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, United States. **Jane Furey** is a postdoctoral research fellow in the Population Research Center at the University of Texas at Austin, United States.

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Asian Americans continue to include marginalization and racialized exclusion in many forms, ranging from workplace discrimination to xenophobic violence and rising anti-Asian hate (Shao 2023; Zhang 2023; Lee 2021). This tension has led some scholars to characterize the Asian American experience as an “assimilation paradox” (Lee and Sheng 2024). Even as Asian people in the US reach parity (or surpass) White people on many measures of socioeconomic status, historical and contemporary mechanisms of exclusion contribute to continued experiences of disadvantage.

This article argues that this apparent tension derives in part from the geographic scale at which inequality is measured. Measuring inequality at both the national and metropolitan scales, we show that the size and even the direction of the income gap between Asian Americans and White people depend fundamentally on the geographic scale of comparison. Compared to the US-born, non-Hispanic White population nationally, Asian Americans earn more, with a median family income 107 percent as large as the median White family income. But compared to the White residents of their own metro areas, Asian Americans earn less—just 88 percent as much, on average. More than 90 percent of Asian Americans live in metro areas where the median Asian family earns less than the median White family. This national–local divergence is present within virtually all educational, nativity, and national origin subgroups, and is distinct from the effect of adjusting for cost of living. Even among US-born Asians with a bachelor’s degree, who previous research shows have come closest to labor market parity with White Americans (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Kim and Zhao 2014), the median Asian American has a family income roughly equal to the median White family nationally, 3 percent smaller after adjusting for cost of living, but 12 percent smaller than the median White family in their metro area.

Our findings suggest that the assimilation paradox may be an ecological fallacy. Asian and White people, on average, tend to live in very different parts of the United States, with Asian people disproportionately living in a small number of high-income metropolitan areas (Wang et al. 2017; Woo 2000, 31). Moreover, as

we show, the White residents of these metros are particularly highly selected in terms of education and income levels, being 50 percent more likely to have graduated from college than White residents of the rest of the country—a pattern that is not observed for either Asian Americans or residents of other ethnoracial groups. While the spatial concentration of Asian Americans in high-income metros partially explains their national advantage, the hyper-selection among White residents contributes to the divergence between national measures indicating Asian advantages and local experiences characterized by disadvantage. National estimates present a paradox—socioeconomic assimilation and continued racialized exclusion—while local estimates provide evidence for economic as well as racial disadvantage among Asian people within their individual metropolitan areas.

While both national and local comparisons of income inequality between Asian and White people are meaningful, they highlight different aspects of the Asian American experience. The national comparison is important for emphasizing the greater economic resources that Asian families have access to, on average, relative to White families, and for highlighting the high levels of socioeconomic success that Asian Americans have achieved. But local measures may better reflect the day-to-day experiences of Asian Americans, who might find that national statistics documenting that Asians outearn White people do not conform to their lived realities. The combination of national advantage and local disadvantage may offer one explanation for the apparent tension found in previous research.

BACKGROUND

Although a large body of research has documented high levels of socioeconomic attainment among Asian residents of the United States, the extent to which Asian Americans have achieved true parity with White people is debated. While much of the previous research has found that Asian Americans display economic advantages compared with White people, other studies qualify these findings by breaking out Asian–White economic disparities by education level, or by highlighting het-

erogeneity among the Asian population. We center the importance of place as an additional explanation of Asian–White inequality in the United States, and argue that measures of local inequality may provide insights into the assimilation paradox among Asian Americans.

National Patterns of Asian–White Socioeconomic Inequality

Previous research has found Asian Americans to have reached parity with or surpassed the socioeconomic status of White Americans across several domains. Asian Americans have consistently been found to have higher average incomes than Whites, or any other major ethnoracial group: They had a median household income of \$51,288 in 2016, compared to \$47,958 for Whites, \$31,082 for African Americans, and \$30,400 for Latinos (Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018). Asian Americans also have higher average levels of educational achievement, as typically measured in test scores and grades, as well as higher educational attainment than other ethnoracial groups (Kao 1995; Kao and Thompson 2003; Pew Research Center 2013). This pattern is sufficiently strong that in some school districts Asian students are viewed as academically superior to middle-class White students by staff, parents, and other students (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013; Warikoo 2022).

Yet, findings of Asian American advantages are not unqualified. For example, Asians’ raw income advantage appears to result primarily from the disproportionately high average levels of education among Asian Americans. When comparing individuals with the same level of education, studies have found that Asian Americans earn less than Whites with the same educational attainment (Hirschman and Wong 1984; Zeng and Xie 2004). The overall Asian advantage, then, may result from “over-education” (Hirschman and Wong 1984): To earn the same income as White Americans, Asian Americans must achieve a higher level of education.

High educational attainment among Asian Americans also reflects the hyper-selectivity of Asian immigration (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou and Lee 2017). Asian immigrants to the US have greater average educational attainment than the overall populations of both their origin

countries and the US itself. Yet inequalities by nativity and place of education emerge. US-born Asian Americans have generally been found to have higher incomes than similarly situated Asian immigrants (Stewart and Dixon 2010), although in some analyses the 1.5 generation—those born abroad but relocated to the US as children—have higher incomes still (Kim and Sakamoto 2010). Zhen Zeng and Yu Xie (2004) also find that Asian immigrants who were educated in the US have similar incomes to US-born Asians and US-born Whites after controlling for education, English language ability, and region of residence.

While there is scholarly agreement that the high educational attainment of Asian Americans, the hyper-selectivity of Asian immigrants to the US, and place of education all contribute to Asian–White income inequality, consensus breaks down beyond these points. Some studies have argued that after accounting for education and nativity there is minimal or no further penalty associated with being Asian per se (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Wang et al. 2017; Zeng and Xie 2004). Other studies have found that Asian–White disparities persist into the second generation and beyond (Kim and Sakamoto 2014; Kim and Zhao 2014; Stewart and Dixon 2010; Takei et al. 2013).

In part, the lack of definitive consensus reflects the heterogeneity among Asian Americans. There is more internal variation among Asian Americans than among other major ethnoracial groups (Budiman and Ruiz 2021; Vo et al. 2023). One analysis drawing on population-level tax records found that Asian Americans were overrepresented in both the top 10 percent and the bottom 10 percent of the income distribution and had a higher within-group Gini coefficient than any other ethnoracial group (Akee et al. 2019). Lucas G. Drouhot and Filiz Garip (2021) identify five distinct subgroups of Asian Americans, ranging from the hyper-selected, of whom 67 percent have a college degree and almost half earn more than \$100,000 a year, to the vulnerable, 69 percent of whom have less than a high school education and only 3 percent of whom earn at least \$100,000. Phoebe Ho and Hyunjoon Park (2026, this issue) show that there is substantial variation across national origin groups in the

labor market outcomes of young workers: Among US-born men aged from twenty-five to thirty-nine with at least a bachelor's degree, Chinese and Indian Americans earn more than similarly educated Whites, on average, while Cambodian and Filipino Americans earn less. Variation extends to other socioeconomic outcomes. For example, the average wealth of Asian Americans at the 90th percentile is over \$1.4 million, compared to less than \$10,000 at the 20th percentile (Tran 2024). That said, there exists substantial economic heterogeneity among other ethnoracial groups as well, which is less commonly studied (Sakamoto et al. 2009).

Experienced Inequality and the Assimilation Paradox

By many traditional measures of assimilation, Asian Americans appear to be largely incorporated into mainstream US society (Alba and Nee 2003), to the extent that they have been said to challenge the majority–minority paradigm in US race relations (Sakamoto et al. 2009). However, this socioeconomic success has not resulted in equal treatment, and Asian Americans continue to be perceived and treated as racialized others. This combination of socioeconomic success and racialized marginalization has led some scholars to describe Asian Americans as presenting an assimilation paradox (Lee and Sheng 2024) or following a path of “racialized assimilation” (Lee and Kye 2016), in which success by traditional measures of assimilation does not bring full acceptance into American society.

To study this apparent paradox, scholars have proposed adopting a “subject-centered” approach to understand Asian–White inequalities (Lee and Sheng 2024). Such an approach centers the lived experiences of individuals, focusing on their perceptions of belonging and sense of group position rather than aggregate measures of success or attainment. Research taking a subject-centered approach in the study of Asian American experiences has helped illuminate how socioeconomic success coexists with racialized exclusion. For example, research on Asian Americans’ experiences in the workplace shows that despite high levels of occupational attainment, Asian Americans report

encountering microaggressions and discrimination from coworkers and being stereotyped as smart and hardworking but unassertive (Sue et al. 2007; Dang et al. 2022; Huang 2021; Yu 2020; Chien et al. 2026, this issue). Importantly, when Asian Americans fail to conform to these stereotypes, they are penalized compared to White coworkers (Berdahl and Min 2012; Lu et al. 2020). While Asian Americans are overrepresented in high-paying occupations, they are underrepresented at the most senior levels—a phenomenon that has been described as a “bamboo ceiling” (Chin 2020; Dang et al. 2022; Gee and Peck 2017; Woo 2000). Clearly, these microlevel dynamics can be consequential for both material and experienced inequality.

Geographic Variation and Asian–White Inequality

This article posits that geographic variation may help resolve the apparent paradox of Asian Americans’ continued experiences of exclusion despite socioeconomic success. Due in large part to historical and contemporary immigration policy, Asian Americans are highly geographically concentrated compared to most other US ethnoracial groups. Early immigrants from Asia arrived primarily to Hawaii and the West Coast, which had tens of thousands of residents of Chinese and Japanese heritage by the turn of the twentieth century (Takaki 2012; Lee 2015). After being largely outlawed by the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Immigration Act of 1924, immigration from Asia revived following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Post-1965 Asian immigrants have generally moved to traditional destination states in the Northeast and West Coast, though from the 1990s onward they were moving to a wider variety of destinations (Massey and Capoferro 2008). For example, many tech hubs in traditional destinations, such as California and New York, as well as less traditional destinations such as Texas, have seen growing Asian populations in recent years (Warikoo 2022; Jiménez and Horowitz 2019). This history has led the Asian American population to have a very different spatial distribution across the United States from that of the US-born White population. Today, 44 percent of Asian Americans live in the Western US, although Asian populations

have grown in other regions in recent decades (Tran 2024).

At a smaller geographic scale, residential choice can be viewed as a mobility strategy for Asian families (Lee et al. 2024). Ties between school attendance boundaries and neighborhoods make residential choices key to class mobility (Lareau and Goyette 2014). Asian families place a particularly high premium on education when deciding where to live, and, as a result, are often drawn to high-income, predominantly White suburbs and Asian “ethnoburbs” with high-performing schools (Lung-Amam 2017; Warikoo 2022). This sometimes comes at a cost: Asian families have higher educational expenditures for their children than families of other ethnoracial groups, and also spend more on housing—likely to gain entry to high-performing school districts (Tian 2023). Some Asian parents have been found to buy or rent smaller houses in desirable districts than they could afford elsewhere, while others co-reside with unrelated families or work multiple jobs to afford their mortgages and secure their children’s education (Lung-Amam 2017). Beyond access to high-quality education, suburbs and communities with large Asian populations offer resources like community centers, language schools, ethnic churches, and Asian supermarkets and businesses that allow Asian Americans to maintain ethnic ties and a sense of community among coethnics (Matsumoto 2019).

There is evidence that geography is an important factor shaping Asian–White economic inequality. Previous work using parametric regression models has shown that the size and even the direction of Asian–White earnings disparities are sensitive to the inclusion of geographic control variables for region of the country, state, or metropolitan area: Several studies have found significant disparities when geographic controls are included, but not when they are absent (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Snipp and Cheung 2016; Stewart and Dixon 2010; Wang et al. 2017; Woo 2000; Kim and Kim 2026, this issue). But this research, while a promising start, has important limitations. First, it has generally suffered from low geographic resolution. Studies typically have either included controls for only broad geographic regions, such

as the nine Census divisions (Kim and Sakamoto 2010) or composite state–region categories (Snipp and Cheung 2016, who use a total of seven categories); or else collapsed geographic variation into a handful of metro-level attributes, such as cost of living (Wang et al. 2017) or demographic and industrial composition (Stewart and Dixon 2010). But research on spatial inequality in the United States has shown that, increasingly, economic conditions vary at scales much smaller than census regions or states, with neighboring metropolitan areas—San Jose and Modesto, California, for example, or Detroit and Ann Arbor, Michigan—sometimes occupying wildly different economic trajectories (Manduca 2019, Kemeny and Storper 2023). Andrew Taeho Kim and ChangHwan Kim (2026, this issue) address this limitation within the parametric framework by including fixed effects for commuting zones, a common way to operationalize metropolitan areas.

Even with the proper geographic resolution, however, parametric studies require simplifying assumptions that may fail to reflect economic reality. Most notably, there are documented interaction effects between individual worker characteristics, such as race, age, or educational attainment, and metropolitan characteristics, such as size, industry composition, or average education level (Glaeser and Resseger 2010; Roca and Puga 2017). These interactions, not typically modeled in parametric studies of Asian–White income disparities, mean that the extent of local inequality may be underestimated by previous research—for instance, if White workers disproportionately benefit from agglomeration economies in large cities, as appears to be the case (Ananat et al. 2018; Buchholz and Storper 2025).

In part, these limitations reflect differences in the basic research question being asked. Most research on Asian–White labor market inequality has sought to determine whether, on average, Asian Americans face discrimination or other forms of disparate treatment in the labor market (Wang et al. 2017). For that question, it may make sense to treat geography as a second-order specification choice, something to be controlled for. Here, we see local Asian–White inequality as an object of interest in itself: a quantitative but subject-centered mea-

sure that may provide insight into individuals' perceptions of group position and how those might vary around the country. For this purpose, a descriptive, nonparametric approach allows us to describe conditions around the country with the greatest fidelity.

The remainder of this article documents that the size and direction of Asian–White income disparities depend fundamentally on which group of White people—the full national population or the White residents of Asian Americans' own metropolitan areas—is used as the basis for comparison, and argues that this may provide one explanation for the apparent disconnect between Asian American success on numerous metrics of attainment and continued lived experiences of marginalization.

DATA AND METHODS

We explore local patterns of Asian–White income inequality in the United States using data from the 2015–2019 American Community Survey (ACS) five-year estimates, sourced from the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (Ruggles et al. 2022). The five-year estimates allow larger sample sizes, which are especially important when studying small geographic regions.¹ We supplement these data with the ACS Supplemental Poverty Measures Research Files (US Census Bureau 2025), which include estimates of taxes paid and cash and near-cash transfers received for each individual in the ACS.

We conduct our analysis at the level of Core-Based Statistical Areas (CBSAs), groups of counties that encompass one or more core cities and the surrounding counties from which they draw commuters (Office of Management and Budget 2021). Microdata are matched to CBSAs using the Missouri Census Data Center's Geographic Correspondence Engine population weights (Missouri Census Data Center 2018). We group “noncore” counties—those

that are not included in a CBSA—into one residual observation per state. In the remainder of the article we refer to “CBSAs” and “metros” interchangeably, including the noncore counties.

Variables

Key variables in our study include race and ethnicity and equivalized disposable family income. To analyze differences between the Asian and White populations in the United States, we create ethnoracial categories using individuals' self-reported racial identities in the ACS. In our primary analysis, we identify “Asian Americans” as only those respondents who identified as Asian alone and who did not identify as Hispanic or Latino.² For all comparisons, we follow previous research (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Kim and Zhao 2014; Wang et al. 2017) and define the “White” reference group to include only respondents born in the United States who identified as non-Hispanic White alone.

We measure economic disparities in equivalized disposable family income. In this we differ from most previous research on Asian–White economic disparities, which has typically focused on logged individual earnings or hourly wages among workers alone, generally with the goal of identifying whether Asian Americans face discrimination in the labor market (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Wang et al. 2017; Zeng and Xie 2004; Ho and Park 2026; Kim and Kim 2026). Disposable family income is well suited to measuring overall standards of living, since it incorporates income received from sources beyond the labor market, net of taxes and transfers (Canberra Group 2011), whereas individual earnings or wages offer a better picture of labor market experiences specifically. We define family income as the sum of all posttax income from any source earned by members of the same family, where *family*

1. We use the 2015–2019 estimates to avoid combining data from before and during the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. Individuals in the US who report being Asian along with another race or along with being Hispanic account for less than 2 percent of the overall population and 18 percent of the population who identify as Asian. Panel D of online appendix table A.3 reports results using a broader definition that includes anyone who identified as Asian, whether or not they also identified as some other race or as Hispanic or Latino. The online appendix for tables A.1 through A.9 and for figures A.1 through A.4 can be found at <https://www.rsfsjournal.org/content/12/3/28/tab-supplemental>.

is defined by the Census Bureau as related individuals living in the same household. We then equalize this measure by dividing by the square root of family size, a common way to account for how expenses scale with the number of people (Smeeding 2016). In supplemental analyses shown in online appendix table A.3, we consider alternate measures of income including household income, family income normalized by family size (rather than its square root), household income normalized by household size (rather than its square root), and pre-tax measures of family and household income. We also report results using labor market earnings only among employed individuals, employed men, and employed women—a specification that more closely aligns with previous research. Our findings are broadly consistent across all income measures.

Previous research on Asian-White inequality has emphasized the importance of national origin, nativity, and educational attainment. We use the ACS detailed race and ethnicity variables to identify national origin subgroups among Asian Americans. We adopt the following national origin categories: Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Indian, other South Asian, Filipino, Vietnamese, other Southeast Asian, Pacific Islander, and other Asian. In addition, we include in our subgroup analysis a separate category for those who identify with more than one Asian subgroup, and two groups of multi-racial Asian Americans: those who identify as Asian and White, and those who identify as Asian and another non-White race or as Asian and Hispanic or Latino. We measure education using six categories: less than high school; high school; some college, but no degree; associate’s degree; bachelor’s degree; and advanced degree. To compare our findings with previous work on inequality among bachelor’s degree holders, we also create a “bachelor’s degree plus” education designation that combines the bachelor’s degree and advanced degree categories. For nativity, we identify whether someone was born inside or outside of the United States.

Inequality Measurement

To explore how differing geographic distributions shape Asian-White inequality, we use an approach of nonparametric geographic disag-

gregation. This involves calculating the same inequality measure simultaneously at two geographic scales: the national and the local. By comparing the national statistic with the (Asian population-weighted) average of the local statistics, we can determine the extent to which the national statistic reflects geographic differences between the comparator groups, in addition to local inequality on the outcome variable (family income in our case). This may occur when two conditions are met: First, the comparator groups have substantially different geographic distributions, and second, the geographic regions where members of each group reside differ systematically on the outcome variable. By not imposing a particular functional form on the interactions between geography, individual characteristics, and labor market characteristics, our nonparametric approach allows us to fully see the magnitude of variation in local inequality between places and between the national and average local statistics. This nonparametric approach serves as a useful complement to parametric approaches, which can seek to identify particular characteristics that contribute to either national or local inequality. For example, Kim and Kim (2026) use a parametric geographic approach to explore the extent to which certain local labor market characteristics contribute to the overall national inequality between Asian and White male workers.

The inequality statistic that we use is the median income ratio: the median family income among Asian Americans divided by that among White people. Ratios above 1 indicate that Asian people have higher incomes on average (an advantage for Asians), while ratios below 1 indicate the opposite (a disadvantage for Asians). Values farther away from 1 indicate greater inequality between Asian and White people. National ratios compare the median income levels of all Asians and Whites in the US. In addition to the raw national ratio, we construct a version of the national ratio in which incomes are adjusted for local cost of living using the Bureau of Economic Analysis regional price parities (US Bureau of Economic Analysis 2024). This accounts for how a given income does not go as far in expensive areas, where Asian Americans disproportionately live (Wang

et al. 2017). However, higher costs in some areas may reflect the lifestyle amenities these areas offer (Diamond 2016), in which case adjusting for cost of living would understate the benefits of living there.³ To measure local disparities, we calculate the Asian–White median income ratio for each CBSA individually, and then compute the mean of cross-CBSA income ratios, weighted by the Asian population of each CBSA.⁴ These calculations allow us to compare three measures of inequality: national inequality, national inequality adjusted for cost of living, and local inequality.

Previous research has shown that nativity, national origin, and education levels are important factors that contribute to Asian–White inequality. There is also considerable geographic variation in these dimensions: almost 70 percent of Japanese Americans, for example, live in the western US, compared with just 27 percent of Indian Americans (Tran 2024). To explore whether the geographic patterns we document reflect geographic variation in these factors, we create measures of national and local inequality for different subgroups defined by nativity, national origin, education, and the intersections of these categories. As with the full population estimates, we provide the national income ratio, the national income ratio adjusted for cost of living, and the mean of local ratios for each subgroup. Finally, while our main results are focused on disparities in median income, we also examine disparities at other points in the income distribution. We calculate national and local inequality at the 10th, 25th, 75th, 90th, and 95th percentiles to provide additional details about Asian–White inequality.

FINDINGS

We find that national and local estimates of Asian–White inequality do indeed diverge. Consistent with previous research, we find that Asians are advantaged nationally. But we find

systematic local inequalities: more than 90 percent of Asian Americans live in metros where Asian families have lower median incomes than White families. Asians’ local income disadvantages are distinct from cost-of-living adjustments, and appear to stem in part from the hyper-selected White populations in the areas where Asians are spatially concentrated. These findings hold when adjusting for nativity, national origin, and education level: local inequalities are heterogeneous but typically reflect an Asian disadvantage. Our results reveal that national comparisons of Asian and White Americans, while meaningful, provide an incomplete picture of Asian–White inequality in the United States. Adding local comparisons adds to our understanding of subject-centered inequality by emphasizing Asian Americans’ relative position in the places where they live.

The Geographic Distributions of Asian American and White Populations

Nationally, the median Asian American in our data had a family income of \$43,583, 107 percent of the \$40,902 median family income among Whites—a small but real income advantage that is consistent with those found in previous research (Sakamoto et al. 2009; Zeng and Xie 2004). After adjusting for cost of living, the median income ratio drops from 107 percent to 97.5 percent, suggesting that higher living costs erode the national Asian income advantage.

Part of the reason that national estimates of inequality are tempered when adjusting for cost of living is that the spatial distribution of Asian Americans across the United States differs markedly from that of White people. Compared to other large ethnoracial groups, Asian Americans are spatially concentrated in just a few major metropolitan areas. Table 1 lists the ten largest metros by total Asian population. Together, these ten metros are home to half of all Asian residents of the United States. For comparison, these ten metros account for

3. The regional price parities are constructed by metropolitan statistical area (MSA), with a residual category for non-metropolitan parts of the US. In total, 97 percent of the Asian population and 81 percent of the White population live in an MSA. In table A.3, we also adjust for price parities at the state level to account for individuals who do not live within MSAs. These analyses yield similar results.

4. Calculating the cross-CBSA median of local ratios yields similar results, which are available in tables A.2 and A.3.

about 15 percent of the US White population. White people are much more evenly spread around the country, but to the extent that certain regions have greater White populations, it is regions with very small Asian populations, such as the non-metropolitan Midwest, Appalachia, and northern New England (figures A.1 and A.2 show the spatial distributions of the Asian and White populations of the United States).

Importantly, Asian people live in metro areas that are richer than average, while White people live in places slightly poorer than the nation as a whole. On average, the median equivalized family income (for residents of every ethnoracial group combined) in metros where Asian people live was \$40,796, about 11 percent higher than that for the country overall. The average median income in the metros where White people live was \$36,428, approximately 1 percent lower than the national median.

In fact, the potential disconnect between national statistics and local experience may be larger than it first appears, because it is a very particular subset of White Americans who live in the CBSAs with large Asian populations. As table 1 shows, White residents of these areas have much higher average levels of education than the White population of the US overall: 50.6 percent of White residents of these ten cities have a bachelor's degree, compared to just 32.9 percent of White residents of the rest of the country. In San Francisco and Washington, DC, the proportions are even higher, at almost 62 percent and 63 percent respectively. The differences in bachelor's degree attainment are much smaller for Asian residents (55.5 percent versus 51.4 percent) and for residents of other ethnoracial groups (21.0 percent versus 18.5 percent; results displayed in table A.1).

Figure 1 reveals that this is a systematic pattern. It plots the relationship between the proportion of CBSA residents who are Asian American and the fraction of Asian and White residents over twenty-five with a bachelor's degree. While the relationship between the size of the Asian American population in a CBSA and average educational attainment among Asian Americans is weakly negative (figure 1, panel A; Asian-population-weighted $r = -0.21$),

there is a strong relationship between the size of the Asian American population in a CBSA and the educational attainment of White residents (figure 1, panel B; White-population-weighted $r = 0.66$). In metros where fewer than 1 percent of the population identifies as Asian American, about 21 percent of Whites have bachelor's degrees (about 45 percent of Asian Americans in these metros have at least a bachelor's degree). In metros where more than 10 percent of the population identifies as Asian, 51 percent of the White population has at least a bachelor's degree—almost exactly equal to the 52 percent share among Asian Americans in these metros. The relationship between education and Asian population share is much weaker for members of other ethnoracial groups (shown in figure A.3; population-weighted $r = 0.19$). White residents of the places where most Asian Americans live are highly selected in terms of their education level—both compared with the national White population and compared with the non-white population of these metros.

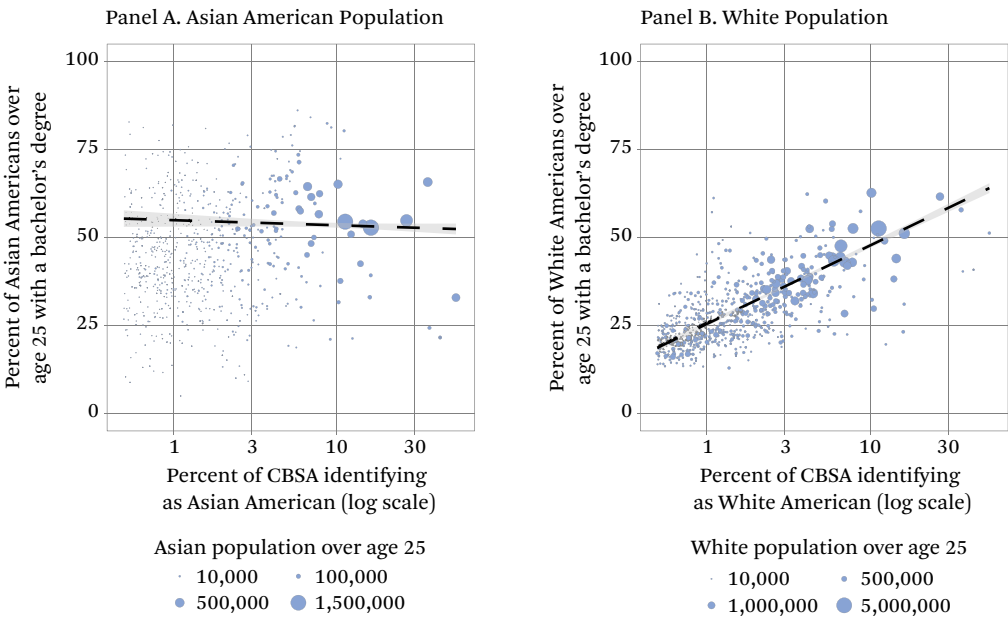
In this article, we do not take a strong stance on the origins or causal direction of the positive relationship between Asian American population size and education levels for White residents. It could be that Asian Americans, with their high average levels of education, disproportionately end up living in metros that furnish many jobs for educated workers in general, and therefore attract educated White residents as well. It could be that, by historical chance, US immigration policy funneled Asian Americans disproportionately to cities that would later become human capital hubs. Or it could be that Asians contribute to the prosperity of these regional economies with their disproportionate levels of human capital. Most likely, more than one of these explanations is operating. No matter the cause, the result is the same: the White people most Asian Americans encounter—who are likely to play an especially strong role in forming their ideas of relative group position—are a highly selected subgroup, both compared with the US White population in general and compared with the average resident of these cities. This may create a disconnect between national-level statistics and local lived experience.

Table 1. Demographic and Socioeconomic Characteristics, CBSAs with the Largest Asian American Populations

Core-Based Statistical Area (CBSA)	Percent of Adults over Age 25 with a Bachelor's Degree		Median Family Income			A-W Ratio (Percent)
	Percent of Asians	Percent of Whites	Total	Asian	White	
New York-Newark-Jersey City, NY-NJ-PA	11.8	4.1	\$42,800	\$43,884	\$57,213	76.7
Los Angeles-Long Beach-Anaheim, CA	11.7	1.7	\$36,524	\$42,759	\$53,777	79.5
San Francisco-Oakland-Berkeley, CA	6.9	0.9	\$52,618	\$55,601	\$66,553	83.5
San Jose-Sunnyvale-Santa Clara, CA	3.9	0.3	\$55,533	\$63,917	\$68,385	93.5
Chicago-Naperville-Elgin, IL-IN-WI	3.4	2.4	\$39,831	\$46,675	\$50,437	92.5
Washington-Arlington-Alexandria, DC-VA-MD-WV	3.4	1.4	\$50,762	\$54,602	\$63,301	86.3
Seattle-Tacoma-Bellevue, WA	3.1	1.2	\$47,599	\$50,530	\$51,844	97.5
Houston-The Woodlands-Sugar Land, TX	2.9	1.2	\$36,575	\$45,956	\$51,417	89.4
Urban Honolulu, HI	2.8	0.1	\$44,778	\$45,299	\$46,085	98.3
Dallas-Fort Worth-Arlington, TX	2.8	1.7	\$37,858	\$46,257	\$49,218	94.0
Top 10 CBSAs combined	52.8	15.0	\$41,780	\$47,776	\$54,691	87.4
Rest of country	47.2	85.0	\$34,820	\$39,552	\$39,026	101.3

Source: 2015–2019 American Community Survey five-year estimates, via IPUMS USA (Ruggles et al. 2022).

Figure 1. Association Between the Percent of CBSA Residents Identifying as Asian and Share of Different Ethnoracial Groups with a Bachelor’s Degree or More Education



Source: 2015–2019 American Community Survey five-year estimates, via IPUMS USA (Ruggles et al. 2022).

Divergence Between National and Local Statistics

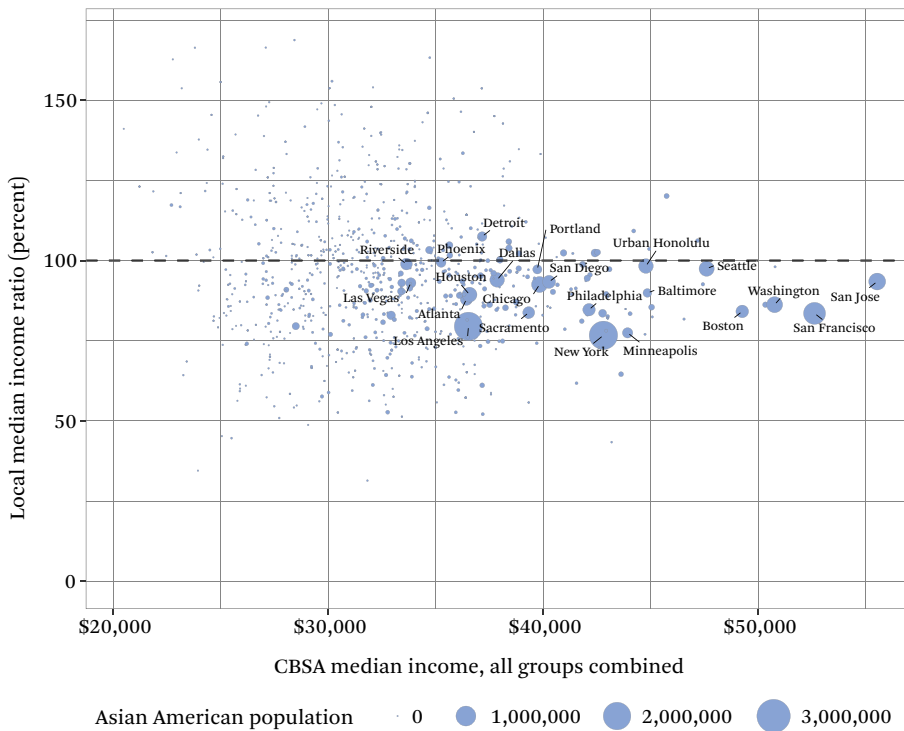
The previous section documented how Asian Americans and White people tend to live in different parts of the country, with Asians disproportionately concentrated in high-income metros. It also showed that the White people who live in areas with large Asian populations are a highly selected subgroup, with much higher average education and income levels than either the national White population or the full population of those metros. This translates to high levels of local inequality experienced by Asian Americans: despite earning 7 percent more than White people nationally, Asian Americans earn an average of 12 percent less than White residents of their metropolitan areas. Distinguishing between national and local measures alters the estimated inequality level by almost 20 percentage points. This effect is not simply a measure of cost of living; the national ratio after adjusting for cost of living is 97.5 percent, meaning that a further 10 percentage points are unaccounted for by cost-of-living adjustments.

Figure 2 plots the local Asian–White median

income ratio against the CBSA median income for all ethnoracial groups combined. Previous research has noted that Asian Americans earn less than White residents of certain large metro areas (Huang 2021; Woo 2000, 31). Figure 2 shows that these cases are not outliers, nor are they balanced out by other parts of the country where Asian Americans outearn Whites. In total, a full 91 percent of Asian Americans live in CBSAs where the median family income among Asians is lower than that among White residents.

There is some geographic heterogeneity in local income ratios: as reported in the last column of table 1, Asian residents of San Jose earn 93.5 percent as much as White residents, while those in New York earn just 76.7 percent as much. Figure A.4 maps local median income ratios for CBSAs with more than 20,000 Asian American residents. The greatest local income disparities are found in California and the Northeastern states, as well as parts of the Midwest, while Asian advantages are found primarily in midsize Southern and Midwestern metros. Figure 2 indicates a slight neg-

Figure 2. Relationship Between CBSA Median Income for All Residents and the Local Median Income Ratio



Source: 2015–2019 American Community Survey five-year estimates, via IPUMS USA (Ruggles et al. 2022).

Note: A ratio of 100 percent indicates income equality between Asian and White people. CBSAs with over 150,000 Asian residents are labeled.

ative relationship (Asian-population-weighted $r = -0.10$) between CBSA median income for all groups combined and the local median income ratio: richer metros tend to have slightly larger income disadvantages for Asian residents. Still, the broad takeaway is one of consistent disadvantage across most places where large numbers of Asian Americans live.

Notably, the income disadvantage in virtually every metro with a large Asian American population comes without any adjustment for individual-level characteristics, including nativity status, national origin, or education level. In contrast to previous studies, which find that the national Asian advantage lessens only after adjusting for key characteristics (Hirschman and Wong 1984; Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Zeng and Xie 2004), we find an income penalty for Asian Americans relative to White residents of

most metro areas prior to any further adjustments. Most previous studies have included geographic controls only in models that also control for individual covariates, but Matthew C. Snipp and Sin Yi Cheung (2016), who do estimate unconditional local income gaps, find slight local advantages for male and female Asian workers until individual covariates are also included. Notably, Kim and Kim (2026), who show unconditional local earnings gaps for employed men in figure 1B of their article, also find stark local inequality in Asian population centers such as New York, Los Angeles, and San Francisco, though they show, if anything, even more heterogeneity in local disparities across less-populated metros. The combination of our findings with Kim and Kim's (2026) suggests that when comparing the experiences of Asian and White Americans, operationaliz-

ing geography using census regions or states is insufficiently specific. In table A.3 we show that results using individual earnings by sex for employed persons, which more closely match the income definitions used in previous research, align closely with our baseline results, suggesting that the difference is not due to the income measure used.

While our main results focus on comparisons at the median, we show in tables A.6 and A.7 that the divergence between national and local inequality holds across the income distribution. At the 10th percentile, Asians are slightly disadvantaged nationally, but the average local Asian–White income ratio is 13 percentage points smaller, indicating greater disadvantage at the local level. At the 75th, 90th, and 95th percentiles, the divergence between national and mean local income ratios is over 20 percentage points, with national advantages coinciding with local disadvantages. Again, these divergences are not driven solely by cost of living. Adjusting for cost of living depresses the national ratios toward 1, but does not result in the notable disadvantages for Asian Americans that the local ratios indicate.

Local Inequality Persists Across Education, Nativity, and National Origin Subgroups

Previous research has demonstrated that Asian American income advantages compared with Whites are often reduced after accounting for high education levels among Asians, nativity status and immigration recency, internal heterogeneity among Asian Americans, and the fact that Asians tend to live in more expensive parts of the country (Hirschman and Wong 1984; Zeng and Xie 2004; Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Sakamoto et al. 2022; Shao 2023; Wang et al. 2017; Kochhar and Cilluffo 2018; Vo et al. 2023). These factors all provide important context for the unadjusted national statistics show-

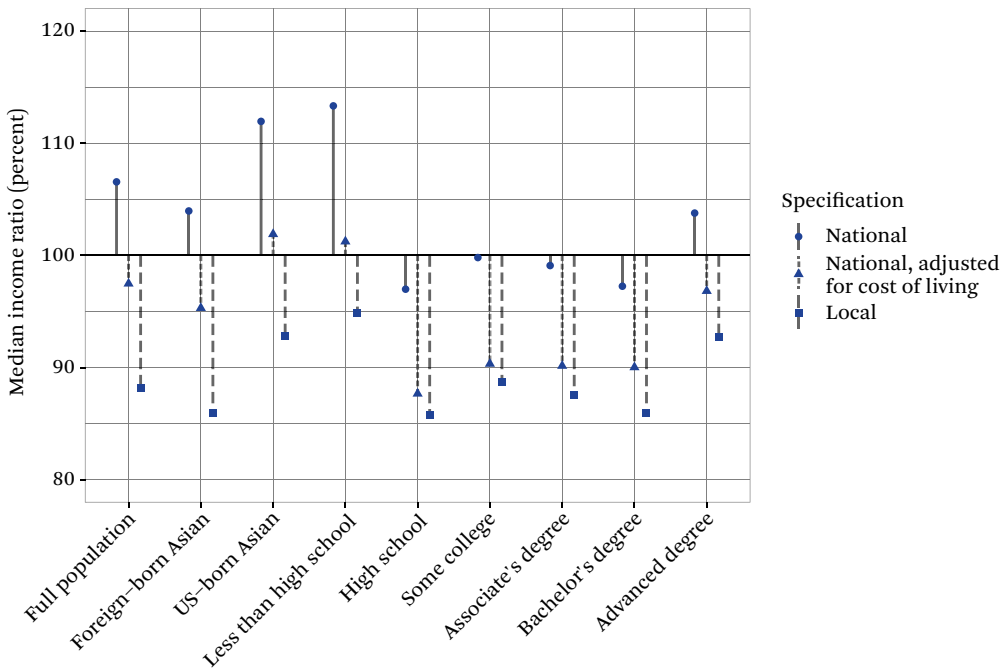
ing that Asian people tend to have higher incomes than White people, on average. But they are distinct from the phenomenon of national–local inequality divergence that we document here. Figures 3 and 4 examine some of the most prominent mechanisms thought to shape Asian–White inequality, and show that the national–local divergence in inequality persists even after accounting for these factors. Table A.2 presents these results numerically.

Figure 3 examines Asian–White income disparities by nativity status and education level. It shows that both US-born and foreign-born Asians have income advantages nationally, but earn median incomes 7–14 percent lower than their local White counterparts. Nationally, the Asian income advantage disappears when comparing Asian and White people of the same education level, consistent with previous research on the over-education hypothesis. But locally, Asian people earn substantially less than White people at each education level. For instance, Asian Americans with a bachelor’s degree have incomes 97 percent as large as those of White people with the same degree nationally. After adjusting for cost of living, the ratio falls to 90 percent. But compared to White residents with a bachelor’s degree in their own metropolitan areas, Asian residents earn just 86 percent as much.⁵ If we combine education and nativity, as research on labor market disparities has convincingly argued is necessary to distinguish outcomes for Asian Americans per se from those due to immigrant status or education level (Kim and Sakamoto 2010), we again see the same pattern: even among US-born Asian Americans who hold bachelor’s degrees or advanced degrees, the national statistics look much more advantageous than the local statistics (which nonetheless still come close to parity with US-born Whites of the same educational levels—see table A.4).⁶

5. Note that cost of living appears to play a bigger role in the discrepancy within education levels than it does for the full population.

6. The most directly comparable prior study is Stewart and Dixon (2010). They find a gross earnings advantage of 2 percent for US-born and a disadvantage of 11 percent for foreign-born Asian American men in random effects regressions with random intercepts for metropolitan area, whereas we find disadvantages of 7 and 14 percent, respectively. Kim and Kim (2026, table 3, model 2) use a parametric approach to control for degree field, demographics, and labor market characteristics in addition to nativity, education, and commuting zone; their results indicate slightly greater disadvantages than we find. These differences most likely reflect either the

Figure 3. Asian-White Median Income Ratios at the National and Local Levels for the Full Population and for Nativity and Education Subgroups



Source: 2015–2019 American Community Survey five-year estimates, via IPUMS USA (Ruggles et al. 2022).

Note: National estimates adjusted for cost of living are presented.

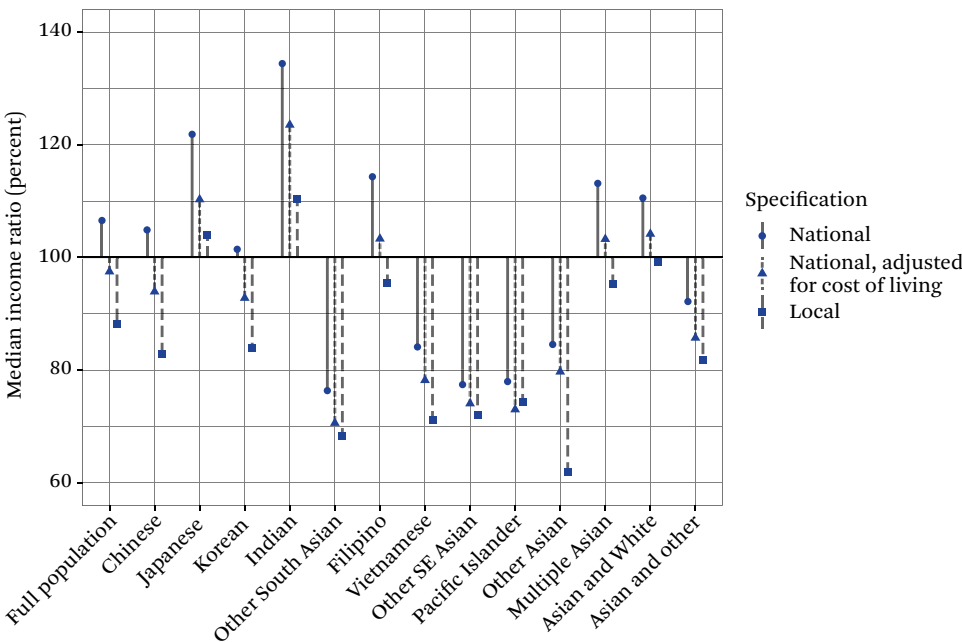
Another important feature of the Asian American population is its internal heterogeneity, which is greater than that of other large ethnoracial groups (Budiman and Ruiz 2021; Vo et al. 2023; Ho and Park 2026). A third-generation Chinese American living in Washington, DC may have a very different economic and social situation than a Hmong refugee living in St. Paul. This heterogeneity is a critical factor to keep in mind when attempting to study the socioeconomic attainment of Asian Americans. But it does not account for the national–local inequality divergence that we have documented. Figure 4 shows national and local median income ratios for members of thirteen national origin subgroups of Asian Americans, compared with US-born Whites. The figure makes apparent the enormous heterogeneity between Asian Americans of different national origins: Indian Americans earn almost 35 per-

cent more than White people nationally, on average, while Pacific Islander Americans and Southeast Asian Americans with origins outside Vietnam or the Philippines earn 20 percent less—a difference of more than 50 percentage points. Put another way, the income gap between Pacific Islander Americans and Indian Americans is almost exactly the same as that between African Americans and White Americans.

Yet the internal heterogeneity among Asians does not negate the divergence between national and local inequality. As figure 4 shows, the national median income ratio is substantially larger than the local ratio for members of every national origin subgroup. For some groups, the difference is enormous: Chinese Americans earn roughly 5 percent more on average than Whites nationally but earn less than 80 percent as much as White residents of their

additional covariates incorporated by Kim and Kim (2026) or other specification differences, such as their use of log earnings with zeros removed.

Figure 4. Asian–White Median Income Ratios at the National and Local Levels for the Full Population and for Specific Asian Subgroups



Source: 2015–2019 American Community Survey five-year estimates, via IPUMS USA (Ruggles et al. 2022).

Note: National estimates adjusted for cost of living are presented. SE = Southeast.

own metro areas—a difference of more than 25 percentage points. Any attempt to understand the Chinese American experience of assimilation and inequality that does not wrestle with this fact is likely to be incomplete at best.

Figure 4 displays some variation in the extent of the national–local divergence for different subgroups. This difference may reflect differences in the extent to which members of each subgroup live in metros with highly selected White residents. In table A.8, we calculate the correlation between the proportion of residents identifying with individual Asian American subgroups and the share of White residents with a bachelor’s degree (condensing the relationships shown in figure 1 to a single number). The correlation varies from 0.72 for Indian Americans, 0.65 for Korean Americans, and 0.64 for Chinese Americans to 0.19 for other Southeast Asians and just 0.08 for Pacific Islander Americans—suggesting that the geographic concentration in metros with hyper-selected White residents is strongest for the

former groups, and consistent with the smaller gaps between national and local statistics for other Southeast Asian Americans and Pacific Islander Americans.

To further investigate heterogeneity, tables A.4 and A.5 present national and local inequality measures for combinations of national origin, nativity, and educational statuses. The inconsistency between national advantage and local disadvantage holds for most combinations of education, national origin, and nativity. On average, across these specifications, the national income ratio is 11 percentage points higher than the ratio comparing Asian people and White people within the same metropolitan areas.

DISCUSSION

Research on the socioeconomic outcomes of Asian Americans has been characterized by seemingly contradictory findings. On the one hand, by most measures of socioeconomic attainment—education level, residential attain-

ment, and to some extent, income—Asian Americans appear to be doing as well or better than US-born Whites. On the other hand, the lived experience of many Asian Americans, even those born in the US and possessing high levels of education, is characterized by discrimination, othering, and barriers to professional advancement (Chin 2020; Huang 2021; Woo 2000). In this article, we have proposed that localized measures of inequality, which capture disparities between Asian and White people in the same metropolitan area, provide insights into this apparent tension. Many measures of Asians' socioeconomic attainment rely on national comparisons. These comparisons provide important information about the average economic resources available to Asian families. However, most people do not have an intuitive sense of the economic conditions facing others half a continent away. Therefore, localized measures of inequality may better capture individuals' day-to-day experiences of inequality—along the lines of the subject-centered approach suggested by Jennifer Lee and Dian Sheng (2024).

We show that national and local measures of Asian–White inequality diverge markedly. This divergence between national and local inequality is present within nativity, education, and national origin subgroups, and persists even when the national disparity is adjusted for cost of living. The divergence reflects the higher average incomes of metro areas home to large Asian American populations, driven in part by differences between the White residents of those metro areas and the national White population. For example, although Asian Americans' education levels are fairly consistent across the country, White people who reside in areas with large Asian populations are much more likely to be highly educated than White residents of the country as a whole or than non-White residents of these metros. Although hyper-selection is most often discussed in the context of Asian immigration, hyper-selection of White residents into the places where Asian Americans live powerfully shapes local inequality dynamics. The result is that national statistics indicating Asian advantages do not necessarily reflect the local inequality that Asian Americans experience.

We believe that the divergence between national and local statistics helps reconcile tensions in the research on Asian–White inequality. While most quantitative studies of Asian–White inequality rely on national-level comparisons, many case studies and qualitative investigations have been conducted using much more localized comparisons: residents of a particular municipality or metropolitan area, or workers in a particular firm, for example. The difference in geographic scale between most quantitative and most qualitative studies may contribute to the disconnect between the apparent economic advantages of Asian Americans and their continued experiences of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization—what scholars have called an assimilation paradox (Lee and Sheng 2024). Our results indicate that the assimilation paradox may be an ecological fallacy—specifically, an example of Simpson's paradox, where the relationship within each subgroup (here, each metropolitan area) runs the opposite direction of the relationship at the aggregate level.

Our results underline and help to explain a finding that has emerged in some previous research, that Asian–White wage disparities are sensitive to the inclusion of geographic controls (Kim and Sakamoto 2010, Stewart and Dixon 2010, Wang et al. 2017). We have shown that in a nonparametric, high-geographic-resolution specification, this sensitivity is even larger than apparent in previous results: a swing of almost 20 percentage points for Asian Americans as a whole, and even more for certain national origin groups. But we do not see this national–local divergence simply as a specification challenge. Rather, the treatment of geography when studying Asian–White income disparities raises a fundamental and longstanding question in social research: that of determining the appropriate reference group. The reference group—the group to which people compare themselves when evaluating their own condition and experiences—is a core sociological concept that is key for understanding how people perceive the conditions in which they live (Hyman 1942; Merton and Kitt Rossi 1950; Runciman 1966; Stouffer et al. 1949). However, identifying the relevant reference group(s) in a given situation is a challenging—and often

under-discussed—conceptual and analytic task (Merton and Kitt Rossi 1950; Johfre and Freese 2021). In this case, whether Asians perceive themselves as doing better or worse economically than White residents of the US depends on which group of White residents they are using as their reference.

The existence of local inequality does not mean that the national Asian income advantage is not meaningful. Both national and local comparisons contribute important information about the economic status of Asian Americans. The national advantage shows that Asian families, on the whole, do have more economic resources than White families nationwide: On a basic material level, Asians are, on average, better off. In fact, in terms of overall well-being and ability to provide opportunity to the next generation, Asian Americans may benefit more from having relatively low incomes within high-income areas than they would from being higher-income members of more disadvantaged regions. Asians’ residence in high-income regions could even be a mobility strategy to preserve their class status and ensure success for their children, analogous to the way Asian parents spend a larger portion of their budgets on housing to provide their children with access to high-performing schools (Lung-Amam 2017; Warikoo 2022). The local comparison, on the other hand, provides context for continued perceptions of exclusion, discrimination, and marginalization: Compared to the White people they are likely to encounter in their daily lives, Asian Americans continue to have an income disadvantage.

The relevance of both national and local comparisons is illustrated with a straightforward counterfactual question. Given our findings that local Asian–White disparities are smaller, on average, in CBSAs with small Asian American populations, would it be beneficial for Asian residents of major cities to move to these places? Even setting aside the questions of whether such moves would be possible or would prompt local inequality to rise, and whether Asian Americans would be willing to pay an economic cost to remain living near family or large coethnic populations, it is not clear that such a move would be a net benefit. As the final two lines in table 1 show, Asian

Americans living in the top ten CBSAs face greater local inequality than Asians living in the rest of the country, earning just 87.4 percent as much as White residents of those CBSAs, compared to 101.3 percent elsewhere. But in absolute terms, Asian residents of the top ten CBSAs have incomes almost \$10,000 larger, at the median, than Asian residents of the rest of the country. The greater Asian–White inequality in these large metros may be outweighed by their aggregate income advantage compared to metros with smaller Asian populations.

While local measures help capture lived experiences of inequality, they may also—perhaps counterintuitively—help to refocus discussions of Asian–White inequalities on structural exclusion rather than individual characteristics. National statistics indicating Asian advantages have been mobilized to create racial narratives, such as “model minority” tropes, which ignore racialized disadvantages experienced by Asian Americans and have been deployed to undermine demands from other minority groups to address structural inequalities. Further, gaps between Asian and White people tend to be reduced to individual level explanations: Asians’ advantages are often attributed to cultural emphases on hard work and education or to “Asian American exceptionalism” (Lee and Zhou 2015), while the lack of true parity is often explained by individual level characteristics. For example, conversations and legal cases around Asian disadvantages in college applications are centered on “personality” (Lee 2021), and the bamboo ceiling is often attributed to “un-assertive” tendencies of Asian employees (Sue et al. 2007; Yu 2020). Yet, these narratives ignore that Asian students and workers often have fewer material resources than their White neighbors and peers as a result of structural inequality. Local measures of inequality can bring structural inequalities into focus to challenge individualized explanations of inequality.

A focus away from the national measures also invites more investigation into what drives Asian–White inequality across the United States. While national advantages have been statistically explained in terms of nativity, education, national origin, or place of residence, we show that local inequality persists across all

of these categories. If local inequality cannot be accounted for by education, nativity, or national origin, what drives Asian income disadvantages and White income advantages in different places? Our results point to the composition of White residents as one important factor that could be explored more systematically. However, other factors that vary across places, such as industries and occupations, residential segregation, and state and local government policies, may also shed light on why national and local statistics diverge. Kim and Kim (2026) take an important first step in this direction, finding that Asian men tend to have lower relative wages in metros with larger Asian American populations and where a greater fraction of Asian Americans are self-employed. Future research can examine how additional factors, from occupational segregation to mobility strategies to perceptions of different racialized groups, contribute to the levels of local inequality experienced by Asian Americans. Future work might also consider how variation in local economic disparities relates to other dimensions of inequality, such as the rise in anti-Asian hate crime and xenophobic violence (Lee 2021) or levels of employment discrimination and workplace inequality (Shao 2023).

Methodologically, the non-parametric geographic disaggregation approach that we have applied to the context of Asian-White income disparities can also be used more broadly. As geographically labeled microdata have become increasingly available and easier to use, social scientists have devoted more attention to studying geographic variation in various forms of inequality and stratification (VanHeuvelen 2022; Thiede et al. 2025; Lobao et al. 2007; Chetty et al. 2014). The approach we use can help identify other instances where national statistics diverge from the average of local ones. While local levels of any type of inequality can vary dramatically from place to place, national-local divergences are more likely to emerge between groups that have markedly different geographic distributions. For example, a national-local divergence would be more likely to occur for educational inequality than for gender inequality, since the geographic distributions of men and women are fairly similar while those of college and high school gradu-

ates are more distinct. Simonetta Longhi (2020) makes use of similar methods in the UK context to show that wage gaps between Whites and minority groups are higher locally than nationally because of the latter's disproportionate presence in metropolitan London.

As the Asian American population has grown, social research has begun to more extensively study the experiences of Asian Americans, and to explore how the forms of inequality they face do and do not align with those faced by other ethnoracial minority groups. Thus far, much of the literature on Asian-White inequality has taken the form of a debate about whether or not Asian Americans experience inequality, particularly in the labor market. Yet, as studies reveal heterogeneity in socioeconomic attainment and inequality experienced by Asian Americans, asking whether inequality exists may be less productive than investigating how or why racialized inequality continues to shape the lives of both Asian and White people. Although by many measures—including the national median income ratio—Asian Americans have achieved a great deal of socioeconomic success, they continue to face exclusion and discrimination in the United States today. We have shown that they also face a material income disadvantage when compared with the White people they are most likely to encounter—those who reside in the same metropolitan area. Inequality is multifaceted, and true parity remains a work in progress.

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Geography, Coethnic Concentration, and Earnings Disadvantage of Asian American Men



ANDREW TAEHO KIM AND CHANGHWAN KIM

Asian Americans are considered a model minority due to their high socioeconomic attainments. On average, they earn more than native-born Whites, but their tendency to live in relatively high-cost areas raises the question of how geographic distribution relates to Asian American earnings advantages. Given that less-educated Asian Americans lack market negotiating power, are vulnerable to local coethnic competition and exploitation, and thus do not fit the model minority stereotype, particular attention is paid to their labor market performances. The analyses using the 2010–2019 American Community Survey uncover that, except for those with advanced degrees, Asian Americans experience a relative earnings disadvantage compared to Whites after controlling for detailed residential areas. The disadvantage for less-educated Asian Americans is exacerbated in local labor markets with higher coethnic concentration.

Keywords: Asian American, earnings, local labor markets, model minority myth

Asian Americans are known as the model minority partly due to their extraordinary educational achievement and high household income (Chou and Feagin 2015; Sakamoto et al. 2012; Xu and Lee 2013). When it comes to labor market outcomes, however, the results are mixed (Lee et al. 2024). Some studies show that Asian Americans have reached near parity with Whites in earnings (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Zeng and Xie 2004) but other studies present that Asian Americans are still disadvantaged in ways unexplained by human capital theory (Chiswick 1983; Sharpe and Abdel-Ghany 2006).

Almost all the studies that report Asian American earnings advantages or parity with Whites present the outcomes at a national level with minimal control for the region (for example, Kim and Sakamoto 2010, 2014; Zeng and Xie 2004). However, Asian Americans are more likely to reside in areas with high costs of living and high average incomes, such as California and New York, and are much more concentrated in urban areas than Whites within the same state (Hurh and Kim 1989, 19; Sakamoto et al. 2009). Thus, higher earnings of Asian Americans relative to equally educated Whites

Andrew Taeho Kim is assistant professor of sociology at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, United States. **ChangHwan Kim** is professor of sociology at the University of Kansas, United States.

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at the national level may be due to the overrepresentation of Asian Americans in more affluent areas (Wang et al. 2017).

Some studies control for broad census regions (for example, Oh et al. 2023; Sakamoto et al. 2012), but outcomes net of detailed localities are seldom presented. Given the growth in the variation in income across small areas within the same broad regions in recent decades (Glaeser et al. 2009), only accounting for the broad census regions, as usually done in prior studies, may not be enough. Given that the unique geographic concentration of Asian Americans is a well-known fact (Hurh and Kim 1989; Sakamoto et al. 2009; Takei et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2017), it is surprising how little research has addressed this concern. Existing research suggests that economic outcomes by gender and race and ethnicity vary spatially across local labor market contexts (Curtis and O'Connell 2017; Kim and Kim 2025; Scarborough 2020). Differences in the cost of living across cities, associated with the variation in local economic structures, are reflected in average wages and salaries by group (Black et al. 2014; Crowley and Stainback 2019).

The lack of research on Asian Americans' relative earnings net of detailed regions stems partially from the small sample sizes of Asian American data. In this study, we use the multi-year Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) American Community Survey (ACS) from 2010 to 2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024) and explore how the earnings of Asian American men vary across local labor markets relative to White men using the concept of commuting zones (CZs) (Tolbert and Sizer 1996; VanHeuvelen 2018). We first assess whether accounting for detailed local labor markets affects the wages of Asian American men relative to native-born White men. We then explore how the local labor market characteristics are associated with the earnings (dis)advantage of Asian American men. A majority of Asian Americans are highly educated immigrants, and studies on Asian Americans tend to focus on highly educated workers (Lee et al. 2024). In this study, we pay attention not only to highly educated Asian Americans but also to less-educated Asian Americans. We examine whether less-educated Asian Americans benefit in earnings from liv-

ing in areas where Asian Americans are concentrated.

This paper sheds new light on the existing literature by presenting that Asian American men, both native-born and immigrants, have not reached parity in earnings with White men net of detailed geographic distribution. The disadvantage is particularly large for the less educated Asian Americans, and their disadvantages are amplified in local labor markets where highly educated coethnoracial groups are concentrated. This study contributes to the literature mainly by showing that it is crucial to consider the detailed geographic regions when examining Asian American labor market outcomes.

PREVIOUS RESEARCH ON EARNINGS DISADVANTAGE OF ASIAN AMERICAN MEN

Studies have reported mixed results regarding whether Asian American men have reached parity with White men in labor markets (Lee et al. 2024). When it comes to earnings, the results vary depending on what variables are controlled for. In a seminal study, Charles Hirschman and Morrison G. Wong (1984) demonstrated that Asian American advantages over or parity with Whites is a result of the omitted-variable bias associated with Asian Americans' overeducation. Once the levels of education are accounted for, they argued that Asian Americans are disadvantaged.

Contrary to this overeducation hypothesis, Arthur Sakamoto and colleagues (2000) showed that the disadvantage of Asian Americans results from another omitted variable: nativity. Asian Americans are the only group in America for which immigrants account for most of their population (Xie and Goyette 2004). Immigrants are less familiar with the US work culture, and their educational credentials, which they earn from their origin societies, are discounted (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Zeng and Xie 2004). Thus, the earnings of immigrants are lower than those of the native-born, not necessarily because of racial disparity but because assimilation takes time. Indeed, college-educated Asian immigrants who spent twenty years in America seem to reach parity in earnings with native-born Whites, while Hispanic and Black immi-

grant counterparts still lag behind (Villarreal and Tamborini 2018). Sakamoto and colleagues (2000) argued that the question of whether Asian Americans have reached parity with Whites should be examined by comparing native-born Asian Americans to native-born Whites rather than including Asian immigrants (Sakamoto et al. 2000; Takei et al. 2012).

The educational conditions required for Asian Americans to reach parity with Whites are not limited to years of education or levels of education. Zhen Zeng and Yu Xie (2004) emphasized the importance of the place of education. Asian Americans who earn their higher education in the United States are not disadvantaged regardless of nativity (Zeng and Xie 2004). The place of education seemed to provide the mechanism through which nativity becomes a salient factor that explains Asian American disadvantage. However, the apparent parity in earnings enjoyed by native-born Asian Americans diminished when horizontal stratification within higher education, such as field of study and college type, was taken into account (Kim and Sakamoto 2010). Interestingly, those who have reached parity with Whites were not native-born Asian Americans, but the 1.5+ generation Asian immigrants who immigrated when they were young and received almost all their education in the United States (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Kim and Zhao 2014).

Some research has shown that the earnings of Asian Americans are lower than those of Whites once the occupation is controlled for (Tran et al. 2019). There is a debate about whether the addition of occupation in the right side of the earnings equation causes an over-control problem (Sakamoto and Hsu 2020; Sakamoto et al. 2000). In any case, the different levels of education, college prestige, fields of study, and occupation for Asian Americans compared to Whites signal a unique distributional choice of Asian Americans. The labor market outcomes of Asian Americans are often interpreted through the lens of strategic adaptation, a concept that posits Asian Americans deliberately select levels of education, fields of study, and occupations to signal competence (Lee et al. 2024; Xie and Goyette 2003). This strategic approach to educational attainment and career choices underscores the intricate rela-

tionship between educational attainment and labor market outcomes within the Asian American community, serving as a mechanism for navigating potential biases or discrimination in the workforce. Methodologically, previous studies have demonstrated the importance of controlling for distributional differences and addressing omitted-variable bias in assessing Asian Americans' relative labor market performance.

Existing research focuses on the distributional peculiarities of Asian Americans in educational and occupational distributions as key factors explaining the relative earnings of Asian Americans. Another distributional peculiarity that has not been properly considered in previous studies is Asian Americans' unique geographic dispersion (Ren et al. 2022). The regional dissimilarity between Asian Americans and Whites measured across states has diminished from 0.98 in 1860 to 0.66 in 1960 and to 0.29 in 2000; however, as of 2018, a substantial dissimilarity remains at 0.24 (Ren et al. 2022). As we will show later, the dissimilarity between Asian Americans and Whites is larger when measured with more detailed geographies. Although the distributional peculiarity of Asian Americans in residential areas is well known, studies on this effect are relatively sparse. Findings from previous work may provide an incomplete picture of the status of Asian American earnings due to the omitted-variable bias. In this study, we explore the role of place of residential locations on top of other covariates.

Geography of Asian American Labor Market Outcomes

Understanding the earnings dynamics of Asian Americans requires careful consideration of detailed geographies. Leslie McCall (2001) found that relative wages of Asian Americans compared to Whites are highest in the Midwest net of individual human capital variables and metropolitan statistical area (MSA) characteristics. The question is whether the geographical variations in Asian American earnings affect their earnings relative to native-born Whites. Don Mar (1999) argued that the estimates of the earnings gap between Asian Americans and non-Hispanic Whites are inappropriate so long as regional differences are not accounted for.

Early immigrant settlement patterns have shaped the geographic concentration of Asian American communities, and Asian Americans have been overrepresented in the areas with high wages and high costs of living (Hurr and Kim 1989; Sakamoto et al. 2009; Takei et al. 2012; Wang et al. 2017). The geographic choice of Asian Americans may be related to the proximity of the American West to Asia, the path dependence of the historical settlement, economic opportunities in urban areas, their strategic adaptation through education, and additional considerations. Asian households tend to spend more on housing to provide better K–12 education for children (Tian 2023). Regardless of what causes it, this spatial clustering has implications for earnings outcomes, as geographic location can influence access to employment opportunities, cost of living adjustments, and other socioeconomic factors.

The sorting of racial groups into various geographies is very much part of the overall stratification process (Massey 2020). Despite the well-known concentration of Asian Americans in a relatively small number of regions and urban areas, the geographic nuances of their earnings disadvantage relative to native-born Whites remain underexplored. Historically, Asian Americans were concentrated on the West Coast, specifically, California and Hawaii (Sakamoto et al. 2009; Tran 2024). While two-thirds of Asian Americans resided in California and Hawaii in 1960, the Asian American population dispersed to other regions in 2019, where 45 percent resided in the West, 24 percent in the South, 19 percent in the Northeast, and 12 percent in the Midwest (Tran 2024, 7). Within state boundaries, Asian Americans are overrepresented in metropolitan areas and underrepresented in rural, nonmetropolitan areas (Xie and Goyette 2004). The overrepresentation of Asian Americans in metropolitan areas has been strongly driven by suburban concentration since the 1990s (Zapatka and Tran 2023), by pioneering into previously White neighborhoods (Kye 2023; Logan and Zhang 2010).

During this period, differences in economic outcomes across detailed geographies have also increased with an overall increase in inequality (Manduca 2019; Moretti 2012; Van-Heuvelen and Copas 2019). Since the 1980s,

when the long-standing trend of regional economic convergence stalled, variations in economic levels by states and smaller regional units have begun to increase (Abel and Deitz 2019; Ganong and Shoag 2017; Manduca 2019). The peculiarities of the geographic distribution of Asian Americans and recent changes in geographic inequality raise the possibility that the previous estimates of the Asian American net earnings disadvantage, which did not control for detailed regions, may have overestimated their advantages.

There are a small number of studies that have explored the effect of locations on Asian Americans' labor market outcomes. For example, when accounting for regional variation in Asian American disadvantage, Isao Takei and colleagues (2013) found that college-educated Asian Americans residing in the West tend to be positively selected in terms of earnings, while those in non-Western regions exhibit negative selection. Arthur Sakamoto and colleagues (2013) reported that the Asian American population in the South has grown more rapidly than in other regions, many of them have migrated from California, and after adjusting for the cost of living, Asian Americans in the South enjoy higher average earnings than Asian Americans elsewhere (Sakamoto et al. 2013, 176). Few studies, however, control for detailed residential or working areas. An exception is Sharron Xuanren Wang and colleagues (2017), in which the US metropolitan area cost of living index for the respondents' current place of residence is controlled for. Wang and colleagues (2017) applied two-stage least squares models, by which the preference for living in high- and low-cost-of-living areas is estimated in the first stage, and then the relative earnings of Asian Americans compared with Whites are estimated in the second stage. Interestingly, Wang and colleagues (2017) reported that Asian Americans are not disadvantaged even after accounting for the cost of living. While adjusting for geographical variations in the cost of living can account for some impacts of detailed geographies, it is limited to capturing price differentials only. Adjusting for the cost of living cannot fully replace the fixed effects of detailed geographic areas.

Whether the residential dissimilarity be-

tween Asian Americans and Whites in detailed areas is correlated with the relative earnings of Asian Americans compared to Whites remains unknown. Given the growing income disparities between small geographic areas over the past several decades, accounting for these detailed areas has become increasingly important in studying racial wage gaps. Because Asian Americans tend to be concentrated in a relatively small number of affluent areas, we expect their earnings to appear lower compared to native-born Whites after accounting for local labor market fixed effects.

Local Labor Market Contexts and Asian American Disadvantages

Existing research provides reasons to suspect that the uneven distribution of Asian Americans across the United States may affect their relative earnings, as well as the mechanisms behind this effect. Due to data limitations, this study does not aim to identify which mechanisms are most likely at play. Instead, we highlight how previous studies have suggested that uneven geographic distribution affects the relative earnings of Asian Americans.

Higher concentrations of racial minorities tend to be associated with increased racial inequality, increased racial discrimination, and limited access to resources by racial minorities (Beggs et al. 1997; Blalock 1956; Frisbie and Neidert 1977; Huffman and Cohen 2004; McCall 2001; Tienda and Lii 1987; Tigges and Tootle 1993). For example, Matthew C. Snipp and Charles Hirschman (2004) reported that the occupational status of Asian American men residing in areas with large populations of coethnics is lower than that of Asian Americans living in other areas. Thus, the visibility hypothesis expects Asian Americans' relative earnings to be lower in local areas where they are concentrated.

Contrary to the visibility hypothesis, the ethnic enclave hypothesis expects Asian Americans' relative earnings to be higher in local areas where they are concentrated and a relatively higher portion of Asian Americans are self-employed (Portes and Jensen 1989). While self-employment and high concentration of coethnic groups in a CZ are not necessarily indicators of an ethnic enclave in themselves, ethnic en-

claves are often closely associated with higher rates of self-employment in areas with relatively higher ethnic concentrations (Portes and Manning 1986). In the pioneering work on the ethnic economy, Ivan Light (1972) showed how Chinese and Japanese Americans could start their businesses relying on ethnic capital such as rotating credit associations in the early twentieth century. Charles Hirschman and Morrison G. Wong (1986) speculated that Asian ethnic enclaves have provided economic means to thrive for highly educated Asian Americans despite the apparent discrimination in the mainstream economic sectors. The ethnic solidarity of Korean Americans was a collective strategy to survive economically at a time of ethnic hostility from Black Americans (Min 2008). The positive effect of the self-employed ethnic concentration is not limited to Asian Americans. For example, Kenneth L. Wilson and Alejandro Portes (1980), focusing on Cuban immigrants, showed how residing within ethnic enclaves can yield heightened returns on human capital accrued from their countries of origin. A concentrated coethnic population, especially a self-employed coethnic population, in this sense, can foster economic opportunities and establish support networks that bolster immigrants' labor market integration and outcomes.

However, not all research on ethnic enclaves finds a positive association between coethnic concentration and earnings. While the benefits of coethnic clustering help immigrants with resources and institutions of social support, it often runs the risk of saturated labor markets and exploitation by coethnics (Flippen and Farrell-Bryan 2021; Xie and Gough 2011). Especially for Asian immigrants with less education who have limited resources and English fluency, their high dependence on coethnic social networks and resources may increase their risk of exploitation by coethnics. Despite this vulnerability, their limited assimilation and continued reliance on coethnic resources restrict their geographic choices. This implies that, for the less educated, coethnic clustering is a result of structural constraints rather than preference. Yet, another possibility is that less-educated Asian Americans benefit from tangible and intangible resources that highly educated coethnic counterparts build in a com-

munity. An example is educational resources. In the latter case, lower earnings are a trade-off for these benefits.

Another context in which the relative earnings of Asian Americans can vary is the model minority stereotype of Asian Americans. The model minority image is also associated with the hyper-selectivity of Asian immigrants. Since the passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, Asian immigrants have been subject to double positive selectivity (Lee and Zhou 2015). They are not only positively selected compared to their peers in their origin societies but also more educated than native-born Whites. Hyper-selectivity refers to this double positive selectivity. The hyper-selectivity hypothesis assumes that the upper-middle class culture of the hyper-selected Asian immigrants has a spillover effect into not-so-positively selected Asian immigrants in success frame (Lee and Zhou 2015). This hypothesis is mainly about the extraordinary educational achievements of Asian American children. But with a slight modification, we can apply the hyper-selectivity hypothesis to the labor market outcomes for less-educated Asian Americans. Hyper-selectivity of Asian immigrants brings about positive changes in the cognitive construction of *Asian* as a racial group (Lee and Zhou 2015; Tran et al. 2018, 2019). Such reconstruction can induce the host society to treat Asian Americans more favorably (Lee and Zhou 2015), which can lead to better outcomes for Asian Americans, including less-educated Asian Americans. Indeed, Byeongdon Oh and colleagues (2023) reported that less-educated Asian Americans are relatively less disadvantaged in labor markets compared to their Black and Hispanic counterparts.

Yet, there is another possibility regarding the effect of the model minority image, which involves what may happen when Asian Americans deviate from the expectation. The study of the model minority comes almost always with the label of myth (Chou and Feagin 2015; Kao and Thompson 2003; Shams 2020). This is because not all Asian Americans fit the image of a model minority, and often, the portrayal of Asian Americans as a model minority is inaccurate and damaging to Asian Americans who do not fit this image (Kao and Thompson 2003;

Min 2003). The so-called model minority myth effect refers to “an earnings disadvantage that Asian Americans may have relative to whites that is net of productivity and is associated with an exaggerated characterization or level of performance that is required for Asian Americans” (Kim and Sakamoto 2014, 285). In this line of argument, the exaggerated expectations of performance or work characterization for Asian Americans will especially be high in the areas where more Asian Americans fit the model minority image by being highly educated. In such an environment, the wages of less-educated Asian Americans can suffer more relative to equally educated Whites, due to the heightened, racialized expectations.

In sum, existing theories suggest that a higher concentration of coethnic groups or a higher proportion of the highly educated individuals among Asian Americans in local labor markets, or both, may be associated with either higher or lower relative wages for Asian Americans. Although this study does not examine specific mechanisms, as a first step, we assess whether coethnic concentration is linked to relative wage outcomes. We pay particular attention to less-educated Asian Americans who may benefit more from coethnic resources in local labor markets while simultaneously being subject to coethnic competition and exploitation.

RESEARCH STRATEGY

This project utilizes a pooled sample of the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series American Community Survey from 2010 to 2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024) and estimates a series of regression models.

Data

The multiyear ACS offers enough sample sizes for Asian Americans in small geographic areas. Samples are limited to those non-Hispanic single-race identified Asian American and native-born White men in their prime working ages from 25 to 64. Only those who are not in school and report positive annual wages are included, excluding the self-employed.

To account for the differences in the detailed geographic areas between Asian Americans and Whites and the effects of local labor

markets, we use commuting zones as a geographic unit. As interest in geographic inequality has grown, scholars have developed alternative ways to define meaningful geographic units beyond administrative boundaries, such as counties or MSAs. One such approach is the use of CZs (Tolbert and Sizer 1996). The initial effort to construct CZs stems from the inadequacy of counties as proper units for understanding an area’s economy (Fowler 2024; Fowler, Rhubart, and Jensen 2016). CZs map the boundaries within which people are likely to commute from residence to work, thereby providing meaningful context for local labor markets and everyday activities. CZs have become a standard measure of local economies in academic research (for example, Acemoglu and Restrepo 2020; Chetty et al. 2014; VanHeuvelen and Copas 2019). In this article, we treat CZs as proxies for local labor markets. To construct CZs, individual-level data are expanded following David H. Autor and David Dorn (2013) and Tom VanHeuvelen (2018), adjusting survey weights to obtain correct CZ-level estimates. The geographic scope of the data is the contiguous United States, consisting of 722 CZs.

Key Variables

The dependent variable for this research is the log of annual wages. Before log transformation, wages are adjusted to 2019 constant dollars. The log transformation of wages follows common practice, which facilitates dealing with the highly skewed distribution and eases of interpretation.

We classify Asian Americans into two groups: native-born Asian Americans and immigrant Asian Americans who immigrated before the age of thirteen (the 1.5+ generation, hereafter), and Asian immigrants who immigrated at or after the age of thirteen (the first generation). For simplicity in reporting results, we group native-born Asian Americans and the 1.5 generations together because the results for these two groups are largely similar. In our main analyses, each group is further divided by levels of education: high school graduates or less than a high school degree (HSG); some college (SC); bachelor’s degrees (BA/BS); and ad-

vanced degrees (GRAD). Thus, a total of eight Asian American groups (that is, four levels of education by two immigrant generations) are examined. In some models, we examine the variation across Asian ethnic groups by disaggregating Asian Americans into Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, Asian Indian, Southeast Asian, South Asian, and other Asian groups, including multiethnic Asians.

Analytic Strategy

Our analyses mainly test two models. First, net of covariates, we assess whether education-specific Asian American disadvantages change when we control for CZ-fixed effects. Second, we examine whether the disadvantages observed in the first model are associated with CZ characteristics such as the density of the Asian American population, the size of the self-employed Asian American population, and the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans. Ordinary least squares models with a large number of fixed effects are estimated.¹ All estimations are weighted. As CZ characteristics are our key independent variables in some models, CZ-year-clustered standard errors are reported. Equation (1) shows the model of the first set of analyses:

$$Y_{ijk} = \alpha + \sum \beta_j A_{ijk} + \mathbf{X}'\mathbf{T} + C_k + T_i + \varepsilon_{ijk} \quad (1),$$

where Y_{ijk} refers to the log wage for individual i of group j in CZ k . With native-born Whites set as the reference group, A_j indicates eight Asian American groups separated by immigrant generation and education. C_k are CZ-fixed effects. The key interest is how the coefficients for being in Asian American groups, β_j , change before and after the inclusion of C_k .

The matrix of control variables, $\mathbf{X}$, includes an extensive set of both individual-level demographic covariates, including levels of education, age, age squared, marital status (married with spouse present, married with spouse not present, separated, divorced, widowed, and never married single), detailed degree field (171 fixed effects), number of children, family size, English proficiency. It also includes labor market covariates such as weeks worked last year

1. Stata’s `reghdfe` command is utilized.

(1–13, 14–26, 27–39, 40–47, 48–49, and 50–52 weeks), usual hours worked per week, and class of worker status (wage or salary: private; wage or salary: non-profit; federal government; state government; local government; and unpaid family worker). Detailed occupations (328 fixed effects) are controlled in some models. T_t are survey year fixed effects.

In addition to equation (1), we perform Kitagawa–Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition analyses (Blinder 1973; Kitagawa 1955; Oaxaca 1973). The decomposition analysis aims to compute the degree to which CZ’s composition and coefficient effects account for the wage gap between Asian Americans and Whites and to compare them with other effects, such as education. Equation (1) and decomposition analyses test whether detailed geographies affect the relative wages of Asian American men compared to native-born White men.

Next, we explore the association between the relative earnings disadvantage of Asian American men and local labor market characteristics. Local labor market characteristics, Z_{kt} , include four variables: the logged Asian American population, the logged Asian American self-employed population,² the proportion of Asian Americans with BA/BS or higher, and average logged household income. These characteristics are measured at the CZ level separately by year among those aged twenty-five to sixty-four. For ease of interpretation, the proportion of BA/BS or higher among Asian Americans is multiplied by 10. Equation (2) shows the model:

$$Y_{ijk} = \alpha + \sum A_{ijk} + \sum \delta_j (A_{ijk} \times Z_{kt}) + \mathbf{X}\mathbf{T} + C_k + T_t + (C_k \times T_t) + \varepsilon_{ijk} \quad (2)$$

Of main interest from equation (2) is the coefficient estimate of δ_j which quantifies the extent to which the relative earnings of Asian Americans grow or decrease as local labor market characteristics, Z_{kt} , increase by one unit (by 10 percent points in case of the proportion of BA/BS or higher among Asian Americans). Because four local labor market covariates covary, we estimate equation (2) separately for each co-

variate. Note that as we control for CZ- and time-fixed effects and their interactions, the main effect of Z_{kt} is dropped from the model due to perfect multicollinearity. Thus, the estimated δ_j is not affected by other observed and unobserved CZ-level heterogeneities and their variation across survey years. Equation (2) tests the association between detailed geographic characteristics and the relative wages of Asian Americans. If δ_j is negative, the concentration of coethnic groups or the proportion of Asian Americans with a BA/BS or higher is negatively associated with their wages. If δ_j is positive, it suggests that Asian Americans tend to benefit from coethnic concentration or hyper-selectivity.

EMPIRICAL FINDINGS

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics. Regardless of immigrant generation, Asian Americans are more likely to have a bachelor’s and advanced degrees than native-born Whites (Whites hereafter). Two-thirds of Whites do not have a bachelor’s degree, while two-thirds of Asian Americans have a bachelor’s degree or higher. Among Asian Americans, the educational distribution of first-generation immigrants is polarized, with 24 percent of them having no college experience while 34 percent having advanced degrees. No such polarized distribution is evident for Whites or the 1.5+ generation of Asian Americans.

On average, both 1.5+ generation and first-generation Asian American men earn higher wages than Whites. Their wages are 12.4 and 9.7 percent higher than Whites, respectively. This is largely due to their higher levels of education. When results are broken down by levels of education, all 1.5+ generation and first-generation Asian American men, except for an advanced degree, earn lower wages than equally educated Whites. Across these levels, there is a larger Asian American disadvantage at lower levels of education. However, these descriptive differences do not necessarily indicate that Asian Americans are disadvantaged. It should be noted that Asian Americans, especially 1.5+ generations, are younger and less

2. Both incorporated and unincorporated businesses are included. Using only unincorporated businesses yields results that are nearly identical to those reported here.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

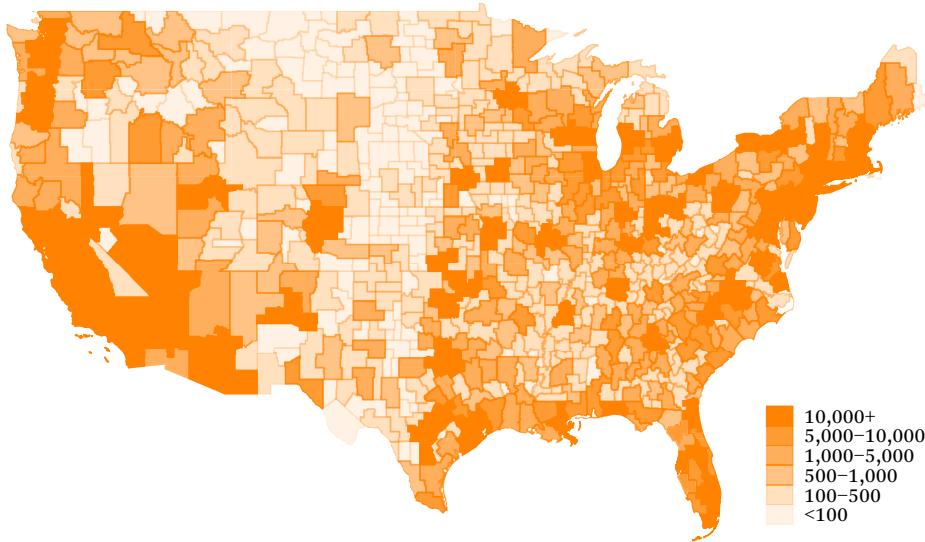
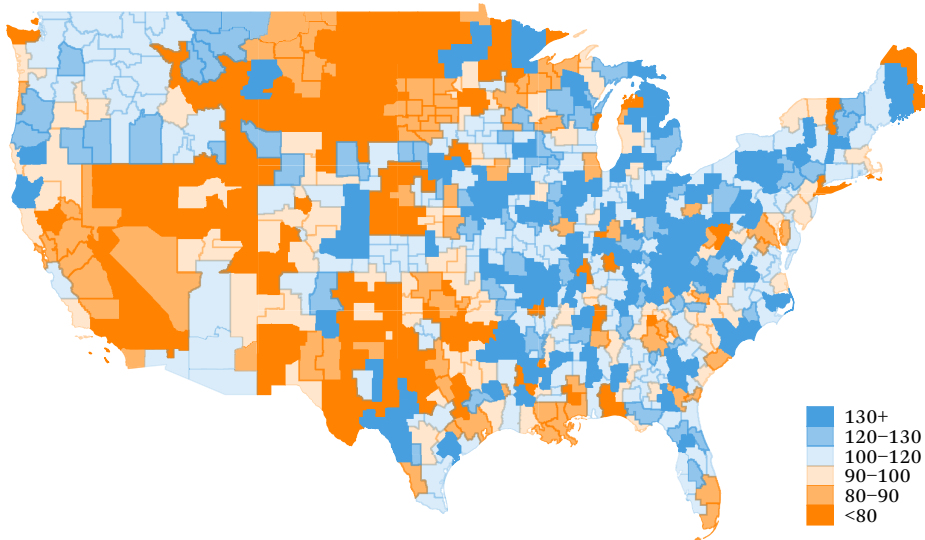
	White Native-Born	Asian American	
		1.5+ Generation	First Generation
Observation	6,913,105	94,289	218,709
Levels of education (%)			
≤ HSG	33.1	14.6	23.8
SC	30.2	23.8	14.0
BA/BS	24.2	39.1	28.2
GRAD	12.5	22.4	34.0
Age	44.2	37.4	44.0
Married (%)	62.4	49.7	80.7
Working FTFY (%)	81.2	80.9	81.1
Log wage	10.807	10.924	10.900
≤ HSG	10.414	10.228	10.136
SC	10.706	10.566	10.509
BA/BS	11.142	11.061	11.055
GRAD	11.440	11.519	11.468
Living in CZs with average family income			
Quantile (%)			
Bottom 20	21.4	5.4	5.1
Second 20	21.1	8.1	8.9
Middle 20	20.2	18.6	17.9
Fourth 20	19.4	26.3	26.9
Top 20	18.0	41.6	41.2

Source: Authors’ tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010–2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).
Note: Calculated from the pooled sample of out-of-school wage workers aged 25–64 with positive annual wages. FTFY refers to full time, full year, having worked fifty weeks or more in the year prior and working at least thirty-five hours per week. ≤ HSG = high school graduates or less than a high school degree, SC = some college, BA/BS = bachelor’s degree, GRAD = advanced degrees. CZs = commuting zones.

likely to be married than Whites. In terms of labor supply measured by working full time and full year, or having worked fifty weeks or more and working at least thirty-five hours per week, there seems to be no difference between Asian Americans and Whites. Looking at the distribution across CZ, Asian Americans are concentrated in affluent neighborhoods. Seven out of ten Asian Americans live in the top two richest quintile CZs, while less than 15 percent live in the bottom two poorest quintiles. Whites are distributed evenly across CZ income quintiles.

The geographic concentration of Asian Americans is substantial. Figure 1, panel A shows the

Asian American population across 722 commuting zones in 2010–2019. As is well known, the Asian American population is concentrated on the West and East Coasts. At the same time, the population of Asian Americans is unevenly distributed within the same state, which suggests that using state boundaries may not fully account for the uneven distribution of Asian Americans. To check whether relative wages for Asian Americans vary across local labor markets or are more or less constant, we measure the average wage of Asian American men relative to White men across CZs and present it in figure 1, panel B. Relative wages for Asian Americans vary by large margins across CZs.

Figure 1. CZ-Level Characteristics of Asian Americans, 2010–2019**Panel A. Asian American Population****Panel B. Wages of Asian Americans Relative to Native-Born Whites Among Men (Percent)**

Source: Authors' tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010–2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Calculated from the pooled sample with adjusted weights on the sample of 25–64 years of age. The log wage gap is calculated from the sample of wage workers. The optimal way to view these maps is in color. We refer readers of the print edition of this article to <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/12/3/50> to view the color version.

There are some overlaps between the CZs with a high number of Asian Americans and the CZs with larger relative wage disadvantages for Asian American men, such as California and New York City. Still, the patterns look too

complicated to draw a quick, general conclusion. At the very least, these descriptive figures suggest that it is worth investigating the relative wages of Asian Americans after taking into account local labor markets.

Asian American Disadvantage
in Local Labor Markets

Table 2 shows the changes in Asian American disadvantages as more detailed geographic regions are added in each model. Before controlling for region and with control for demographic, labor market covariates, levels of education and fields of study, model 1 shows that 1.5+ generation Asian American men are advantaged compared to White men, while first-generation Asian American men are disadvantaged. In models 2 and 3, the addition of 8 census regions and 48 state-fixed effects reduces the 1.5+ generation Asian American advantage to 0.022 and -0.010, respectively, and the first-generation Asian American disadvantage to -0.140 and -0.174. When 721 CZ-fixed effects are added in model 4, 1.5+ generation

Asian American men turn out to be disadvantaged by 4.7 percent ($= e^{-0.048} - 1$) compared to White men, and the disadvantage of first-generation Asian immigrants is enlarged to a whopping 19.5 percent ($= e^{-0.217} - 1$). The Duncan dissimilarity index in nine census regions is 0.307, which means that around 31 percent of Asian Americans need to relocate to have the same distribution as Whites. In terms of CZs, the dissimilarity index is substantially larger at 0.465.

Next, we further desegregate Asian Americans by their levels of education and assess their relative earnings in table 3. Without controlling for CZ-fixed effects, 1.5+ generation Asian American men show higher relative earnings than their White counterparts regardless of levels of education. For first-generation

Table 2. Log Wage Disadvantage of Asian American (AA) Men

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Education	O	O	O	O
Field of degree	O	O	O	O
Demographic controls	O	O	O	O
Labor market controls	O	O	O	O
Census region-fixed effects (8)	X	O	X	X
State-fixed effects (48)	X	X	O	X
CZ-fixed effects (721)	X	X	X	O
Gap from native-born Whites				
1.5+ generation AA	0.076*** (0.006)	0.022*** (0.006)	-0.010* (0.005)	-0.048*** (0.004)
First generation AA	-0.098*** (0.007)	-0.140*** (0.008)	-0.174*** (0.008)	-0.217*** (0.007)
Observations	7,226,103	7,226,103	7,226,103	7,226,103
Adjusted R ²	0.564	0.569	0.574	0.580
Dissimilarity index on geography (D)				
Native-born White versus AA		0.307	0.391	0.465
Native-born White versus 1.5+ generation AA		0.360	0.428	0.497
Native-born White versus first generation AA		0.284	0.378	0.456

Source: Authors’ tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010–2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).
Note: Demographic controls include age, age squared, marital status, English proficiency, number of children, family size, and survey-year fixed effects. Labor market controls include weeks worked last year, usual hours worked per week, and class of worker. Robust standard errors clustered on the combination of commuting zones (CZs) and survey years are in parentheses. Only the coefficients and robust standard errors of interest are shown to save space.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

Table 3. Education-Specific Log Wage Disadvantage of Asian American (AA) Men

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Education	O	O	O	O
Field of degree	O	O	O	O
Demographic controls	O	O	O	O
Labor market controls	O	O	O	O
CZ-fixed effects	X	O	X	O
Occupation	X	X	O	O
Gap from native-born Whites				
1.5+ generation AA ×				
≤ HSG	0.050*** (0.010)	-0.090*** (0.011)	0.079*** (0.009)	-0.041*** (0.009)
SC	0.083*** (0.008)	-0.055*** (0.006)	0.082*** (0.007)	-0.036*** (0.006)
BA/BS	0.073*** (0.008)	-0.050*** (0.005)	0.051*** (0.007)	-0.056*** (0.004)
GRAD	0.096*** (0.008)	-0.007 (0.007)	0.016* (0.008)	-0.076*** (0.006)
First generation AA ×				
≤ HSG	-0.164*** (0.008)	-0.323*** (0.011)	-0.047*** (0.007)	-0.186*** (0.009)
SC	-0.122*** (0.007)	-0.275*** (0.006)	-0.034*** (0.007)	-0.169*** (0.005)
BA/BS	-0.119*** (0.009)	-0.232*** (0.009)	-0.080*** (0.007)	-0.181*** (0.006)
GRAD	-0.032*** (0.009)	-0.121*** (0.006)	-0.035*** (0.008)	-0.110*** (0.005)
Observations	7,226,103	7,226,103	7,226,103	7,226,103
Adjusted R^2	0.564	0.581	0.620	0.632

Source: Authors' tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010–2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Demographic controls include age, age squared, marital status, English proficiency, number of children, family size, and survey-year fixed effects. Labor market controls include weeks worked last year, usual hours worked per week, and class of worker. Robust standard errors clustered on the combination of commuting zones (CZs) and survey years are in parentheses. Only the coefficients and robust standard errors of interest are shown to save space. ≤ HSG = high school graduates or less than a high school degree, SC = some college, BA/BS = bachelor's degree, GRAD = advanced degrees.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

Asian immigrants, their earnings are lower than Whites. The disadvantage for less educated Asian immigrants is more than 15 percent compared to equally educated Whites, while those with an advanced degree seem to have reached near parity. However, when CZ-fixed effects are added in model 2, all 1.5+ generation Asian American groups except graduate degree holders turn out to be disadvantaged relative to equally educated Whites. The disadvantage for first-generation Asian immigrants,

including graduate degree holders, becomes substantially larger. Accounting for detailed local labor markets, the disadvantage suffered by first-generation Asian American men enlarges, and the advantage enjoyed by the 1.5+ generation turns to a disadvantage. These results suggest the importance of incorporating detailed geography in understanding labor market performance of Asian American men.

There is debate about whether adding occupation to the right-hand side of the regres-

sion equation creates an over-control problem (Sakamoto and Wang 2021; Tran et al. 2019). We do not claim that occupation should be controlled for when assessing the relative wages of Asian Americans. Instead, we treat the occupational distribution as an indicator of the strategic adaptation of Asian Americans and check whether the control of occupation accounts for Asian American disadvantages. First, we control for occupation without adding CZ-fixed effects in model 3. Accounting for detailed occupation has heterogeneous effects across levels of education. Compared to the coefficients estimated in model 1 in which occupation is not controlled for, the relative wages of Asian Americans without a bachelor's degree either increase or remain the same in model 3 with the control of occupation, while those for the highly educated decreases. The differences in net wage disadvantage of Asian Americans between models 1 and 3 suggest that the distributional difference in occupations between Asian Americans and Whites is associated with lower wages for less-educated Asian Americans, while it is associated with higher wages for highly educated Asian Americans. Occupation explains almost all advantages for graduate-school-educated 1.5+ generation Asian American men.

These results highlight the strategic adaptation of college-educated Asian Americans. Asian Americans are likely to choose occupations that require the most education and can signal competence (Lee et al. 2024). Unlike the highly educated who can strategically choose fields of study in college that might lead to occupations in which the Asian American disadvantage is weak or nonexistent, less-educated Asian Americans might be devoid of such a strategic adaptation in choosing occupations, and thus the occupational distribution for less educated Asian Americans may be a source of disadvantage rather than advantage. The increase in relative wages for less-educated Asian Americans in model 3 compared with model 1 is consistent with this expectation. When both detailed occupations and CZ-fixed effects are added in model 4, the educational gradient of Asian American disadvantages disappears. All Asian Americans, regardless of levels of education and immigrant generation, are statistically

significantly and substantially disadvantaged compared to their White counterparts.

Ethnic Diversity of Asian Americans

The ethnic diversity of Asian Americans is one of the key characteristics that define Asian Americans (Tran 2024; Vo et al. 2023). Thus, we reestimate model 2 of table 3 after desegregating Asian Americans by their ethnicities. Table 4 shows the result.

As expected, there are noticeable variations across Asian ethnic groups. In particular, the ethnic variation among highly educated 1.5+ generation Asian Americans is noteworthy. Asian Indian Americans with advanced degrees are the only group with a statistically significant advantage over Whites. Korean Americans are another group with small, though statistically insignificant, advantages over Whites. Chinese and Vietnamese Americans with advanced degrees have reached parity with Whites. Other Asian groups are disadvantaged compared to Whites. Among those with a bachelor's degree, Asian Indians and Korean Americans are not disadvantaged, while other groups endure wage disadvantages. Among the less educated, almost all ethnic groups are disadvantaged. Less-educated other Southeast Asian Americans do not seem to be disadvantaged.

For Asian immigrants, all ethnic groups are disadvantaged compared to Whites regardless of levels of education. Although they are disadvantaged like other groups, the extent to which highly educated Asian Indian immigrants are disadvantaged is noticeably smaller than that of other Asian ethnic groups. Unlike the highly educated, less-educated Asian Indian immigrants are as disadvantaged as other Asian ethnic groups. This might be because highly educated first-generation Asian Indian immigrants are more hyper-selected than other groups (Lee et al. 2024) and that, unlike East Asians, they have a culture encouraging assertiveness (Lu et al. 2020), which is valued in leadership positions. Overall, table 4 uncovers that, with a few important exceptions, most Asian ethnic groups endure disadvantages in wages compared to Whites, once levels of education and local labor markets are controlled for. Detailed geography matters for the relative wages of most Asian ethnic groups.

Table 4. Education-Specific Log Wage Disadvantage of Asian American (AA) Men by Ethnicity

	≤ HSG	SC	BA/BS	GRAD
Education	O	O	O	O
Field of degree	O	O	O	O
Demographic controls	O	O	O	O
Labor market controls	O	O	O	O
CZ-fixed effects	O	O	O	O
Gap from native-born Whites				
1.5+ generation AA				
Chinese	-0.225***	-0.055***	-0.040***	-0.005
Korean	-0.046	-0.063**	-0.013	0.033
Filipino	-0.090***	-0.061***	-0.113***	-0.077***
Vietnamese	-0.115***	-0.048**	-0.076***	0.003
Asian Indian	-0.135***	-0.064**	0.029*	0.029*
Other Southeast Asian	0.013	-0.053***	-0.118***	-0.109**
Other South Asian	-0.216**	-0.032	-0.045	-0.114**
Other Asian	-0.090**	-0.064***	-0.061***	-0.039*
First generation AA				
Chinese	-0.472***	-0.286***	-0.224***	-0.129***
Korean	-0.238***	-0.292***	-0.309***	-0.277***
Filipino	-0.272***	-0.308***	-0.449***	-0.278***
Vietnamese	-0.282***	-0.226***	-0.281***	-0.205***
Asian Indian	-0.325***	-0.280***	-0.074***	-0.051***
Other Southeast Asian	-0.191***	-0.267***	-0.379***	-0.247***
Other South Asian	-0.442***	-0.400***	-0.466***	-0.299***
Other Asian	-0.167***	-0.151***	-0.135***	-0.186***
Observations	7,226,103			
Adjusted R^2	0.582			

Source: Authors' tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010-2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: All estimates are from the same model. Demographic controls include age, age squared, marital status, English proficiency, number of children, family size, and survey-year fixed effects. Labor market controls include weeks worked last year, usual hours worked per week, and class of worker. Robust standard errors clustered on the combination of commuting zones (CZs) and survey years are in parentheses. Only the coefficients and robust standard errors of interest are shown to save space. ≤ HSG = high school graduates or less than a high school degree, SC = some college, BA/BS = bachelor's degree, GRAD = advanced degrees.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

Decomposition of Asian American Wage Disadvantage

Analyses so far demonstrate that 1.5+ generation Asian Americans' wage advantage is a spurious outcome of the omitted-variable bias and that the disadvantages of first-generation Asian immigrants are underestimated due to the lack of control for local labor markets. The following question is how much overestimation of Asian American wages is associated with geo-

graphic distributions. To assess this, we conduct the Kitagawa–Oaxaca–Blinder decomposition analyses. The results are presented in table 5, where the first set of result columns shows the detailed decomposition of the wage advantage for 1.5+ generation Asian Americans, and the second set shows that for first-generation Asian immigrants. In this analysis, all covariates are grand-mean centered (Kim 2013), and thus, the constant quantifies the expected wage

Table 5. Detailed Decomposition of Log Wage Gap between Asian American (AA) and White Men

	Gap from Native-Born White					
	1.5+ Generation AA			First Generation AA		
	Estimate	Standard Error	Percent	Estimate	Standard Error	Percent
Total Gap (= A+B)	0.117***	(0.004)	100	0.093***	(0.003)	100
A. Composition	0.150***	(0.006)	128	0.213***	(0.005)	229
Demographic	-0.108***	(0.003)	-92	0.016***	(0.001)	17
Labor market	-0.010***	(0.002)	-9	-0.018***	(0.001)	-19
Education	0.058***	(0.016)	50	0.045***	(0.011)	48
Field of BA/BS	0.037*	(0.016)	32	0.072***	(0.011)	77
Occupation	0.084***	(0.003)	72	0.064***	(0.003)	69
Other	-0.003***	(0.000)	-3	-0.029***	(0.001)	-31
Commuting zone	0.091***	(0.004)	78	0.063***	(0.003)	68
B. Coefficient	-0.032***	(0.006)	-27	-0.119***	(0.004)	-128
Demographic	-0.000***	(0.000)	0	0.000***	(0.000)	0
Labor market	-0.000*	(0.000)	0	-0.000***	(0.000)	0
Education	0.000	(0.000)	0	0.002**	(0.001)	2
Field of BA/BS	-0.000	(0.000)	0	-0.001	(0.001)	-1
Occupation	-0.000***	(0.000)	0	-0.002***	(0.000)	-2
Other	0.000*	(0.000)	0	0.001***	(0.000)	1
Commuting zone	0.001***	(0.000)	1	0.004***	(0.000)	4
Constant	-0.033***	(0.006)	-28	-0.122***	(0.004)	-131
Observations	7,007,394			7,131,814		

Source: Authors’ tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010–2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Demographic = age and age squared, marital status, number of children, and family size. Labor market = weeks worked last year, usual hours worked per week, and class of worker. Other = English proficiency indicator and survey-year fixed effects. BA/BS = bachelor’s degree. Robust standard errors are in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

gap when all covariates are set at their grand means for both Asian Americans and Whites.

In the decomposition analyses, we are primarily interested in the composition and coefficient effects of CZs, which are the sums of 721 CZ-fixed effects. Out of the total gaps between 1.5+ generation Asian Americans and Whites, the composition effect of CZs contributes the most to the higher wage of Asian American men relative to White men. The total gap between 1.5+ generation Asian Americans and Whites is 12.4 percent, or 0.117 log dollars, which means Asian Americans earn 12.4 percent more than Whites. Out of this advantage, the composition effect of CZs accounts for

about three-fourths (0.091 out of 0.117). That is, 1.5+ generation Asian Americans earn 9.5 percent ($= e^{0.091}$) more than Whites simply because they reside in high-wage CZs. The effect size of the composition of CZs is slightly larger than that of occupation and comparable to that of education, including fields of study ($0.095 = 0.058 + 0.037$). The overrepresentation of Asian Americans in high-wage CZs has a similar effect size to the overeducation of Asian Americans and their strategic adaptation in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics majors. The coefficient effects of CZs are negligible, which indicates that 1.5+ generation Asian Americans are not getting par-

ticularly favorable treatment when residing in high-wage CZs.

For first-generation Asian immigrants, the grand advantage is 9.7 percent, or 0.093 log dollars. Out of this advantage, the composition effect of CZs (0.063) accounts for about two-thirds. The effect size of the composition of CZs is similar to that of occupation (0.064). Compared with the combined composition effects of levels of education and fields of study ($0.117 = 0.045 + 0.072$), that of CZs is around half. Thus, the lack of control for local labor markets yields more biased results when estimating the relative wages for 1.5+ generation Asian Americans than for first-generation Asian immigrants. Conversely, controlling for detailed fields of study is more important when estimating the relative wages for first-generation Asian immigrants than for 1.5+ generation Asian Americans.

Coethnic Concentration and Asian American Disadvantage Across Local Labor Markets

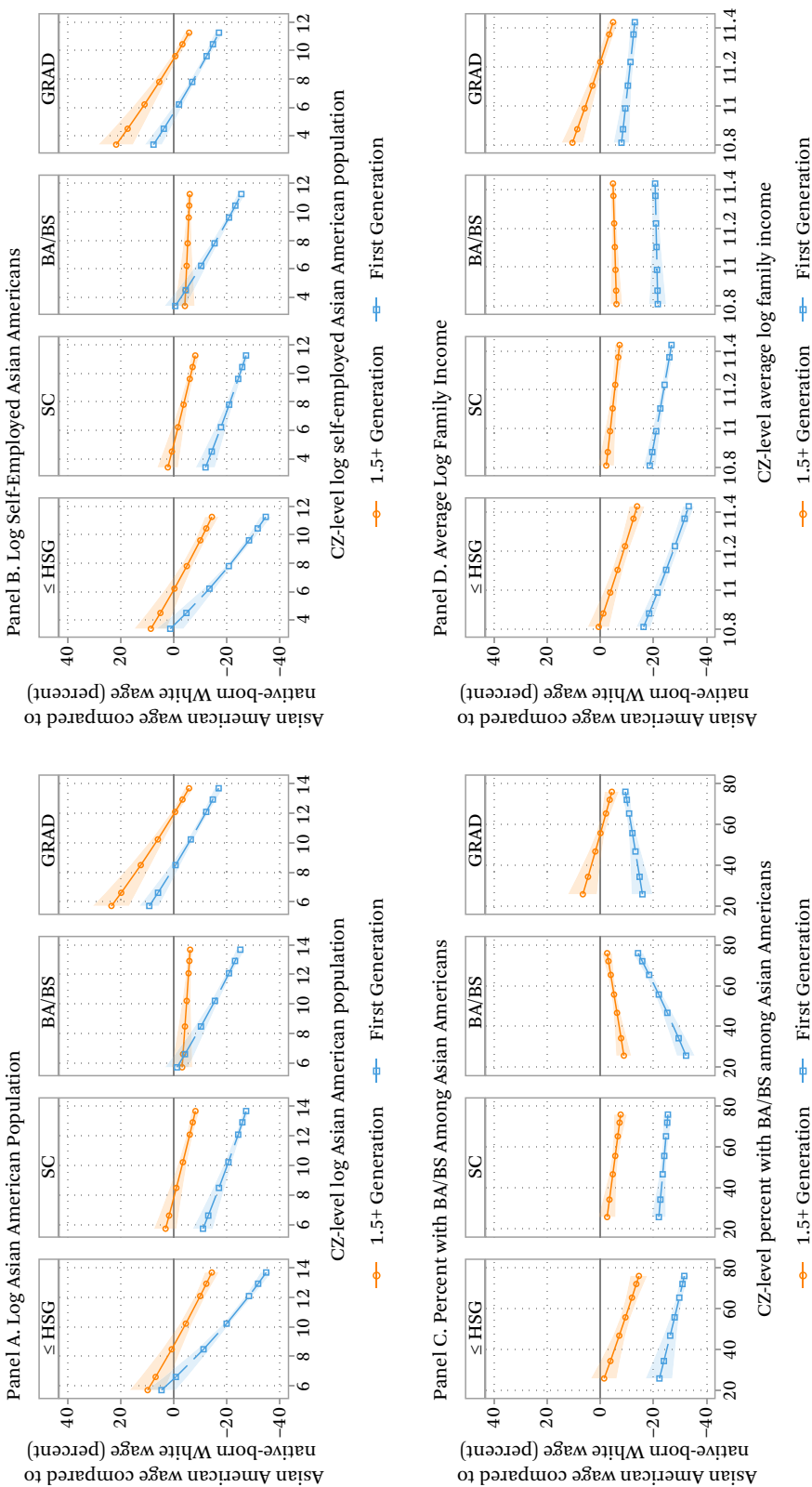
As shown in figure 1, panel B, the wage gaps between Asian Americans and Whites are not constant across local labor markets but vary substantially. In this section, we explore how the variations are systematically associated with Asian American coethnic concentration and educational selectivity. If Asian Americans benefit from the ethnic economy, the relative wages for Asian Americans are positively associated with either the population size of Asian Americans in the CZ or that of self-employed Asian Americans or with both. If there is a spillover effect of hyper-selected Asian Americans, the relative wages for Asian Americans are positively associated with the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans in the CZ. Conversely, if coethnic competition, coethnic exploitation, and the model minority image hurt Asian Americans who do not fit this image, the relative wages for less-educated Asian Americans would be negatively associated with the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans in the CZ. As noted earlier, we do not assess which mechanisms are most likely at play. Instead, we examine whether coethnic concentration and the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans across CZs are associated with their relative wages.

Figure 2 plots the predicted (dis)advantage of Asian American men relative to equally educated Whites across four CZ-level characteristics: log Asian American population, log population size of self-employed Asian Americans, the proportion of bachelor's degree holders among Asian Americans, and average log family income by CZ. The first two variables indicate ethnic economy and the third variable indicates the educational selectivity of Asian Americans. It turns out that the higher the concentration of Asian Americans and the higher the number of self-employed Asian Americans, the lower the relative wages of Asian American men relative to Whites. The negative associations look steeper for first-generation Asian immigrants than for 1.5+ generation Asian Americans. An interesting finding is that for all levels of education, 1.5+ generation Asian Americans do not experience wage disadvantage if they live in CZs with a small Asian American population.

The associations between the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans in the CZ and the relative wages of Asian Americans vary depending on levels of education. As the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans grows in a local community, the earnings disadvantage of the less educated Asian American workers becomes worse. Contrary to this, the increase in the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans is positively associated with the net earnings of Asian American workers with a BA/BS. On the other hand, the association is negative for 1.5+ generation Asian Americans with an advanced degree. With these mixed results, it is hard to make a strong conclusion regarding the association between higher proportion of BA/BS holders among Asian Americans in local communities and the relative wages of Asian American men. At minimum, this result indicates that there is no positive wage spillover effect for less-educated Asian Americans in areas with higher proportions of highly educated Asian Americans.

We also test whether Asian Americans earn more by living in affluent CZs and find no such association. As shown in figure 2, panel D, average CZ family income is either negatively associated with the relative wages for Asian Americans or not associated. In particular, less-

Figure 2. Education-Specific Wage Disadvantage of Asian American Men Across CZ Characteristics



Source: Authors' tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010–2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Plotted estimates represent the expected net disadvantage relative to equally educated native-born White men, expressed as percentages, at P5, P10, P25, P50, P75, P90, and P95 of CZ-level variable. Shaded areas indicate confidence intervals at 95 percent. Based on equation (2). HSG = high school graduates, SC = some college, BA/BS = bachelor's degree, GRAD = advanced degrees. CZ = commuting zone.

educated Asian Americans suffer from larger relative wage disadvantages when they live in affluent CZs. This result is consistent with the speculation that less-educated Asian Americans may invest in houses in affluent areas because affluent CZs offer good public schools despite such action hurting their wages (Tian 2023).

Robustness Check

While we have accounted for CZ-fixed effects in this study, some will argue that this is not enough to control for the heterogeneous preferences of Asian Americans. There is a possibility that Whites are more likely to move internally for better wages than Asian Americans, while Asian Americans are more likely to stay in coastal areas where the population density of Asian Americans is high. As shown in figure 2, panel A, Asian population density is negatively associated with wages for Asian Americans. To address this concern, we limit our sample to the native-born and estimate the model with control for 51 birth states and their full interaction with 722 CZs (= 35,358 fixed effects excluding empty cases). In this model, respondents' preference for the current residential area given their birth states is fully controlled. Table 6 shows the results.

The estimated disadvantages for Asian Americans who are second generation or greater are reduced only marginally when the full interactions between birth states and current CZs are added. There are no changes in the direction and significance of the estimated coefficients of being Asian Americans, regardless of levels of education. When we conduct the formal test of the change in coefficients between model 1 and model 2, no changes are statistically significant.

As shown in table 1, 1.5+ generation Asian Americans are younger as a group than native-born Whites and first-generation Asian Americans. Limiting the respondents' age ranges from twenty-five to fifty-four or from thirty-five to forty-four alters the estimated coefficients as expected but does not change our main conclusion. For an additional robustness check, we exclude California and New York states from our analyses and repeat the same analyses with table 3. Our conclusions are not altered either.

Our sample includes only wage workers. Given the higher likelihood of self-employment among Asian Americans, particularly first-generation immigrants (Le 2012; Tran and Poon 2011), less-educated Asian American wage workers may be negatively selected in terms of potential earnings, especially in CZs with a high concentration of highly educated coethnics and greater ethnic business opportunities. To address this concern, we repeat the same analyses with table 3 and figure 2 using a sample that includes the self-employed, with annual earnings as the dependent variable. The results are almost identical to what we report here.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This study highlights the importance of incorporating detailed geographies to understand the earnings disadvantage of Asian American men. There are several important findings. First, estimating Asian American wages relative to Whites without controlling for the detailed geographies in the United States risks positively biased estimates. Second, net of local labor markets and demographic, educational, and other labor market covariates, all groups of Asian American men, regardless of immigrant generation and levels of education, are disadvantaged relative to equally educated native-born Whites. The graduate school-educated 1.5+ generation is the only group that is not disadvantaged. However, when detailed occupations are added to the right-hand side of the regression equation, even graduate school-educated 1.5+ generation Asian Americans earn less than Whites. Third, the different distribution of geographic areas is the single most powerful component accounting for the gross advantage of 1.5+ generation Asian Americans. Its effect size is similar to the combined effect of education and field of study. For first-generation Asian immigrants, the extent to which the different distribution of geographic areas accounts for their advantage is around half of the combined effect of education and field of study. Fourth, there are substantial variations across Asian ethnic groups in the magnitude of disadvantages. Highly educated Asian Indians and Korean Americans are relatively less disadvantaged than other ethnic groups or

Table 6. Education-Specific Log Wage Disadvantage of Native-Born Asian American (AA) Men

	Model 1	Model 2
Education	O	O
Field of degree	O	O
Demographic controls	O	O
Labor market controls	O	O
CZ-fixed effects	O	O
Birth state	X	O
CZ-fixed effects x birth state	X	O
Gap from native-born Whites		
Second generation AA ×		
≤ HSG	−0.057*** (0.014)	−0.053*** (0.014)
SC	−0.039*** (0.008)	−0.033*** (0.008)
BA/BS	−0.038*** (0.006)	−0.029*** (0.006)
GRAD	−0.010 (0.008)	−0.008 (0.008)
Observations	6,965,161	6,965,161
Adjusted R ²	0.584	0.586

Source: Authors’ tabulation based on American Community Survey 2010–2019 (Ruggles et al. 2024).
Note: Sample limited to native-born individuals. Demographic controls include age, age squared, marital status, English proficiency, number of children, family size, and survey-year fixed effects. Labor market controls include weeks worked last year, usual hours worked per week, and class of worker. Robust standard errors clustered on the combination of commuting zones (CZs) and survey years are in parentheses. Only the coefficients and robust standard errors of interest are shown to save space. ≤ HSG = high school graduates or less than a high school degree, SC = some college, BA/BS = bachelor’s degree, GRAD = advanced degrees.
* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

even have reached parity compared to Whites. Fifth, the wage disadvantages of Asian Americans are larger in local labor markets where the population density of Asian Americans and self-employed Asian entrepreneurs is higher. Less-educated Asian Americans are faring worse in local labor markets where highly educated Asian Americans are more concentrated. Studies on Asian Americans tend to focus on the highly educated. This is a reflection of the population composition, as a majority of Asian Americans are well-educated. Nevertheless, the lack of studies on less-educated Asian Americans is a gap in Asian American studies. A few studies on less-educated Asian Americans report mixed findings. ChangHwan Kim and Arthur Sakamoto (2014) find that less-educated Asian American men suffer a larger penalty

when they deviate from the model minority image, while Oh and colleagues (2023) find that, unlike the other ethnoracial minorities, less-educated Asian American men have reached parity with Whites. Our results suggest that the perceived parity in earnings between less-educated Asian Americans and Whites may be due to an omitted variable bias stemming from a failure to control for detailed geography. Studies show that less-educated workers are less likely to move across regions and have more constrained geographic choices compared to highly educated workers (Erickson and Kim 2022; Kennan and Walker 2011), suggesting that accounting for detailed regional variations is crucial when estimating relative wages for less-educated workers. Asian Americans, in particular the less edu-

cated, experience larger wage disadvantages in local labor markets where Asian American population density, self-employed Asian Americans, and the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans are higher. Even for Asian Americans with an advanced degree, their advantages are increasingly weaker in local areas where Asian American density and self-employed Asian Americans are higher. These outcomes are consistent with the visibility discrimination hypothesis, the coethnic competition hypothesis, the coethnic exploitation hypothesis, and the negative impact of the model minority image on those who do not fit this stereotype, while they are at odds with the benefits of the ethnic economy and the spillover effect of hyper-selected Asian immigrants. Because of data limitations, we cannot discern which mechanisms account for how much disadvantage. Nor can we test whether one mechanism is responsible for these phenomena or multiple mechanisms are at work. Future research needs to investigate the mechanisms behind the variation in Asian American disadvantages across local labor markets.

While our results do not support the expected positive spillover effect of hyper-selected Asian immigrants across class and ethnic boundaries, such effects may be better captured by ethnicity-specific counts of hyper-selected coethnics in local communities, rather than by the overall number of hyper-selected Asian Americans. This would be particularly relevant if the spillover effect of hyper-selected Asian immigrants is limited within the same ethnic community rather than extending to other ethnic groups. That is, whether the pan-ethnicity of Asian Americans is evident in the sharing of resources built by hyper-selected Asian immigrants needs further empirical investigation. It is also unclear whether the spillover effect of the hyper-selected Asian immigrants operates across ethnic lines: More granular data on specific Asian ethnic communities are required. In our results, the relatively small disadvantages of Asian Indians, who are the most highly selected among Asian Americans (Lu et al. 2020), are consistent with this speculation. Likewise, Southeast Asians, especially Filipinos, are found to deviate from the model minority stereotype (Gambol 2023; Gam-

bol et al. 2026; Min and Jang 2015; Ocampo 2016). It needs to be studied whether Southeast Asians benefit from living in areas where other Asian Americans or members of the same ethnic group are highly educated.

Although we checked for robustness regarding the potential effect of residential preference, at least among the native-born in the previous section (table 6), we still cannot rule out the possibility that the geographical distribution of Asian Americans can reflect voluntary clustering. Even though there are large relative wage disadvantages in areas where Asian Americans are concentrated and the proportion of hyper-selected Asian Americans is high, those who live there may value other benefits over relative wage advantages. These benefits might include better schooling for their children; a more academically oriented educational culture; and a more familiar coethnic culture, such as foods, coethnic social networks, and related forms of community support. The trade-off between individual wages and other benefits of ethnic communities can be particularly attractive to the less-educated. That is, there may be compensating differentials associated with other benefits in the residential areas of less-educated Asian Americans (Gabriel and Rosenthal 1996), which could be especially pronounced when they work for coethnic employers. This may be because coethnic employers may better understand the value of these differentials than other employers. This possibility aligns well with the finding of a negative association between the relative wages of less-educated Asian Americans and the proportion of Asians who are self-employed.

Interregional mobility has steadily decreased in the US (Erickson and Kim 2022; Molloy et al. 2011). Contrary to this trend, Asian immigrants and their children are more likely than other groups to move from typical gateway cities to other areas (Hall 2013). It remains unknown whether this pattern reflects changing preferences among Asian Americans. Despite their dispersal into previously nontraditional areas, our results show that Asian Americans continue to face disadvantages, net of the fixed effects for birth states, current residential areas, and their interactions (table 6).

At minimum, our results suggest that more research is needed on both the residential preferences of Asian Americans and the implications of detailed geographic factors in studying ethnoracial inequality.

Other studies in this issue also explore labor market outcomes of Asian Americans in varying ways. These studies complement each other and share some common messages. While the article by Phoebe Ho and Hyunjoon Park (2026, this issue) looks at labor market outcomes of 1.5+ generation only, they look at detailed Asian ethnic groups throughout and include analyses by gender. The main focus of Ho and Park (2026) is to address the role of labor supply and occupations in wage differences between Asian ethnic groups and Whites. While we discuss the relative wages of Asian men by ethnicity, they further show distinct variations by level of education for both men and women. Their study also compares Asian Americans not only with Whites but also with other ethnoracial groups. Despite a somewhat different approach, Ho and Park (2026) reach the same conclusion as ours that Asian Americans face disadvantages. Similar to our study, Robert Manduca and Jane Furey (2026, this issue) also look at geographic variations. They use core-based statistical areas rather than CZs and assess inequality in equivalized disposable family income rather than individual wages. Although their income measures and geographic units differ from ours, they reach the same conclusion: Asian Americans are disadvantaged after accounting for detailed geographic areas. Taken together with our results, these studies highlight the importance of detailed geographies in Asian Americans' socioeconomic disadvantages compared to Whites. We hope our study, along with other studies in this issue, facilitates future research incorporating detailed geographic contexts by which the labor market outcomes of Asian Americans and other ethnoracial groups manifest.

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PART II

Gender, Family, and Marriage Penalties and Premiums

How Asian Americans Fare in the Labor Market: The Intersection of Education, Gender, and Ethnicity



PHOEBE HO AND HYUNJOON PARK

Studies of Asian Americans in the labor market point to significant variations in experiences by educational attainment, gender, and ethnicity, but few studies attend to the intersections of these characteristics in yielding disparate patterns of earnings. Using data from the American Community Survey 2019 five-year file, we compare the earnings of 1.5 generation and native-born prime working-age Asian Americans from the five largest ethnic groups (Chinese, Filipinos, Indians, Koreans, and Vietnamese) with the earnings of White Americans, focusing on the role of labor supply and occupations in explaining differences in earnings. At baseline, we find no consistent earnings advantage for Asian Americans. Asian American men across levels of education typically work less and in different types of occupations compared to White men. These patterns contribute substantively to differences in earnings among men. In contrast, Asian American women do not differ markedly from White women in labor supply, though college-educated Asian American women do tend to work in different occupations, which contributes to a modest earnings advantage. Findings have implications for understanding the racialized, classed, and gendered experiences of Asian Americans in the labor market.

Keywords: Asian Americans, wage income, labor supply, occupations, educational attainment, gender

Numerous studies of Asian Americans have consistently documented their higher levels of academic achievement and postsecondary education, albeit with considerable ethnic heterogeneity (Hsin and Xie 2014; Lee and Kye 2016;

Sakamoto et al. 2009). Such educational success is a core component of contemporary portrayals of Asian Americans. However, less attention has been paid to how such racialized patterns of educational attainment play out in

Phoebe Ho is assistant professor at the University at Buffalo's Graduate School of Education, New York, United States. **Hyunjoon Park** is the Korea Foundation Professor of Sociology and Director of the James Joo-Jin Kim Center for Korean Studies at the University of Pennsylvania, United States.

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the labor market experiences and earnings of Asian American men and women. Prior studies have yielded insight on stratifying forces such as nativity, gendered labor, and the professional “bamboo ceiling” (Chin 2020; Kang 2010; Kim and Sakamoto 2010), but with less attention paid to how varied social identities, such as race, educational attainment, and gender, intersect to produce differences among Asian Americans and between Asian Americans and other groups in the labor market. Without examining the intersection of educational attainment and gender in shaping the racialized labor market experiences of Asian Americans, we are left with an incomplete story of their socioeconomic well-being (Ho et al. 2022).

This study examines the earnings of prime working-age Asian Americans (ages twenty-five to fifty-four) across different levels of educational attainment, focusing on native-born Asian Americans and those who immigrated as younger children (before age thirteen), both of whom would be wholly or largely educated and socialized in the US. Conflicting findings about Asian American earnings may be due in part to differences in the groups of Asian Americans studied, particularly with regard to nativity and related factors such as place of education and English proficiency (Hurh and Kim 1989; Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Sakamoto and Furuichi 2002; Zeng and Xie 2004). By excluding those who immigrated as adults, we can more clearly evaluate the role of race. We also focus on comparisons by level of education (those with at least a bachelor’s degree and those without) and by gender (men and women). Taken as a whole, a majority of Asian Americans are college-educated. Comparisons to the minority without bachelor’s degrees can provide additional insight into the role of educational credentials in ameliorating racial inequalities in the labor market. In analyzing men and women separately, we heed calls to attend to the contexts under which race and gender intersect in the labor market (Browne and Misra 2003).

In addition, our study analyzes the role of specific labor market experiences—namely, labor supply (time spent at work) and occupations—in contributing to disparities in earnings. Time spent at work and occupations held

can be understood as reflecting both larger structural opportunities and constraints in the labor market and individual responses based on social locations. For Asian Americans, the interplay between structural forces and individual agency in the labor market is simultaneously racialized, classed, and gendered. How much time Asian American workers are allowed, expected, need, or prefer to work and in what types of occupations, we argue, depends on broader societal stereotypes about Asian Americans and the differential ways in which Asian American men and women are seen to inhabit and may respond to such stereotypes.

Lastly, we disaggregate Asian Americans by ethnicity, including the five largest ethnic groups: Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese Americans. While we primarily expect that stereotypes about Asian Americans, including their gendered components, are broadly applied with little regard to ethnic variation, there may be instances in which established niches driven by US immigration policies result in labor market experiences that are unique to specific ethnic groups (such as Filipino nurses, South Asian doctors, Vietnamese nail salon workers). Since such niches are also often notably classed and gendered, our inclusion of ethnic groups contributes to the broader focus on the intersection of identities as they relate to the labor market experiences and earnings of Asian Americans.

We find that the patterns of earnings for 1.5 and later generation Asian American workers vary in ways that call for an intersectional approach. Asian American men typically experience an earnings disadvantage relative to White men, with differences in labor supply and occupations implicated for those without bachelor’s degrees and occupations driving differences for those with bachelor’s degrees. In contrast, Asian American women are largely at parity with White women, sometimes even experiencing an earnings advantage that is largely attributable to differences in occupations. Baseline differences in earnings speak broadly to the racialized labor market experiences of Asian Americans, but the differing patterns by educational attainment and for men and women speak to concurrently classed and gendered experiences.

INTERSECTIONALITY, STEREOTYPES OF ASIAN AMERICANS, AND EARNINGS IN THE LABOR MARKET

A large and growing body of literature under the conceptual umbrella of intersectionality has sought to document and explain how multiple aspects of an individual or group “operate not as unitary, mutually exclusive entities, but as reciprocally constructing phenomena that in turn shape complex social inequalities” (Collins 2015, 2). For example, Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) highlights several employment discrimination lawsuits concerning Black women in which courts interpreted race- and gender-based discrimination in unidimensional fashion, overlooking the ways in which Black women’s labor market experiences are distinct from those of Black men and White women. Similarly, Peggy Li (2014) critiques the “single-axis” framing offered by the “glass ceiling” and the “bamboo ceiling,” labor market metaphors that respectively focus on gender and race, as obscuring the experiences of Asian American women.

To better understand some of the ways in which race, class, and gender intersect to shape the labor market experiences of contemporary Asian Americans, we draw on what Yoko Kawai (2005) describes as the ambivalence of Asian American stereotypes, in which they are seen contradictorily as both a “Yellow Peril” and a “Model Minority.” Both depictions are closely linked to economic concerns. Early Asian labor migrants to the US, for example, were seen as cheap and pliant—a peril to White workers in their numbers and willingness to tolerate subpar working and living conditions (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014; Saito 1997). More modern portrayals of Asian Americans see them as highly educated and hardworking—a model minority—but lacking the requisite qualities to be leaders in the workplace (Chin 2020; Li 2014). In the contemporary labor market, these perceptions may result in classed experiences for Asian Americans. Asian Americans without college degrees run counter to model minority stereotypes and may be viewed as especially deviant cases suitable at best for particular types of menial labor. Asian Americans with college degrees, on the other hand, might be considered competent technical workers in a narrow

sense, restricting their opportunities for advancement (Chin 2020; Li 2014), or as “forever foreigners” whose loyalties are suspect (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014), thus rendering them unsuitable for high-level positions.

Indeed, studies that control for or disaggregate by educational attainment show no earnings advantage for Asian Americans (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Zeng and Xie 2004) or even an Asian American earnings disadvantage when compared with Whites (Covarrubias and Liou 2014; Kim and Sakamoto 2010). A study using US census data from 2000 to 2007 finds that native-born Asian American men who did not complete high school and those with only a high school diploma earn significantly less than their White counterparts, especially at the lower end of the earnings distribution (Kim and Sakamoto 2014). Two studies using data from the 2003 National Survey of College Graduates, one comparing the annual earnings of college-educated men (Kim and Sakamoto 2010) and the other of college-educated women (Kim and Zhao 2014), find that native-born Asian Americans do not have an earnings advantage over Whites once field of study and college selectivity are taken into account.

Stereotypes of Asian Americans also have strongly gendered implications. The historical relegation of Asian American men to domestic jobs in laundering and housekeeping and strict immigration policies that led to Asian “bachelor societies” have sustained stereotypes of Asian American men as lacking in masculinity (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014). In the contemporary labor market, such stereotypes may block Asian American men from masculine-coded blue-collar work, such as occupations in construction, and Asian American men in white-collar jobs may be evaluated less favorably on traits deemed necessary for career advancement (for example, leadership and charisma). Historical depictions of Asian American women, in addition to being highly exoticized and sexualized, painted them as either vulnerable or cunning (Dhingra and Rodriguez 2014; Li 2014). These tropes, alongside model minority stereotypes, might play out in classed fashion in the labor market. Working-class Asian American women may be seen as ideal menial workers, given their supposed docility, whereas

highly educated Asian American women might be judged as more aggressive and competent relative to other women.

Research offers evidence for the intersection of race and gender in shaping Asian American experiences in educational and workplace settings. Amy Hsin (2018) argues that the model minority stereotype is more harmful for Asian American boys than girls because it runs counter to hegemonic ideals of masculinity. Hsin finds that Asian American boys perform academically as well as Asian American girls in elementary school but fall behind in adolescence. The salience of gender thus grows over time for Asian Americans. In a recent study using data from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement, averaged across more than a quarter century, researchers find that the gender gap in predicted income favoring men is smaller among Asian American workers than among White workers (Vo et al. 2023). Earlier research also finds a similar pattern of smaller gender gaps in earnings for Asian American and other non-White women (Greenman and Xie 2008). On the whole, a deeper look at the ways in which stereotypes of Asian Americans are classed and gendered suggests possible disadvantages for Asian American men and advantages for Asian American women in earnings, with the caveat that any advantages for the latter may stem from harmful stereotypes and do not preclude an overall female disadvantage in the labor market.

LABOR SUPPLY AND OCCUPATIONAL STRATIFICATION

We focus on two potential avenues through which Asian Americans experience work in simultaneously racialized, classed, and gendered ways that result in differences in earnings compared with their White counterparts: labor supply and occupations. Reports of time spent at work either omit Asian Americans entirely (Wilson and Jones 2018) or else offer a monolithic and unidimensional view of them. For example, a Bureau of Labor Statistics statistical table shows similar average hours worked for Asian American and White men and women (aged sixteen and older) but does not provide estimates based on level of education or nativity.

Studies of occupations tend to focus on specialized or elite jobs requiring high levels of education (Chin 2020; Greenman 2011), with much less focus on the types of occupations available to Asian Americans without college degrees. The amount of time spent at work and occupations worked also represent a combination of employer and employee needs and preferences, both of which are shaped by the varying social locations of Asian American men and women, with and without college degrees.

Early work on Asians in the US labor market alludes to their longer working hours, though it is not always clear whether this holds across immigrant generations and levels of education (Chun 1980; Hirschman and Wong 1981; Hurh and Kim 1989). For example, Charles Hirschman and Morrison G. Wong (1981) briefly mention the "long hours and low pay" associated with jobs commonly held by immigrant Chinese men. Yet simply accepting that all Asian Americans are predisposed to working longer hours, whether out of necessity or choice, risks turning a finding for a particular segment of the population into a stereotype of all Asian Americans with little empirical basis. In fact, ChangHwan Kim and Arthur Sakamoto (2014) find that native-born Asian American men typically work less than White men, both in terms of hours per week and weeks over the year, with differences generally larger among men without college degrees. Two other studies find evidence of greater labor supply among highly educated Asian American women. Emily Greenman's (2011) study of women scientists and engineers finds that both prior to and after having a child, Asian American women are more likely than White women to be working full-time. ChangHwan Kim and Yang Zhao's (2014) findings show that greater labor supply accounts for some of the earnings differences college-educated Asian American women have with White women across immigrant generations. However, whether such findings apply to Asian American women without college degrees remains a question.

Family factors also shape labor supply in significantly racialized and gendered ways. Emily Greenman and Yu Xie's (2008) analysis of Census 2000 data finds that among married mothers with young children, nearly all groups

of non-White mothers are more likely than White mothers to work full-time, year-round. The authors suggest that White families are most likely to engage in "gender role specialization," in which men engage in "market" production and women in "domestic" production. Elsewhere, Greenman (2011) argues that a mix of structural and cultural factors—ranging from immigration trends to family composition to cultural perspectives on mothering—contributes to Asian American women's greater participation in the labor market, even after becoming mothers. Greenman suggests that immigrant and highly educated Asian American women are likely to have a "strong work commitment" but the study's focus on elite workers (scientists and engineers) and lack of analysis by nativity again calls for greater attention to be paid to the intersection of race, class, and gender.

Differences in earnings between Asian Americans and Whites might also be due to occupations. Some scholars have argued that, given their "newcomer" and minority status in the US, Asian Americans tend to strategically aim for occupations that require "hard" skills, credentials, and training because they believe evaluations for such positions are more objective and less susceptible to bias and discrimination. Thus, technical occupations in science, engineering, law, and medicine are seen as ideal (Chun 1980; Lee and Zhou 2015; Xie and Goyette 2003). Such occupations, because of the specialized skill sets required, also typically command higher pay. To the extent that college-educated Asian Americans are more highly concentrated in such occupations, they may enjoy an overall earnings advantage. However, because such occupations conform to model minority stereotypes of Asian Americans as technically competent but otherwise unexceptional workers, they might not outearn their White peers within similar occupations. Preferences and strategies for occupations may also be gendered. For example, Asian American women, but not Asian American men, are generally more likely to select college majors with greater earnings potential compared to their White counterparts (Song and Glick 2004). In professional fields where women remain underrepresented, such as in many science, tech-

nology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) occupations, Asian American overrepresentation may advantage Asian American women. In such occupations, gender, if not race, can set Asian American women apart, marking them as exceptional or more capable workers, whereas neither gender nor race sets Asian American men apart in STEM occupations, casting them as typical workers.

For Asian Americans without high levels of education, earnings may depend on what types of occupations are open to them in the low-wage sector. The Bureau of Labor Statistics lists jobs in construction, maintenance, and transportation as among the better-paying jobs for those without college degrees (Farrell and Lawhorn 2022). As we argued earlier, such occupations are strongly coded as masculine in ways that disadvantage Asian American men, an argument some earlier research supports (Hirschman and Wong 1981). This suggests that Asian American men may not have access to the same types of occupations with lower educational requirements as their White peers and may instead be concentrated in service work with lower pay. However, we think it unlikely that stereotypes about Asian Americans disadvantage Asian American women in the same way in the low-skill, low-wage labor market. This is because employers may view Asian American women in such jobs as especially hardworking and compliant, in other words, as ideal workers for the types of jobs commonly open to women without high levels of education.

To summarize, we have argued that the ambivalent nature of Asian American stereotypes—ranging from yellow peril to model minority tropes—has distinct implications for the labor market experiences of Asian Americans across class and gender. We theorize that the racialized experiences of Asian American workers by class and gender may manifest in differences in both the amount of time spent at work and in the kinds of work done, ultimately resulting in differences in earnings. Our analyses build on these ideas by examining the labor supply, occupations, and earnings of Asian Americans in comparison with their White counterparts and with particular attention paid to similarities and variations in such compari-

sons across educational attainment and gender. Comparisons with White Americans, as well as with Black Americans, offer insight into the broader racialized experiences of Asian Americans, while patterns by educational attainment, for men and women, speak to the extent to which Asian American experiences are classed and gendered in ways that have largely been understudied in the extant literature. Our analytic strategies allow us to assess the extent to which differences in labor supply (time spent working) and occupations account for earnings differences between Asian American men and women and their White peers across levels of education.

DATA AND METHODS

In the following sections, we describe the data upon which this study relies, including sample restrictions and composition. We also provide descriptions of study measures before outlining the analytic strategy.

Data and Sample

To assess the earnings of Asian American men and women across levels of education, as well as the contributions of labor supply and occupations to differences in earnings, we draw on data from the American Community Survey (ACS) 2019 five-year file compiled by IPUMS (Ruggles et al. 2024). Our sample is restricted to those who were ages twenty-five to fifty-four from 2015 to 2019 (birth years 1961–1994). We include non-Hispanic Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese Americans who selected a single ethnicity. Though these

groups represent a selected portion of the ethnic diversity found among the Asian American population, they include the largest ethnic groups and represent groups that have varying immigration histories and socioeconomic profiles. As a point of reference, we include non-Hispanic White and Black Americans. For Asian Americans, we restrict the sample to those who were either born in the US or who immigrated prior to age thirteen. For Whites and Blacks, we include only those born in the US. In addition, we include only those who are currently employed as wage workers (excluding those self-employed, unemployed, or out of the labor force),¹ who are not living in group quarters, who are not enrolled in school, and who reported non-zero wage and salary income (hereafter referred to as wage income) in the past year. This yields an analytic sample of 5,383,008 respondents.

Measures

We measure earning, labor supply, occupations, and background characteristics as follows.

Wage income: the total amount, pretax, a respondent earned as an employee in the past twelve months (INCWAGE in the IPUMS data). This income includes wages, salaries, and other money received from an employer. Amounts are adjusted by IPUMS to 2019 dollars.

Labor supply: the product of weeks worked in the past twelve months² and usual hours worked per week to approximate total hours worked over the prior year.

1. In supplementary analyses (available upon request), we run our main models with a broader sample of all who reported any nonzero wage income in the past year, including those currently self-employed, unemployed, or out of the labor force. Substantive findings were very similar to those from the analytic models in this article, as the vast majority of those with any wage income across groups are currently employed as wage workers. See table A.1 for distributions across employment status by race and ethnicity. Tables A.1 and A.2 can be found in the online appendix at <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/12/3/76/tab-supplemental>.

2. In 2015–2018, weeks worked in the past twelve months were measured in intervals in the ACS, whereas for 2019, weeks worked were measured as the actual number of weeks. We recoded weeks worked for the 2015–2018 ACS respondents as the midpoint of the selected interval (for example, a respondent would be coded as working twenty weeks if they selected the category “14 to 26 weeks”). In addition, the number of weeks worked covers total weeks the respondent worked “for profit, pay, or as an unpaid family worker.” Therefore, although our dependent variable indicates wage income and we restrict the sample to those currently employed as wage workers, there remains a possibility that the number of weeks worked can include weeks worked not as an employee.

Occupation: We use two occupational classifications. In descriptive analyses, we use OCC2010, a harmonized measure of over 400 occupations created by IPUMS that is based on the Census Bureau’s 2010 ACS classification scheme.³ The primary variable used in multivariate analyses is an aggregated measure that groups OCC2010 occupations into twenty-five occupational categories based on a coding scheme provided by IPUMS. For example, the category of office and administrative support contains a number of clerical and secretarial occupations.

Background and demographic controls: We include a number of control measures in multivariate models. These include educational attainment (high school or less or some college in models examining those without bachelor’s degrees, bachelor’s degree or graduate degree in models examining those with at least a bachelor’s degree), respondent’s age (centered at forty) and age squared, whether the respondent is currently married, and whether the respondent has at least one child of their own in their household. Lastly, we incorporate local labor market contexts using commuting zones, an indicator that clusters counties based on commuting ties (Autor and Dorn 2013; Autor et al. 2019). Andrew Taeho Kim and ChangHwan Kim (2026, this issue) offer a focused examination of commuting zones, and Robert Manduca and Jane Furey (2026, this issue) offer a comparison of national versus local labor markets.

As can be seen in table A.2, which presents selected descriptive statistics, educational attainment varies by race and gender. On average, the Asian American groups represented in this study have an educational advantage over their White and Black peers, and women outpace men in the shares with at least a bachelor’s degree across racial and ethnic groups. Nearly half to over three-fourths of the Asian American men included in the sample have a bachelor’s degree or higher compared with 39 percent of White men and 22 percent of Black men. Still, the share of prime working-age Asian American men without a bachelor’s de-

gree ranges from 21 to 54 percent, a sizeable enough group to warrant greater scholarly attention. Asian American women also have a marked educational advantage: 57 to 85 percent have at least a bachelor’s degree compared with 48 percent of White women and 30 percent of Black women. Though a bachelor’s degree or higher is more the norm for Asian American women, anywhere from 15 to 43 percent do not have one.

Analytic Strategy

We first present descriptive analyses that depict gross differences in our dependent variable, wage income. We then show how Asian American workers differ in their labor supply (hours worked) and occupations, relative to White and Black workers. These descriptive statistics provide an empirical basis for our earlier theoretical discussion of the potential role played by labor supply and occupation in generating racialized, classed, and gendered differences in earnings for Asian Americans. We then apply ordinary least squares (OLS) regression with the dependent variable of logged wage income predicted by race and ethnicity, focusing on the explanatory power of labor supply and occupation. We present results by educational attainment (no bachelor’s degree; bachelor’s degree or higher) and separately for men and women.

FINDINGS

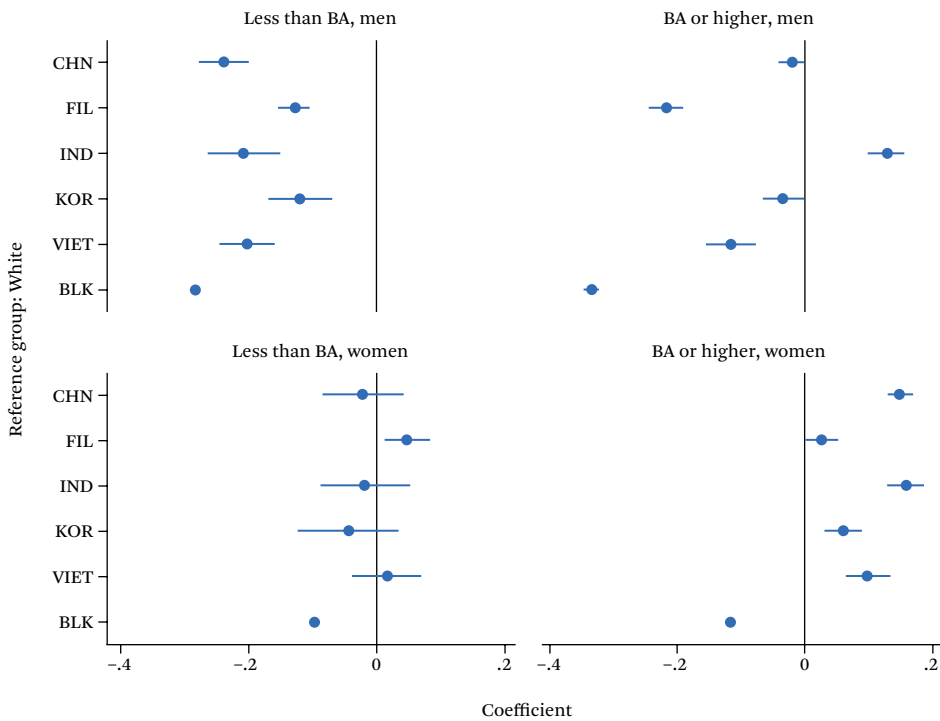
We first present descriptive analyses of wage differences, labor supply, and occupations. Next, we present findings from multivariate models that examine the relationships between labor supply, occupations, and wage income.

Wage Differences

Figure 1 plots gross differences from Whites in logged wage income by gender and education. These estimates control for background and demographic variables but not labor supply or occupation. Among men without a bachelor’s degree, Asian American men across all represented ethnic groups earn significantly less than comparably educated White men, with wage incomes ranging from about 11–21 per-

3. For respondents who worked more than one job, OCC2010 codes the occupation for which respondents worked the most hours in the last week.

Figure 1. Gross Differences in Logged Wage Income from Whites by Gender and Educational Attainment (Ages 25–54)



Source: IPUMS American Community Survey five-year file (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: CHN = Chinese, FIL = Filipino, IND = Indian, KOR = Korean, VIET = Vietnamese, BLK = Black.

Whites, represented as vertical lines, are the reference group. Estimates are weighted and control for demographic variables, including additional educational categories (associate's degree or graduate degree), marital status, child in household, age, and commuting zone. BA = bachelor's degree.

cent lower.⁴ For reference, Black men without bachelor's degrees earn about 24 percent less in wage income than their White counterparts. As shown in figure 1, the wage incomes of Chinese, Indian, and Vietnamese American men without bachelor's degrees are closer to the wage income of Black men than to the wage income of White men.

Among men with a bachelor's degree, we find somewhat less consistent evidence of an Asian American disadvantage. College-educated Filipino and Vietnamese American men earn less than comparably educated White men (by about 20 percent and 10 percent, respectively). For Filipino men with bachelor's degrees, the wage income disadvantage relative

to Whites is even larger than corresponding comparisons among their counterparts without bachelor's degrees. This places their earnings closer to that of college-educated Black men, who earn about 28 percent less than college-educated White men. College-educated Chinese and Korean American men are at a slight disadvantage ($p < .10$) and college-educated Indian American men are at a clear advantage, earning nearly 14 percent more than similarly educated White men.

For women, we find a pattern of Asian American parity among those without a bachelor's degree and an advantage among those with at least a bachelor's degree relative to their White counterparts. Filipina Americans without a

4. Percentage differences can be obtained using $(e^{\beta} - 1) \times 100$, where β is the estimated coefficient for each racial and ethnic group in the base models presented in tables 1 and 2.

bachelor's degree earn about 5 percent more in wage income, while Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese American women without a bachelor's degree earn about the same as comparably educated White women. Among women with at least a bachelor's degree, all Asian American groups shown in figure 1 have a wage income advantage, with the advantage being largest for Chinese and Indian American women, who earn about 16–17 percent more than comparably educated White women. These patterns contrast with the experiences of Black women, who have lower wage incomes than White women across levels of education.

Baseline wage income comparisons provide evidence that Asian American earnings are strongly patterned by the intersection of class (via educational attainment) and gender. While Asian American men are largely at a disadvantage relative to White men, there is variability in this overall pattern among the college-educated. Asian American women do not experience the same earnings disadvantage as men, but any earnings advantage they may have is restricted to the college-educated. Here, we examine the potential of labor supply and occupations in helping to understand these differences in earnings.

Labor Supply Differences

Figure 2 presents differences from Whites in hours worked over the past year, approximated by taking the product of the number of weeks worked in the past year and the usual hours worked per week. A clear division is seen between Asian American and White men in that nearly all of the former, across levels of education, work fewer hours than the latter. Among men without a bachelor's degree, the largest gap is seen between Chinese American and White men, with the former having worked about 169 fewer hours (roughly five fewer full-time work weeks) than the latter over the past year.⁵ For other Asian American men without a bachelor's degree, differences range from 100 to 137 fewer hours worked over the past year (about three to four fewer full-time work

weeks). This places the labor supply of Asian American men without college degrees in the range of their Black counterparts, who worked about 147 fewer hours than White men over the past year.

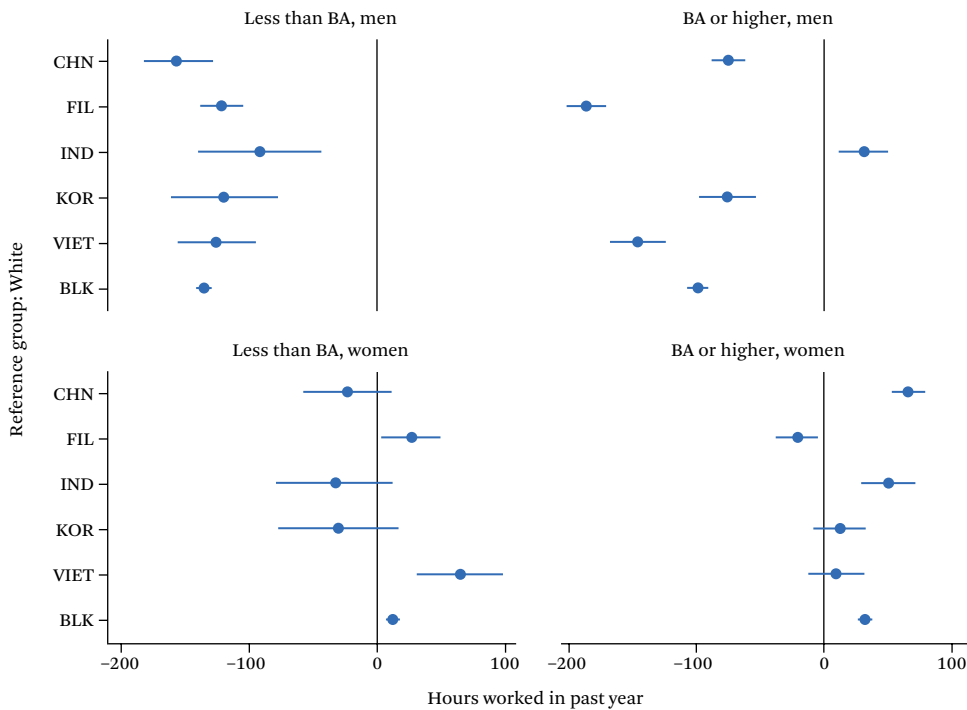
This pattern is also mostly present for men with a bachelor's degree or higher. The difference is especially stark for college-educated Filipino Americans, who worked about 200 fewer hours (nearly six fewer full-time work weeks) than college-educated White men over the past year. College-educated Vietnamese American men likewise worked about 159 fewer hours than White men (more than four fewer full-time work weeks). Both these groups have even lower labor supply than college-educated Black men. The lower labor supply of Korean and Chinese American men with at least a bachelor's degree is more modest—about two fewer full-time work weeks. Once again, the exception is college-educated Indian American men, who worked about thirty-three more hours over the past year than comparably educated White men.

Unlike the generally consistent pattern of lower labor supply among Asian American men, Asian American women typically work about the same or more hours than White women. Among women without bachelor's degrees, Chinese, Indian, and Korean American women's labor supply is no different from that of their White counterparts, while Filipina Americans and Vietnamese American women, like Black women, work more hours. For Filipina Americans, the difference is a modest twenty-nine more hours worked over the past year, while for Vietnamese American women, the difference is larger at just over seventy more hours worked (about two more full-time work weeks). Among the college-educated, Chinese and Indian American women, like Black women, work more than White women, while Korean and Vietnamese American women work about the same amount. Only college-educated Filipina Americans work slightly less than White women.

Patterns of labor supply differences largely map onto the differences in earnings seen in

5. We follow the definition of full-time work used by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is thirty-five or more hours per week.

Figure 2. Differences in Labor Supply from Whites by Gender and Educational Attainment (Ages 25–54)



Source: IPUMS American Community Survey five-year file (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: CHN = Chinese, FIL = Filipino, IND = Indian, KOR = Korean, VIET = Vietnamese, BLK = Black.

Whites, represented as vertical lines, are the reference group. Estimates are weighted. BA = bachelor's degree.

figure 1. Of course, we would expect the amount of time spent at work to correspond to earnings. Our focus, however, lies in the racialized, classed, and gendered ways in which these differences emerge. Moreover, the role labor supply plays in explaining earnings differences is likely to be stronger among those without college degrees, as the jobs available to such individuals are typically of the hourly pay type. Labor supply may play a lesser role in explaining earnings differences among the college-educated, who are more likely to work in jobs that pay a salary and where time spent at work has a less direct connection to pay. For such workers, occupations may play a larger role, as we discuss in the following section.

Occupational Differences

To understand how occupations might account for differences in wage income, we present two

descriptive measures: occupational segregation (figure 3) and occupational concentration (figures 4 and 5). To measure occupational segregation, we estimate the dissimilarity index D for each Asian American group and for Blacks relative to Whites by gender and educational attainment using OCC2010, an IPUMS measure that captures over 400 occupations. The dissimilarity index indicates the extent to which the distribution of Asian Americans across occupations differs from the corresponding distribution of Whites. To gauge occupational concentration, we depict the top three most common occupational categories for each racial and ethnic group, by gender and educational attainment. In other words, we aim to show how much occupations differ between Asian Americans and Whites as well as what types of occupations are most common for each group.

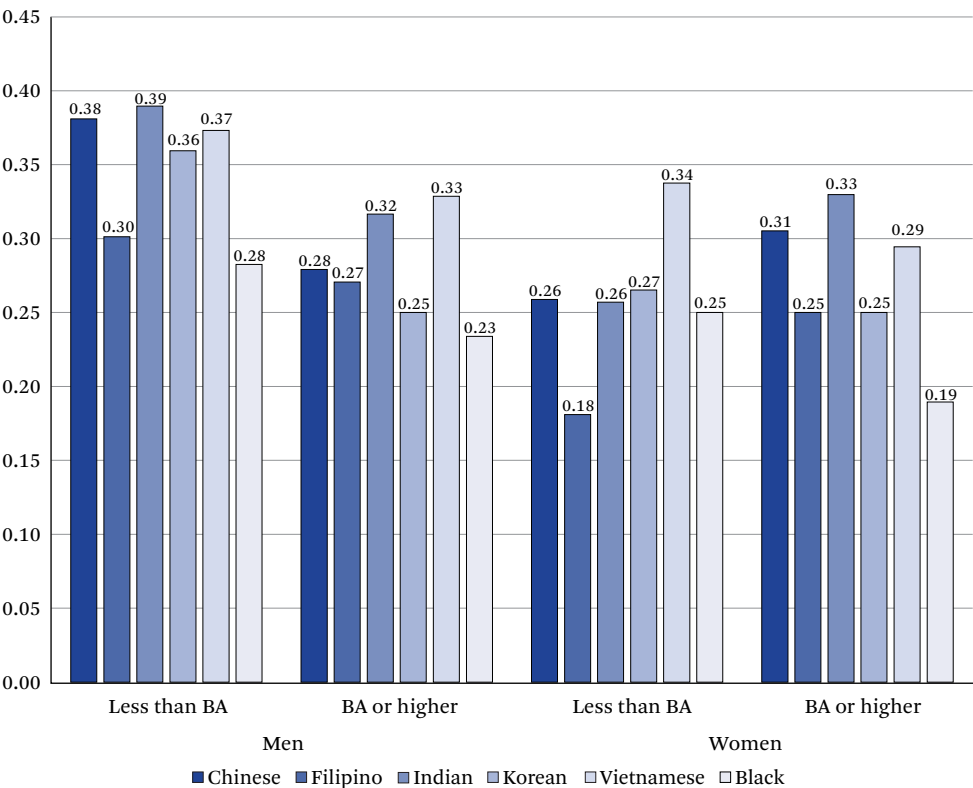
Occupations Among Men

Figure 3 depicts estimates of occupational dissimilarity from Whites, which can be interpreted as the proportion of each group that would need to change occupations in order to have a distribution across occupations similar to that of Whites. For example, more than one-third of Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese American men without a bachelor’s degree would have to change occupations in order to be distributed in a manner similar to that of their White counterparts. The occupational dissimilarity scores for Filipino and Black men are somewhat lower (30 and 28, respectively). From this perspective, Asian American men without bachelor’s degrees are more dissimilar to Whites than Black men are in the occupations they hold. Levels of occupational dissimilarity among college-educated

men are generally lower, but racial and ethnic patterns remain similar. Anywhere from one-quarter to one-third of Asian American men would have to change occupations in order to have distributions like that of their White counterparts. This level of occupational dissimilarity between college-educated Asian American and White men is generally higher than that seen between college-educated Black and White men.

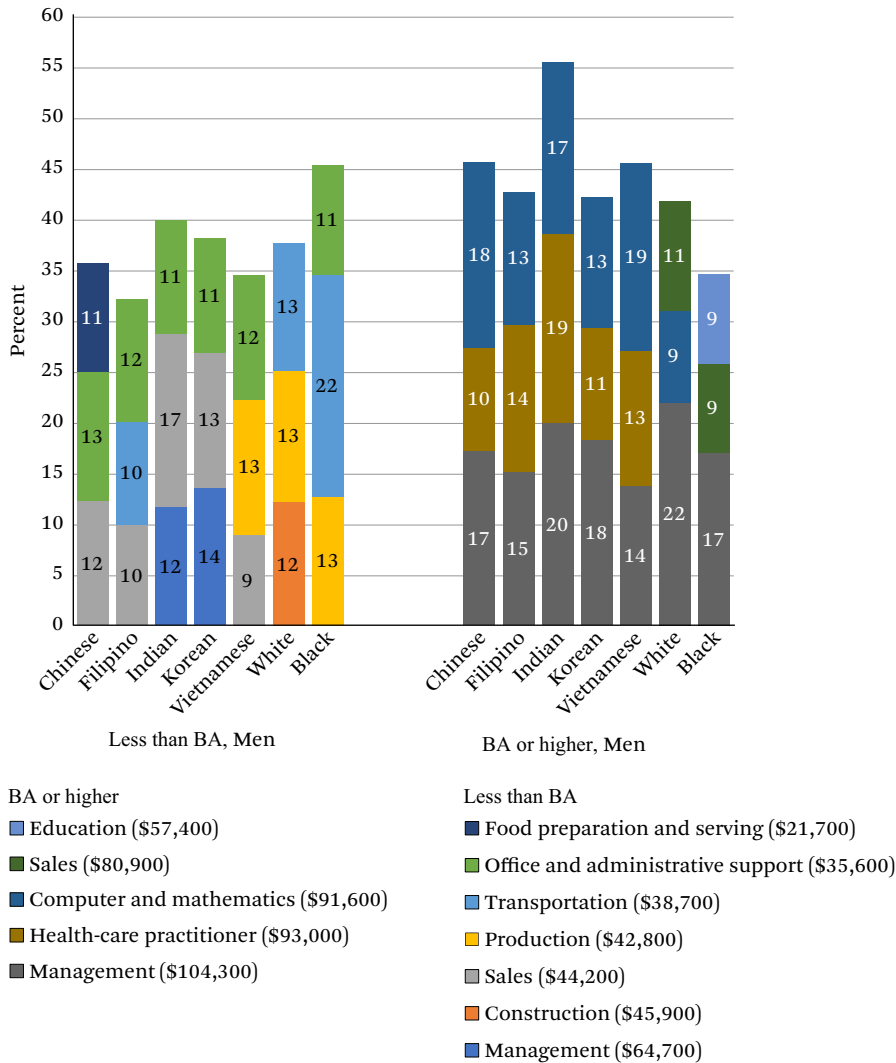
Figure 4 shows the three most common occupational categories for men with and without bachelor’s degrees, alongside the median wage income for men with the respective level of educational attainment in the occupational category. For example, among Chinese American men without bachelor’s degrees, the most common occupational category is office and administrative support (13 percent) and the median

Figure 3. Occupational Dissimilarity to Whites by Gender and Educational Attainment (Ages 25–54)



Source: IPUMS American Community Survey five-year file (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Estimates are weighted. BA = bachelor’s degree.

Figure 4. Common Occupational Categories for Men by Educational Attainment (Ages 25–54)

Source: IPUMS American Community Survey five-year file (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Estimates are weighted. The three most common occupational categories for each subgroup are depicted, with respective median wage incomes (based on gender and educational attainment) also provided. The optimal way to view this figure is in color. We refer readers of the print edition of this article to <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/12/3/76> to view the color version.

wage income for all men without bachelor's degrees in the analytic sample working in such occupations is \$35,600 (rounded to the nearest hundred). The levels of occupational dissimilarity seen in figure 3 are reflected in figure 4. Whereas construction and production occupations are common among White men without bachelor's degrees, such occupations are not

consistently seen among comparably educated Asian American men. For the latter, occupations in office and administrative support, as well as sales, are more common. There is also ethnic variation among Asian American men without bachelor's degrees. For example, occupations in food preparation and serving are common among Chinese Americans, transpor-

tation and moving occupations among Filipino Americans, and management positions among Indian and Korean Americans. Figure 3 shows that among men with at least a bachelor's degree, levels of occupational dissimilarity between Asian Americans and Whites are generally lower. Likewise, figure 4 shows that management and computer and mathematical occupations are common among both Asian American and White men. However, while anywhere from 10 to 19 percent of college-educated Asian American men work as health-care practitioners and technicians, such occupations do not rank among the most common for college-educated White men.

Occupations Among Women

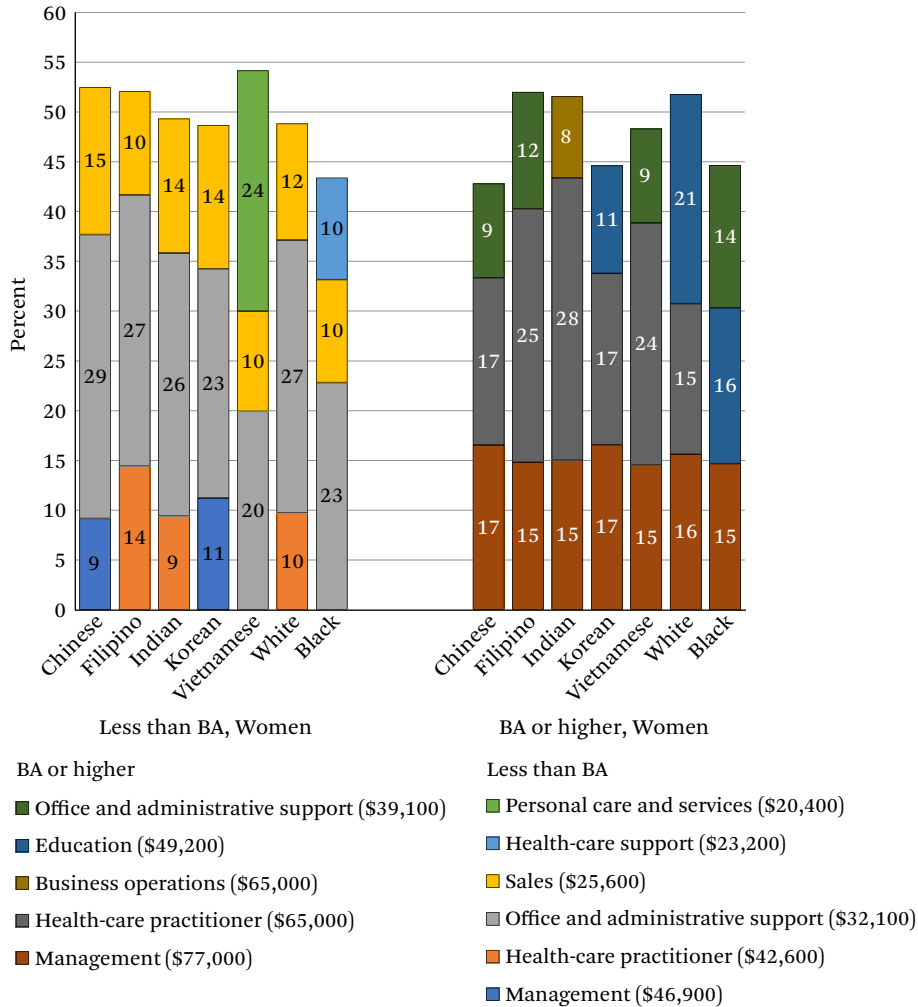
Compared with their male counterparts, Asian American women without bachelor's degrees exhibit less occupational dissimilarity from Whites (figure 3). About one-quarter of Chinese, Indian, and Korean American women without bachelor's degrees would need to change occupations to achieve distributions across occupations like that of comparably educated White women. This level of occupational dissimilarity is on par with that of Black women without bachelor's degrees. Filipina Americans show the lowest dissimilarity scores to Whites, while Vietnamese American women show the highest (18 and 34, respectively). Whereas among men, Asian American occupational dissimilarity was generally lower among the college-educated, the opposite appears to be the case for some groups of Asian American women. College-educated Chinese and Indian American women, as well as Filipina Americans, show noticeably higher levels of occupational dissimilarity from their White counterparts compared to levels among women without bachelor's degrees.

Women show greater occupational concentration compared to men in that the top three occupations typically account for about half of each group (figure 5). Moreover, among women without college degrees, some occupational categories are fairly common regardless of race and ethnicity: anywhere from 20 to 29 percent of Asian American, Black, and White women work in office and administrative support, and

another 10 to 15 percent work in sales. One notable outlier is Vietnamese American women without bachelor's degrees, nearly a quarter of whom work in personal care and services. This is likely a reflection of the prevalence of Vietnamese American women in the US who work as manicurists (Eckstein and Nguyen 2011), an economic niche that is highly racialized, classed, and gendered.

College-educated women also tend to work in similar occupations. Roughly equal shares of Asian American, Black, and White women with at least a bachelor's degree are in management occupations (15–17 percent). Office and administrative support occupations are also common for college-educated women. Occupations such as health-care practitioners and technicians are common for college-educated Asian American and White women, albeit to varying degrees. For example, about 28 percent of prime working-age Indian American women with at least a bachelor's degree work in such occupations, almost double the 15 percent of White women who do so. Nearly one-fifth of college-educated White women work in education, but such occupations are not common among most Asian American women, with the exception of Korean American women, though their share is about half that of White women. Indian American women with at least a bachelor's degree are the only group for whom occupations as business operations specialists are relatively common.

Before turning to multivariate models, we sum up the descriptive findings presented thus far. Among prime working-age adults, there is no consistent earnings advantage for Asian Americans relative to Whites. Instead, patterns vary by educational attainment and gender. Among workers without bachelor's degrees, Asian American men experience a consistent wage income disadvantage relative to Whites while Asian American women do not. Among college-educated workers, Asian American women experience an earnings advantage relative to Whites while only Indian American men have a noticeable earnings advantage. Both labor supply and occupations may account for some of the above patterns. The lower labor supply of Asian American men without bachelor's degrees, as well as their concentration in

Figure 5. Common Occupational Categories for Women by Educational Attainment (Ages 25–54)

Source: IPUMS American Community Survey five-year file (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Estimates are weighted. The three most common occupational categories for each subgroup are depicted, with respective median wage incomes (based on gender and educational attainment) also provided. The optimal way to view this figure is in color. We refer readers of the print edition of this article to <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/12/3/76> to view the color version.

occupations with lower median wage incomes, may account for their earnings disadvantage relative to Whites. For college-educated men, their concentration in higher-paying occupations such as health-care practitioners and technicians and in computer and mathematical fields is likely to matter for their earnings. Labor supply and occupational differences are less prominent among women and thus may have less explanatory power when it comes to earnings. However, where wage income advan-

tages exist for Asian American women, we typically also find corresponding greater labor supply or greater concentrations in occupational categories with higher median wage incomes.

Explaining Earnings Differences

Table 1 presents the results of OLS regression models estimating logged wages by educational attainment for men. Table 2 presents the same for women. Each set of analyses consists

of four models. The base model presents racial and ethnic differences, after accounting for demographic variables (age, age squared, marital status, child in household, and commuting zones). For analyses of those without a bachelor's degree, we control for whether a respondent had some college education (versus high school or less). Similarly, we control for whether a respondent had a graduate degree (versus bachelor's degree only) for analyses of those with at least a bachelor's degree. Estimates from these models are depicted in figure 1, described earlier. The labor supply model builds on the base model by controlling for labor supply while the occupation model adds occupational categories to the base model. The full model includes all variables from previous models.

Recall that at baseline, Asian American men earn significantly less than their White counterparts, as do Black men (see figure 1). Differences in both labor supply and occupations account for some of these earnings disadvantages. As seen in the full model, labor supply (hours and weeks worked) and occupations collectively account for a substantive amount of the differences in wage income Asian American men experience relative to White men. For example, the wage income disadvantage experienced by Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese American men without bachelor's degrees is reduced by about half when accounting for both labor supply and occupations in the full model, resulting in wage incomes ranging from 5 to 10 percent lower than that of their White counterparts. For Chinese and Indian American men without bachelor's degrees, labor supply seems to play a larger role than occupations in explaining their earnings disadvantage. Yet Chinese and Indian American men without bachelor's degrees have wage incomes that remain about 13–16 percent lower than that of comparably educated White men in the full model, an earnings disadvantage strikingly similar to that experienced by Black men without bachelor's degrees (13 percent lower wage incomes).

For college-educated Asian American men, the relationship between labor supply, occupations, and earnings is more complex. Recall from figure 2 that college-educated Asian

American men worked fewer hours than their White peers, with the exception of Indian Americans. Thus, accounting for these differences in labor supply explains about half or more of Filipino American and Vietnamese American men's earnings disadvantage, the entirety of the earnings disadvantage of Chinese and Korean American men, and very little of the Indian American earnings advantage. The occupation model, however, shows that college-educated Asian American men are generally advantaged in terms of occupations. Baseline disadvantages increase with the introduction of occupational categories, and the earnings advantage of Indian Americans is substantially reduced. In other words, the types of jobs college-educated Asian American men hold are a buffer against lower earnings. In the full model, college-educated Indian American men maintain a small earnings advantage of about 4 percent over White men while other college-educated Asian American men have earnings that range from 2 to 14 percent lower than White men. College-educated Black men, however, are much more disadvantaged, with wage incomes about 19 percent lower than that of White men in the full model, and with labor supply and occupations separately accounting for modest amounts of the difference.

Among women without a bachelor's degree, there are few notable differences in earnings between Asian Americans and Whites. For Filipina Americans and Vietnamese American women without bachelor's degrees, their greater labor supply contributes to a modest earnings advantage for the former and protects against an earnings disadvantage for the latter. Since women without a bachelor's degree often work in similar types of jobs (see figure 5), accounting for occupational categories does not have much of an impact on earnings. One exception is Vietnamese American women, among whom an earnings advantage emerges in the occupation model (recall that Vietnamese American women without bachelor's degrees are highly concentrated in personal care and services, one of the lower-paying occupational categories). Asian American women without a bachelor's degree are not disadvantaged in the same way as Asian American men

Table 1. Coefficients from OLS Regression Models Estimating Logged Wage Income (Men, Ages 25–54)

Reference: White	Less than Bachelor's Degree			Bachelor's Degree or Higher				
	Base	Labor Supply	Occupation	Full	Base	Labor Supply	Occupation	Full
Chinese	-0.24*** (0.02)	-0.16*** (0.02)	-0.20*** (0.02)	-0.14*** (0.02)	-0.02+ (0.01)	0.02* (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.04*** (0.01)
Filipino	-0.13*** (0.01)	-0.07*** (0.01)	-0.09*** (0.01)	-0.05*** (0.01)	-0.22*** (0.01)	-0.12*** (0.01)	-0.24*** (0.01)	-0.15*** (0.01)
Indian	-0.21*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.03)	-0.20*** (0.03)	-0.17*** (0.03)	0.13*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.04** (0.01)
Korean	-0.12*** (0.03)	-0.07** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.06** (0.02)	-0.03+ (0.02)	0.01 (0.02)	-0.06*** (0.02)	-0.02+ (0.01)
Vietnamese	-0.20*** (0.02)	-0.13*** (0.02)	-0.15*** (0.02)	-0.10*** (0.02)	-0.11*** (0.02)	-0.04* (0.02)	-0.14*** (0.02)	-0.08*** (0.02)
Black	-0.28*** (0.00)	-0.20*** (0.00)	-0.21*** (0.00)	-0.14*** (0.00)	-0.33*** (0.01)	-0.28*** (0.01)	-0.25*** (0.01)	-0.21*** (0.00)
Demographics	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.
Labor supply ^a	—	0.07*** (0.00)	—	0.06*** (0.00)	—	0.06*** (0.00)	—	0.05*** (0.00)
Occupational categories	—	—	incl.	incl.	—	—	incl.	incl.
R-squared	0.170	0.415	0.239	0.455	0.217	0.361	0.320	0.433
Observations		1,880,692				885,005		

Source: IPUMS American Community Survey five-year file (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Demographic variables include additional educational categories (associate's degree or graduate degree), marital status, child in household, age (centered at forty), age (centered) squared, and commuting zones. Occupational categories include twenty-five categories grouping over four hundred occupations classified by the Census Bureau. Standard errors in parentheses. OLS = ordinary least squares.

^a Labor supply is the product of usual hours worked per week and weeks worked in the past twelve months, divided by one hundred to facilitate interpretation.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; + $p < .10$

Table 2. Coefficients from OLS Regression Models Estimating Logged Wage Income (Women, Ages 25–54)

Reference: White	Less than Bachelor's Degree			Bachelor's Degree or Higher				
	Base	Labor Supply	Occupation	Full	Base	Labor Supply	Occupation	Full
Chinese	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.02)	-0.00 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.15*** (0.01)	0.11*** (0.01)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Filipino	0.05** (0.02)	0.00 (0.01)	0.02 (0.02)	-0.02 (0.01)	0.03+ (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)	-0.03* (0.01)
Indian	-0.02 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.02 (0.03)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.16*** (0.01)	0.14*** (0.01)	0.05*** (0.01)	0.04*** (0.01)
Korean	-0.04 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	-0.03 (0.04)	-0.01 (0.03)	0.06*** (0.02)	0.07*** (0.01)	0.01 (0.01)	0.02+ (0.01)
Vietnamese	0.02 (0.03)	-0.06* (0.02)	0.09** (0.03)	-0.01 (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.10*** (0.02)	0.03* (0.02)	0.03* (0.01)
Black	-0.10*** (0.00)	-0.10*** (0.00)	-0.06*** (0.00)	-0.07*** (0.00)	-0.12*** (0.00)	-0.11*** (0.00)	-0.09*** (0.00)	-0.09*** (0.00)
Demographics	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.	incl.
Labor supply ^a	—	0.09*** (0.00)	—	0.09*** (0.00)	—	0.08*** (0.00)	—	0.08*** (0.00)
Occupational categories	—	—	incl.	incl.	—	—	incl.	incl.
R-squared	0.080	0.486	0.198	0.532	0.094	0.426	0.218	0.497
Observations		1,537,744				1,079,567		

Source: IPUMS American Community Survey five-year file (Ruggles et al. 2024).

Note: Demographic variables include additional educational categories (associate's degree or graduate degree), marital status, child in household, age (centered at forty), age (centered) squared, and commuting zones. Occupational categories include twenty-five categories grouping over four hundred occupations classified by the Census Bureau. Standard errors in parentheses. OLS = ordinary least squares.

^a Labor supply is the product of usual hours worked per week and weeks worked in the past twelve months, divided by one hundred to facilitate interpretation.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$; + $p < .10$

without a bachelor's degree. Net of demographic, labor supply, and occupation measures, Asian American women at the lower end of educational attainment are essentially at parity with White women, in contrast to the consistent wage income disadvantage experienced by Black women across models.

College-educated Asian American women are the only group to have a consistent albeit modest earnings advantage over their White counterparts. For these women, differences in occupation more so than labor supply help to explain their advantage. Controlling for occupational categories explains more than half or nearly all of the earnings advantage of college-educated Chinese, Indian, Korean, and Vietnamese American women. For Filipina Americans, accounting for occupations results in a small earnings disadvantage. In the full model, college-educated Filipina Americans have wage incomes that are about 3 percent lower while all other Asian American women's wage incomes are about 2–4 percent greater than that of their White peers. Both labor supply and occupations explain some of the earnings disadvantage experienced by college-educated Black women, but to a lesser extent, and in the full model, they retain a roughly 9 percent earnings disadvantage relative to White women. This suggests that factors beyond time spent at work and occupations better explain Black women's earnings differences.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study makes a number of contributions to research on contemporary Asian American experiences in the labor market. We examine wage incomes for an ethnically diverse sample of prime working-age Asian Americans relative to their White peers across intersecting dimensions. Because our sample of Asian Americans is restricted to the native-born and those who arrived as younger children, our study is well-suited to examining the role of race and its impact on Asian Americans in the labor market. Moreover, based on our focused literature review, we identify labor supply and occupations as two important factors that are subject to ambivalent stereotypes about Asian Americans and that potentially explain differences in earnings between Asian Americans and Whites

across levels of education and by gender. In doing so, we highlight the ways in which Asian American experiences in the labor market are simultaneously racialized, classed, and gendered. This approach provides a broader comparative perspective than is found in most existing research on Asian American labor market experiences.

Our empirical analysis aligns closely with our theoretical framework, which focuses on the ways in which stereotypes about Asian Americans impact their labor market experiences. We show that the disadvantages in wage income among Asian American men without bachelor's degrees are explained in large part by their lower labor supply and different occupations held relative to White men. Our study cannot determine if these differences reflect employer discrimination. However, such findings accord with broader classed and gendered stereotypes about Asian American men in a number of ways. First, as 1.5 and later generation Asian Americans educated in the US but who do not hold bachelor's degrees, these men do not conform to model minority stereotypes, potentially making employers wary of their potential as workers. Second, both yellow peril and model minority stereotypes might serve to funnel these men into low-wage service occupations (akin to the launderers and houseboys of the past) and hinder their entry into traditionally masculine blue-collar occupations in construction and production, which are among the higher-paying jobs for men without college degrees. Our findings suggest that Asian Americans should not be overlooked in research on the low-wage labor market for men. Their experiences are essential to understanding the potential harm of stereotypes about Asian Americans beyond educational experiences.

The finding that college-educated Asian American men would be at an even greater earnings disadvantage relative to White men were it not for their occupations also brings to mind model minority stereotypes of Asian Americans as particularly suited for certain occupations. We show that larger shares of college-educated Asian American men do indeed work in computer and mathematical jobs and as health-care practitioners and techni-

cians, both higher-paying occupational categories. To be sure, individual agency and preferences play a role, but the set of occupational choices college-educated Asian American men select from may be constrained by group-based definitions of success (Lee and Zhou 2015), “playbooks” that prescribe limited tactics for getting ahead (Chin 2020), and beliefs about opportunities for upward mobility (Sue and Okazaki 1990). Some might construe these as part of the culture of Asian Americans, though we would argue such strategies reflect a sense of precariousness about their position within the US racial and socioeconomic hierarchy. Controlling for occupations, many college-educated Asian American men actually earn less than their White peers. Again, stereotypes may play a role—whether in viewing Asian American workers as virtually identical to one another (and thus interchangeable and replaceable), in assumptions of their supposed foreignness, or in doubts about their suitability for leadership roles.

Our comparison of earnings among women further underscores the racialized, classed, and gendered nature of Asian American labor market experiences. We show that Asian American women, unlike Asian American men, do not have an earnings disadvantage relative to White women and, at the upper end of educational attainment, even have a small advantage. Unlike their male counterparts, Asian American women without a bachelor’s degree work similar or sometimes greater hours than their White counterparts, and they do so in largely similar occupations. This suggests a gendered dimension to how Asian American workers in the low-wage labor market are perceived. Whereas Asian American men without a bachelor’s degree may be seen as unsuitable for masculine-coded occupations, Asian American women without bachelor’s degrees appear to have access to the same types of occupations as other women. While such women may not embody the stereotype of a highly educated model minority, they do fit long-established, strongly gendered depictions of Asian women in subservient roles.

College-educated Asian American women are the only group of Asian Americans for whom we find clearer evidence of an earnings

advantage. As with their male counterparts, occupational concentration plays a larger role than labor supply in explaining earnings differences. College-educated Asian American men and women may adhere to similar strategies for achieving upward mobility, such as greater investments in education and the selection of particular occupations. But the contrast between model minority stereotypes of Asian Americans as exceptionally skilled in math and science and gender stereotypes of women as lacking skills in such fields may also serve to advantage college-educated Asian American women over other women in some occupational settings. Notably, our findings do not suggest that college-educated Asian American women are advantaged over their male counterparts. For all groups, men retain an advantage over women in average wage incomes (see table A.2). As college-educated Asian American women consider their labor market experiences, they may come to view gender rather than race as of greater salience (Huang 2021), given that they appear to earn as much, if not more, than other women but not as much as men.

In explaining patterns of Asian American earnings relative to Whites by level of education and gender, we have focused on the role of labor supply and occupations. However, our study also yields results that speak to a need for more research on family dynamics, ethnic variations, and disparate mechanisms driving racial differences. For example, we find that Asian American women are at parity or outearn White women net of controls for marital status and the presence of children in the household. We recognize that this strategy does not fully capture the complicated ways in which family dynamics and decision-making matter for Asian American women’s labor market experiences; see Sojung Lim and Wonjeong Jeong (2026, this issue) for a focus on how family composition shapes labor force participation for Asian American women. We instead highlight how stereotypes about Asian American workers have a highly gendered element that is not often articulated when drawing on simple descriptions of model minority stereotypes and believe this framework can be expanded to incorporate family dynamics.

Throughout, we also noted instances in which specific ethnic groups exhibited different baseline patterns—for instance, that college-educated Indian American men have an earnings advantage over White men whereas other Asian American men do not. Even among 1.5- and later generation Asian Americans, ethnic niches can persist in the labor market (such as the concentration of Vietnamese American women in personal services and Filipina Americans in health care). The framework we have offered of Asian American stereotypes as concurrently racialized, classed, and gendered can be applied to studies focused on particular ethnic groups. We note also that our study shows labor supply and occupations have similar classed and gendered impacts on earnings across Asian American ethnic groups, even though baseline earnings differ.

Lastly, including Black Americans as an additional point of reference proved illuminating in a number of ways. First, some Asian American men without bachelor's degrees have labor market experiences that are startlingly similar to those of Black Americans, in terms of labor supply and earnings disadvantages. Not only does this run completely counter to model minority stereotypes, it also suggests pockets of Asian American disadvantage that have been largely overlooked in the literature. Second, while differences in labor supply and occupations are key to explaining differences in earnings experienced by Asian American workers, they appear to play a smaller role for understanding the experiences of Black American workers. This has implications for future research on mechanisms that drive racial differences in earnings. We have argued that stereotypes about Asian Americans may undergird decisions made by workers and employers that manifest in differences in labor supply, occupations, and ultimately, earnings. Stereotypes about other racial groups might also result in differences in earnings but through different channels.

Overall, our results reveal that the intersection of race, class, and gender offers a much more nuanced story of Asian American earnings that is consistent with literature on the power of stereotypes in shaping Asian American experiences. A compelling theoretical

framework—one that moves beyond simply critiquing the harmfulness of stereotypes about Asian Americans and instead moves toward understanding how such stereotypes differentially impact Asian Americans—remains elusive. We have endeavored to articulate ways in which contradictory but often simultaneously held stereotypes about Asian Americans—as yellow peril threats or competent but faceless model minorities—might operate in classed and gendered fashion to produce differences in the labor supply, occupations, and earnings of Asian American men and women workers with and without college degrees. Future research can further explore mechanisms that might be contributing to differences in time spent at work and occupational concentrations among Asian American men and women, which we have shown are key to understanding differences in earnings. We hope also that future work on Asian Americans, in the spirit of intersectional scholars, pays attention to those on the “margins” (Crenshaw 1991), including Asian Americans who, whether for reasons related to their level of education, the types of occupations they hold, or other characteristics, do not fit common perceptions of Asian American success and advantage. Without attending to their experiences, we cannot continue to advance in our understanding of the contemporary and future well-being of Asian Americans.

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Narrowing the Gender Wage Gap Among Computer Science Professionals: What Differentiates the Earnings of Asian and White Workers?



SHARON SASSLER AND GABRIELLE SORRESSO

Increasing women's representation in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) is often seen as a way to reduce the gender wage gap. Asians are overrepresented in STEM, and previous studies found a smaller gender wage gap among Asians compared with Whites, but this research overlooked ethnic heterogeneity among Asians. This study uses 2009–2022 American Community Survey (ACS) data to examine gender differences in income for computer science (CS) professionals. We show that the gender wage gap is roughly twice as large among Indians as among Chinese and White CS workers, even after controlling for family and human capital characteristics. Indian women experience larger marriage and parenthood penalties than do White and Chinese women. They are also more likely than White and Chinese women to be married to another CS professional, which negatively impacts earnings. Our findings on how household dynamics shape the gender wage gap contribute to the literature revealing that this gap is a family wage gap in disguise.

Keywords: gender wage gap, STEM workers, Asians, family

Numerous initiatives have sought to increase the presence of women and minorities employed in the STEM workforce. Women's underrepresentation in various STEM fields—particularly computer science and engineering—serves to perpetuate the gender wage gap, as STEM jobs have higher-than-average earnings (Micheltmore and Sassler 2016; Xie and Killewald 2012). Asians are overrepresented among STEM professionals (Landivar 2013), and studies have

found that the gender wage gap is smaller among Asians and other racial minorities than among Whites working in STEM professions (Greenman 2011; Micheltmore and Sassler 2016). Furthermore, the impact of parenthood on earnings has long been found to differ across racial groups, with Asian women less likely than White women to reduce their labor force supply on becoming mothers (Greenman 2011), thereby accumulating more work experience.

Sharon Sassler is a professor in the Brooks School of Public Policy and the sociology department at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, United States. **Gabrielle Sorresso** is a PhD student in the Brooks School of Public Policy at Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, United States.

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These patterns suggest racial differences in family strategies for economic attainment and success.

To date, however, studies that explore differences between White and Asian STEM workers generally examine racial minorities as if they were one undifferentiated whole (for example, Greenman 2011; Micheltore and Sassler 2016). Nationally representative surveys such as the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), or the Panel Study of Income Dynamics (PSID) contain too few STEM workers to disaggregate by ethnicity and gender (Glass et al. 2013), while data sets like the Scientists and Engineers Statistical Data System (SESTAT) also lack a sufficient sample of various ancestry groups (Greenman 2011; Micheltore and Sassler 2016; Xie and Killewald 2012). The timing of immigrant streams and changes in US visa policies have also differentiated the experiences of Asians in the United States (Lee and Zhou 2015). As a result, little is known about ethnic-specific strategies for mobility that distinguish the experiences of Asian groups working in STEM fields and whether these experiences challenge or reify traditional gender roles.

To the extent that Asian overrepresentation in the STEM labor force contributes to their economic success, knowing more about the factors shaping returns to work, as well as how this might differ among the largest Asian ethnic groups and by gender, can provide a clearer understanding of the Asian American mobility experience (Lu 2024). This article explores the factors contributing to the gender wage gap among Asians and Whites working in CS occupations, which account for about half of all STEM jobs; we further differentiate between the two largest Asian ethnic groups working in CS, Indians and Chinese. We use data from the 2009–2022 waves of the ACS, an annual cross-sectional household survey that provides nationally representative, large sample data (Ruggles 2025). Our results suggest that even among the most highly paid workers in STEM occupations, gender continues to differentiate earnings. We find considerable heterogeneity in the factors shaping the gender wage gap among Chinese and Indian CS professionals, as well as

between Asians and Whites who work in CS occupations. Even as Indian and Chinese CS professionals earn more, on average, than their White counterparts, the penalties for marriage and motherhood are larger. Indian women, who adhere to more traditional family behaviors, with earlier marriage and parenthood, experience a larger gender wage gap than either Chinese or White CS workers. High levels of occupational homogamy among married couples further decrease earnings of Indian women, though we do not observe this effect for White or Chinese women. The persistence of differential returns to family roles indicates that the gender wage gap is really a family wage gap in disguise, highlighting how family dynamics interact with occupational demands and ethnicity to perpetuate the gender wage gap.

GENDER WAGE GAPS, FAMILY WAGE GAPS, ETHNIC WAGE GAPS

The social science literature on the gender wage gap is voluminous. Women who work full-time, year-round earn significantly less than their male counterparts, and progress toward narrowing the gender wage gap has largely stalled since the 1990s (Blau and Kahn 2017; Goldin 2014). That is, in part, due to women's underrepresentation in well-remunerated occupations such as STEM, which have a smaller gender wage gap than the overall labor force (Micheltore and Sassler 2016). Traditional economic explanations for earnings disparities between women and men often emphasize gendered differences in human capital accumulation, whereas sociologists frequently focus on how gendered role expectations for partnering and parenting shape employment and wages (Blau and Kahn 2017; Cech and Blair-Loy 2019). Of late, various sociologists have sought to unpack the salience of family factors that shape the gender wage gap, utilizing different segments of the working population or focusing only on the most highly educated (Beutel and Schleifer 2022; Cha et al. 2023; Quadlin et al. 2023; Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023; Zheng and Weeden 2023). Overlooked in much of this research is an understanding of how gendered behaviors—whether investing in human capital or engaging in time-consuming

family roles—vary across race and ethnic groups (see Lim and Jeong 2026, this issue). In this article, we review how competing explanations might account for the persistent gender wage gap in CS occupations.

Human Capital Explanations for the Gender Wage Gap

The differential in wages between men and women has been extensively covered in the economics literature (Blau and Kahn 2017). This research focuses on disparities in human capital accumulation, such as the choice of college major and work histories (Becker 1985), with gendered variation in fields of study, educational attainment, hours worked, experience, and job sector used to explain wage differences. Some of these factors—such as educational attainment—have declined in explanatory power as the average education levels among women have surpassed those of men (Blau and Kahn 2017), and the proportion of women with degrees in STEM fields has grown (Micheltmore and Sassler 2016). Studies focused on the college-educated population note, for example, that the college wage premium is similar for men and women (England et al. 2020).

Yet other markers of human capital investment—hours worked, and compensation for working long hours, along with selection into job sectors with high returns—continue to differentiate the earnings of men and women, resulting in the persistent gender wage gap (Goldin 2014). Men are significantly more likely than women to engage in long work hours (more than fifty hours a week), which perpetuates the gender wage gap, especially among professionals (Cha and Weeden 2014; Weeden et al. 2016). Furthermore, occupational segregation remains high, and the importance of industry and occupation now accounts for a larger share of the gender wage gap than in the latter years of the twentieth century. In 1980, gender gaps in industry and occupation accounted for one-fifth of pay disparities between women and men, but by 2010 they accounted for 51 percent of the gender gap— despite the

decline over time in that gap (Blau and Kahn 2017). Even when women work in occupations stereotypically considered more “masculine,” such as STEM jobs, the greatest economic rewards continue to flow to workers engaged in jobs with the lowest shares of women, such as programming-intensive occupations (Cheng et al. 2019; Micheltmore and Sassler 2016). Among those working in CS, for example, occupation accounts for a considerable share of the (unexplained) gender wage gap, largely because women are less likely than men to work in the highest-paid jobs in CS, such as software developers (Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023).

Several recent explorations of gender disparities in occupational attainment and pay have highlighted the need to pay closer attention to differential returns to men’s and women’s attributes— suggesting that despite legislation that prohibits discrimination, bias against women persists (Fernandez and Campero 2017; Galperin 2021; Moss-Racusin et al. 2012). Occupational sorting plays an important role in perpetuating gendered wage disparities among highly educated workers (Quadlin et al. 2023; Smith-Doerr et al. 2019; Zheng and Weeden 2023), and emerges early in the professional life-course— well before family formation begins. Furthermore, gender wage disparities persist within occupations, even among men and women with observably identical attributes (Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). Certain occupations also impose heavy penalties on employees who may desire more flexible employment for caregiving responsibilities (Goldin 2014), with those who work long hours benefiting the most in terms of earnings (Weeden et al. 2016).

Family Explanations for the Gender Wage Gap

Sociological explanations for the persistent gender wage gap have focused on gendered norms that assign primacy to women’s obligations as wives and mothers—factors that are difficult to integrate into the human capital theoretical framework, due to concerns over endogeneity.¹ The literature often refers to

1. Youngjoo Cha and colleagues (2023) explain the endogeneity problem by stating that human capital, including educational attainment and work experience, mediates the association between family status and wages, while family status also mediates the association between human capital and wages. Changes in family forma-

earnings advantages and disadvantages—premiums and penalties—that are associated with those who have the intersecting identities of employees and parents. Whereas working mothers often experience penalties such as wage reductions, diminished opportunities for career advancement, and lower perceived professional competence relative to childless women and both childless men and fathers, fathers are often viewed as more committed and responsible workers and rewarded accordingly (Correll et al. 2007). Recent research has pointed out that family factors, namely marital and parental status, play a sizable role in differentiating men and women's earnings, especially when focusing on the highly educated (Beutel and Schleifer 2022; Cha et al. 2023; Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). Such research has moved beyond asking whether there is a motherhood penalty, a fatherhood premium, or a marriage bonus, to instead asking whether the gender wage gap is really a family wage gap (Cha et al. 2023; Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023).

The evidence of gender disparities among men and women with at least a college degree has shifted in recent years, as the returns to education rise, marriage is increasingly delayed, and parental roles change due to delayed fertility, childlessness, and the spread of blended families (Sassler and Lichter 2020). Although married men earn more, on average, than unmarried men, the association between marriage and wages among women has changed across cohorts (Killewald and Gough 2013). Michelle J. Budig and Misun Lim (2016) found that both baby boomer and millennial men and women received marriage premiums, though the advantages were smaller for millennial men and larger for millennial women. Katherine Micheltore and Sharon Sassler (2016) found that married women with college

degrees who worked in STEM occupations also earned more than their unmarried counterparts (see also Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). Selection into marriage in part explains this finding (Budig and Lim 2016); along with the rise in educational homogamy, and the increase in dual-career couples, returns to remaining in the paid labor force have grown, resulting in higher levels of female employment among college-educated women (Percheski 2008). We therefore expect to find a marriage premium among CS professionals.

But marital status alone does not capture the importance of couple-level characteristics in shaping the gender wage gap. Jennifer Glass and colleagues (2013), looking at baby boomer women with degrees in a STEM field, found that those whose spouse worked in STEM were significantly more likely to remain in STEM jobs than those whose spouse worked in another field, but that as a spouse's work hours increased the likelihood of women exiting the labor force rose. Youngjoo Cha and Kim Weeden (2014) suggest that men's greater likelihood of engaging in overwork (defined as working fifty or more hours per week), in conjunction with the rising hourly wage returns to overwork, contributes to the persistent gender wage gap, particularly among those for whom at least one partner works in a professional and managerial occupation.² In other work, Cha and colleagues (2023) find that the gender wage gap was substantially larger among married White respondents compared with their married Black or Hispanic counterparts. Yet few studies explore the importance of couple-level attributes in determining the size of the gender wage gap, further reifying gendered assumptions about marriage and parenthood.

In fact, the bulk of research on the family wage gap has focused on rewards or penalties

tion behaviors, particularly among the college-educated, complicate this association. Young women no longer plan their occupational goals around caregiving or family plans (Morgan et al. 2013), and the proportions of women projected to remain childless by midlife are estimated to reach around one-quarter of all women, due to delayed fertility (Guzzo and Hayford 2023). Yet it has been difficult to dismiss the endogeneity challenge, which may in itself reveal the gendered nature of research. The pursuit of particular degrees or work hours and their association with family formation and wages does not feature in studies of factors influencing men's choices.

2. Their more recent scholarship on family wage gaps notes racial differences in the association between family wage gaps and the gender wage gap, but their sample does not include Asians (Cha et al. 2023).

to unpaid care work, such as looking after children or aging parents, rather than marriage (Lim and Jeong 2026). While much of this research focuses on the general population, studies concentrated on those with a college degree or more or those engaged in demanding professions challenge the accepted wisdom that mothers are penalized relative to childless women in terms of their earnings. Among college-educated men, fathers earn more than their childless counterparts (Buchmann and McDaniel 2016; Glauber 2008). The association between motherhood and earnings is less clear for highly educated mothers. A growing body of evidence shows that among professionals, the size of the negative wage differential for motherhood has decreased when childless women are the referent (Beutel and Schleifer 2022; Buchmann and McDaniel 2016). In fact, in traditionally male-dominated professions, such as STEM, medicine, and law, women with children earn more than their childless counterparts (Buchmann and McDaniel 2016; Micheltore and Sassler 2016; Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). Women in female-dominated professions continue to experience a motherhood penalty (Buchmann and McDaniel 2016), and the gender wage gap widens at the top of the earnings distribution among professionals (Quadlin et al. 2023; Zheng and Weeden 2023). Findings regarding the motherhood wage penalty, then, depend on women's educational attainment and job sector, as well as on marital status and race. Given our sample, we anticipate a parenthood premium for both women and men.

Further disaggregation of the impacts of motherhood focuses on whether children of a particular age are more detrimental to earnings for women, with some exploring the impact of preschool-aged children or various ages of children (Percheski 2008; Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023), and others examining the number of children (Buchmann and McDaniel 2016). Buchmann and McDaniel (2016) find that among professional women employed in medicine, STEM, and law, mothers earn more than childless women, regardless of number of children, though there is variation across professions; among women working in STEM professions, those with one child or three or more children

earn similar wages to childless women (Buchmann and McDaniel 2016, note 13; see also Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). One recent study of college graduates working in CS found that both men and women with parenting responsibilities earned more than childless CS professionals; this held regardless of the age of children, but the premium was greatest when children were the youngest (Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). While men with only preschool-aged children earned seven cents more than did childless men, women with preschool-aged children only earned 2.1 cents more per hour than their childless counterparts (Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). The wage premium was somewhat smaller when there were both young and school-aged children, at least for men, and was smallest for those with only school-aged children. What matters here is the referent: while mothers earned more than childless women, they continued to earn significantly less than fathers, thereby widening the gender wage gap—even though women were significantly less likely to be parents than were men. We therefore anticipate that both mothers and fathers will experience a parenthood premium, but it is not clear *ex ante* how this may vary by age and number of children and ethnicity.

Given changes in union formation patterns, little attention has been paid to the importance of maternal age at birth as a factor shaping wage penalties. One such study, using data from the NLSY79, found that for college graduates, motherhood penalties were larger when first births occurred at earlier ages, but declined with older ages at first birth; women who delayed fertility until their mid-30s received a motherhood premium (Doren 2019). Since baby boomer women came of age, however, the median age at first marriage, especially for college-educated women, has increased, and college-educated women mostly bear children within marital unions (Sassler and Lichter 2020). In fact, the majority of college-educated women's first births were at ages older than thirty (Bui and Cain Miller 2018), suggesting additional factors associated with returns to motherhood that require study. Heterogeneity in family formation and caretaking behaviors may further exacerbate or minimize the gender wage gap, as older first-time mothers accrue additional

job tenure and work experience prior to parenthood.

Racial and Ethnic Variation in Work Behaviors Contributing to the Gender Wage Gap

Asians are frequently overlooked in research, particularly in studies that explore the factors contributing to the gender wage gap (Lu 2024). Despite being overrepresented in professional occupations—particularly in STEM jobs—Asians accounted for only 6 percent of the US population in 2020 (Jones et al. 2021).³ While Asians are the fastest-growing racial group in the United States, given their overall population size, longitudinal surveys frequently do not contain enough Asian respondents to assess wage gaps across occupations or differentiate between ethnic groups. Furthermore, the work-family literature that explores gender variation in earnings generally overlooks racial and ethnic heterogeneity (Perry-Jenkins and Gerstel 2020). Research that has assessed racial variation in the gender wage gap tends to contrast Black and Hispanic workers with White workers (Budig et al. 2021; Cha et al. 2023). Such studies have found that the marriage premium is smaller for Black men than for White men, while the motherhood penalty is smaller for Black and Hispanic women (England et al. 2016; Glauber 2007), especially among the highly educated.

The few studies that have examined gender wage gaps among Asians have found that the gender wage gap is smaller among Asians than among Whites working in STEM professions (Greenman 2011; Greenman and Xie 2008; Micheltmore and Sassler 2016). Utilizing data from the 2000 Census, Emily Greenman and Yu Xie (2008) showed that there were smaller gender earnings gaps among various Asian groups than among Whites, though they limited their analysis to native-born workers. Other analyses that included foreign-born Asians found that the gender earnings gap was larger among immigrants than among native-born workers (Goyette and Xie 1999; Xie and Shauman 2005); while not testing it directly, these articles suggested that this disparity arose because foreign-born wives were trailing spouses (Goyette and

Xie 1999; Xie and Shauman 2005). Others have noted more of an earnings premium for parenthood among some groups of women; for example, Asian mothers (along with their White and Black counterparts) earned more than their childless counterparts (see Micheltmore and Sassler 2016), but Hispanic women did not. Greenman and Xie (2008) also found less of an earnings penalty for marriage and parenthood among their sample of native-born minorities (Asians, Blacks, and Hispanics) relative to Whites, leading them to suggest the possibility of greater traditional role specialization among White couples. Taken as a whole, these results suggest the possibility that Asian families utilize somewhat different care work strategies than other race groups in the United States, with important ramifications for economic well-being.

Other, causal work has sought to unpack the mechanisms behind the smaller wage gaps and higher returns to family status among Asian workers. Such studies, relying on various data sources, have found that Asian women were less likely than White women to reduce their labor supply on becoming mothers. Using nationally representative data from SIPP, Yao Lu and colleagues (2017) found that Asian women who were employed before childbirth demonstrated greater labor market continuation than their White counterparts (see also Greenman and Xie 2008). Lu and colleagues (2017) also found that immigrant women who had been in the US for longer durations demonstrated greater labor force attachment. This also appears to be the case among Asian women employed in STEM fields. Using data from SESTAT, Emily Greenman (2011) found that Asian women were less likely than White women to reduce their labor force supply on becoming mothers. This enabled them to accumulate more work experience. Other family behaviors—the timing of marriage, for example, or the age at which women become mothers and men fathers—may also contribute to wage premiums or penalties (Doren 2019).

We advance the research into wage gaps and ethnic attainment by exploring how family attributes are associated with the gender wage

3. This refers to single ancestry responses, rather than those who selected more than one race.

gap among different Asian ethnic groups compared with Whites. If patterns found for other racial minorities (England et al. 2016; Glauber 2007) hold, the marriage premium may be smaller for Chinese and Indian women than it is for White women. But the evidence also suggests that parenthood penalties might be greater for White women than for Chinese and Indian women (Greenman and Xie 2008; Michelsmore and Sassler 2016). These studies, then, do not provide a clear direction for how the impact of motherhood may differ by age of children.

Other Explanatory Factors

A key factor distinguishing Asian workers from their White counterparts—even among those working in a similar occupation—is the large proportion who are foreign-born, as well as their disproportionate representation in STEM occupations. Asians are overrepresented among those working in all STEM occupations in general, and in computer occupations in particular (Landivar 2013). Furthermore, many of those working in STEM jobs are foreign-born. As of 2021, over one in four (26 percent) foreign-born workers employed in the United States worked in STEM occupations (National Science Board 2024), and among Asians this proportion is even greater.⁴

Therefore, any reports about the size of the gender wage gap among Asians must account for the share who are foreign-born, and the factors differentiating earnings among them (such as naturalization and education). One recent exploration of the gender wage gap among CS workers, for example, found that Asian workers earned significantly more than their White counterparts, though the Asian earnings advantage was entirely driven by foreign-born workers (Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). But various factors differentiate the earnings trajec-

ries of the foreign-born in ways that may shape the gender wage gap. Where one’s education was obtained, the prestige of schools attended, English-speaking ability, and work experience in the US all have been shown to influence Asians’ earnings (Lee et al. 2024; Zeng and Xie 2004). Looking at natives and immigrants in the early 1990s, Zhen Zeng and Yu Xie (2004) found that foreign-educated immigrants’ earnings were substantially lower than those of immigrants and natives who obtained their schooling in the United States; they concluded that foreign education was less valuable in the US job market. Jennifer Lee and colleagues (2024) report that Asians in the United States engage in strategic adaptation to a discriminatory marketplace by pursuing credentials at prestigious universities; such strategies, however, often still fail to eliminate bias in job returns.

Others argue for the need to differentiate culturally between East Asians, (for example, ethnic Chinese) and South Asians (for example, ethnic Indians). Jackson G. Lu (2024) asserts that whereas Chinese professionals in the business world tend to experience a “bamboo ceiling,” Indian professionals do not. Examining those who attain MBAs or work in consulting, Lu (2024) documents differential treatment in starting salaries (Lu 2023) and leadership attainment (Lu 2022), with Chinese professionals experiencing more barriers than their Indian counterparts. Explanations for these differences focus on social-cognitive disparities, such as assertiveness and perceived creativity (Lu et al. 2022). These studies examine professionals working in law, business, and consulting; it is unclear whether such factors shape work in CS to the same extent. Furthermore, these arguments are focused on the successes of Indian men and give short shrift to the fact that Indian women do not fare as well (Lu

4. The demand for H-1B (a US specialty occupation visa program) workers, which has increased since the early years of the twenty-first century, contributes to the increase in foreign-born representation among STEM workers, while also shaping the ethnic and gender composition of foreign nationals (Ruiz 2017). In recent years, the largest share of H-1B visas has gone to CS professionals; in fiscal year 2023, computer-related occupations accounted for 65 percent of all approved H-1B petitions. Additionally, the vast majority of H-1B beneficiaries in recent years have been men; among the top ten countries of birth for approved H-1B beneficiaries in fiscal year 2023, 71 percent were male, with an even larger male representation (76 percent) among Indians (US Citizenship and Immigration Services 2024).

2024). We therefore differentiate between Indians and Chinese CS professionals, contrasting them with their White counterparts and with each other, to better understand the cultural as well as structural dynamics shaping the gender wage gap.

DATA, VARIABLES, AND METHODS

Our analyses use data from ACS, an annual cross-sectional household survey conducted annually between 2009, the year that the field of an individual's bachelor's degree was initially ascertained, and 2022. Among the primary advantages of using ACS cross-sectional data over other longitudinal studies is its sizable sample of Asians, which enables us to disaggregate different ethnic groups to assess within racial group heterogeneity. We are unable to test a causal model of wages, determine starting salaries (Lu 2023), or detail how decisions made over the life course cumulate to shape wage gaps, though information on the timing of events—age at first marriage, for example, or first childbirth—does allow us to provide a more thorough description of the empirical relationship between the gender wage gap and family wage gaps. The cross-sectional nature of the ACS precludes our ability to assess what role selection plays in gender differences in pay; previous research indicates that women are significantly more likely than men to exit jobs in CS (Sassler et al. 2023).

We limit our sample to those with a bachelor's degree or higher, who account for over two-thirds of full-time CS professionals. Penalties for family attributes have been greatest among highly educated women (England et al. 2016; Glauber 2008), whereas among men the fatherhood premium has mostly benefited highly educated fathers living with children (Glauber 2008). Next, we restrict the sample to individuals working at least thirty-five hours

per week (working full-time) who had positive income, were in the prime working age population (ages twenty-two to sixty), and whose youngest child living in the household was younger than age eighteen.⁵

Our analysis focuses on those working in CS occupations, as these positions account for roughly half of all STEM jobs (Landivar 2013). Among STEM occupations, CS jobs have the highest average annual earnings and the best job prospects (Beutel and Schleifer 2022). We follow the Census definitions for a CS occupation.⁶ To implement these classifications, we use the 2000 Standard Occupational Classification (SOC) for 2009, the 2010 SOC for 2010–2017 and the 2018 SOC for 2018 and onward, for consistent occupation classification across years. Everyone in our sample works in one of twelve CS occupations.

Our final restriction limits our sample to those who identify as non-Hispanic Asian or non-Hispanic White individuals who report a single race. Whites and Asians account for 86 percent of all full-time CS workers in our sample; only 4 percent of all CS workers are Hispanic, and 5 percent are Black or African American, with another 5 percent identifying as another race or a non-Asian mixed race. The ACS provides a sizable sample of Asians who work in CS occupations, including 24,831 Asian females (including 12,380 Indian and 6,814 Chinese women), and 65,388 Asian males. There are 171,378 White men and 50,516 White women working in CS jobs.

Variables

Our key dependent variable is the natural log of pretax wage and salary income for individuals working in CS. Our wage measure includes all pretax income respondents receive as an employee, which includes bonuses that can make up a large portion of all income in CS oc-

5. Including part-time STEM workers yields similar results to models using only full-time workers (see also Blau and Kahn 2017; Quadlin et al. 2023; Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023); they make up a very small share of all STEM workers ($n = 13,217$, or 3.6 percent of the sample). Women make up a somewhat larger share of part-time workers ($n = 6,208$, or 6.7 percent of all women), compared to men, among whom only 2.6 percent ($n = 7,009$) work part-time.

6. CS occupations include: computer and information science (CIS) manager, computer scientist, computer analyst, information analyst, computer programmer, software developer, web developer, computer specialist, data administrator, network administrator, network architect, and all other computer occupations.

occupations (Dice 2025). All wages are converted into 2018 dollars using the Consumer Price Index. The ACS top codes the income data;⁷ the maximum salary in our sample is \$780,000.

Our analysis examines how both gender and race influence earnings. Gender in our sample is a binary variable (male or female). We focus on two race groups: non-Hispanic White and non-Hispanic Asian. We further disaggregate Asians into the two largest subgroups working in CS, Indians and Chinese, to disentangle ethnic-specific strategies for balancing work and family. Sample size precludes us from examining additional Asian ethnic groups.

Our measures of family characteristics include respondents’ marital and parental status, and whether they reside in a three-generation family. Those who are currently married serve as the reference group; dummy variables capture those who are previously married (divorced, separated, or widowed) and never married. Parental status is measured with two ACS questions on the number of children in the household (number of children under age eighteen in the household, and number of children under age five in the household) to capture differential demands children impose on parents’ ability to work at different stages of child development.⁸ We include a continuous variable for the number of children a respondent has, before further differentiating the age groups of respondents’ children into four mutually exclusive groups: those with no children, those with only children under age five, those with only children five and older, and those with children who are both under five and over five. We also include an indicator of whether the respondent lives in a multigenerational household, where at least three generations are present, which is more prevalent among Asian families (Lim and Jeong 2026).

In additional sensitivity analyses, we limit

the sample to those who are married to explore the impact of occupational homogamy on the gender wage gap. This allows us to more thoroughly assess a previously understudied aspect of the family wage gap. The ACS enables us to link married respondents to their spouses if they reside in the same household. We then determine whether both spouses were employed in the same field and then the same occupation, first exploring the broad field of STEM, before narrowing the analysis to determine if both spouses worked in a CS occupation.

Our measures of human capital accumulation include variables relating to experience, degree field and educational attainment, and occupation. While the ACS does not have a variable that captures work experience or time in the labor force, we proxy this (imperfectly) with age and its square, to account for its nonlinear impact over the work life course. We include the college major of individuals, comparing those with CS majors to other majors prevalent among those working in CS occupations—engineering, other STEM majors, business, and other non-STEM majors. We also include an indicator for educational attainment, comparing having a bachelor’s degree with having a professional or master’s degree, and with a doctorate.⁹ Our final indicator of human capital differentiates between twelve CS occupations. In some model specifications we also include an indicator for overwork, noting whether an individual reports that their usual hours of work exceed fifty hours a week.

Additionally, we include controls for citizenship status, given that sizable proportions of our Asian respondents were born abroad, and research suggests that immigrants who become American citizens fare better in the workforce than those who do not (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2017).¹⁰ We compare native US citizens with

7. Incomes at or above the 99.5th percentile of a state are recoded to the median income of that state.

8. Our measures capture only children who live in the household; we do not observe children over the age of eighteen or minors residing elsewhere (such as with a different parent). Our measures therefore understate parental obligations, more so for men than women (Goldscheider and Sassler 2006).

9. The ACS does not collect data on the field of study of the graduate degree.

10. Research also shows that foreign-born individuals who receive their degrees in the US outearn their immigrant counterparts who obtained degrees in their home country (Zeng and Xie 2004). To avoid conflating year

those who are non-US born and who have or have not naturalized to be US citizens.¹¹ In some analyses, we include fixed effects for all fifty states, as well as year fixed effects for all years.

Descriptive Results

Despite numerous efforts designed to increase the representation of women in CS occupations, only 24 percent of our sample of CS workers are female. Table 1 shows basic summary statistics for our full analysis sample and split by gender. Female CS professionals are more diverse than male CS professionals; 67 percent of all female CS professionals are White, compared to 72 percent of all male CS professionals. Chinese women are overrepresented among female CS professionals compared to Chinese men, making up 9 percent of all female CS professionals, compared to Chinese men who are just 6 percent of all male CS professionals. Finally, women employed in CS jobs earn significantly less than their male counterparts, regardless of race or ethnic group. The gender wage gap for the entire sample is \$19,500.

Because the overall means for our sample mask considerable variation across race and ethnic groups, we review descriptive statistics for our variables of interest for White, Indian, and Chinese groups (see table 2). While the gender wage gap is evident across race groups, Asians earn more than their White counterparts (see the top column in table 2). But Asians are a heterogeneous group; Chinese men and women earn substantially more than Indian men and women, who earn more than White men and women.

If, as the literature suggests, there is increasingly a family premium among professional workers—both in terms of financial returns to marriage and parenthood—then variation in the family attributes of those working in CS suggests one possible contribution to the earnings disparities observed earlier. Even though most men and women who work in CS occupa-

tions are currently married, White CS professionals are significantly less likely to be married than their Asian counterparts, and the gap is the largest between Whites and Indians. Only 58 percent of White women and 66 percent of White men who work in CS occupations are married, compared with 86 percent of Indian women and 83 percent of Indian men. White CS workers are also significantly more likely to be previously married, a status that may not have the same returns as marriage. Furthermore, over half of White women and men working in CS (60 percent of women, and 53 percent of men) have no minor children, compared with only about a third of Indian men and women, and half of Chinese men and women.

The research literature also suggests the importance of other factors shaping career investments, including partner attributes (such as their occupation or hours worked), as well as marriage timing and the age of first parenthood (see table 3). Focusing only on married couples, we explored the proportion of CS professionals whose spouse works in any STEM field, before refining this to assess occupationally homogamous couples—where both spouses work in CS jobs. This subanalysis reveals that across all groups, women who worked in CS are significantly more likely to be married to a spouse who worked either in a STEM field or more specifically in CS than their male counterparts. Marriage to another STEM professional or a spouse whose job was in CS was least likely for White men in our sample of CS professionals (9 percent and 6 percent, respectively). Indian and Chinese men were considerably more likely than White men to have a spouse who also worked in a STEM field. But occupational homogamy is far more prevalent among women, and Indian women stand out for their incredibly high level of occupational marital homogamy. Over two-thirds of Indian women's spouses are also employed in a STEM field, with a surprising 59 percent of Indian women who are CS professionals married to a spouse who also works in CS. While still

of degree receipt, year of immigration, and nativity, we focus instead on naturalization status, which is measured in the ACS.

11. The ACS defines native US citizens as those born in the US or born abroad to US citizens.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Analysis Variables Whole Sample and by Gender

	All	Female	Male	Female–Male Difference
Race and ethnicity				
White	0.71	0.67	0.72	–0.05**
Indian	0.16	0.16	0.15	0.01**
Chinese	0.07	0.09	0.06	0.03**
Asian (other)	0.06	0.07	0.06	0.01**
Marriage and household structure				
Married	0.68	0.64	0.69	–0.05**
Previously married	0.06	0.10	0.05	0.05**
Never married	0.26	0.27	0.26	0.01**
Multigenerational household	0.03	0.04	0.03	0.01**
Parental status				
Parent	0.48	0.45	0.49	–0.05**
Number of children	0.89	0.77	0.93	–0.17**
Child(ren) only 0–5	0.11	0.10	0.12	–0.02**
Children 0–18	0.11	0.09	0.12	–0.03**
Child(ren) only 5–18	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.00
Birthplace				
Foreign born	0.32	0.34	0.31	0.03**
Human capital				
Income (thousands)	105.51	90.76	110.22	–19.46**
Age	39.26	39.34	39.23	0.11**
Work 50+ hours	0.18	0.15	0.19	–0.04**
Degree field				
Computer science	0.30	0.22	0.32	–0.10**
Engineering	0.22	0.14	0.25	–0.11**
Other STEM	0.14	0.16	0.13	0.03**
Business	0.16	0.20	0.15	0.05**
Other non-STEM	0.18	0.28	0.15	0.13**
Highest degree				
Bachelor’s	0.66	0.64	0.67	–0.03**
Master’s or professional	0.31	0.34	0.3	0.04**
Doctoral	0.03	0.02	0.03	–0.01**
Occupation				
CIS manager	0.14	0.16	0.13	0.03**
Computer scientist	0.02	0.02	0.02	0.00**
Computer system analyst	0.11	0.16	0.09	0.07**
Information security analyst	0.02	0.01	0.02	–0.01**
Computer programmer	0.09	0.08	0.09	–0.01**
Software developer	0.38	0.31	0.40	–0.10**
Web developer	0.03	0.05	0.03	0.02**
Support specialist	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.00*
Database administrator	0.02	0.02	0.01	0.01**
Network administrator	0.03	0.02	0.03	–0.01**
Network architect	0.01	0.00	0.01	–0.01**
CS other	0.08	0.08	0.08	0.00
Observations	312,277	75,511	236,766	

Source: Authors’ calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .0$

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Analysis Variables by Race and Gender Subcategory

	White		Indian		Chinese		Significant Difference
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Marriage and Household Structure							
Married	<u>0.58</u>	<u>0.66</u>	<u>0.86</u>	<u>0.83</u>	<u>0.67</u>	<u>0.68</u>	a,b,c,d
Previously married	<u>0.12</u>	<u>0.06</u>	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.06</u>	<u>0.02</u>	a,b,c,d
Never married	<u>0.30</u>	<u>0.27</u>	<u>0.11</u>	<u>0.15</u>	<u>0.28</u>	<u>0.30</u>	a,b,c,d
Multigenerational household	0.02	0.02	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.08	a,b,c,d
Parental Status							
Parent	<u>0.39</u>	<u>0.47</u>	<u>0.67</u>	<u>0.63</u>	<u>0.49</u>	<u>0.48</u>	a,b,c,d
Number of children	<u>0.69</u>	<u>0.93</u>	<u>1.06</u>	<u>1.01</u>	<u>0.77</u>	<u>0.81</u>	a,b,c,d
Child(ren) only 0–5	<u>0.08</u>	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.17</u>	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.11</u>	<u>0.12</u>	a,b,c,d
Children 0–18	<u>0.07</u>	<u>0.11</u>	<u>0.16</u>	<u>0.16</u>	<u>0.08</u>	<u>0.10</u>	a,b,c
Child(ren) only 5–18	<u>0.24</u>	<u>0.26</u>	<u>0.33</u>	<u>0.28</u>	<u>0.30</u>	<u>0.26</u>	a,b,c
Birthplace							
Foreign born	<u>0.09</u>	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.95</u>	<u>0.96</u>	<u>0.81</u>	<u>0.77</u>	a,b,c,d
Human Capital							
Income (thousands)	<u>87.27</u>	<u>107.33</u>	<u>94.72</u>	<u>119.42</u>	<u>109.82</u>	<u>127.96</u>	a,b,c,d
Age	<u>40.32</u>	<u>39.70</u>	<u>36.09</u>	<u>37.46</u>	<u>38.99</u>	<u>38.75</u>	a,b,c,d
Work 50+ hours	<u>0.17</u>	<u>0.22</u>	<u>0.07</u>	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.12</u>	<u>0.15</u>	a,b,c,d
Degree field							
Computer science	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.33</u>	<u>0.32</u>	<u>0.29</u>	<u>0.29</u>	<u>0.34</u>	a,b,c,d
Engineering	<u>0.07</u>	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.37</u>	<u>0.52</u>	<u>0.23</u>	<u>0.34</u>	a,b,c,d
Other STEM	<u>0.17</u>	<u>0.14</u>	<u>0.13</u>	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.16</u>	a,b,c,d
Business	<u>0.24</u>	<u>0.17</u>	<u>0.09</u>	<u>0.06</u>	<u>0.14</u>	<u>0.09</u>	a,b,c,d
Other non-STEM	<u>0.34</u>	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.09</u>	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.15</u>	<u>0.07</u>	a,b,c,d
Highest degree							
Bachelor's	<u>0.71</u>	<u>0.74</u>	<u>0.43</u>	<u>0.43</u>	<u>0.38</u>	<u>0.44</u>	a,b,c,d
Master's or professional	<u>0.27</u>	<u>0.24</u>	<u>0.56</u>	<u>0.55</u>	<u>0.54</u>	<u>0.44</u>	a,b,c,d
Doctoral	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.08</u>	<u>0.12</u>	a,b,c,d
Occupation							
CIS manager	<u>0.20</u>	<u>0.14</u>	<u>0.08</u>	<u>0.11</u>	<u>0.08</u>	<u>0.07</u>	a,b,c,d
Computer scientist	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.02</u>	a,c
Computer system analyst	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.09</u>	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.09</u>	<u>0.14</u>	<u>0.08</u>	a,b,d
Information security analyst	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.00</u>	<u>0.01</u>	a,b,c,d
Computer programmer	<u>0.07</u>	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.08</u>	<u>0.07</u>	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.09</u>	a,b,c,d
Software developer	<u>0.21</u>	<u>0.35</u>	<u>0.57</u>	<u>0.56</u>	<u>0.47</u>	<u>0.55</u>	a,b,c,d
Web developer	<u>0.06</u>	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.02</u>	a,b,c,d
Support specialist	<u>0.10</u>	<u>0.09</u>	<u>0.04</u>	<u>0.04</u>	<u>0.04</u>	<u>0.06</u>	a,b,c,d
Database administrator	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.01</u>	a
Network administrator	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.02</u>	<u>0.02</u>	a,b,c,d
Network architect	<u>0.00</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	<u>0.01</u>	c,d
CS other	0.09	0.09	0.06	0.06	0.06	0.06	a,b,c,d
Observations	50,680	171,378	12,380	36,467	6,814	14,390	

Source: Authors' calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: Underlining denotes significant within-race differences ($p < .001$). Letters show significant difference between: (a) White and Indian females; (b) White and Chinese females; (c) White and Indian males; and (d) White and Chinese males.

Table 3. Descriptive Statistics of Spouses for Married Members in Analysis Sample

	White		Indian		Chinese		Significant Difference
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Spouse income (thousands)	<u>80.81</u>	<u>44.28</u>	<u>128.14</u>	<u>42.83</u>	<u>127.47</u>	<u>62.7</u>	a,b,c,d
Spouse STEM occupation	<u>0.26</u>	<u>0.09</u>	<u>0.69</u>	<u>0.30</u>	<u>0.59</u>	<u>0.26</u>	a,b,c,d
Spouse CS occupation	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.06</u>	<u>0.59</u>	<u>0.25</u>	<u>0.40</u>	<u>0.17</u>	a,b,c,d
Observations	30,130	114,460	10,435	29,285	4,399	9,351	

Source: Author’s calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: Underlining denotes significant within-race differences ($p < .001$). Letters show significant difference between: (a) White and Indian females; (b) White and Chinese females; (c) White and Indian males; and (d) White and Chinese males.

considerable, the proportions are much lower for Chinese women working in CS (40 percent of whose spouses also worked in a CS job), and only 18 percent of White women working in CS have spouses also working in CS.

There are also other ways that the family behaviors of our Asian groups differ from Whites that may shape earnings and contribute to the gender wage gap. Additional analyses reveal that Indian women marry earlier, become mothers earlier, and have more children on average than either their White or Chinese counterparts. Figure 1 shows these trends across gender and racial groups in our sample. The age gap at first marriage is largest among Indians, and smallest among Whites. Indian women also have their first child earlier, on average, than White and Chinese women, as shown in figure 1, panel B. Indian women are just over the age of twenty-nine when their first child is born. While this is older than the population in general, it is younger than other groups in our specific sample of highly educated women (Bui and Cain Miller 2018). The average age at first childbirth for White women is thirty-one, while for Chinese women the average age is 32.5. The average age at first parenthood for men is later than for their female counterparts, at ages in the early thirties. There is important heterogeneity in the family behaviors of Chinese and Indian women that is overlooked when Asian women are analyzed as a monolith.

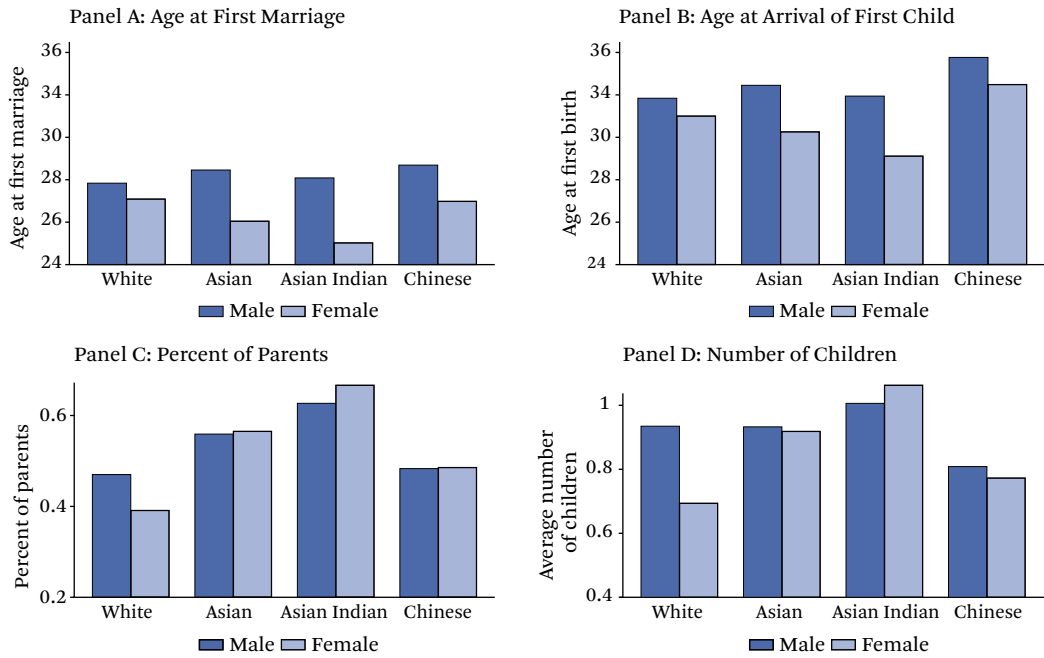
We also observe important differences in measures of human capital, by gender as well as race and ethnicity (see table A.1). White CS

workers are significantly older than their Asian counterparts, suggesting that Asian CS workers are more recent graduates, who may have had less time to experience wage compression. Furthermore, White CS professionals are far less likely than their Indian and Chinese counterparts to have obtained their degrees in CS or engineering, or to have post-graduate degrees. Finally, the descriptive results reveal stark differences in occupational concentration across ethnic groups, depicted in Figure 2. Chinese and Indian individuals are much more likely to be employed in software development—the second highest paid occupation, on average, in our sample—than their White counterparts; over half of all Indian and Chinese individuals work as software developers. Indian women are significantly more likely to work in this high-paying occupation than Chinese women; however, female Indian software developers make about \$20,000 less per year than their Chinese counterparts, indicating factors beyond occupational segregation that drive wage gaps across and between ethnic groups. Both Indian and Chinese women are significantly more likely than White women to work in high-paying occupations.

MULTIVARIATE RESULTS

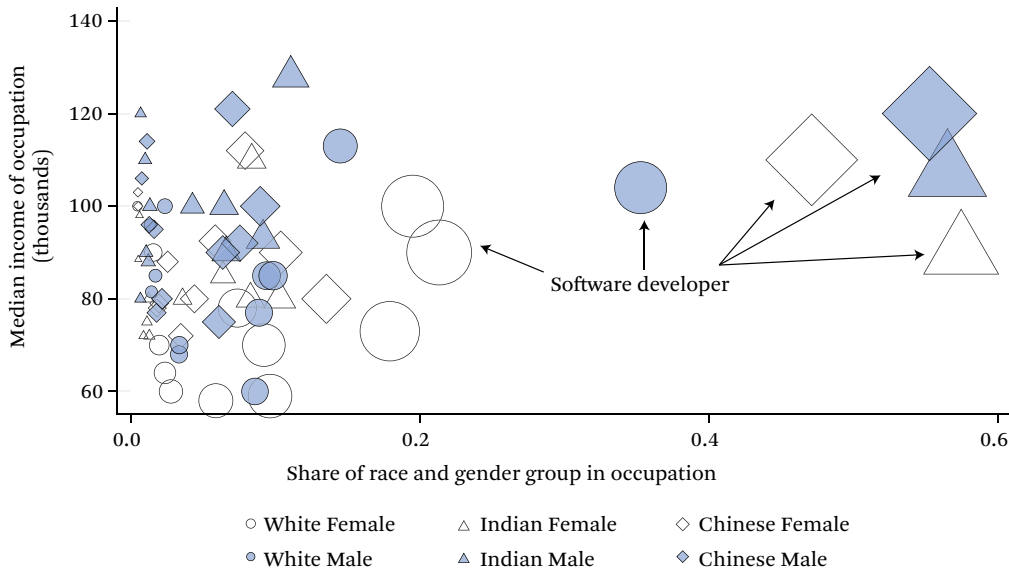
We turn now to our multivariate regression results to explore possible explanations for racial and ethnic differences in the gender wage gap. We initially seek to quantify the magnitude of the gender wage gap within racial groups, by running regressions separately for each racial group (White, Indian, and Chinese), with and

Figure 1. Family Differences by Race and Gender



Source: Authors' calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Figure 2. Occupation Median Salary by Occupation Share Across Race and Gender Groups



Source: Authors' calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: Size of marker is determined by the raw number of individuals within each occupation.

without the control variables described above. The key coefficient of interest is the indicator variable *female*. We first run the regression without any controls, before incorporating a vector of control variables.¹² We use robust standard errors and ACS person weights in all regressions. The coefficient on the *female* indicator can be interpreted as the percentage difference between men and women in annual wages and salary. With each estimate we also display the 95 percent confidence interval (CI), to identify the precision of our estimates relative to each other.

Our first set of regression specifications is presented in table 4. Results of the raw gender wage gap are shown in column 1, while column 2 shows the analogous information (the coefficient and 95 percent confidence interval) when our full set of controls is included. Results from the naive model reveal that the gender wage gap between White men and women is large and significant. White women make 17.4 percent less than White men in salary and wage income. Asian men and women working in CS experience a similar gender wage gap (17.8 percent), and this is not statistically different from the gender wage gap between White men and women. There is, however, considerable heterogeneity across Asian ethnic groups. Among Indians, the raw gender wage gap is 23.3 percent, statistically larger than all other groups at the 95 percent confidence level. The raw gender wage gap among Chinese men and women is 12.7 percent, and this is statistically smaller than for White individuals.

Column 2 of table 4 accounts for family and human capital attributes, and also includes controls for state and year fixed effects to net out differences that may result from time

trends or cost-of-living differences or changing salaries across states. Incorporating these controls improves the model fit substantially and shrinks the gender wage gap within our groups. The White gender wage gap shrinks by 7.7 percent, resulting in White women earning 9.8 percent less than White men. The overall Asian gender wage gap shrinks by 4.6 percent, leaving a wage gap of 13.2 percent. These differences are statistically different from one another; the Asian gender wage gap is an estimated 3.7 percent larger than the White gender wage gap.

But a focus on the pan-ethnic Asian group masks considerable ethnic variation in the magnitude of change resulting from incorporating additional controls. Among Indians, incorporating the range of family and human capital measures shrinks the gender wage gap minimally; Indian women continue to earn nearly 20 percent less than Indian men. The gap between Chinese men and women, in contrast, decreases nearly 5 percent on including other controls, and in the full models, Chinese women earn 7.9 percent less than Chinese men—the smallest gap in our sample.

Ethnic Variation in the Contribution of Family Factors

To isolate the effects of family factors—assessing the extent to which the gender wage gap is really a family wage gap—we explore the impact of our family variables from our second set of regressions (table 4, column 2), presenting these as a coefficient plot in figure 3. Shown here are the coefficient estimates and 95 percent confidence intervals for regressions run individually for each race and gender group. The graph shows the impact of marriage and parenthood on earnings, across women and men from different ethnic groups with similar

12. Controls include: children indicators, including children ages 0–5, children ages 0–18, and children ages 5–18 (omitted = childless). Marital status indicators include previously married and never married (omitted = married). Citizenship indicators include naturalized citizen and foreign-born noncitizen (omitted = citizen from birth). Additional controls include age and age squared. Field-of-degree indicators include engineering, other STEM, business, other non-STEM (omitted = computer science). Highest degree indicators include master’s, professional degree, PhD (omitted = bachelor’s). Computer science occupations include CIS manager, computer scientist, computer systems analyst, information security analyst, computer programmer, web developer, support specialist, database administrator, network administrator, network architect (omitted = software development). In some specifications, models also include an indicator for overwork (works fifty or more hours per week), as well as state and year fixed effects.

Table 4. Linear Regression Predicting Log Hourly Wages: Coefficients on Female

	Model 1. Raw Gender Wage Gap		Model 2. Gender Wage Gap with Controls	
	Coefficient [95 Percent Confidence Interval]	Number of Observations <i>R</i> -Squared	Coefficient [95 Percent Confidence Interval]	Number of Observations <i>R</i> -Squared
White	-0.174 *** [-0.182, -0.166]	222,058 0.01	-0.098*** [-0.105, -0.091]	222,058 0.32
Asian	-0.178*** [-0.191, -0.165]	90,219 0.01	-0.135*** [-0.147, -0.123]	902,19 0.25
Indian	-0.233*** [-0.251, -0.215]	48,847 0.02	-0.196*** [-0.214, -0.179]	48,847 0.26
Chinese	-0.127*** [-0.152, -0.101]	21,204 0.01	-0.079*** [-0.101, -0.056]	21,204 0.20

Source: Authors' calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: Models run separately for each racial category. Displayed are the coefficients on an indicator for female. All models for the White category include robust standard errors. In brackets is a 95 percent confidence interval. Model 2 controls include: children indicators, including children ages 0–5, children ages 0–18, children ages 5–18 (omitted = childless). Marital status indicators include previously married and never married (omitted = married). Citizenship indicators include naturalized citizen and foreign-born noncitizen (omitted = citizen from birth). Additional controls include age and age squared. Field-of-degree indicators include engineering, other STEM, business, other non-STEM (omitted = computer science). Highest degree indicators include master's, professional degree, PhD (omitted = bachelor's). Computer science occupations include CIS manager, computer scientist, computer systems analyst, information security analyst, computer programmer, web developer, support specialist, database administrator, network administrator, network architect (omitted = software development). Indicator for overwork (works fifty or more hours per week), as well as state and year fixed effects.

*** $p < .01$.

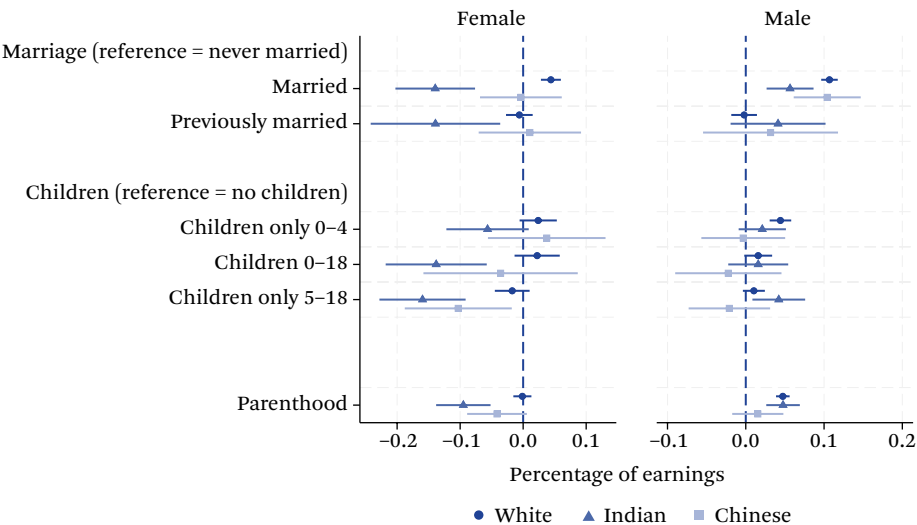
levels of human capital. Specifically, within this set of regressions, we compare unmarried women and men to their married and divorced counterparts and childless women and men to those with children in varying age brackets within each racial group. To capture the full effect of parenthood, we also run a specification including only a parent indicator.

Figure 3 reveals considerably greater divergence in returns to marriage and parenthood among women than among men. Men of all groups examined here, White, Indian, and Chinese, experience a marriage premium, though this is greater for those who are currently married than the previously married. Married White and Chinese men experience an earnings boost of around 10 percent compared to their never married counterparts, while married Indian men earn 8.4 percent

more; these differences are all statistically different from zero. White men experience a significantly larger marriage premium than Indian men.

In contrast to men, and to expectations drawn from the literature on professional working women, only White women experience a marriage premium that is significantly different from zero, earning 5 percent more than their never married counterparts. While married Chinese women do not experience an earnings premium, they also do not experience a marriage penalty; though imprecisely estimated, the point estimate is very close to zero. But Indian women experience large marriage penalties, which are significantly different from the returns to marriage experienced by White and Chinese women. Being married decreases Indian women's earnings by 14 percent

Figure 3. Impact of Family Status on Wages by Race and Gender



Source: Authors’ calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: Models are run separately for each race by gender pair. Each marker displays the coefficient estimate for the coefficient labeled on the y-axis. We display 95 percent confidence intervals. Controls include: children indicators, including children 0–5, children 0–18, children 5–18 (omitted = Childless) [except in the parenthood indicator set of models where these are excluded]. Marital status indicators include married and previously married (omitted = never married). Citizenship indicators include naturalized citizen and foreign-born noncitizen (omitted = citizen from birth). Additional controls include age and age squared. Field-of-degree indicators include engineering, other STEM, business, other non-STEM (omitted = computer science). Highest degree indicators include master’s, professional degree, PhD (omitted = bachelor’s). Computer science occupations include CIS manager, computer scientist, computer systems analyst, information security analyst, computer programmer, web developer, support specialist, database administrator, network administrator, network architect (omitted = software development).

relative to their never married counterparts; they also experience a marriage penalty relative to married Chinese and White women. A similar pattern with regard to returns to parenthood can also be observed. Though returns to fatherhood vary somewhat across different stages of parenthood, most fathers receive a small premium for being parents, relative to their childless counterparts. There is some slight variation across ethnic groups, though these differences are not significant. White men who are fathers of preschoolers, for example, experience a small 4.8 percent earnings premium over their childless counterparts. But the earnings of Indian and Chinese fathers of preschool-aged children do not differ significantly from their childless counterparts. On the

other hand, Indian fathers experience a slight earnings premium (5.4 percent) over their childless counterparts when they have school-aged children, though this difference is not significantly different from the bonus White fathers of older children experience. Chinese fathers experience no earnings premium, regardless of the age of their child or children, over childless Chinese men.

Among women, there is considerably more heterogeneity in the effect of parenthood on earnings, both across ages of children and ethnic groups. Indian women have the largest estimated parenthood penalty, of around 13 percent, statistically larger than that of White women, who have a very small positive effect of parenthood that is not different from zero. Chi-

nese women have a parenthood penalty roughly in the middle of the two groups, around 5 percent. Whereas research on professional women has found that those with preschool-aged children experienced a wage premium relative to childless women, disaggregating motherhood penalties by ethnicity and age of children reveals a more nuanced picture. The impact of having children of different age groups on wages also shows that the effect sizes are generally larger for Indian and Chinese women than for White women, but they are more noisily estimated due to smaller sample sizes. Consistent with the results on marriage, there are larger penalties for Indian mothers compared to Indian childless women. But having older children—whether all school-aged, or in combination with preschool-aged children—has the largest estimated earnings penalty for Indian women, though we cannot say that this is significantly different from the penalty for having younger children. Indian women with both preschool- and school-aged children earn 13.5 percent less than childless women, while those with only older children (aged five to eighteen) earn 15 percent less. Chinese women also experience a mother penalty when they have only school-aged children, though the point estimates are smaller.

Figure 4 reveals how the effects of marriage and parenthood differ within racial groups across genders, highlighting across-sex variation in returns to family roles. To compare the effects of marriage and parenthood across men and women within the same racial or ethnic group, we use a set of interaction terms. Relying on the same set of controls described previously, we include an interaction between the female indicator and the associated variables for each set of relevant characteristics. We run three regressions for each racial group: the first includes interactions between females and both married and previously married (relative to never married); the second includes the interaction of female and a parenthood indicator; the third includes the interaction between female and each child age group. The coefficients on the interaction term for each of these regressions are shown in figure 4.

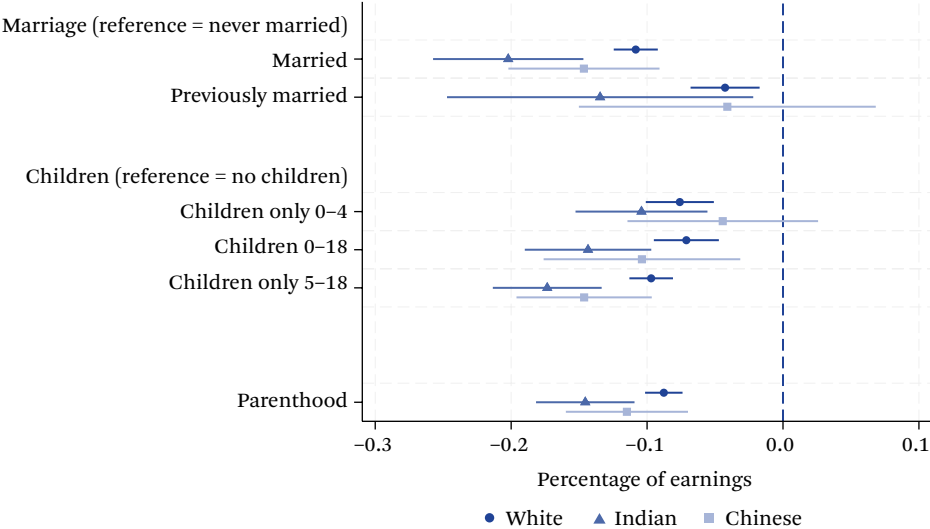
The vertical dashed line crossing through zero shown in figure 4 reflects the balance be-

tween returns for men and women of the characteristic being interacted. The coefficients can be interpreted as the difference between females and males in the effect of the variable on income, not the overall effect of the characteristic on income. Returns to family attributes are universally lower for women than for men. In other words, even when women receive a marriage premium, it is significantly lower than that received by their male counterparts. White women experience the smallest penalties relative to their male counterparts, while Indian women generally experience the largest penalties relative to Indian men. Compared to White men who are married, married White women earn 11 percent less per year, on average, which is significant at the 1 percent level. But the marriage penalty between married Indian women and men is substantially larger, and the difference from Whites is statistically significant; married Indian women earn 21 percent less per year than married Indian men. The marriage premium for Chinese men relative to women is 15 percent, which is not statistically different from the estimates for White or Indian women.

A similar pattern is observed with regard to the parenthood penalty. White women also face significantly smaller parenthood penalties versus white men when compared to the parenthood penalties Indian mothers face relative to Indian fathers. In our specification with just a parenthood indicator, White women have about an 8 percent parenthood penalty compared to White men (significant at the 1 percent level). On the other hand, this penalty for Indian women is 15 percent ($p < .001$) and this estimate is also significantly more negative than the parenthood gap for White men and women. The parenthood gap between Indian women and men with older children is likely what is driving the larger parenthood gap for this group.

Given these large ethnic differences in returns to family attributes—particularly the wide disparities in returns to marriage—we further explore the role of occupational homogamy and whether those whose spouse is working in the same field or occupation are disadvantaged in terms of relative earnings. We do this by focusing on married couples and run-

Figure 4. Differential Impact of Family Status for Females Compared to Males by Race



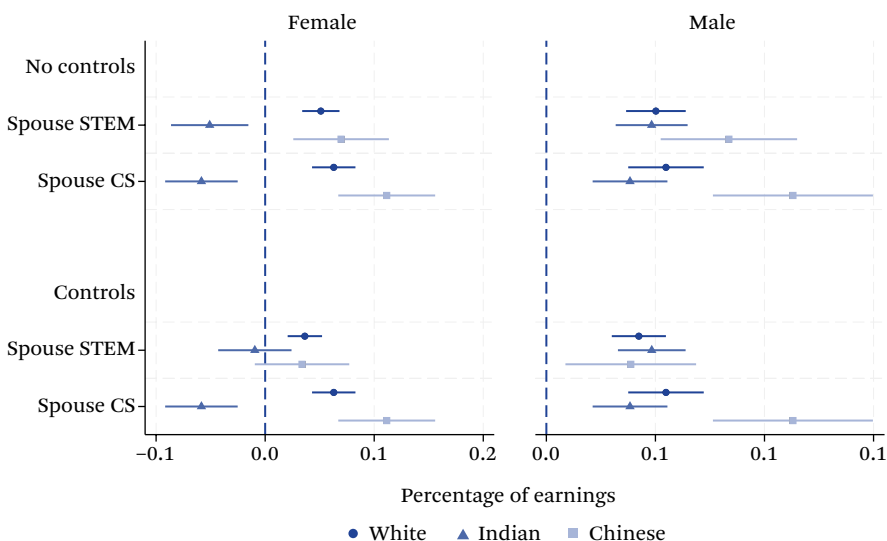
Source: Authors’ calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: We run models separately for each racial group. Each marker is the coefficient for an interaction term between female and the variable displayed on the y-axis. We display 95 percent confidence intervals. Controls include: female, children indicators, including children 0–5, children 0–18, children 5–18 (omitted = childless) [except in the parenthood regression where these controls are omitted]. Marital status indicators include married and previously married (omitted = never married). Citizenship indicators include naturalized citizen and foreign-born noncitizen (omitted = citizen from birth). Additional controls include age and age squared. Field-of-degree indicators include engineering, other STEM, business, other non-STEM (omitted = computer science). Highest degree indicators include master’s, professional degree, PhD (omitted = bachelor’s). Computer science occupations include CIS manager, computer scientist, computer systems analyst, information security analyst, computer programmer, web developer, support specialist, database administrator, network administrator, network architect (omitted = software development).

ning regressions for each racial and gender group separately; the outcome is the log of wage and salary income, consistent with our previous analysis of the entire sample. We first include only an indicator for whether a respondent’s spouse was in a STEM occupation, before further limiting it to those where both partners worked in CS. Then we include the controls described earlier, along with this indicator. The coefficients on the spousal occupation indicator are shown in figure 5.

The results of these models demonstrate that for men working in CS, having a spouse employed in either a STEM occupation more broadly, or in CS more specifically, is associated with roughly a 5 percent increase in income.

The one outlier here is Chinese men, who appear to particularly benefit from having a spouse in CS, which is associated with income gains of around 10 percent, at statistically significant levels (though the confidence intervals around this estimate are fairly wide). Notably, for Chinese and White women, having a spouse in CS (STEM) is also associated with income gains, with these gains also being around 5 percent in the naive model, a difference that shrinks to around 3 percent when controls are included. Chinese women are again an exception to this. Like their male counterparts, they appear to particularly benefit from having a spouse in CS; having a husband who works in CS is associated with income gains of around

Figure 5. Effect of Spouse in Computer Science (STEM) Occupation on Wages by Race and Gender

Source: Authors' calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: Models are run separately for each race by gender pair. Each marker displays the coefficient estimate for the coefficient labeled on the y-axis. We display 95 percent confidence intervals. Controls include: female, children indicators, including children 0–5, children 0–18, children 5–18 (omitted = childless) [except in the parenthood regression where these controls are omitted]. Marital status indicators include married and previously married (omitted = never married). Citizenship indicators include naturalized citizen and foreign-born noncitizen (omitted = citizen from birth). Additional controls include age and age squared. Field-of-degree indicators include engineering, other STEM, business, other non-STEM (omitted = computer science). Highest degree indicators include master's, professional degree, PhD (omitted = bachelor's). Computer science occupations include CIS manager, computer scientist, computer systems analyst, information security analyst, computer programmer, web developer, support specialist, database administrator, network administrator, network architect (omitted = software development). CS = computer science. STEM = science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. CIS = Computer and Information Systems.

10 percent for Chinese women, at statistically significant levels. For Indian women who work in CS, being married to a spouse who also is employed in CS is associated with a 5 percent decline in income, significant at conventional levels. This is striking, as nearly 60 percent of Indian women in our sample have spouses who work in CS.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Attempts to reduce the gender wage gap frequently focus on the importance of encouraging women to enter STEM occupations. Numerous public campaigns also promote the idea that women should increase their presence in

well-remunerated fields such as CS, through coding boot camps, college summer sessions focused on creating pathways for talented young women to major in technologically related majors, and affinity groups for women and minorities in STEM. Expanding women's representation in STEM occupations is often forwarded as one means of reducing the gap in men and women's wages, as is improving women's attachment to the labor market. Our analyses suggest that this strategy is already utilized by some ethnic groups. Asian women in general, and Chinese and Indian women in particular, are better represented in STEM occupations, and particularly in CS jobs, than their

White counterparts. Both Chinese and Indian women also earn significantly more, on average, than do White women who work in CS.

While Asian women earn more, on average, than White women, they continue to earn significantly less than Asian men. Female Asian and White full-time CS professionals earn about 17 percent less than men—a raw gender gap that is similar to the gender wage gap for the overall labor force (where it was 82 percent) (Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). Controlling for family attributes and other factors narrows the gender wage gap, though White women continue to earn 9.8 cents per dollar less than their male counterparts, Chinese women earn 7.9 cents per dollar less, and Indian women make 19.6 cents per dollar less than Indian men working in CS occupations. Therefore, increasing women’s representation in STEM fields such as CS may not reduce the overall size of the gender wage gap.

Family factors are frequently believed to explain the persistence and size of the gender wage gap. Our findings provide further nuance to this explanation, given how marriage and parenthood penalties differ across ethnic groups. All men benefit from a marriage premium, relative to never married men, though Indian men benefit less than White men; Chinese men garner a premium that is between the two other groups but not statistically different from either one. But not all married women benefit from a marriage premium, which is contrary to what we expected on the basis of what other studies of professional women have found (for example, Buchmann and McDaniel 2016; Micheltore and Sassler 2016; Sassler and Meyerhofer 2023). Among most women working in CS, the marriage premium is limited to White married women, who outearned never married and previously married women; their bonus, however, was significantly smaller than that obtained by married White men. Indian women in particular experience a significantly larger marital penalty, relative to unmarried Indian women, than do White or Chinese women. This is notable, as the vast majority of Indian women in our sample of CS professionals (86 percent) were married. Given the cross-sectional nature of the ACS data, we are unable to ascertain whether there are differences

across White, Indian, and Chinese women in the likelihood of remaining in CS occupations. Other data sources likewise do not provide sufficient ethnic-specific samples to determine whether married Indian women are more likely to remain in CS occupations than White or Chinese women with similarly high, unobservable marriage penalties (Sassler et al. 2023). Nonetheless, the larger wage gap evidenced among Indian CS professionals may be the result of their greater propensity to remain in the labor force following marriage and motherhood.

Furthermore, our results provide suggestive evidence that returns to parenthood also differ among women, particularly by the age of children, no doubt reflecting how parents respond differently to children’s needs across the life course. There is considerable variation among women in when and how family roles are arranged. These differences may impact earnings and, therefore, the gender wage gap. White women working in CS experience less of a parenthood penalty relative to their male counterparts than Indian women, though the difference is not significant when compared to Chinese women. Additional research is needed to ascertain why this may be the case, given that existing research finds that Asian women are less likely than White women to reduce labor supply in response to parenthood (Greenman 2011). As others have shown (Cha et al. 2023), the gender gap framing operates better for White workers than for Black or Hispanic workers; our research indicates that it also has less purchase for Asian workers.

Differential costs of family behaviors perpetuate the gender wage gap, but family strategies regarding women’s behaviors differ broadly across ethnic and racial groups. Indian women, for example, marry and become mothers at substantially younger ages than their Chinese and White counterparts. As noted by other articles in this issue (Lim and Jeong 2026), Chinese and Indians have greater prevalence of extended families than their White counterparts, with important ramifications for women’s labor force participation rates. Both Indian and Chinese women’s likelihood of employment is shaped by the prevalence of living in multigeneration households (Lim and Jeong 2026), though the presence of parents or in-laws may

shape mothers' ability to work but can also introduce additional care burdens. The larger parenthood penalty experienced by Indian women relative to White women when they have children who are school-aged suggests the need for further attention to child investment strategies and how they differ across both Asian groups and parents in demanding professional occupations. Our evidence suggests that intensive parenting norms may exact higher costs on Indian mothers relative to White mothers with school-aged children, with less differentiation among Chinese and White mothers of school-aged children.

There is clearly a need to better identify the sources of gender differences in family premiums or penalties in the family wage gap literature. Additional research should determine how age at marriage or first birth shapes wage disparities and the gender wage gap, as the later family formation behaviors of White and Chinese women appear responsible for some of this gender difference in returns. Future studies could also assess whether men and women receive the same returns to working in occupations (such as software developer) where Indian and Chinese men and women are well-represented. In her examination of the factors contributing to "a grand gender convergence," Claudia Goldin (2014, 1091) asserted that what happened within each occupation was far more important in shaping the gender wage gap than gender differences in the occupations in which men and women wound up (see also Quadlin et al. 2023; Zheng and Weeden 2023). Given marital sorting and the rise in educational homogamy, better understanding what happens not only within occupations but also within couples where both partners work in the same occupation may shed further light on how the family wage gap is perpetuated or reduced. Our results on occupational homogamy within married couples reveal that women from some ethnic groups may be more disadvantaged by interfamily exchanges when it comes to relative earnings, while other women are benefited. White and Chinese women, for example, experience more of a marriage premium when they are married to men who also work in CS occupations; Indian women, on the other hand, experience a marriage penalty for occupational

marital homogamy. This is clearly an important subset of what could be termed the family wage gap.

Of course, our analysis is not without shortcomings. Due to the cross-sectional nature of the ACS data, we only observe those working in a CS occupation at the time of interview, which means we cannot address differential attrition in CS by gender prior to observing respondents. Retention in CS jobs is substantially lower for women than men (Sassler et al. 2017; Sassler et al. 2023). Workers who remain in CS jobs may be more highly qualified workers or in better-paid positions. Our estimates are likely a lower bound if those most dissatisfied with jobs in CS had left CS jobs prior to being observed. We are also unable to ascertain whether pay disparities are the result of "glass ceiling" effects, where women's earnings are lower than men's with similar levels of work experience due to discrimination occurring across the work life course. The structure of the ACS data does not enable us to determine how long respondents have worked in current positions or in the field of CS, or if women left the labor force for a period of time following childbirth. Furthermore, the immigration experience may influence the gender wage gap in ways that we cannot ascertain with ACS data; Indian men and women are significantly more likely to be foreign-born and non-citizens than their Chinese and White counterparts. Yet we lack information on the type of visa status the foreign-born initially had, and whether, among those married to others currently working in CS, both partners were working or if one partner was prohibited from holding a job—a factor that could affect work experience and, therefore, wages. There are, then, various factors beyond family responsibilities that shape the gender wage gap within ethnic groups, though our findings suggest these remain gendered. Many data limitations challenge our ability to explore how the family decisions of women and men play out over the career life course.

Better understanding the factors that shape the persistent gender wage gap, and how these differ across ethnic groups overrepresented in well-paid professions, is necessary in order to reduce gender and racial inequality in the

United States. As our results show, ethnic variation in returns to marriage and parenthood, as well as within married couple differences in the returns to occupational homogamy, help perpetuate the gender wage gap, even when women work in STEM fields such as CS. That means that encouraging more women to enter and remain in STEM occupations will not, alone, be enough to reduce the gender wage gap. Narrowing wage disparities between women and men remains a challenge. Even among ethnic groups with high levels of STEM

engagement, wage disparities persist. This disparity is clearly evident among Asians working in CS in the United States. While Chinese and Indian women earn more than White women, their family roles result in significantly lower returns to their employment than those experienced by their male counterparts. In other words, for Chinese and Indian women, the gender wage gap appears to be largely a family wage gap, with important ramifications for the Asian American experience in the United States.

APPENDIX

Table A.1. Further Descriptive Statistics on Immigration Status for Analysis Sample

	White		Indian		Chinese		Significant Difference
	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Native born citizen	<u>0.91</u>	<u>0.90</u>	<u>0.05</u>	<u>0.04</u>	<u>0.19</u>	<u>0.23</u>	a,b,c,d
Naturalized citizen	<u>0.06</u>	<u>0.06</u>	<u>0.35</u>	<u>0.28</u>	<u>0.48</u>	<u>0.42</u>	a,b,c,d
Noncitizen	<u>0.03</u>	<u>0.05</u>	<u>0.60</u>	<u>0.68</u>	<u>0.33</u>	<u>0.35</u>	a,b,c,d
US education*	<u>0.94</u>	<u>0.93</u>	<u>0.21</u>	<u>0.18</u>	<u>0.46</u>	<u>0.52</u>	a,b,c,d
Age at immigration**	<u>20.17</u>	<u>21.66</u>	<u>24.7</u>	<u>26.55</u>	<u>22.38</u>	<u>22.05</u>	a,b,c,d
Age at naturalization***	<u>29.3</u>	<u>30.19</u>	<u>32.84</u>	<u>34.98</u>	<u>31.01</u>	<u>29.7</u>	a,b,c,d
Native English speaker	0.89	0.89	0.09	0.11	0.17	0.20	a,b,c,d
Speaks English well	0.11	0.11	0.91	0.89	0.82	0.78	a,b,c,d
Does not speak English well	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.01	0.02	a,b,c,d
Total observations	50,680	171,378	12,380	36,467	6,814	14,390	

Source: Authors’ calculations using American Community Survey one-year estimates from 2009–2022.

Note: Underlining denotes significant within-race differences ($p < .001$). Letters show significant difference between: (a) White and Indian females; (b) White and Chinese females; (c) White and Indian males; and (d) White and Chinese males.

*Imputed if immigrated prior to twenty-two years old; **Conditional on having immigrated to the US; ***Conditional on having naturalized to the US.

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The Role of Extended Family in Asian American Women's Employment from 1990 to 2022



SOJUNG LIM AND WONJEONG JEONG

Prior research suggests that extended family living arrangements may contribute to Asian women's labor-market advantage over White women. However, our understanding of the role that extended family plays in Asian women's employment across ethnicity, immigrant generation, and time periods remain limited. Using the Census (1990, 2000) and the American Community Survey (2001–2022), we compare employment patterns of the five largest Asian groups—Asian Indian, Chinese, Korean, Filipino, and Vietnamese—with those of US-born, non-Hispanic White women. Across groups and generations, Asian women are more likely than White women to live in extended households. Logistic regression analyses show that extended family structure is positively associated with Asian women's employment, particularly among first-generation immigrants, with patterns that persist across various family circumstances, including the presence of young children and household economic conditions. These findings offer valuable insights into processes and differentials in the socioeconomic assimilation and mobility of Asian Americans.

Keywords: Asian American, women, employment, labor market attachment, extended family

Asian American women tend to have higher earnings and hourly wages compared to their non-Hispanic White counterparts (Greenman and Xie 2008; Greenman 2011). One of the primary explanations for Asian women's earnings advantage over White women is their greater labor supply, including less interruption by motherhood (Greenman 2011; Ho et al. 2022). Evidence from previous studies implies that extended family structure may be a critical factor

in accounting for Asian women's labor market activities and their observed earnings advantage over Whites (Kang and Cohen 2018). As is well documented, Asian Americans have a high prevalence of forming extended households. According to the 2021 Current Population Survey Annual Social and Economic Supplement, about one-quarter of Asian Americans live in multigenerational households (Cohn et al. 2022). Despite evidence of the potential role

Sojung Lim is associate professor of sociology and criminology and Korea Foundation Professor of Korean Studies, State University of New York at Buffalo, United States. **Wonjeong Jeong** is a postdoctoral associate, Social Science Division, New York University Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.

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that extended families play in Asian American women's employment, few studies have explicitly examined the association between extended family structure and their labor market activities (Kang and Cohen 2018). Furthermore, existing research fails to consider important differences by ethnicity, immigrant generation, and time of arrival that may affect both the motivations for and the significance of household extension in Asian women's work. This gap is particularly notable given significant variations in labor market outcomes by such characteristics as ethnicity and nativity, as highlighted by Phoebe Ho and Hyunjoon Park (2026, this issue).

For example, Jeehye Kang and Philip N. Cohen (2018), the only study on this specific topic, included only first-generation Asian Americans in their analysis, thus overlooking potential changes among second or later immigrant generations. In addition, the study's focus on differences within Asian groups makes it difficult to assess whether and how help from extended families explains the Asian advantage over Whites in the labor market attachment. Other studies on Asian women's employment are also limited in that they often collapse Asians into one group without accounting for ethnic differences or focus on selective subgroups, such as college graduates in STEM occupations (Greenman 2011). Another important limitation of prior research is that almost all studies examine the associations between Asian women's labor supply and family structure at a single point in time. Therefore, we do not know if the benefit of an extended family for Asian women's employment is more or less consistent over time, or if it is a one-time observation.

Recognizing the limitations of prior research, we examine the associations between extended family structure and Asian women's employment while considering variations by ethnicity and immigrant generation across multiple time points from 1990 to 2022. To foreshadow, we use data from the US Census (1990, 2000) and the American Community Survey (2001–2022) and conduct disaggregated analyses that compare employment rates of the five largest Asian groups to those of non-Hispanic Whites across family structures (that is, whether women live in extended household or

not). To the best of our knowledge, this study is the first to simultaneously examine differentials by ethnicity, immigrant generation, and time concerning the role of extended families in Asian American women's employment. We further extend the literature by examining the extent to which (dis)advantages in Asian women's labor supply over White women in extended families are similar or dissimilar depending on various family circumstances, including the presence of young children, the type of extended family (women's own parent versus parent-in-law), and household income. The findings of our study have important implications for understanding Asian women's employment patterns that are critical to the processes of assimilation and mobility for them and their families (Lee and Kye 2016). They further help us understand the source of heterogeneity and economic inequality found across various Asian American subpopulations.

EXTENDED FAMILY STRUCTURE AND ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S EMPLOYMENT

The prevalence of extended family structure among Asian Americans is often attributed to Asian culture, which emphasizes traditional family values and filial piety (Burr and Mutchler 1993; Speare and Avery 1993). While declining, the extended family structure is still common in Asia: for example, multigenerational households made up about 23 percent of all households according to the 2010 China Census (Wang 2013). Consistent with cultural explanations, Asian American families are more likely to form extended households even after controlling for demographic and economic characteristics (Kamo 2000). Some further argue that such a cultural effect on extended family living arrangements would last long after immigration, an effect not fully explained by the assimilation model (Kamo and Zhou 1994). Additionally, evidence that foreign-born Asian immigrants' gains in household earnings from an extended family structure diminish or become negative as their duration in the US increases indicates that household extension can be considered a manifestation of cultural disposition beyond economic considerations (Kulkarni 2019).

Another explanation for household extension among Asian Americans is that it may be a strategy for immigrants to cope under structural constraints (Kulkarni 2019). Studies show that intergenerational coresidence serves as a survival strategy for low-income families that pool economic resources and receive help for childcare (Edin and Lein 1997). Extended households can also serve as a “private safety net” in the face of uncertainties and economic insecurities (Western et al. 2012). In fact, structural pressures including economic factors have been repeatedly identified as one of the major explanations for household structures across various groups and nativity statuses (for example, Glick et al. 1997). This strategy might be particularly relevant to Asian Americans as newcomers, who are often considered perpetual foreigners by US citizens, because shared households can help achieve economies of scale and invest in the human capital of household members (Ermisch 1988; Kaushal and Reimers 2007). Consistent with this perspective, Asian households benefit more from household extension than White households in terms of household-level earnings, and extended family structure is more prevalent among Asian families with lower education and limited English proficiency (Kulkarni 2019). Large family size is also theoretically linked to women’s greater labor force participation by increasing the economic needs of a family for a given level of consumption (Becker 1965; Tienda and Glass 1985).

However, cultural factors and structural strains as explanations for Asian Americans’ household extension (and their potential role in women’s employment) are not necessarily mutually exclusive and are often closely interconnected. For instance, recent research on women’s employment in China still documents gender asymmetries in multigenerational families: whether an extended family structure is conducive to women’s employment often depends on the gender of the live-in-parent (mother versus father) and the family relationship (own parents versus husband’s parents) (Yu and Cheng 2024; Yu and Xie 2018). The importance of parental help, particularly from one’s own mother, in women’s employment reflects broader patterns of traditional gender

norms and workplace structures in Asia, in which women bear a disproportionate share of housework and childcare, while fathers’ involvement remains limited (Raymo et al. 2023). Similarly, a qualitative study on middle-class Korean women living in suburban areas of New York finds that full-time employment is often determined by the availability of transgenerational shared mothering, especially for those with young children (Moon 2003). At the same time, household extension can also be interpreted as a response to structural constraints, as evidence shows that Asian American women face limited access to parental leave benefits through work and formal childcare (Brown et al. 2020; Malik et al. 2018). In such contexts, forming a multigenerational household is a resource or a strategy for Asian American women to stay in the labor force, while the pattern of help is influenced by their cultural norms, such as living with one’s own parents being more beneficial (Greenman 2011; Kang and Cohen 2018; Moon 2003).

VARIATION BY ETHNICITY, IMMIGRANT GENERATION, AND TIME

One of the major limitations of the literature on Asian Americans is its failure to consider heterogeneity and differentials within this group. This limitation primarily reflects the lack of data sources that allow the disaggregation of Asian groups that have small population sizes. Nevertheless, the approach of considering Asian Americans as a whole group is problematic because it obscures the socioeconomic and cultural characteristics of various groups that may lead to different patterns of immigrant adaptation and assimilation strategies (Drouhot and Garip 2021). That said, while Asian Americans are considered to hold traditional family values, the organization of family life, including the prevalence and patterns of household extension and intergenerational support, differs across ethnicities. Family extension, for instance, is more common for first-generation Asian American women among Southeast Asians (Vietnamese and Filipina) than among East Asians (Korean and Japanese) (Kang and Cohen 2018; Kulkarni 2019). Evidence further suggests that the patterns of support from additional adults in the household

and their impact on women's work vary by national origin. For example, the burden of caring for disabled adults is negatively associated with women's employment for Koreans only among seven Asian groups examined (Kang and Cohen 2018).

Additionally, whether the household extension of Asian immigrants is due to cultural factors or structural strains, the influence of these factors may not be constant across different immigrant generations. First-generation immigrants bring their cultural values and national traditions from their country of origin, both of which influence their family lives (Kamo and Zhou 1994; Kang and Cohen 2018). However, the process of acculturation leads to exposure to and adoption of the cultural values of the US society among the later generations (Gordon 1964). When it comes to living arrangements of the elderly in the US, independent residence is the most prevalent form. According to an analysis of the 2021 Current Population Survey, only 7.6 percent of parents aged sixty and over coreside with adult children aged forty or over (Eickmeyer and Brown 2019). Therefore, cultural preference for extended family is likely to attenuate for later immigrant generations in a way that it converges with that of the majority group (non-Hispanic Whites).

Considering differentials across immigrant generations in the patterns of household extension is also important, since structural constraints that may motivate extended living arrangements are not shared equally by different generations. The economic necessities of elderly parents, which are structurally conditioned in US society (for instance, eligibility for health and pension benefits), may be a strong driver of intergenerational coresidence among first-generation Asian Americans. A great majority of Asian American elders (aged sixty-five and over) are foreign-born and have migrated at a more advanced age due mostly to family reunification (Mui et al. 2007) and are likely economically dependent on their children (Mui and Shibusawa 2008). However, later generations of Asian Americans tend to achieve economic parity with—or even surpass—US-born Whites in outcomes such as hourly wages and annual earnings, largely due to their high level of educational attainment (Hirschman and

Wong 1984; Wang et al. 2017; Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Zeng and Xie 2004).

Some evidence suggests a White-Asian disparity for the non-US-born immigrants (Kim and Zhao 2014; Shao 2023). One explanation is that they have completed their education outside of the US, where educational credentials are less likely to be similarly recognized (Zeng and Xie 2004). Another explanation points out the potential harm of the model minority myth since it penalizes Asian Americans who do not fit the stereotype of overachieving Asians, including men without a college degree (Kim and Sakamoto 2014). Andrew Taeho Kim and ChangHwan Kim's study (2026, this issue), for example, documents earnings disadvantages of less-educated Asian American men, especially in local labor markets where the proportion of highly educated Asian Americans is high. Despite some discrepancies in their findings, prior studies consistently show that the nativity, which is associated with the place of education, is an important factor in determining Asian Americans' labor market outcomes (Kim and Zhao 2014; Zeng and Xie 2004).

Lastly, the characteristics of Asian Americans and the US socioeconomic and cultural context surrounding them may differ across time. Compared to immigrants of earlier periods, recent Asian immigrants are increasingly better educated and more skilled, contributing to the image of a model minority. These changing compositional characteristics of Asian immigrants reflect multiple factors, including political and economic development in their origin countries and the US immigration policies and labor market context. Reflecting the recent trends of skill-biased labor market polarization and globalization (Autor et al. 2006), new immigrants from Asia are most likely to become legal permanent residents (LPRs) through employment-based preferences among all LPRs according to recent data (Hanna and Batalova 2021). Some argue that the increasing number of middle-class Asian immigrants in recent decades has contributed to the diversification and polarization of class among Asian Americans (Hu-DeHart 1999; Ong et al. 1994). To the extent that compositional characteristics of Asian immigrants as well as the US socioeconomic and cultural context dif-

fer across time, the role of extended households in Asian women’s employment can also be expected to vary over different periods.

DATA AND METHODS

We use data from the US Census (1990, 2000) and the American Community Survey (2001–2022), provided by the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series (IPUMS) (Ruggles et al. 2024), to examine ethnic and generational variations as well as changes over time. Our analytic sample includes women of working age, between twenty-five and forty-nine years, who are either the head of household or the spouse of the head of household.¹ By doing so, we can approximate adult children “hosting” their parents in multigenerational households and evaluate whether parental coresidence is associated with women’s likelihood of working (rather than working while living as a dependent) (for example, Kang and Cohen 2018). Our focus on women between twenty-five and forty-nine years of age aligns with a stage in the life course when work and family responsibilities often conflict, particularly due to the demands of motherhood (Greenman 2011). As discussed above, the presence of parents or parents-in-law may have a different impact on women’s work depending on family conditions that vary by life course. For example, extended family living arrangements would be conducive to women’s employment if the elderly parent(s) can help with housework and child-care. However, living with an elderly parent who needs care may negatively affect women’s

work (Kang and Cohen 2018). By restricting the analytic sample to women between twenty-five and forty-nine years of age and including a control for parental health status, we aim to minimize the cases in which the presence of an elderly parent is negatively associated with women’s work.²

Employment Status

The main outcome variable is women’s employment status, defined as *employed* if they worked at least one hour in the previous week. Those who are unemployed or out of the labor force are considered *not employed*, following the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development standard (OECD 2024), as we are interested in the extent to which women aged 25–49 are actually employed depending on family structure. Additionally, we consider only wage employment and exclude self-employment and family work. While we acknowledge the importance of self-employment for Asian women’s labor force participation, the labor market contexts are different for wage employment and non-wage employment, which have different theoretical implications for immigrant assimilation and mobility (Lee 2013; Lee and Kye 2016). Our focus on wage employment also takes into account that prior research on the Asian–White earnings disparity mostly examines paid employment (Greenman 2011; Kim and Zhao 2014; Shao 2023).³ In the supplementary analyses, we also examine whether there are differences by full-time or part-time employment. The substantive con-

1. We also conducted a sensitivity check by including women who are not household heads or spouses to evaluate whether their exclusion—mostly adult children and children-in-law living with parents who are householders or their spouses—affects the results. Due to the structure of the data (a household survey), most adult children who do not live with their parents are either household heads or spouses. As a result, the number of younger women classified as children or children-in-law of the householders is relatively small, and the results are almost identical when they are included in the analysis.

2. In supplementary analyses, we compared the results from models that included a wider age range of women, extending up to age sixty-five. The substantive conclusions remain unchanged.

3. We conducted supplementary analyses to examine whether the exclusion of self-employment may change the results. The results remain unchanged regardless of whether self-employment is included, for both the first-generation and 2+ generations. One minor difference is that first-generation Korean women in extended households show a slightly higher employment rate with the inclusion of self-employment in the analytic sample. However, first-generation Korean women still show the lowest employment rate among all groups considered, particularly among those not living with parents or parents-in-law.

clusions remain the same as the results presented in the current analysis.⁴

Ethnicity

Recognizing diversity and heterogeneity among Asian Americans, we disaggregate Asian women into three broad categories (East Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian) which consist of the following five largest ethnic groups: Chinese, Korean, Asian Indian, Vietnamese, and Filipina. Additionally, we include US-born, non-Hispanic White women as a reference group for comparison with Asian women.

Immigrant Generation

As noted earlier, nativity and place of education are closely related to Asian Americans' labor market outcomes (Kim and Zhao 2014; Zeng and Xie 2004). Furthermore, the cultural preference and economic conditions for extended households may differ across generations (Kamo 2000; Kim and Zhao 2014). Considering this evidence and following prior research (Rumbaut 2004), we identify the first generation as those who were foreign-born and immigrated to the US at the age of thirteen or older. The second or later generations refer to those who were born in the US or immigrated to the US before the age of thirteen. We use the term "2+ generation" to include third and fourth generations, both of whom were born in the US.

Some scholars further break down immigrant generations by identifying those who have received a high school education in the US as the 1.5 generation (Shao 2023; Kim and Sakamoto 2010). Additionally, immigrants who received the highest degree in the US are often considered the 1.25 generation, separately from the 1.0 generation who completed their education outside the US (Kim and Zhao 2014). We

use the age of thirteen as a threshold to identify generations, considering the evidence for labor market disadvantages for both the 1.0 and 1.25 generations and parity or even advantage of the 2.0 generation among Asian Americans (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Kim and Zhao 2014; Zeng and Xie 2004). This decision is also made out of consideration that the number of the 1.5 generation is too small for some groups, thus prohibiting reliable estimates. In the supplementary analysis, we identified the 1.25, 1.5, and 1.75 generations to examine whether the associations of extended households with women's work are robust across different specifications. The substantive conclusions do not change across different identifications of immigrant generations.

Family Structure

Since the Census and ACS are household-level surveys, we use information on each household member's relationship to the head of household to identify the presence of parents or parents-in-law. If a woman lives with her own parents or parents-in-law in the same household, it is coded as 1; otherwise 0.

In all models, we control for several demographic and socioeconomic characteristics that may be related to household type (extended versus nuclear) and women's employment status.⁵ Specifically, we include age (linear) and age squared, the level of education (whether holding a bachelor's degree or not), census region (New England, Middle Atlantic, East North Central, West North Central, South Atlantic, East South Central, West South Central, Mountain, and Pacific), marital status (coded as 1 if currently married and 0 otherwise), parenthood status (coded as 1 if there is at least one child under the age of eighteen in the household and 0 otherwise), and annual household

4. The employment-promoting role of coresiding parents or parents-in-law is more pronounced among women working full time than among those in part-time employment, which confirms the importance of extended family in Asian women's continuous labor supply (Greenman 2011).

5. Some studies, including those in this issue, such as Kim and Kim 2026, emphasize the importance of metropolitan areas in shaping the economic outcomes of Asian Americans. Unfortunately, information on metropolitan area status is not consistently available across all samples used in our analysis, specifically the 1990 Census and the 2001–2004 American Community Survey. As a result, we did not incorporate this variable in our main analysis. However, our supplementary analyses using a limited sample that includes this variable indicate that our results are not sensitive to its inclusion.

income (logged, from income from the previous year). Women’s income is excluded from household income due to endogeneity as women’s employment (and thus their income) is the dependent variable of interest (Kang and Cohen 2018).⁶ This approach also allows us to control for overall household economic resources that may be related to women’s employment decisions (Becker 1965; Tienda and Glass 1985). Finally, we include the measure for the health status of the elderly parent because some women live with elderly parents with health issues, which may reduce the beneficial effect of the extended family structure on women’s employment (Kang and Cohen 2018). This measure is a dichotomous variable derived from the question, “Because of a physical, mental, or emotional condition, does this person have difficulty doing errands alone such as visiting a doctor’s office or shopping?” (US Census Bureau, n.d.). We recode the variable as 1 for women living with at least one elderly parent with health issues and 0 otherwise.

Empirical Strategy

We estimate a series of logistic regression models that predict women’s employment as a function of the extended family structure while controlling for various compositional characteristics. Specifically, we examine how the association between coresidence with parents or parents-in-law and women’s employment varies by ethnicity across immigrant generations over different time points spanning from 1990 to 2022. We do so by assessing four-way interaction terms among these statuses: parental coresidence, detailed Asian ethnicity, immigrant generation, and time period. Appendix tables A.1 and A.2 demonstrate the importance of accounting for these characteristics by ethnicity, immigrant generation, and time, as the sociodemographic characteristics of Asian American and non-Hispanic White women have

shifted substantially over the past several decades.

US-born, non-Hispanic White women who do not live with parents or parents-in-law are the reference group, as White women in extended families are very selective (see figure 1). Additionally, we do not account for differences by ethnicity and immigration status of White women as we want to examine the role of the extended family structure in Asian women’s employment, and any differentials across ethnicity and generations, in comparison with that of the majority group (non-Hispanic Whites) in the US, following the approach adopted by prior research (Kim and Sakamoto 2010; Shao 2023).

RESULTS

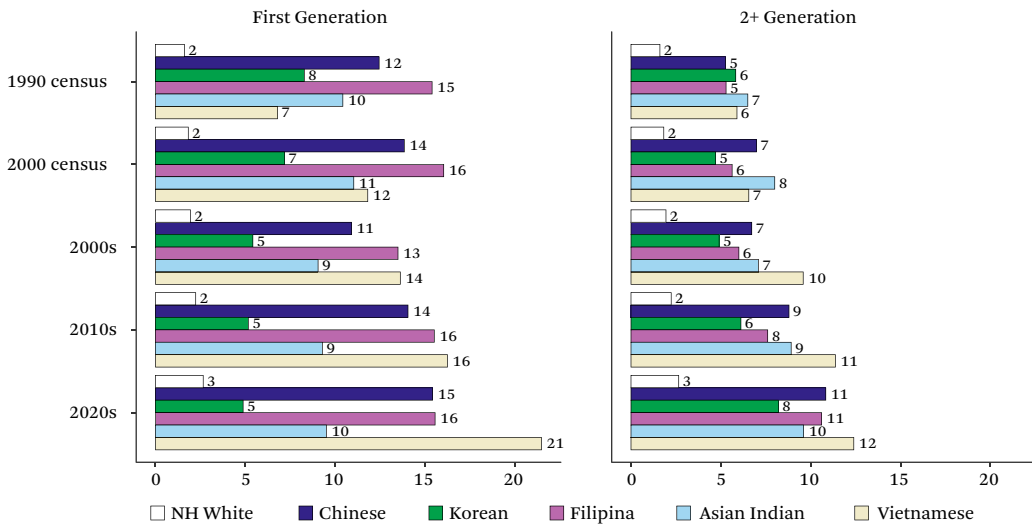
We first describe patterns in the prevalence of extended family arrangements and employment rates in the analytic sample (figures 1–2). We then present the results from multivariate logistic regression analyses examining employment gaps between Asian and White women by family structure (figures 3–6).

Prevalence of Extended Family by Ethnicity, Immigrant Generation, and Period

Figure 1 shows the prevalence of extended family households for five Asian groups—Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Korean, and Vietnamese—and non-Hispanic Whites, from 1990 to the early 2020s, separately by immigrant generation. As noted, the values for extended family among US-born, non-Hispanic Whites are shown without differentiating generation.

Across all periods, the percentage of extended families is constant for non-Hispanic Whites at around 2–3 percent. Compared to US-born, non-Hispanic Whites, all Asian groups have a higher prevalence of extended households at all time points. This pattern holds for both the first- and 2+ generations, although the

6. We do not separate the husband’s income from the household income since the husband’s income would be correlated with the household income, and including both would introduce multicollinearity. Moreover, the primary goal of this study is to examine the role of family structure (extended family or not) in women’s employment. Additionally, controlling for marital status accounts for all non-women’s income regardless of marital situation. In cases where women are sole earners, that is, household income apart from the women’s income is zero, we add 1 before transforming household income to a logarithmic scale.

Figure 1. Prevalence of Extended Family by Ethnicity, Immigrant Generation, and Period

Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

Note: Extended family refers to a household that includes at least one parent or parent-in-law. In this figure, “2000s” refers to the ACS data from 2001 to 2009, “2010s” refers to the ACS data from 2010 to 2019, and “2020s” refers to the ACS data from 2020 to 2022. Statistics are weighted using individual weights. For US-born, non-Hispanic White women, immigrant generation is not differentiated.

NH = non-Hispanic.

overall level of household extension is lower for the 2+ generation Asian Americans. As for trends over time, the percentage of the 2+ generation Asian women in extended households tends to increase after 2010, consistent with the growing trend of multigenerational households in the US in general (Cohn et al. 2022).

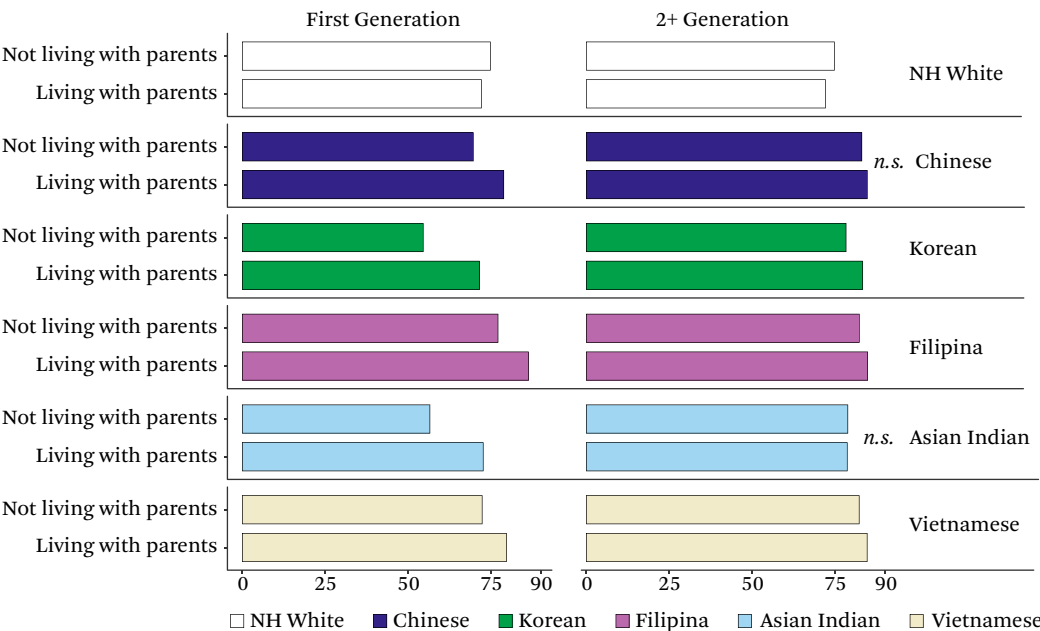
Additionally, figure 1 reveals some subgroup differentials. For instance, among the first generation, Korean women have the lowest level of coresidence with parents or parents-in-law. They even show a downward trend in coresidence while most groups in the first generation have more or less a similar prevalence of extended family across different periods. On the other end of the spectrum, Vietnamese women are more likely to be in extended households in recent decades, with about one in five first-generation women living in such circumstances around 2020. This upward trend is also clear for the 2+ generation of Vietnamese women. These ethnic differences in extended family living arrangements are consistent with

findings documented in prior research (Kang and Cohen 2018; Kulkarni 2019).

Employment Rates by Ethnicity, Immigrant Generation, and Family Structure

Next, figure 2 shows women’s employment rates by ethnicity, immigrant generation, and family structure. Compared to figure 1, we observe relatively modest differences in employment rates between Asian groups and White women. Notably, Asian women in extended families are more likely to be employed compared to those in nuclear families for both the first- and 2+ generations. Specifically, first-generation Asian women living with parents or parents-in-law have much higher employment rates than those not in extended households. This pattern is found across all groups ($p < 0.05$). While the magnitude of the difference is smaller, the employment advantage from extended families persists for Koreans, Vietnamese, and Filipinas among the 2+ generation ($p < 0.05$). For Chinese and Asian Indian

Figure 2. Employment Rates by Ethnicity, Immigrant Generation, and Family Structure



Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

Note: Extended family refers to a household that includes at least one parent or parent-in-law. In this figure, “2000s” refers to the ACS data from 2001 to 2009, “2010s” refers to the ACS data from 2010 to 2019, and “2020s” refers to the ACS data from 2020 to 2022. Statistics are weighted using individual weights. For US-born, non-Hispanic White women, immigrant generation is not differentiated. All group differences by family type are statistically significant at the 95 percent level unless noted as *n.s.*, which stands for non-significant difference at the 95 percent confidence level. NH = non-Hispanic.

women, the group differences are not statistically significant. In contrast, White women’s employment rates are consistently lower when they coreside with parents or parents-in-law although group differences by household type are smaller than those of Asian groups. This, again, reflects that extended families are uncommon among White families (Lofquist et al. 2012) and that their patterns of intergenerational support in extended households (for example, an adult child caring for a sick parent compared to an elderly parent helping with childcare) might be different from those of Asian families.

Additionally, there is notable within-group heterogeneity among first-generation Asian women. Filipinas, for instance, have the highest employment rate of all Asian groups, surpassing Whites. At the same time, first generation Korean and Asian Indian women have the

lowest employment rates, especially those in nuclear families (figure 2, left panel); however, the 2+ generation of these groups has higher employment rates than non-Hispanic White women, showing the most dramatic changes across immigration generations. When it comes to the 2+ generation, Asian American women in general have employment rates similar to or higher than those of White women. The parity or advantage of labor market activities of US-born Asian Americans is consistent with prior research (Kim and Zhao 2014).

Employment Gap Between Asian and White Women by Family Structure

Figures 3–6 show results from the logit models to predict women’s employment status as a function of family structure (extended family or not). For easier interpretation, we present the results in terms of the differences in the

predicted probability of employment for a given Asian group relative to non-Hispanic White women who do not coreside with parents or parents-in-law (the reference group). That is, the dashed horizontal line, which is set at zero, refers to non-Hispanic White women, and each line represents the difference in employment probability of the group from the employment probability of non-Hispanic White women. Thus, any positive values (higher than the dashed horizontal line) indicate a group's higher employment rates, and negative values indicate lower employment rates in comparison to non-Hispanic White women. Additionally, the circled dot represents statistical significance (between a specific Asian group and White women at a particular time point, $p < 0.5$), and the x-mark represents non-significance.⁷ All models control for demographic and socioeconomic characteristics. Predicted values were calculated while holding control variables (such as the level of education, age, and household income) constant at their observed distributions.

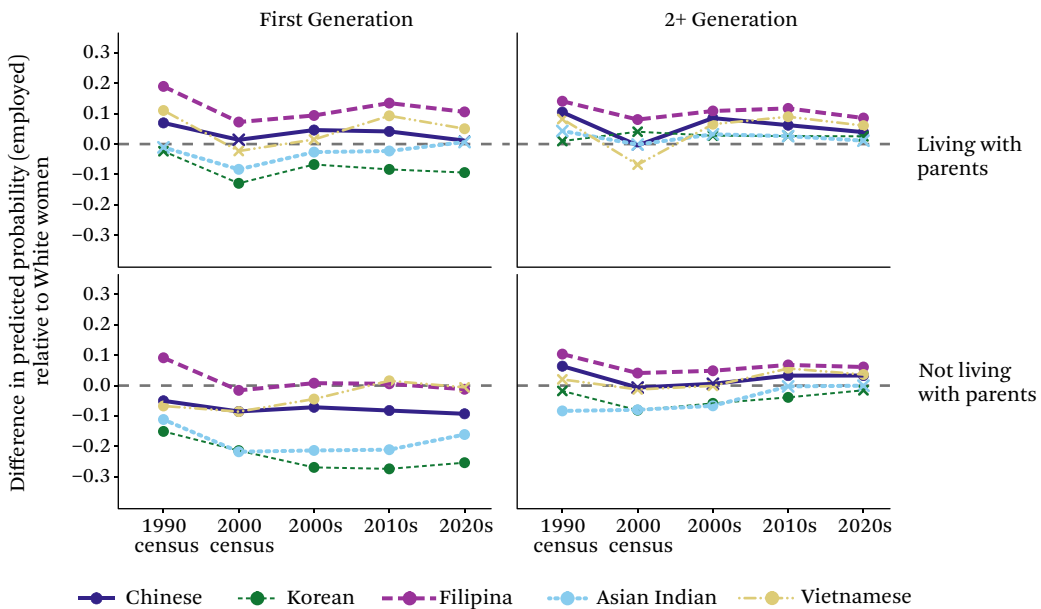
Results from figure 3 illustrate the employment-promoting role of extended family arrangements, showing that Asian women generally have a higher probability of employment (than White women) when coresiding with parents or parents-in-law. This pattern is consistent across generations and different time points, while it is more pronounced for the first generation. It is important to note that this positive association between household extension and Asian women's employment is found net of various socioeconomic (such as education and household income) and demographic (including age, parenthood, and marital status) characteristics (Kang and Cohen 2018), as well as coresiding parents' health conditions (Kang and Cohen 2018).

At the same time, the importance of extended family structure in women's employment differs by ethnicity. Among the first generation, the presence of parents or parents-in-law appears to be decisive for Chinese women and Filipinas, as their employment

rates in extended households are significantly higher than those for Whites, while employment rates in nuclear households are lower (and comparable for Filipinas). Intergenerational coresidence is also important for Korean and Asian Indian women—their employment rates are much lower than White women's when they do not live in extended households, and the employment gap for those in nuclear families has widened in recent decades. Given the low prevalence of extended families among first-generation Korean and Asian Indian women (figure 1), it suggests that the employment rates would be higher for these groups if they had similar levels of extended households to other Asian groups. Additionally, Southeast Asian women (Filipinas and Vietnamese) in extended households have the highest employment rates across all groups, including Whites. In contrast, employment rates of those in nuclear households do not differ from those of White women for Filipinas and are lower for Vietnamese women in earlier periods.

Turning to the 2+ generations (figure 3, right panel), the most noticeable difference from the first generation is the disappearance or reduction of the White–Asian employment gap across family structures. Overall, differences in employment rates between Asian and White women become smaller or statistically nonsignificant in many cases. That is, the important role of extended families in keeping first-generation Asian women in the labor market (for example, Chinese and Filipina) is less pronounced for the US-born or US-educated Asian women. Still, an extended family structure seems to be conducive to Asian women's employment: Asian Indian and Korean women not living with parents or parents-in-law, for example, have significantly lower employment rates than White women, especially in earlier periods. However, those in extended family households have comparable rates. Additionally, Filipinas are more likely than White women to work regardless of family structure, but the employment gap is larger for those in extended families.

7. We would like to add a caveat that statistical significance is affected by sample size, and some groups (such as the 2+ generation) have small *N* when broken down by ethnicity and time, thus resulting in wide confidence intervals.

Figure 3. Differences in the Predicted Probability of Employment Between Asian and White Women

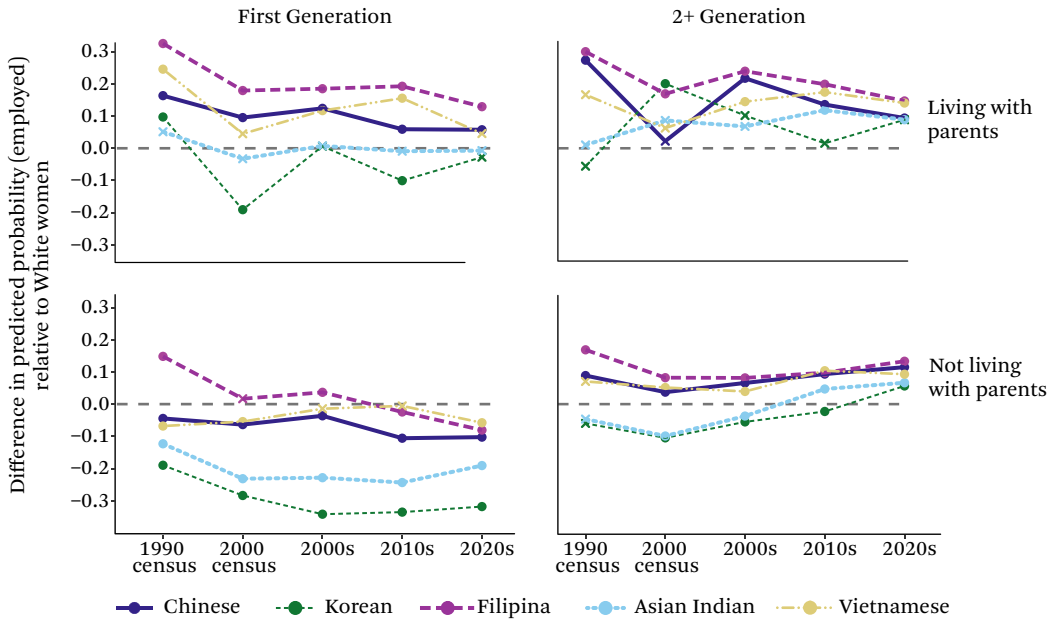
Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

Note: Extended family refers to a household that includes at least one parent or parent-in-law. In this figure, “2000s” refers to the ACS data from 2001 to 2009, “2010s” refers to the ACS data from 2010 to 2019, and “2020s” refers to the ACS data from 2020 to 2022. The figure displays differences in predicted probabilities of employment between US-born, non-Hispanic White women (represented by the dashed horizontal line) and various Asian groups. Circled dots indicate statistically significant differences between a specific Asian group and White women at the 95 percent confidence level, while x-marks represent non-significant differences. Predicted values are calculated while holding all control variables, including age, census region, education, marital status, parenthood status, and household income, constant at their observed distributions.

As discussed earlier, evidence that Asian women’s labor supply is less disrupted by motherhood than White women’s (Greenman 2011; Greenman and Xie 2008) suggests the potential role of help from extended family members in Asian women’s employment (Kang and Cohen 2018). We thus examine the extent to which the employment status of women with young children is conditioned by the presence of parents or parents-in-law. According to figure 4, the employment-promoting role of an extended family member becomes even more pronounced when Asian women have young children under age five. In comparison with figure 3, which uses the analytic sample of all women, we observe much larger White–Asian employment gaps: the positive differences (that is, Asian groups having higher employ-

ment rates than Whites) for those in extended families increase in magnitude, and the negative differences (that is, Asian groups having lower employment rates than Whites) in nuclear families also increase. Specifically, first-generation Asian women in extended family households, except for Koreans and Asian Indian (non-significance difference), are much more likely than White women to be employed when they live with parents or parents-in-law. Conversely, first-generation Asian women with young children have lower employment rates than White women in the absence of coresiding parents or parents-in-law, except for Filipinas between the 1990s and the 2000s. This pattern is more pronounced in recent decades.

Importantly, the positive role of extended families in Asian women’s employment (in

Figure 4. Differences in the Predicted Probability of Employment Among Women with Young Children

Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

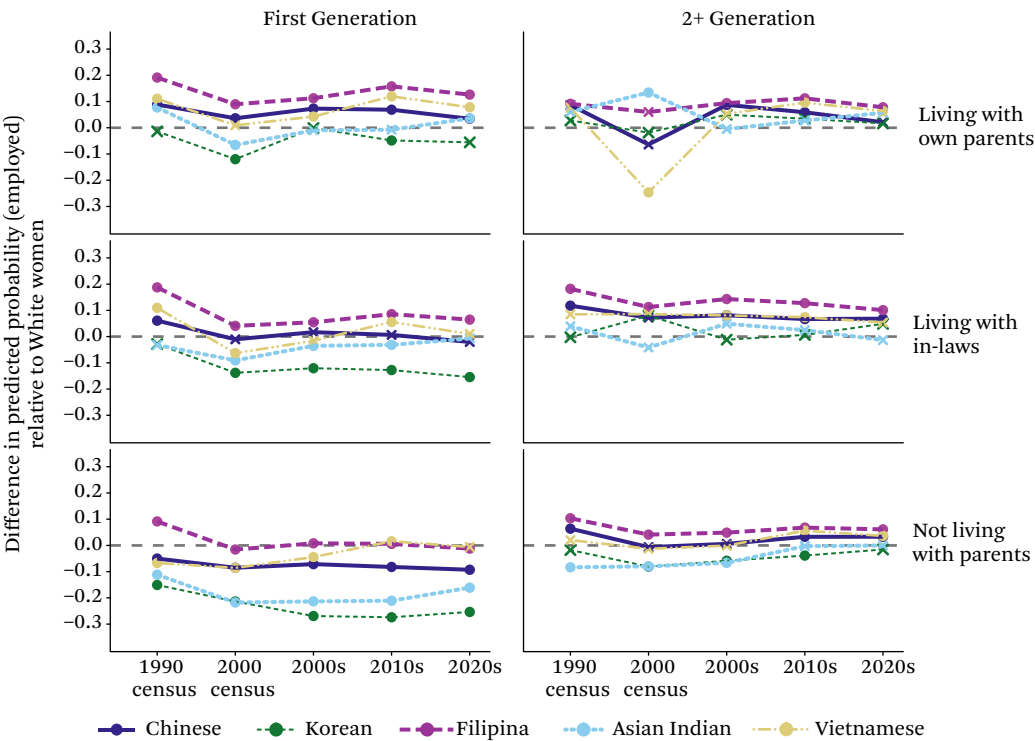
Note: Extended family refers to a household that includes at least one parent or parent-in-law. In this figure, “2000s” refers to the ACS data from 2001 to 2009, “2010s” refers to the ACS data from 2010 to 2019, and “2020s” refers to the ACS data from 2020 to 2022. The presence of young children is defined as having at least one child under the age of five. The figure displays differences in predicted probabilities of employment between US-born, non-Hispanic White women (represented by the dashed horizontal line) and various Asian groups. Circled dots indicate statistically significant difference between a specific Asian group and White women at the 95 percent confidence level, while x-marks represent non-significant differences. Predicted values are calculated while holding all control variables, including age, census region, education, marital status, parenthood status, and household income, constant at their observed distributions.

comparison with White women) persists for the 2+ generation. These results suggest that coresiding parents or parents-in-law in Asian American families are likely involved in household chores and childcare, especially in families with young children (Kang and Cohen 2018), thus facilitating women’s labor force participation (Greenman 2011). The finding that the positive role of extended families carries over to the 2+ generation further indicates that help from parents or parents-in-law is still an important resource or strategy for labor force attachment of the 2+ generation Asian women with young children. Additionally, our supplementary analyses show that Asian women living with parents with health limitations still have higher employment rates than those in

nuclear families, especially the first generation. These results suggest that elderly parents, even with some health limitations, may provide help with childcare and housework, which leads to a greater labor supply of Asian women (Greenman 2011; Kang and Cohen 2018).

Next, figure 5 breaks down parental coresidence into two groups: women living with their own parents and women living with parents-in-law. The degree of familistic-collective value and traditional gender norms, which affect family structure and the patterns of intergenerational support, might not be uniform across subgroups of Asian Americans (Kang and Cohen 2018; Moon 2003). Therefore, whether and how extended households facilitate women’s employment might differ by the type of ex-

Figure 5. Differences in the Predicted Probability of Employment by Type of Extended Family



Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

Note: Extended family refers to a household that includes at least one parent or parent-in-law. In this figure, “2000s” refers to the ACS data from 2001 to 2009, “2010s” refers to the ACS data from 2010 to 2019, and “2020s” refers to the ACS data from 2020 to 2022. The figure displays differences in predicted probabilities of employment between US-born, non-Hispanic White women (represented by the dashed horizontal line) and various Asian groups. Circled dots indicate statistically significant difference between a specific Asian group and White women at the 95 percent confidence level, while x-marks represent non-significant differences. Predicted values are calculated while holding all control variables, including age, census region, education, marital status, parenthood status, and household income, constant at their observed distributions.

tended family—whether coresiding with their own parents or parents-in-law (Yu and Cheng 2024; Yu and Xie 2018).

As noted in figure 3, Asian American women in extended households in general have higher employment rates than Whites, especially among the first generation. Figure 5 further reveals nuanced differences in Asian women’s employment by extended family type. Among first-generation Asian women, for example, the positive difference relative to White women is larger when they live with their own parents. However, the White–Asian gap is smaller or nonsignificant for Asian women in extended

families with their parents-in-law. Further, Korean women who coreside with parents-in-law stand out in that they show significantly lower employment rates than White women. The unique pattern found among first-generation Korean women is consistent with evidence of the negative association with employment when elderly parents with care needs are present in the household (Kang and Cohen 2018). Additionally, Chinese women living with their own parents show higher employment rates than White women, while there are no advantages from living with parents-in-law, a similar finding documented in mainland China

(Yu and Cheng 2024; Yu and Xie 2018). It is also interesting that, for Asian Indian women, who often showed similar employment patterns to Korean women, differences in employment rates by the type of extended family appear to be smaller than those of Korean women, although living with their own parents is more conducive to their labor force attachment.

In contrast, the significance of the type of extended family in employment, particularly the negative role of coresiding parents-in-law found for some groups, is much less pronounced among 2+ generation Asian women (figure 5, right panel). Interestingly, until the 2000s, Filipina and Vietnamese women in extended households with parents-in-law have higher employment rates (relative to Whites) than those living with their own parents. With the caveat that the percentages of 2+ generation women in intergenerational households are small when broken into types of extended family structure, these findings suggest that 2+ generation Asian families may be less influenced by traditional family values, including the relationship between parent-in-law and daughter-in-law. Moreover, because of the positive role that coresiding parents and parents-in-law play in women's employment, household extension can be a strategy for achieving social mobility through increased labor force participation among Asian American families (Ermisch 1988; Kang and Cohen 2018; Kaushal and Reimers 2007; Moon 2003).

Lastly, figure 6 presents the results for women's employment by the level of household income, specifically the top 20 percent (panel A) and the bottom 20 percent (panel B). This analysis helps us examine whether the association between household extension and women's employment varies by household economic conditions (Kulkarni 2019).⁸ Notably, almost all

Asian groups in the top 20 percent of household income, regardless of immigrant generation, show higher or similar employment rates compared to White women in the presence of parents or parents-in-law. These findings may suggest the possibility of selection among Asian women in high-income households (such as those with higher education and professional occupations), reflecting compositional characteristics of recent Asian immigrants, which may increase their household income (Lee and Min 2015). At the same time, they may imply the importance of extended family support in women's employment in high-income Asian households (Kulkarni 2019), consistent with evidence of a greater labor supply of Asian women (compared to White women) in the STEM fields, which thus contributes to the White-Asian earnings growth gap (Greenman 2011).

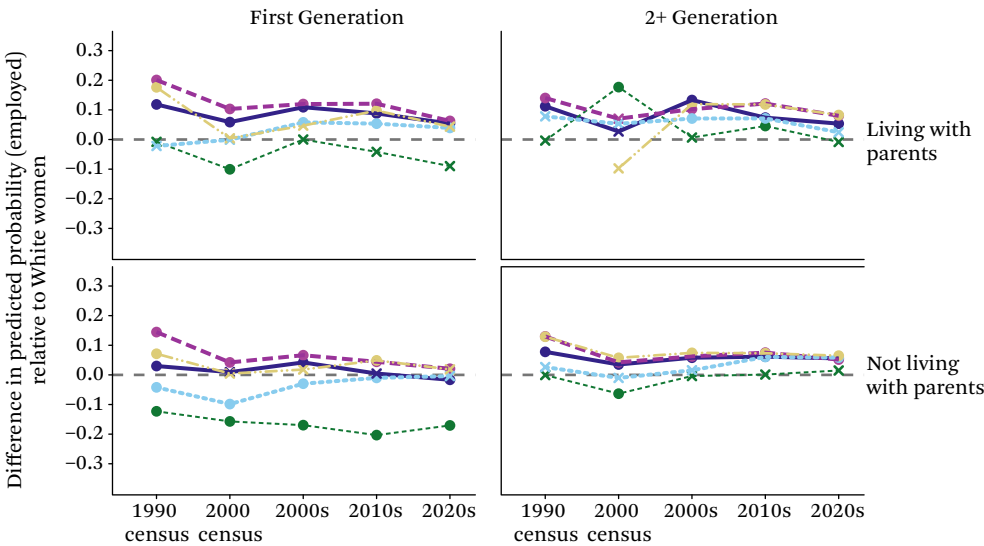
Interestingly, first-generation Korean women in the top 20 percent income bracket in nuclear families have the lowest employment rates, with a widening gap from other groups over time. First-generation Asian Indian women show similar patterns, but they are more likely to work in recent decades, reaching parity with White women.

Additionally, among low-income households, first-generation Asian women in extended households are more likely than White women to be working. Korean and Asian Indian women, who often show diverging patterns from other Asian groups in labor force attachment, have comparable rates to White women only when in extended families. These findings provide supporting evidence for the structural constraints argument that Asian American families may form extended households due to economic needs or as a mobility strategy (Kulkarni 2019). Supplementary analysis (not shown) reveals that Asian women often assume

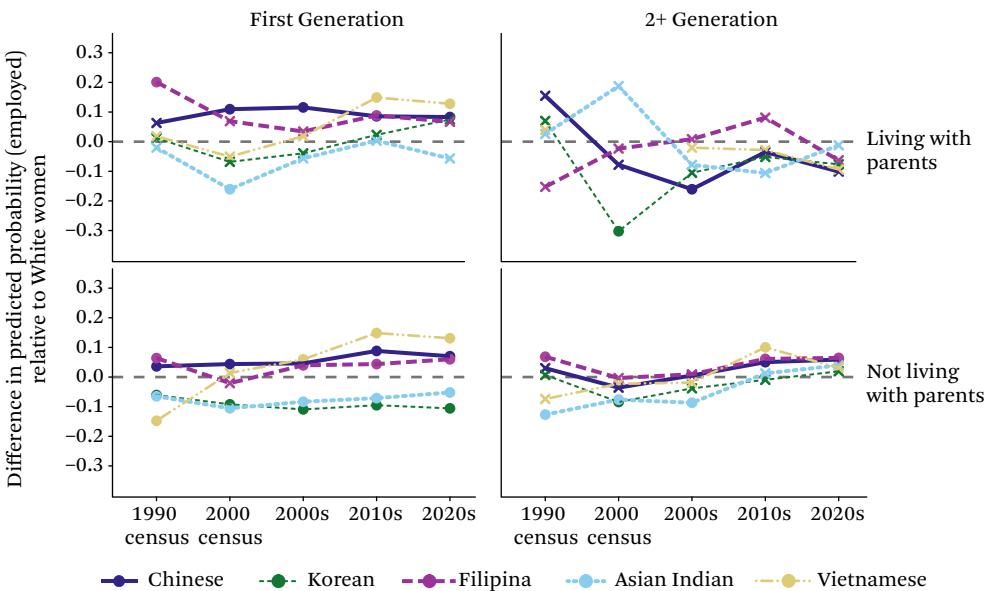
8. Total household income including women's income is used to identify the top 20 percent and the bottom 20 percent in order to reflect an accurate representation of household economic status. If women are the sole or primary earners, using household income excluding women's income for stratifying the distribution of household incomes severely misrepresents these households' economic positions. Additionally, given the evidence on the potential role of the extended family, which, presumably through women's continuous employment (Greenman 2011), increases household earnings among Asian Americans (Kulkarni 2019), it is more appropriate to incorporate women's income into the household income. For consistency and clearer interpretation, household income including women's income is also controlled for in analyses for figure 6.

Figure 6. Differences in the Predicted Probability of Employment by Household Income Level

Panel A. Top 20 Percent



Panel B. Bottom 20 Percent



Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

Note: Extended family refers to a household that includes at least one parent or parent-in-law. In this figure, “2000s” refers to the ACS data from 2001 to 2009, “2010s” refers to the ACS data from 2010 to 2019, and “2020s” refers to the ACS data from 2020 to 2022. The figure displays differences in predicted probabilities of employment between US-born, non-Hispanic White women (represented by the dashed horizontal line) and various Asian groups. Circled dots indicate statistically significant difference between a specific Asian group and White women at the 95 percent confidence level, while x-marks represent non-significant differences. Predicted values are calculated while holding all control variables, including age, census region, education, marital status, parenthood status, and household income, constant at their observed distributions.

the role of a primary earner in low-income households, indicating the importance of extended family structure in providing financial support to family members through household extension, which may in turn encourage or require women's employment (Becker 1965; Tienda and Glass 1985).

CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

In this study, we examine the role of vertically extended families in Asian American women's employment with a focus on within-Asian and Asian-White variations by immigrant generations across multiple time periods from 1990 to 2022. Our findings indicate that all Asian groups considered in this study—Chinese, Korean, Filipino, Asian Indian, and Vietnamese—have a greater prevalence of extended families than US-born White women. This pattern still holds for the 2+ generation, although the gap in extended households narrows compared to first-generation Asian American women (figure 1). Further, Asian women living with parents or parents-in-law show higher employment rates than their counterparts in nuclear families ($p < 0.05$) across all groups among the first generation (figure 2). Differences in employment rates across household types are largest for Korean and Asian Indian women. While the gap in employment rates by family structure declines among the 2+ generation, the extended family structure appears to promote Asian women's labor force attachment. It is, however, interesting that White women's employment rates are lower when they live with parents or parents-in-law, probably reflecting differentials in motivations for household extension or the patterns of intergenerational help between White and Asian families (Lofquist et al. 2012).

Our results from a series of logistic regression models demonstrate that these patterns hold true after controlling for various demographic (such as parenthood and marital status) and socioeconomic (including household income) characteristics. The importance of the extended family in Asian women's employment is particularly salient for the first generation: East Asian (Chinese and Korean) and South Asian (Asian Indian) women in nuclear families, for instance, have much lower employ-

ment rates than their White counterparts (figure 3). More importantly, results from the analyses that further consider demographic and economic conditions of the family consistently show the employment-promoting role of extended families for Asian women. For example, the presence of parents or parents-in-law helps Asian women with young child(ren) stay in the labor market at higher rates relative to White women (figure 4). First-generation Asian Indian and Korean women, who have the lowest levels of extended families and employment (figures 1 and 2), have employment rates close to those of Whites if they live in extended family households, even with the presence of young children. This finding suggests that their employment rates would be higher if they were similar to other Asian groups in terms of household extension. Additionally, first-generation Chinese women's employment depends on whether parents or parents-in-law are in the household when they raise young children. We also find that extended families widen the White-Asian employment gap among the 2+ generation raising young children in a way that it boosts employment rates for most groups (Chinese, Filipina, Vietnamese) or stops some groups from withdrawing from the labor market (Korean and Asian Indian) (figure 4, right panel). As noted, even living with parents with health limitations appears to be conducive to Asian women's employment. Additionally, this positive association between extended family structure and Asian women's employment is found for both high- and low-income households. Taken together, these results indicate the important role that extended living arrangements play in supporting Asian women's continuous employment, which contributes to their labor supply advantage over White women (Greenman 2011).

However, the role of extended families is not uniformly positive in Asian women's labor market activities, as within-group heterogeneity may exist with regard to family values and gender roles (Drouhot and Garip 2021; Kang and Cohen 2018). For example, certain cultural characteristics, such as collectivism in East Asian societies, may affect the level and process of integration, which in turn affects their family structure and labor market behaviors. As noted,

first-generation Korean women are employed at comparable rates to White women when co-residing with their own parents; however, those living with parents-in-law show much lower employment rates (figure 5). At the same time, first-generation Korean women in high-income households have lower employment rates than other Asian groups, and their gap from other Asian groups is persistent in recent decades (figure 6). Prior research suggests that Korean immigrants' economic segregation in ethnic enclaves and their affiliation with ethnic churches may perpetuate the patriarchal ideologies that stress husbands as primary family breadwinners and mothers as caregivers (Min 2001). Indeed, evidence from Korean women in New York, where there is a high concentration of Korean Americans, shows that full-time employment is influenced by the availability of transgenerational help from elderly female adults (Moon 2003). These diverging patterns found among the first generation largely disappear in the 2+ generation of Korean women, indicating the diminishing influence of traditional culture in family relations and division of labor for later immigration generations. As noted, ethnic variabilities in the patterns of household extension and employment rates, as well as the role of extended families in employment, become smaller in the 2+ generation of Asian women.

In conclusion, we would like to discuss the limitations of the present study and offer some suggestions for future research. First, given the structure of the data, we can only estimate the correlation of household extension with women's employment measured at the same time. It would be ideal to have longitudinal data to examine the causal relationship between co-residence with parents or parents-in-law and women's labor market activities by conducting analyses that account for unobserved individual- or family-level characteristics.

Second, we did not consider the potential role of a horizontally extended family structure in women's employment. While horizontally extended families are less prevalent among Asians compared to other racial minorities (for example, Blacks and Hispanics) (Kamo 2000), there may exist ethnic variability in preference

for and the patterns of support in horizontally extended households.

Third, due to data limitations, we cannot fully detect temporary parental help (such as visits from parents or parents-in-law from the country of origin), particularly for the first generation. Therefore, our estimates about the role of extended families in Asian women's employment may be conservative if they receive help from nonresident parents more than White women (Greenman 2011).

Lastly, while the Census and ACS are among the best data sources that allow analyses for variations by ethnicity, immigrant generation, and time periods, we have to exclude some groups due to small cell size when broken into multiple categories (by household extension and generation). The lack of data that capture the heterogeneity of Asian American subpopulations is identified as the primary reason for a limited understanding of Asians in the US, thus calling for future data collection efforts targeting Asian Americans (Le et al. 2020). Better data will help further understand what factors lead to variations by ethnicity, generation, and time in the associations between household extension and Asian American women's employment documented in this study.

Despite these limitations, our study is the first to examine the role of an extended family in Asian American women's employment with a focus on differences across subgroups and immigrant generations spanning from 1990 to the early 2020s. We also document how extended family living arrangements are associated with Asian women's employment in various family circumstances, including the presence of young children, the type of household extension (own parents versus parents-in-law), and household economic conditions. Combined with prior research (Greenman 2011; Kang and Cohen 2018; Moon 2003), the findings of this study document the employment-promoting role of extended family structure for Asian women, both for the first- and 2+ generations. While the motivations for forming extended households may reflect cultural factors as well as economic considerations (Glick et al. 1997; Kamo 2000), household extension would be a strategy or mechanism for Asian families

to achieve mobility across generations (Greenman 2011; Kulkarni 2019). Building on the findings of this study, future research needs to examine detailed mechanisms linking extended

family structures to the socioeconomic mobility of Asian families, such as educational attainment, household income, and asset accumulation.

APPENDIX

Table A.1. Sample Characteristics of First-Generation Women (Percentage and Mean)

	Employed	Age	With Bachelor's Degree	Married	With Young Children	HHINC Top 20 Percent	HHINC Bottom 20 Percent	N
1990 census								
NH White	71.54	36.62	24.40	79.09	24.54	19.93	19.48	1,320,981
Chinese	66.33	37.44	37.19	90.62	29.38	26.09	25.12	7,791
Korean	53.46	37.15	26.88	90.59	29.11	16.19	28.92	5,381
Filipina	83.38	38.04	54.57	86.26	28.43	27.85	12.51	9,096
Asian Indian	59.79	36.75	55.29	95.42	32.43	34.57	14.81	5,153
Vietnamese	59.80	36.91	10.71	84.60	34.13	17.39	31.12	3,236
2000 census								
NH White	73.72	38.19	31.20	76.82	22.50	20.51	19.17	1,301,566
Chinese	65.62	38.73	48.70	89.06	26.51	28.90	22.86	12,627
Korean	49.77	39.10	36.60	87.80	21.47	16.90	28.82	6,129
Filipina	73.41	39.39	53.92	85.20	24.50	25.43	13.20	11,432
Asian Indian	53.11	36.08	64.72	94.07	33.29	32.88	16.10	10,571
Vietnamese	59.23	38.54	13.06	85.83	30.24	17.70	29.29	5,579
2000s								
NH White	72.91	38.49	34.71	74.23	22.62	18.40	22.06	1,643,185
Chinese	66.72	39.32	56.87	87.15	24.54	29.38	23.28	21,836
Korean	46.56	39.45	51.08	87.36	23.32	15.18	29.83	8,460
Filipina	76.22	39.70	58.62	84.62	23.55	22.87	14.82	17,756
Asian Indian	52.20	35.89	71.57	93.82	35.55	30.79	16.06	21,823
Vietnamese	64.31	38.51	19.98	83.57	30.83	14.59	32.29	8,082
2010s								
NH White	76.32	38.19	45.26	72.33	23.99	17.97	21.66	1,983,271
Chinese	69.76	39.26	62.95	86.06	24.67	29.99	22.85	35,858
Korean	50.26	40.22	66.83	86.37	22.65	19.18	23.53	11,035
Filipina	78.95	40.11	60.55	85.27	22.26	21.20	14.65	25,142
Asian Indian	56.03	36.38	82.92	94.44	33.97	37.80	10.25	46,081
Vietnamese	74.56	40.30	24.41	84.30	23.54	14.15	31.56	12,508
2020s								
NH White	78.59	37.72	53.46	71.94	24.66	17.11	21.82	511,547
Chinese	71.20	38.60	69.22	82.67	23.51	31.85	21.92	10,737
Korean	55.03	40.51	77.19	86.22	20.11	24.53	19.96	3,019
Filipina	78.34	40.23	62.16	85.31	19.83	18.67	17.55	6,878
Asian Indian	63.49	37.86	86.85	93.60	28.69	42.52	8.64	16,234
Vietnamese	73.02	40.20	34.10	83.23	21.52	15.17	30.44	3,217

Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

Note: Statistics are weighted using individual weights. US-born, non-Hispanic White women who do not live with their parents or parents-in-law are included as a reference group, and immigrant generation is not differentiated for this population. HHINC denotes household income. NH = non-Hispanic.

Table A.2. Sample Characteristics of 2+ Generation Women (Percentage and Mean)

	Employed	Age	With Bachelor's Degree	Married	With Young Children	HHINC Top 20 Percent	HHINC Bottom 20 Percent	N
1990 census								
NH White	71.54	36.62	24.40	79.09	24.54	19.93	19.48	1,320,981
Chinese	81.32	35.09	60.17	74.39	28.65	40.61	8.67	2,548
Korean	70.97	31.46	43.84	79.42	34.87	24.90	17.40	466
Filipina	81.03	34.11	26.09	79.14	34.21	24.63	14.47	1,988
Asian Indian	64.23	31.94	46.44	82.43	38.14	30.89	22.63	305
Vietnamese	72.72	29.20	26.02	79.87	44.42	18.23	24.70	190
2000 census								
NH White	73.72	38.19	31.20	76.82	22.50	20.51	19.17	1,301,566
Chinese	77.00	36.22	70.61	73.72	27.07	43.18	10.36	3,423
Korean	70.66	32.43	63.85	69.55	31.78	27.61	15.86	1,410
Filipina	76.67	34.83	42.47	77.21	35.26	27.14	12.59	3,099
Asian Indian	71.68	32.10	68.51	75.78	33.76	34.60	13.73	1,242
Vietnamese	73.63	31.29	52.40	77.02	41.35	32.67	14.55	981
2000s								
NH White	72.91	38.49	34.71	74.23	22.62	18.40	22.06	1,643,185
Chinese	78.31	36.46	76.25	71.05	27.51	41.73	11.15	6,931
Korean	72.63	34.11	69.54	70.51	31.52	33.77	13.78	3,526
Filipina	78.86	35.64	48.03	74.20	30.78	28.91	12.85	6,097
Asian Indian	71.03	33.41	76.78	76.14	34.49	36.92	14.24	3,197
Vietnamese	76.14	33.92	55.28	72.87	36.01	31.29	15.27	2,934
2010s								
NH White	76.32	38.19	45.26	72.33	23.99	17.97	21.66	1,983,271
Chinese	83.56	36.82	82.93	68.33	25.60	43.78	9.74	14,407
Korean	77.51	36.85	76.58	69.05	27.21	36.14	12.79	8,080
Filipina	82.64	37.43	57.93	74.74	27.93	30.08	11.75	11,386
Asian Indian	79.35	35.78	83.13	77.27	31.93	47.36	10.28	8,687
Vietnamese	82.76	36.69	65.25	71.78	28.70	35.30	14.96	6,489
2020s								
NH White	78.59	37.72	53.46	71.94	24.66	17.11	21.82	511,547
Chinese	84.90	36.82	84.58	67.83	24.78	42.71	10.23	5,503
Korean	81.98	38.04	81.30	68.73	21.49	36.46	12.89	2,978
Filipina	84.99	37.95	61.79	70.71	24.20	28.45	14.13	4,029
Asian Indian	80.16	36.66	84.76	77.97	26.98	43.44	9.57	3,663
Vietnamese	81.81	37.14	67.57	68.67	25.85	31.02	15.83	2,502

Source: 1990 Census; 2000 Census; ACS 2001–2022.

Note: Statistics are weighted using individual weights. US-born, non-Hispanic White women who do not live with their parents or parents-in-law are included as a reference group, and immigrant generation is not differentiated for this population. HHINC denotes household income. NH = non-Hispanic.

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Nonmarital Childbearing and Family Structure Among Asian Americans: The Role of Socioeconomic Status, Ethnicity, and Immigration



FUMIYA UCHIKOSHI^{ORCID} AND AIRAN LIU^{ORCID}

This study examines how maternal education shapes nonmarital childbearing and family structure among Asian Americans compared with non-Hispanic Whites. We also assess within-group variation by Asian ethnicity, generational status, and interracial marriage. Drawing on 2015–2019 natality data from the National Vital Statistics System and the 2013–2024 Current Population Survey Annual Socioeconomic Supplement, we find that Asian mothers, particularly South Asians, are significantly less likely than Whites to give birth outside of marriage and more likely to raise children in married, two-parent households. Also, educational gradients in these outcomes are weaker among Asians, especially among foreign-born and racially endogamous individuals, suggesting that immigrant selectivity and cultural norms moderate how socioeconomic status shapes family formation. In contrast, stronger educational differences emerge among native-born and interracial/partnered Asians. These findings highlight the importance of subgroup diversity for understanding family inequality in an increasingly diverse US population.

Keywords: nonmarital childbearing, family structure, race-ethnicity, education, immigration, Asian Americans

In the United States, family formation and dissolution are increasingly patterned by socioeconomic status (SES) (Raley and Sweeney 2020; Smock and Schwartz 2020). Decades of

demographic studies have shown that socioeconomic disparities in a range of family behaviors have increased, including nonmarital childbearing (Hayford et al. 2014; Wu 2017), en-

Fumiya Uchikoshi is an Academy Scholar at the Harvard Academy for International and Area Studies, Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard University, Massachusetts, United States. **Airan Liu** is an associate professor at the Center for Social Research, Guanghua School of Management at Peking University, Beijing, China.

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try into marriage (Carbone and Cahn 2015; Isen and Stevenson 2011), or marital dissolution (Killewald 2016; Martin 2006; Perelli-Harris and Lyons-Amos 2016). Among various indicators of SES, educational attainment has emerged as a particularly salient factor shaping these family behaviors, and by extension, family stability, serving as a marker of economic resources (McLanahan 2004). Since these family events play an important role in shaping children’s well-being and behavioral outcomes, studies suggest that socioeconomic divergence in family behaviors may contribute to the reproduction of inequality over generations (Lundberg et al. 2016; McLanahan 2004).

In this context, Asian Americans’ family experience has been missing from the mainstream literature compared with that of other racial-ethnic groups. A majority of studies that document changing socioeconomic patterns in family outcomes have primarily focused on Black–White differences or the Hispanic population (for simplicity, we will use “Whites” to refer to “non-Hispanic Whites,” “Blacks” to refer to “non-Hispanic Blacks,” and “Asians” to refer to “non-Hispanic Asians” throughout the rest of the text). Speculatively, the lack of interest in family outcomes among Asian Americans partially stems from relatively stable and traditional family patterns among Asians. Indeed, while studies have consistently found considerably lower divorce or nonmarital childbearing rates among Asians than Whites or other racial groups (Curtin et al. 2014; Kreider and Ellis 2011; Mayol-García et al. 2021; Oropesa and Landale 2004; Raley et al. 2015; Xie and Goyette 2004; Zhang and Van Hook 2009), the focus on socioeconomic differences across race and ethnicity did not carefully examine the case of Asians in the United States. Such family stability among Asians does not necessarily fit with the dominant theoretical debates about family changes in US sociology, where scholars have extensively examined trends, causes, and consequences of increasingly unstable American families (Brown et al. 2016; Carlson and Meyer 2014), thus not including Asian Americans into a portrait of the increasingly diversified family in America. Consequently, how Asian Americans’ family behaviors beyond divorce, such as nonmarital childbearing and two-parent fami-

lies, are related to their socioeconomic backgrounds, and how such relationships or patterns differ from other racial-ethnic groups remain largely unclear despite the fact that Asian Americans are the fastest-growing population in the United States (Budiman and Ruiz 2021).

Indeed, it is likely that the well-documented socioeconomic divergence in family behaviors among other racial-ethnic groups is less significant among Asians. In other words, the strong relationships between educational attainment and family formation or dissolution—which have been observed in previous studies on other racial-ethnic groups—are weaker among Asians. This expectation originates from the so-called Asian American Achievement Paradox, which refers to second-generation Asian Americans’ high educational achievement and the weaker association between family background and children’s educational attainment among Asians than among other racial and ethnic groups (Kim 2025; Lee and Zhou 2015). There are two competing hypotheses to explain the paradox. First, the immigrant selectivity hypothesis posits that East and South Asian immigrants may benefit from selective immigration with positive characteristics (Barringer et al. 1990; Fishman 2025), while a sizable fraction of Southeast Asians came to the United States as refugees. Even if Asian immigrants are not educated by US standards, they may have higher human capital in their origin context (Feliciano and Lanuza 2017). Second, a competing perspective emphasizes the role of widely shared norms and expectations about children’s educational success among Asians, which is typically supported empirically by the weaker educational disparities in children’s educational attainment net of potential confounders (Hsin and Xie 2014; Liu and Xie 2016).

While empirical evidence for these competing hypotheses is still mixed (Kim 2025), applying these two perspectives to the case of family formation and dissolution of Asians expects us to see the weak socioeconomic differences in these outcomes among Asians. To support this speculation, studies argue that divorce and unmarried parenthood are still considered stigmatized in Asia (Guru 2009; Hertog 2009; Zhang 2020). Family demography of Asian Americans

is further complicated by the fact that this population group is ethnically diverse; Asian immigrants from different origin countries are equipped with different cultural values and social norms, and they migrate to the US for different reasons and under various social backdrops (Gambol 2023; Kihara 2024; Kim 2025). All these render Asian Americans of different ethnicities distinct subgroups that deserve separate consideration. To support this speculation, for example, anecdotal evidence discusses social stigma attached to divorce among South Asian immigrant communities (Bain 2015). South Asians' distinctive cultural norms also indicate that when examining the socioeconomic pattern in Asian Americans' family behaviors, it is important to account for the ethnic differences within Asian Americans. Indeed, South Asians' divorce or nonmarital childbearing rates are significantly lower than other Asian groups (Driscoll 2018; Uchikoshi et al. 2023). Despite that the Asian population has long been framed within a "model minority" (Wong et al. 1998), this perception was formed during the 1960s primarily to describe socioeconomic success among Japanese and Chinese Americans (Lee and Zhou 2015; Ramírez 2020).

This study aims to bridge the gap in the literature by examining the socioeconomic patterns in family inequality outcomes among Asian Americans and how these patterns differ from those observed among non-Hispanic Whites. We focus specifically on the relationship between educational attainment as an important indicator of SES and family outcomes associated with disadvantages. These outcomes are measured using two key indicators commonly used in demographic and sociological research: whether a child is born to an unmarried mother (nonmarital childbearing) and whether a child lives with married parents at the time of observation (family structure). Together, these measures capture both the circumstances of a child's birth and their current

household structure, allowing for consistent comparison across racial and socioeconomic groups.¹ We focus on these outcomes as indicators of family instability, which refers to structural forms of family or transitions that disrupt the continuity of children's living environments, including parental separation, divorce, single parenthood, or repeated repartnering. While not unstable by definition, nonmarital childbearing, which refers to childbirth outside of marriage, is also widely recognized as a marker and potential precursor of such instability, as nonmarital unions are more likely to dissolve than marital ones (Musick and Michelmores 2015; Rackin and Gibson-Davis 2012). As such, we treat nonmarital births as part of the broader constellation of family arrangements that increase the likelihood of instability over the life course. Importantly, studies have found that both nonmarital childbearing are associated with poorer maternal health (Williams et al. 2011) and adverse outcomes for children, including behavioral problems and reduced well-being (Forehand et al. 1998; McLanahan et al. 2013). Robust evidence also shows that family structure shapes children's cognitive development (Carlson and Corcoran 2001; McLanahan et al. 2013). Together, these outcomes have implications for social inequality and intergenerational mobility (McLanahan 2004).

Drawing on 2015–2019 natality data from the National Vital Statistics System and the 2013–2024 Current Population Survey Annual Socioeconomic Supplement, we guide our analyses by the following questions: Are educational gradients in nonmarital childbearing and family structure weaker for Asians than non-Hispanic Whites, and is there any heterogeneity among Asians by ethnicity, generational status, or interracial union? In this study, we use the term "educational gradient" as shorthand for the relationship between education and family outcomes, and a greater gradient means a stronger relationship between educational attainment and family outcomes.

1. While alternative measures—such as parental cohabitation, union duration, or transitions in family structure—can provide further nuance, the focus on marital status reflects its enduring significance in shaping children's socioeconomic outcomes and access to resources (McLanahan and Percheski 2008; Musick and Michelmores 2015). In this context, higher rates of children living with married parents and lower rates of nonmarital births are interpreted as proxies for greater family stability.

Our analysis reveals that Asian Americans exhibit significantly higher family stability than Whites, as evidenced by lower rates of nonmarital childbearing and a higher likelihood of children living with two married parents. These patterns are especially pronounced among South Asians and are largely explained by the high prevalence of foreign-born individuals within Asian populations, for whom educational attainment plays a smaller role in shaping family outcomes. Educational gradients in nonmarital childbearing and family structure—sharp among Whites—are much flatter among Asians, particularly among the foreign-born and those in racially endogamous unions. However, these racial and ethnic differences diminish among native-born parents, suggesting that generational status and acculturation, including interracial union, play key roles in moderating the relationship between education and family formation behaviors. Together, these findings point to the importance of immigrant selectivity and cultural practices in shaping patterns of family stability among Asian Americans. These results contribute not only to the literature on racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic differences in family formation but also to the sociological literature on the bifurcation of family formation in the United States. This study also illustrates the utility of the diversity approach in comprehensively understanding the demographic portrait of increasingly diversified American families.

SOCIOECONOMIC BACKGROUND, RACE-ETHNICITY, AND FAMILY INEQUALITY IN THE US

Family behaviors, especially those linked to family stability and instability, are shaped by SES, which is a key predictor. Previous studies show that a range of indicators associated with family instability, including early marriage, divorce, nonmarital childbirth, or single-parent family, are significantly stratified by parental socioeconomic status (McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Jacobsen 2015). Such socioeconomic bifurcation in family behaviors and instability has also been increasing in the past five decades (Furstenberg 2014; McLanahan 2004; McLanahan and Jacobsen 2015). For example, Steven P. Martin (2006) estimated that 38 per-

cent of women with no high school education who married between 1975 and 1979 experienced marital dissolution within ten years, while 28 percent of college-educated women in the same marriage cohort did so. The gap increased for women who married between 1990 and 1994, with the probability of divorce within ten years since marriage reaching 46 percent for women with no high school education versus 16 percent for women with a college education. As unstable and non-intact families are traditionally viewed as less capable of providing children with sufficient resources, scholars have speculated that the growing socioeconomic bifurcation in family behaviors will result in growing developmental gaps among children from different socioeconomic backgrounds in the US and reproduce social inequality over generations (Kearney 2023; McLanahan 2004).

Besides socioeconomic backgrounds, race-ethnicity has been another focal point discussed in the existing literature. Similar to socioeconomic resources, family behaviors associated with instability are increasingly patterned by race-ethnicity (Raley et al. 2015; Sweeney and Phillips 2004; Rosenfeld and Roesler 2024). A recent study by Michael J. Rosenfeld and Katharina Roesler (2024), for example, estimates that the cumulative marriage survival rate for Black wives dropped from 63 percent for marriages formed in the 1990s to 49 percent for those formed in the 2000s. By contrast, marital rates among White wives remained stable; the ten-year marriage survival rate was 69 percent for marriages in the 1990s and 71 percent for those in the 2000s. However, compared to the socioeconomic disparities, our understanding of racial-ethnic variation in family behaviors and outcomes remains limited. Compositional differences in characteristics associated with the risk of these behaviors, such as age at marriage or educational background, do not fully account for the observed racial disparity (Guzzo et al. 2015; Su and Addo 2018; Sweeney and Phillips 2004). As Karen Benjamin Guzzo and Sarah R. Hayford (2020: 124) note in their recent review of racial-ethnic differences in family outcomes, we need more research “to understand differences in fertility behaviors and outcomes

across—and within—race-ethnic groups and immigrant generations.”

Recent studies have begun to realize that socioeconomic backgrounds and race-ethnicity can interact to shape family outcomes in the United States (Cross 2020; Cross et al. 2022; Guzzo and Hayford 2020; Rosenfeld and Roesler 2024). For example, Rosenfeld and Roesler (2024) examined socioeconomic correlates of marital dissolution in the United States, where they found that the relationship between education and the risk of marital dissolution is weaker among the non-White population. Potential mechanisms for such and other racial differences in family behaviors, or the so-called racial moderation hypothesis, include differential returns to marriage by race and ethnicity (Manning and Brown 2006; Shapiro et al. 2013), a social acceptance of diverse family forms among racial-ethnic minorities (Heard 2007; Manning and Brown 2006), or differential exposure to discrimination and disadvantages across racial and ethnic groups (Cross et al. 2022). Nonetheless, previous studies that consider the interplay of race-ethnicity and socioeconomic status in shaping family behaviors and instability have mostly focused on evaluating the impacts of disruptive events and life stresses associated with socioeconomic resources and comparing the Black and Hispanic populations with the White population.

SOCIOECONOMIC DISPARITIES IN FAMILY BEHAVIORS AMONG ASIAN AMERICANS

Although many studies examine racial and ethnic disparities in family behaviors, Asian Americans remain comparatively understudied. When they are included, most analyses take a reductionist approach, focusing on average group differences between Asians and Whites in marriage, fertility, and dissolution (Curtin et al. 2014; Kreider and Ellis 2011; Mayol-García et al. 2021; Oropesa and Landale 2004; Osterman et al. 2024; Raley et al. 2015; Xie and Goyette 2004; Zhang and Van Hook 2009). These studies have consistently found that Asian Americans exhibit relatively stable family behaviors, including delayed fertility, lower divorce rates, and a higher likelihood of marriage.

Empirical efforts to examine socioeconomic variation in these outcomes within the Asian American population have been more limited. One notable exception is the work by economist Melissa S. Kearney (2023, 31–33), who found that Asian children are the most likely among major racial-ethnic groups to live with married parents, and that the difference by maternal education, while present, is much smaller among Asians than among Whites, Hispanics, or Blacks. The gap is especially pronounced among children of less-educated mothers: even when mothers have only a high school diploma or less, Asian children are significantly more likely to live in two-parent households.

Kearney interprets this pattern as reflecting the influence of “a strong cultural norm” (Kearney 2023, 36) surrounding family structure, supported by cross-national data showing lower rates of single parenthood in many Asian countries. Indeed, the emphasis on cultural values is a common explanation for Asian Americans’ distinctive family patterns. This is paralleled by findings in the study of social mobility; many scholars argue that widely shared expectations around children’s educational attainment among Asians, regardless of social class, can reduce the influence of parental socioeconomic status on educational outcomes (Goyette and Xie 1999; Liu and Xie 2016; Tran 2015; Lee et al. 2024). These cultural expectations may, in turn, promote marital stability, especially given the higher exit costs of marriage compared to nonmarital unions (Lundberg et al. 2016). Thus, if there exists a normative emphasis on educational success and intergenerational mobility across socioeconomic strata among Asians, we would expect weaker educational differences in family behaviors associated with child well-being, such as nonmarital childbearing, early fertility, and union dissolution.

An alternative but complementary explanation for patterns of stability among Asian American families emphasizes the role of structural factors, particularly immigrant selectivity, shaped by changes in US immigration law after 1965 (Yang 1999). Positive immigrant selectivity refers to the phenomenon in which immigrants arrive in the United States with higher

educational attainment than those who remain in their country of origin (Feliciano 2005). Expanding this, Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2015) introduced the concept of hyper-selectivity, where an immigrant group is doubly selected—not only better educated than nonmigrants in their home country but also more educated than the average US population. Asian immigrants, particularly those who migrated after 1965, are disproportionately represented in this hyper-selected category, often entering through highly selective employment-based visa pathways (Feliciano 2005; Jasso et al. 2000).

While the concept of hyper-selectivity was originally developed to explain the distinctive educational outcomes of Asian Americans, it may also help explain why Asian American families tend to exhibit stability regardless of parents’ educational attainment. Hyper-selectivity creates community-level advantages, such as dense ethnic networks, high levels of coethnic human capital, and norms that promote interdependence and long-term investment in the future (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou 2008). These structural advantages enable the development and reinforcement of group-based resources and behavioral norms, such as the cultural construction of a “success frame,” which prizes delayed gratification, stable family structures, and disciplined child-rearing.

Crucially, because these resources and norms are community-based rather than individually derived, they may extend to less-educated coethnics within hyper-selected groups. As such, even working-class Asian immigrant families may benefit from ethnic capital—in the form of social expectations, parenting norms, and institutional support such as tutoring centers, community associations—that help buffer against the family instability typically associated with socioeconomic disadvantage. Therefore, hyper-selectivity offers a theoretical basis to expect family stability across class lines within Asian American populations, as community-driven structures and expectations mitigate the impacts of individuals’ limited socioeconomic resources.

Taken together, these perspectives suggest that Asian families are, regardless of ethnicity, more stable than their White counterparts and that class-based disparities in nonmarital

childbearing and family structure may be smaller among Asians.

Hypothesis 1: On average, Asian children are (a) less likely to be born to unmarried mothers and more likely to live with married parents than White children, and (b) the educational gradient in these family outcomes is smaller for Asian children than for their White counterparts, regardless of Asian ethnic subgroup.

DIVERSITY AMONG ASIAN AMERICANS: ETHNICITY, GENERATIONAL STATUS, AND INTERMARRIAGE

Significant variation exists within the Asian American population in the United States, shaped by factors such as ethnicity, generational status, and patterns of interracial union. This section reviews relevant literature and motivates the development of three hypotheses.

Ethnic Heterogeneity

The category “Asian American” encompasses a broad range of ethnic groups, including but not limited to East Asian, South Asian, and Southeast Asian populations. Originating as a political identity during the civil rights era (Espiritu 1993), the term obscures substantial variation in migration histories, cultural practices, and socioeconomic outcomes (Omi and Winant 2014; Zhou and Lee 2017). These differences have important implications for both educational and family outcomes. For example, East and South Asian groups—such as Chinese, Indian, and Korean Americans—are characterized by higher levels of parental education and immigration to the United States through selective employment or student visa pathways, which reflect positive immigrant selectivity (Feliciano 2005; Lee and Zhou 2015). They also tend to emphasize intergenerational mobility through education and uphold stronger cultural expectations around marriage and family cohesion (Kao and Thompson 2003; Lee et al. 2024; Liu and Xie 2016).

By contrast, many Southeast Asian groups—such as Cambodian, Hmong, and Laotian Americans—arrived as refugees and face greater structural disadvantages, which make their educational patterns more akin to other racial-ethnic minorities (Ngo and Lee 2007; Wu 2002; Zhou and Bankston 1998). These diver-

gent migration histories shape group-level resources and norms. Hyper-selectivity, which is characterized by selective educational profiles and strong community cohesion, is primarily observed among East and South Asians (Lee and Zhou 2015; Gambol 2023), whereas Southeast Asian groups are less likely to benefit from these protective mechanisms (Gavigan 2021; Model 2020). If group-level sociocultural institutions or community norms that facilitate status attainment among less resourceful groups are limited in South Asian immigrant communities, family outcomes among Southeast Asians may be more sensitive to socioeconomic status. In contrast, the presence of such institutions and norms may buffer against socioeconomic gradients among East and South Asians. Given these differences in cultural norms, migration pathways, and structural disadvantages, we expect that the association between maternal education and family outcomes will vary across Asian subgroups. Specifically, East and South Asians may exhibit more stable family patterns across education levels due to positive educational selection through high-skilled migration and stronger community norms around marriage and family stability, while family outcomes among Southeast Asians may be more stratified by socioeconomic status.

Hypothesis 2: The difference in nonmarital birth rates or the prevalence of children living with married mothers between less- and more-educated groups will be smaller for East and South Asian children than for Southeast Asian children.

Generational Status and Immigrant Selectivity

Generational status is another critical axis of diversity within the Asian American population. While Asian Americans are frequently treated as a monolithic group, their experiences are deeply shaped by whether they or their parents were born in the United States. A large body of research indicates that foreign-born individuals tend to maintain more stable family structures than their US-born counterparts (Jensen and Chitose 1994; Landale and Oropesa 2007; Min 2002; Wang 2021; Zhang and Van Hook 2009). These patterns are attributed to immigrant selectivity, the idea that those

who migrate are not a random sample of their origin countries, but tend to be positively selected on attributes such as ambition, work ethic, and family orientation (Feliciano 2005). In this framework, immigrants are more likely to adhere to cultural norms that emphasize marriage and two-parent family formation (Wang 2021; Wong 2002), and often delay union formation due to extended educational or occupational preparation in a new destination (Glick et al. 2006).

These distinctive patterns of family formation and stability among immigrants are also consistent with classical assimilation theory, which views intergenerational shifts in family behavior as a product of acculturation to mainstream norms (Gordon 1964). In the case of Asian American family formation, generational differences may be especially salient because the group includes a high proportion of foreign-born parents. First-generation and even 1.5 generation parents may bring with them stronger cultural and institutional commitments to marriage and family cohesion, which could buffer against the socioeconomic gradients typically observed in family instability. In contrast, native-born Asian Americans may experience greater exposure to less familistic norms, delayed or nonmarital childbearing, and diverse family forms. As such, the strength of the association between education and family structure may differ significantly by generational status.

Thus, we expect that generational status will not only confound but also moderate the relationship between education and family structure. If immigrant selectivity and cultural continuity play a stabilizing role, educational gradients in nonmarital childbearing and family structure should be less pronounced among the children of foreign-born Asian parents.

Hypothesis 3: Educational differences in nonmarital births and family structure are less pronounced among children of foreign-born Asian parents than among those of US-born parents.

Interracial Union and Cultural Negotiation

Interracial union represents a further axis of assimilation and heterogeneity, particularly salient among the US-born second generation.

Approximately one-third of Asian newlyweds marry outside their racial group—most often Whites—and rates are even higher among the native-born (Livingston and Brown 2017; Qian and Qian 2020). This phenomenon is also gendered: Asian women are more likely than Asian men to marry outside their race (Xie and Goyette 2004). According to classical assimilation theory (Gordon 1964), intermarriage with Whites represents an advanced stage of assimilation, often associated with the adoption of mainstream cultural norms. Studies suggest that interracial couples are different from racial-ethnic endogamous couples in terms of childbearing patterns (Choi and Goldberg 2018) or family instability (Bratter and King 2008; Choi and Goldberg 2021; but see Zhang and Van Hook 2009). However, more recent qualitative work complicates this view. For instance, Marguerite Lengyell and Nic M. Weststrate (2025) demonstrate that interracial parenting often involves heightened racial consciousness and active negotiation of parenting norms. These findings suggest that interracial families may navigate family life in distinct ways—characterized by mutual learning and active negotiation of values—compared to endogamous Asian couples, where homogeneous family norms between spouses reinforce stability. This leads us to expect the following hypothesis.

Hypothesis 4: The educational differences in nonmarital birth rates and family structure among Asians are weaker among racially endogamous unions than among interracial unions.

DATA AND METHOD

A careful investigation of the socioeconomic pattern in Asian Americans’ family behaviors, and how these patterns differ from other racial-ethnic groups, complicates broader theoretical understanding of the potential role of race-ethnicity in shaping family inequality. The case of educational differences in family outcomes associated with “pattern of disadvantage” helps researchers understand how cultural values, immigration patterns, and so-

cioeconomic status shape stratification outcomes. To this end, this study focuses on two outcomes, namely, nonmarital childbearing and family structure, which allow us to examine distinctive yet complementary aspects of family formation and stability. The first outcome captures the marital context at the time of the child’s birth. This is a critical starting point for understanding later family trajectories, as it reflects norms and decisions around marriage and fertility timing. The second outcome captures the subsequent evolution of those family arrangements. A child may be born to unmarried parents but later live in a married-couple household, or vice versa. Therefore, family structure at the time of the survey reflects the accumulation of union formation and dissolution over time. These differences allow us to evaluate not only initial conditions but also later transitions in family structure.

For the analysis of nonmarital childbearing, we use the data from the National Vital Statistics System (NVSS), 2015–2019, which is published annually by the National Center for Health Statistics and provides information on all registered births in the United States. We specifically use the Vital Statistics Natality Birth Data from the NVSS, as provided by the National Bureau of Economic Research. We restricted our sample to the first live births born to mothers aged eighteen to forty-nine whose residence is in the United States.² For the analysis of family structure, we use the Current Population Survey Annual Socioeconomic Supplement (CPS-ASEC), 2013–2024.³ The analytic sample was restricted to households with children aged twelve or younger. For both analyses, we focus on the comparison between non-Hispanic Whites and non-Hispanic Asians.

The dependent variables of interest are whether the marital status reported by mothers is unmarried or married (for NVSS) and children’s family structure (two parents, married; two parents, cohabiting; unpartnered parent) (for CPS-ASEC). As we discussed earlier, the focus on nonmarital childbearing and family

2. Note that the NVSS 2015 data do not include births that occurred in Connecticut and New Jersey. For other years, all births in the fifty states and the District of Columbia are included.

3. We included these years because the Asian ethnicity question has been asked since the 2013 survey.

structure is theoretical but these outcomes are also chosen for a practical reason. Specifically, it is not easy to compare Asians' family behavior with other population groups or examine the within-race diversity among Asians due to their relatively smaller population size. To address this issue, this study uses data from the NVSS and the CPS-ASEC, which allow us to conduct detailed analyses of educational-ethnic differences in nonmarital childbearing and family structure among Asians as compared with Whites.

The main predictors are the mother's race-ethnicity and educational level. For ethnic differences among Asians, groups include South Asian, East Asian (Chinese, Japanese, and Korean), Southeast Asian (Filipino and Vietnamese), and Other Asian.⁴ For educational level, we use mother's highest degree or level of school completed (at the time of the delivery for NVSS and at the time of the survey for CPS-ASEC). This variable is based on four categories, including less than a high school degree or GED (less than high school), high school degree or GED (high school), some college or associate degree (some college), and bachelor's degree or higher (bachelor of arts). Lastly, the immigrant generation is constructed as follows: For both NVSS and CPS-ASEC, we use the mother's generational status to distinguish between foreign-born and native-born mothers. The final sample size is 4,161,369 for NVSS (452,805 for Asians and 3,708,564 for Whites) and 54,881 for CPS-ASEC (4,964 for Asians and 49,917 for Whites).

The descriptive statistics are shown separately between Whites and Asians in table 1. As expected, sociodemographic characteristics are different for these two groups. Specifically, mothers are more educated and older among Asians than among Whites. We can also see differences in the two focal family outcomes. Compared to Whites, Asian mothers tend to be married when the first child is born and less likely to be single parents. These group-level

differences may be attributed to compositional differences between the two groups, such as educational level or mother's age. The subsequent analysis examines how race-ethnicity and socioeconomic status, measured as educational level, interactively shape these family outcomes.

We estimate the likelihood of nonmarital childbearing using logistic regressions as a function of race-ethnicity, educational level, and other covariates. First, we estimate models of the functional form, where the outcome (nonmarital childbearing or family structure) is predicted by race-ethnicity and mother's educational level, where we diversify the Asian category by considering Asian ethnicity, with other potential confounders including survey year, parents' generational status, and region.⁵ Next, model 2 examines a potential interaction between race-ethnicity and educational level. Lastly, model 3 examines differences by generational status by estimating model 2 separately for those who are foreign-born and native-born.

RESULTS

This section presents our main results on nonmarital childbearing and family structure. We first report the regression estimates, followed by predicted values derived from these models.

Nonmarital Childbearing

Table 2 presents logistic regression models assessing the likelihood of nonmarital childbearing among Whites and four Asian ethnic groups. Consistent with prior research, results from model 1 indicate that Asian mothers are significantly less likely than White mothers to give birth outside of marriage. South Asians show the largest difference, followed by East and Southeast Asians. Specifically, South Asians are 8.5 times ($1/\exp(-2.138)$) less likely to experience nonmarital childbearing, followed by East Asians (1.9 times, $1/\exp(-0.638)$) and Southeast Asians (1.26 times, $1/\exp(-0.229)$)

4. NVSS started including options for six specific Asian subgroups, which include Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese, in 2003 for those who self-identified as Asians (Driscoll 2018). The 2003 revision also includes a nonspecific Asian category, Other Asian (Specify). The publicly available data do not allow us to disentangle the Other Asian category.

5. For NVSS data, the public use data do not include detailed geographic information including state or county.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

National Vital Statistics System, 2015–2019										
	White		South Asian		East Asian		Southeast Asian		Other Asian	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Nonmarital childbearing	0.33	0.47	0.03	0.17	0.11	0.31	0.22	0.42	0.23	0.42
Mother’s education										
Less than high school	0.05	0.22	0.03	0.16	0.03	0.18	0.04	0.20	0.11	0.31
High school	0.20	0.40	0.06	0.24	0.07	0.26	0.15	0.36	0.20	0.40
Some college	0.29	0.45	0.08	0.27	0.14	0.34	0.28	0.45	0.21	0.41
BA+	0.46	0.50	0.83	0.37	0.76	0.43	0.53	0.50	0.48	0.50
Mother foreign born	0.06	0.24	0.90	0.30	0.83	0.37	0.75	0.43	0.74	0.44
Racial endogamy			0.91	0.29	0.70	0.46	0.54	0.50	0.70	0.46
Mother’s age	27.6	5.45	29.74	4.09	31.4	4.57	30.2	5.22	28.5	5.31
Survey year	2017	1.42	2017	1.4	2017	1.39	2017	1.42	2017	1.42
Observations	3,708,564		154,267		143,872		81,764		72,902	
Current Population Survey Annual Socioeconomic Supplement, 2013–2024										
	White		South Asian		East Asian		Southeast Asian		Other Asian	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Family structure										
Single parent	0.15	0.36	0.04	0.20	0.09	0.28	0.13	0.33	0.11	0.31
Two parents, cohabiting	0.08	0.28	0.01	0.09	0.03	0.16	0.06	0.23	0.05	0.21
Two parents, married	0.76	0.43	0.95	0.21	0.89	0.32	0.82	0.39	0.84	0.36
Mother’s education										
Less than high school	0.04	0.2	0.02	0.12	0.03	0.17	0.07	0.26	0.16	0.36
High school	0.2	0.4	0.07	0.26	0.14	0.34	0.22	0.42	0.25	0.43
Some college	0.31	0.46	0.06	0.24	0.17	0.38	0.27	0.44	0.18	0.38
BA+	0.45	0.5	0.85	0.36	0.66	0.47	0.44	0.5	0.42	0.49
Mother foreign born	0.05	0.23	0.92	0.27	0.73	0.45	0.76	0.43	0.81	0.39
Racial endogamy			0.91	0.29	0.66	0.47	0.6	0.49	0.73	0.45
Mother’s age	36.7	8.12	36.8	6.43	39.8	7.65	39.0	8.19	36.7	7.61
Region										
Midwest	0.26	0.44	0.16	0.37	0.10	0.30	0.09	0.28	0.19	0.39
Northwest	0.20	0.40	0.30	0.46	0.22	0.41	0.08	0.28	0.23	0.42
South	0.32	0.47	0.32	0.47	0.20	0.40	0.22	0.41	0.23	0.42
West	0.22	0.41	0.21	0.41	0.49	0.50	0.61	0.49	0.35	0.48
Survey year	2016	2.75	2016	2.94	2016	2.83	2016	2.64	2016	2.92
Observations	49,917		1,227		1,538		1,249		950	

Source: Authors' tabulations.

Note: SD = standard deviation. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

Table 2. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Nonmarital Childbearing Among Whites and Asians

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Race-ethnicity (ref = White)						
South Asian	-2.138***	(0.016)	-1.707***	(0.030)	-1.073***	(0.031)
East Asian	-0.638***	(0.009)	-0.633***	(0.018)	0.031 ⁺	(0.018)
Southeast Asian	-0.229***	(0.010)	-0.202***	(0.015)	0.359***	(0.015)
Other Asian	-0.604***	(0.010)	-0.177***	(0.017)	0.272***	(0.018)
Mother's education (ref = some college)						
Less than high school	0.831***	(0.005)	0.918***	(0.006)	0.946***	(0.006)
High school degree	0.621***	(0.003)	0.649***	(0.003)	0.660***	(0.003)
BA+	-1.493***	(0.003)	-1.515***	(0.003)	-1.511***	(0.003)
South Asian x less than high school			-0.872***	(0.056)	-0.775***	(0.056)
South Asian x high school			-0.498***	(0.043)	-0.429***	(0.043)
South Asian x BA+			-0.504***	(0.039)	-0.450***	(0.040)
East Asian x less than high school			-0.348***	(0.036)	-0.263***	(0.036)
East Asian x high school			-0.333***	(0.028)	-0.277***	(0.028)
East Asian x BA+			0.197***	(0.022)	0.120***	(0.022)
Southeast Asian x less than high school			-0.770***	(0.040)	-0.676***	(0.040)
Southeast Asian x high school			-0.584***	(0.024)	-0.504***	(0.025)
Southeast Asian x BA+			0.533***	(0.021)	0.469***	(0.021)
Other Asian x less than high school			-1.459***	(0.031)	-1.216***	(0.032)
Other Asian x high school			-0.722***	(0.025)	-0.620***	(0.025)
Other Asian x BA+			0.128***	(0.026)	0.210***	(0.026)
Mother foreign born					-0.842***	(0.006)
Constant	1.178	(1.787)	1.466	(1.790)	3.716*	(1.795)
Observations				4,161,369		

Source: NVSS 2015–2019.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models include survey year and mother's age. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

who are also less likely to experience nonmarital childbearing than Whites. These results are consistent with both hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2.

Model 2 adds interaction terms between race-ethnicity and maternal education, allowing us to examine whether educational gradients in nonmarital childbearing differ across groups. Among Whites, lower education is strongly associated with higher odds of nonmarital childbearing. In contrast, the association is weaker among Asians—particularly at the lower end of the educational spectrum—supporting the hypothesis that education matters less for family formation behaviors among racial minorities. These patterns remain ro-

bust in model 3, which controls for generational status.

To explore the role of nativity more explicitly, table 3 disaggregates the sample by mothers' generational status. South Asians continue to show significantly lower odds of nonmarital childbearing than their White counterparts for both foreign-born and native-born mothers (−1.312 and −0.493, respectively). For other groups, the patterns are more variable. For foreign-born mothers with some college education, East Asians and Other Asians tend to have a slightly lower chance of nonmarital childbearing than Whites, but the size of the coefficient is smaller than that of South Asians. For native-born mothers with some college educa-

Table 3. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Nonmarital Childbearing Among Whites and Asians by Generational Status

	Foreign-Born Mother		Native-Born Mother	
Race-ethnicity (ref = White)				
South Asian	-1.312***	(0.040)	-0.493***	(0.053)
East Asian	-0.125***	(0.022)	0.065	(0.042)
Southeast Asian	0.238***	(0.021)	0.447***	(0.027)
Other Asian	-0.063*	(0.027)	0.678***	(0.027)
Mother's education (ref = some college)				
Less than high school	0.167***	(0.026)	0.982***	(0.006)
High school degree	0.139***	(0.017)	0.673***	(0.003)
BA+	-0.888***	(0.014)	-1.540***	(0.004)
South Asian x less than high school	0.266***	(0.068)	-0.382*	(0.170)
South Asian x high school	0.255***	(0.055)	-0.176+	(0.093)
South Asian x BA+	-1.146***	(0.051)	-0.437***	(0.071)
East Asian x less than high school	0.612***	(0.045)	0.065	(0.193)
East Asian x high school	0.305***	(0.034)	-0.179*	(0.085)
East Asian x BA+	-0.515***	(0.028)	-0.118*	(0.050)
Southeast Asian x less than high school	0.032	(0.050)	-0.046	(0.122)
Southeast Asian x high school	-0.020	(0.032)	-0.120*	(0.057)
Southeast Asian x BA+	-0.086**	(0.029)	0.058	(0.038)
Other Asian x less than high school	-0.139**	(0.046)	-0.004	(0.109)
Other Asian x high school	-0.021	(0.038)	-0.197***	(0.046)
Other Asian x BA+	-0.317***	(0.038)	-0.068+	(0.040)
Constant	14.719*	(5.967)	1.091	(1.894)
Observations	610,486		3,550,883	

Source: NVSS 2015–2019.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. Both models include survey year and mother's age. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

* $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

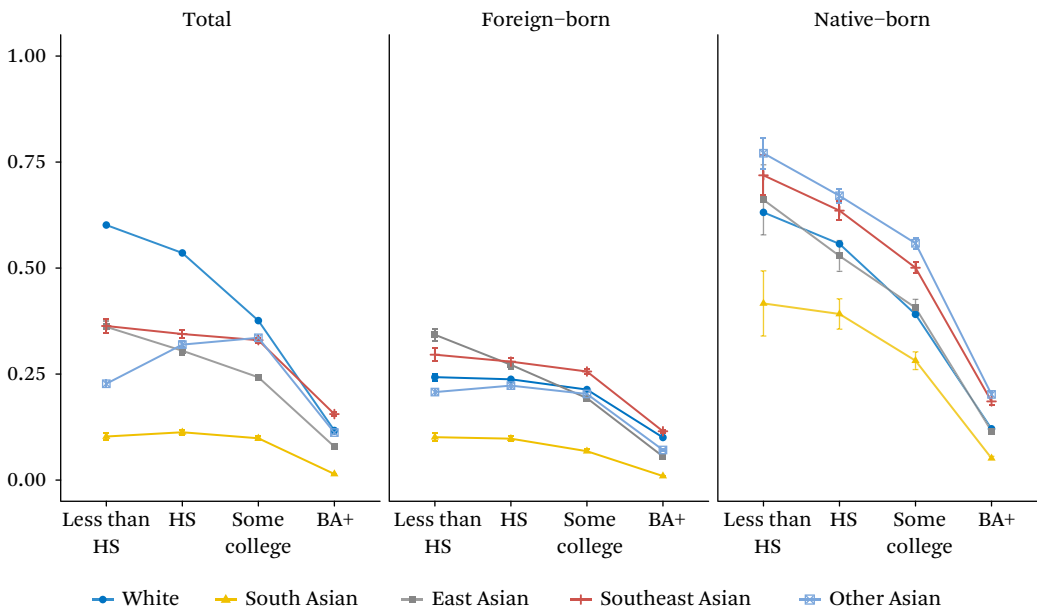
tion, the likelihood of nonmarital childbearing is not statistically different between East Asians and Whites, while native-born Other Asians have a higher chance of nonmarital childbearing than Whites. Southeast Asians, notably, exhibit higher rates of nonmarital childbearing than Whites in both generational groups (0.238 and 0.447, respectively).

These interaction effects highlight how generational status moderates the relationship between education, race-ethnicity, and nonmarital childbearing. If educational differences in nonmarital childbearing are smaller among Asians than Whites, we should see negative coefficients for the interaction between Asian ethnicities and lower education (less than high school or high school education) and positive

coefficients for the interaction between Asian ethnicities and higher education (BA+). Results indicate that this pattern is observed only for native-born South Asians. For other ethnic and generational status groups, we do not see clear patterns consistent with the expectation.

Figure 1 presents the predicted marginal probability of nonmarital childbearing based on model 2 in table 2 and table 3, which reinforces these findings. The first panel is based on models presented in table 2, and the second and third panels are based on results presented in table 3. Looking at the first panel, we can see educational level matters less for nonmarital childbearing among all Asian ethnicities than among Whites. This is driven by weaker educational gradients in nonmarital childbearing

Figure 1. Predicted Probabilities of Nonmarital Childbearing for Whites and Four Asian Ethnic Groups by Generational Status



Source: NVSS 2015–2019.

Note: HS = high school. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

among non-college-educated Asians compared to their White counterparts. Non-college-educated Asians' weaker educational gradients are also the case for Southeast Asians, East Asians, and Other Asians.

Meanwhile, the second and third panels show how race-ethnicity and education shape nonmarital childbearing vary by generational status. Among foreign-born mothers, educational differences in nonmarital childbearing are minimal across all racial-ethnic groups, including Whites.⁶ In contrast, educational gradients are steeper among native-born mothers, although still somewhat attenuated among South Asians compared to Whites. Still, the proportion of nonmarital childbearing is larger compared to foreign-born mothers, where the likelihood of nonmarital childbearing is negli-

gibly low regardless of educational level. This suggests that the muted role of education in shaping family behaviors among Asians is largely driven by the high prevalence of immigrants, whose family formation patterns appear less responsive to socioeconomic differences. These results are consistent with hypothesis 3.

The pronounced generational differences among Asians suggest that acculturation to American family norms shapes family formation patterns. As we discussed earlier, one key dimension of acculturation is interracial union formation, which may alter the influence of education on family outcomes. In particular, the within-Asian difference between South Asians and other groups of Asians may reflect their distinct family patterns characterized by the

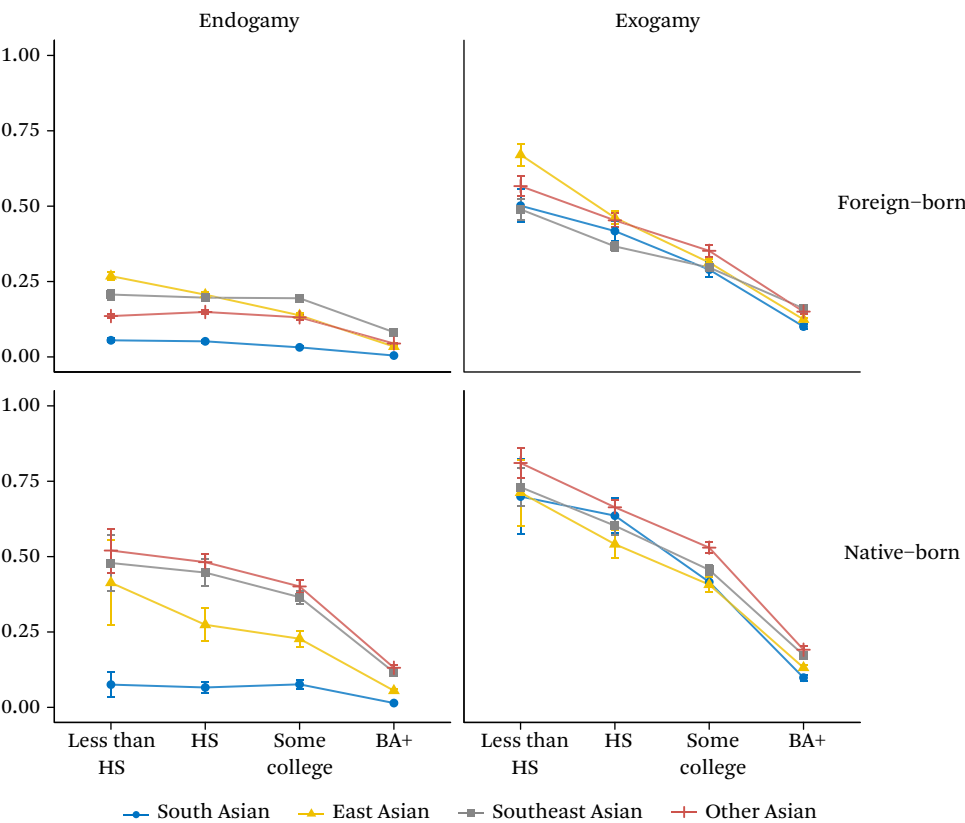
6. It should be noted that among the least-educated group (less than high school graduates), the rate of nonmarital childbearing is lower for Whites than Southeast Asians or East Asians. Most White immigrants to the United States comprise those from Europe, while the share of immigrants from the Middle East has also increased (Read and Fairfax 2025). Although NVSS data do not allow us to examine country of origin, the relatively lower likelihood of nonmarital childbearing as well as weaker educational difference may reflect that these White immigrants also carry different cultural norms.

larger prevalence of racial endogamy. To test this expectation, we examine within-Asian variation in nonmarital childbearing and family structure by disaggregating this population not only by generational status but also by racial pairings. To this end, we create a dummy variable that indicates one if the mother’s race is the same as the father’s.

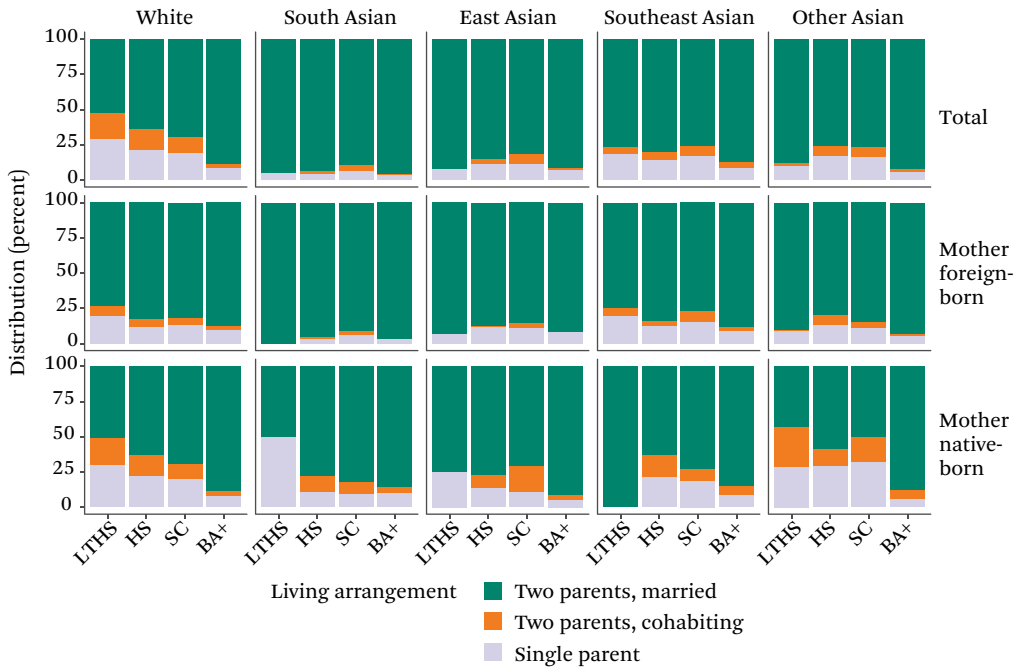
Figure 2 shows the predicted probability of nonmarital childbearing among Asian mothers by generational status and racial pairings. Foreign-born, endogamously partnered mothers have consistently low rates of nonmarital births across education levels. In contrast, among native-born and/or interracially partnered mothers, nonmarital birth rates are higher and more responsive to educational differences. This result indicates that the lower

rate of nonmarital childbirth among the foreign-born population is driven by the fact that they are likely to marry endogamously, which suppresses educational differences. The gap is especially pronounced among less-educated South and East Asian mothers, where interracial unions are associated with substantially higher probabilities of nonmarital childbearing than endogamous ones. Interestingly, regardless of being foreign- or native-born, endogamous South Asian mothers are least likely to experience nonmarital childbearing across educational levels, which suggests that racial endogamy and specific family expectations are closely tied together in South Asian communities. In such an environment, regardless of immigrant background, individuals are socially expected to experience a set of family forma-

Figure 2. Predicted Probabilities of Nonmarital Childbearing for Four Asian Ethnic Groups by Generational Status and Racial Intermarriage



Source: NVSS 2015–2019.
Note: HS = high school. BA+ = bachelor’s degree or higher.

Figure 3. Distribution of Family Structure by Race-Ethnicity and Generational Status

Source: CPS-ASEC 2013–2024.

Note: LTHS = less than high school. HS = high school. SC = some college. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

tion patterns, which includes marriage to someone of the same ethnicity and marital fertility.

Family Structure

We next examine the relationship between maternal education and children's living arrangements, focusing on differences between Asian and White families. Figure 3 presents the distribution of family structure by mother's race-ethnicity, educational level, and generational status. Among White families, maternal education is strongly associated with stable family arrangements: the likelihood of children living with two married parents increases steadily with education. For example, about one in four children live in a single-parent White family if their mothers did not complete high school, while the share of single-parent households is less than 10 percent for those who completed college. In contrast, family structure among Asians is more uniform across education levels, particularly among South and East Asians. The

difference is mainly due to the smaller (or larger) prevalence of single parents (or married two parents) among the less-educated Asians than that among their White counterparts. For example, among mothers who have received a high school education, 93 percent of South Asian children live with two married parents, compared to only 64 percent among Whites. These results are consistent with both hypothesis 1 and hypothesis 2.

Stratifying by nativity, we find that educational gradients in family structure are minimal among foreign-born mothers, regardless of race. Children of foreign-born Asian mothers are especially likely to live in married two-parent households across all education levels. For foreign-born mothers whose educational level is high school, for example, 83 percent of children of White mothers are living with married two-parent families, while 95 percent of South Asian and 87 percent of East Asian counterparts do so. For college-educated mothers, children are less likely to live with one parent,

Table 4. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Married Two Parents Among Whites and Four Asian Ethnic Groups

	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
Race-ethnicity (ref = White)						
South Asian	1.382***	(0.137)	1.312***	(0.376)	0.930*	(0.378)
East Asian	0.552***	(0.084)	0.505***	(0.161)	0.189	(0.165)
Southeast Asian	0.228***	(0.077)	0.175	(0.130)	-0.130	(0.134)
Other Asian	0.684***	(0.094)	0.334 ⁺	(0.183)	-0.003	(0.187)
Parents' education (ref = some college)						
Less than high school	-0.544***	(0.047)	-0.635***	(0.049)	-0.662***	(0.049)
High school	-0.209***	(0.027)	-0.227***	(0.027)	-0.234***	(0.028)
BA+	1.086***	(0.027)	1.107***	(0.028)	1.099***	(0.028)
South Asian x less than HS			1.471	(1.097)	1.485	(1.099)
South Asian x high school			0.745	(0.567)	0.723	(0.567)
South Asian x BA+			-0.132	(0.407)	-0.168	(0.408)
East Asian x less than HS			1.626***	(0.550)	1.552***	(0.551)
East Asian x high school			0.486 ⁺	(0.254)	0.454 ⁺	(0.255)
East Asian x BA+			-0.269	(0.197)	-0.252	(0.198)
Southeast Asian x less than HS			0.500 ⁺	(0.288)	0.404	(0.289)
Southeast Asian x high school			0.468*	(0.200)	0.417*	(0.201)
Southeast Asian x BA+			-0.414*	(0.183)	-0.419*	(0.184)
Other Asian x Less than HS			1.496***	(0.316)	1.424***	(0.317)
Other Asian x high school			0.179	(0.239)	0.169	(0.241)
Other Asian x BA+			0.070	(0.261)	0.060	(0.262)
Parents foreign-born					0.485***	(0.050)
Intercept	4.047***	(1.353)	3.905***	(1.350)	3.877***	(1.352)
Observations			54,881			

Source: CPS-ASEC 2013–2024.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models include survey years, mother's age, and regions. HS = high school. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

⁺ $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$

both for Whites and Asians (88 percent for Whites versus 97 percent for South Asians or 91 percent for East Asians).

Among native-born mothers, however, we observe stronger educational gradients in family structure for both Asians and Whites. Compared to children of foreign-born mothers, children of native-born Asian mothers are more likely to live with unmarried parents or single parents. Still, some Asian groups—especially South Asians—show greater family stability than Whites at comparable education levels, although small sample sizes in the CPS-ASEC

limit conclusions for the least educated subgroups.⁷

Table 4 presents regression results predicting the likelihood of living with two married parents. Model 1 confirms that children of Asian mothers are more likely than those of White mothers to reside in married-parent households, with the strongest effects for South and Other Asians. According to model 2 where we add interactions between Asian ethnicities and maternal education, we can see that educational gradients are much weaker among Asians than Whites—especially for East

7. For those native-born South Asians, the sample size is small (fewer than twenty cases) for all education groups except for the BA+ group.

and Southeast Asians—indicating that lower education does not correspond to the same drop in family stability. For East, Southeast, and Other Asians, the interaction coefficients with less than high school or high school education are positive and statistically significant, which offsets the negative coefficients of the main education effects. Smaller educational differences are particularly evident for East Asians. The interaction coefficient is also positive for South Asians, but their relatively larger standard error reflects relatively fewer cases of those who went to high school or less. Results are robust to including the mother's nativity status in model 3.

In table 5, we separate the models by gen-

eration status. Among foreign-born mothers, we find flat or inconsistent educational gradients for Asians, while White families continue to show more predictable associations between education and family structure. Compared to mothers with some college education (reference category), children of White mothers whose education is less than high school are 1.58 times ($1/\exp(-0.463)$) less likely to live with two married parents, while children of White mothers whose education is BA+ are 1.6 times ($\exp(0.467)$) more likely to live with two married parents. Compared with these results, we can see that the likelihood of living with two married parents is not clearly patterned by maternal education among Asians. For East and

Table 5. Logistic Regression Results Predicting Married Two Parents Among Whites and Four Asian Ethnic Groups by Generational Status

	Foreign-Born Mother		Native-Born Mother	
Race/ethnicity (ref = White)				
South Asian	0.794 ⁺	(0.443)	0.764	(0.784)
East Asian	0.302	(0.233)	-0.045	(0.263)
Southeast Asian	-0.254	(0.193)	0.068	(0.225)
Other Asian	0.221	(0.267)	-0.757 [*]	(0.321)
Parents' education (ref = some college)				
Less than high school	-0.463 [*]	(0.204)	-0.678 ^{***}	(0.051)
High school	0.072	(0.160)	-0.244 ^{***}	(0.028)
BA+	0.467 ^{***}	(0.136)	1.133 ^{***}	(0.029)
South Asian x less than HS			-0.605	(1.620)
South Asian x high school	0.613	(0.687)	-0.107	(1.126)
South Asian x BA+	0.620	(0.485)	-1.054	(0.850)
East Asian x less than HS	1.268 ⁺	(0.665)	0.882	(1.217)
East Asian x high school	0.067	(0.349)	0.450	(0.453)
East Asian x BA+	0.111	(0.279)	0.218	(0.335)
Southeast Asian x less than HS	0.325	(0.362)		
Southeast Asian x high school	0.363	(0.287)	-0.167	(0.369)
Southeast Asian x BA+	0.303	(0.256)	-0.475	(0.325)
Other Asian x less than HS	0.986 [*]	(0.424)	0.687	(0.851)
Other Asian x high school	-0.397	(0.344)	0.513	(0.432)
Other Asian x BA+	0.419	(0.356)	0.624	(0.467)
Constant	-24.990	(28.917)	11.511	(8.316)
Observations	6,657		48,201	

Source: CPS-ASEC 2013–2024.

Note: Standard errors in parentheses. All models include survey years, mother's age, and regions.

Note: HS = high school. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

⁺ $p < .10$; ^{*} $p < .05$; ^{**} $p < .01$; ^{***} $p < .001$

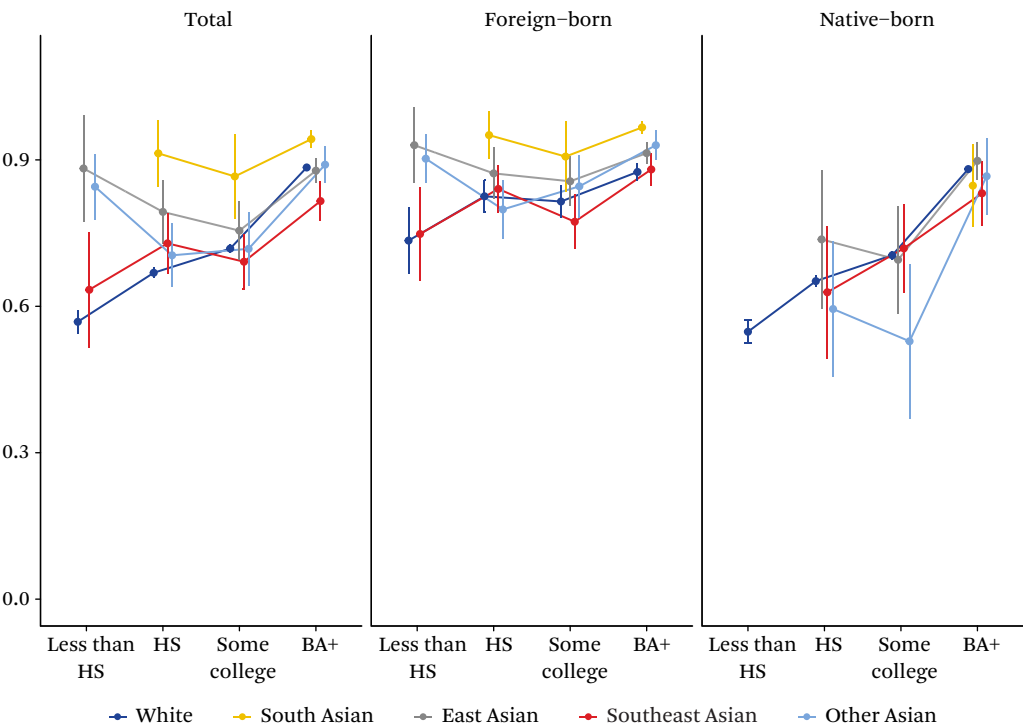
Other Asians, interactions with less than a high school education are positive and statistically significant, which offsets the negative main effect of mother’s lower education. This indicates that children of East Asian and Other Asian mothers with less than high school education are more likely to live with two married parents than children whose mother’s education is some college. In general, however, a majority of interaction coefficients are not statistically significant, possibly due to small sample issues.

Among native-born mothers, steeper gradients emerge for all groups, although differences between Asians and Whites are smaller. Children of White mothers with less than high school education are 1.97 times ($1/\exp(-0.678)$) less likely to live with two married parents, while children of mothers with college education are 3.1 times ($\exp(1.133)$) more likely to do so than those whose mothers have some col-

lege education. Again, similar to foreign-born mothers, interaction coefficients are largely non-significant, suggesting that educational gradient patterns are similar between children of White and Asian mothers among native-born mothers.

Figure 4 presents predicted probabilities based on model 3 for each of table 4 (the first panel) and table 5 (the second and third panels), which illustrate these patterns. Looking at the first panel, educational gradients in family structure defined by married two-parent families are significantly weaker among Asian ethnic groups than among Whites. This figure also shows that the predicted probabilities of two married parents among less than high school, high school, and some college graduates are almost identical for South Asians. Meanwhile, gradients are much steeper for Whites. Looking at the second and third panels, these Asian–White gap results are largely explained by con-

Figure 4. Predicted Probabilities of Two Married Parents Among Whites and Four Asian Ethnic Groups by Generational Status



Source: CPS-ASEC 2013–2024.

Note: Error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Predicted values with fewer than twenty cases are dropped. HS = high school. BA+ = bachelor’s degree or higher.

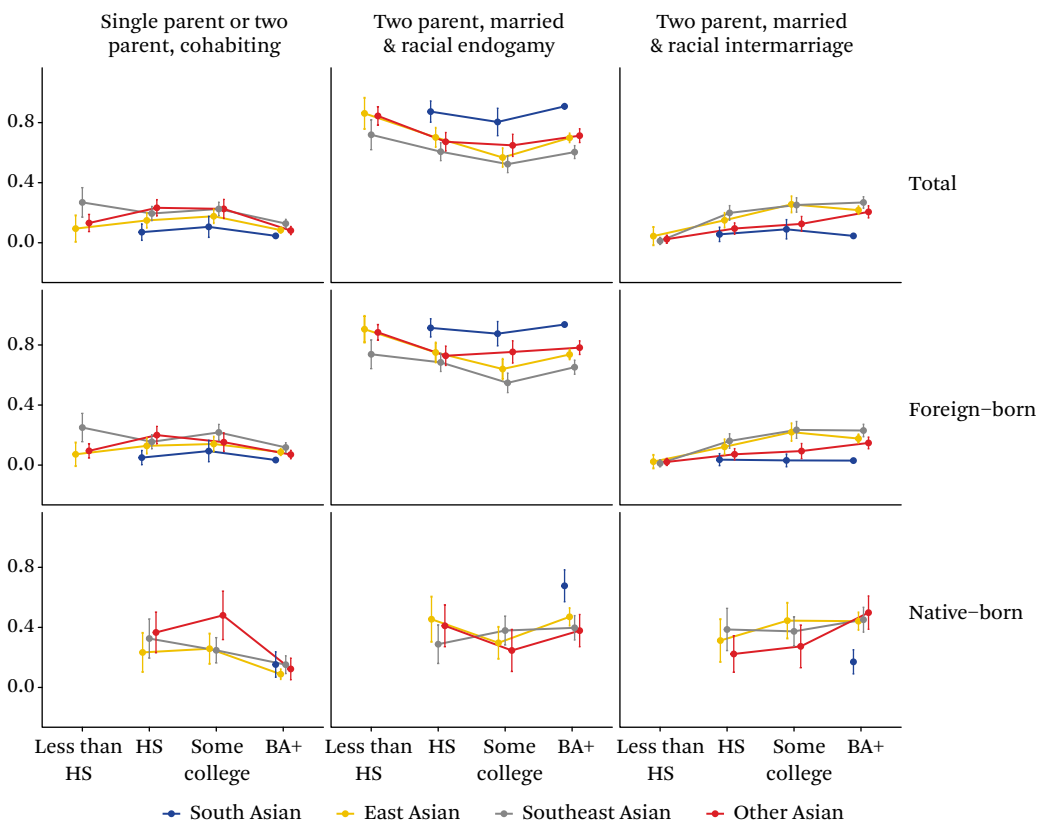
sidering the mother's generational status. Among foreign-born mothers, children of Asian mothers are consistently more likely to live with married parents, regardless of education, than those of White mothers. Some educational gradients appear among Whites and Southeast Asians, while they are much flatter for South, East, and Other Asians.

Among native-born mothers, however, the racial gap narrows, and family structure becomes more responsive to maternal education across all ethnicities. These findings suggest that the high family stability observed among Asians is largely attributable to the prevalence of immigrants, whose family behaviors appear less sensitive to socioeconomic variation, con-

sistent with hypothesis 3. On average, immigrant families tend to be stable. Since a large fraction of Asian parents are immigrants, this explains Asians' relatively stable family structure. Meanwhile, education level matters more for family structure among native-born parents, regardless of whether they are Asian or White. Since a large fraction of White parents are non-immigrants, this explains the steeper educational gradients in family structure among Whites.

Figure 5 presents results where we consider the role of racial endogamy and exogamy. For this analysis, we distinguish children living with two married parents by the mother's endogamy status. We estimate the probability us-

Figure 5. Predicted Probabilities of Family Structure and Racial Intermarriage for Four Asian Ethnic Groups by Generational Status



Source: CPS-ASEC 2013–2024.

Note: Error bars indicate 95 percent confidence intervals. Predicted values with fewer than twenty cases are dropped. HS = high school. BA+ = bachelor's degree or higher.

ing multinomial logistic regression. Since a majority of Asian groups are foreign-born (see table 1), results from all samples and those from foreign-born samples are substantially similar. Across most Asian groups, foreign-born, endogamous mothers are highly likely to live with a spouse, regardless of education. Among interracial couples, however, education is more predictive of whether children live with two married parents. These results help us to understand the seemingly U-shaped patterns between mother’s educational level and family structure for Asians, particularly foreign-born Asians; family structure tends to be stable for racial endogamous couples, while educational level is positively associated with two married parents for interracial couples. Overall, these patterns suggest that racial endogamy reinforces stable family norms, while interracial unions may expose families to more variable expectations and structural influences, making family outcomes more contingent on socioeconomic resources, consistent with hypothesis 4.

DISCUSSION

Drawing on nationally representative data from the NVSS (2015–2019) and the CPS-ASEC (2013–2024), this study examined how educational gradients in two outcomes associated with family instability—nonmarital childbearing and family structure—differ between non-Hispanic Whites and Asians. Our analyses revealed three key findings. First, consistent with prior research, we find that Asian American mothers are significantly less likely than White mothers to give birth outside of marriage and are more likely to raise children in married, two-parent households. These patterns hold across ethnic subgroups but are particularly pronounced among South Asians, followed by East Asians and Southeast Asians. Second, we found that the relationship between maternal education and these two outcomes is markedly weaker among Asians than among Whites. While White families exhibit steeper educational gradients, where lower education strongly predicts higher rates of nonmarital childbearing and nonmarital family arrangements, these gradients are significantly flatter among Asians. Third, the muted relationship among Asians is largely explained by immi-

grant generational status and racial endogamy. Foreign-born Asian mothers, especially those in racially endogamous unions, show negligible differences in family outcomes across education levels. In contrast, native-born Asians and interracial couples exhibit patterns more aligned with those of White families, including steeper educational gradients.

Although the current data do not allow us to disentangle alternative mechanisms, these results lend support to theoretical perspectives emphasizing the enduring role of cultural norms and immigrant selectivity. On the one hand, the current results are consistent with our expectation that widely shared cultural norms among Asians that emphasize the role of family in children’s socioeconomic success may help stabilize marital unions and reduce socioeconomic disparities in family behavior among Asians (Lundberg et al. 2016). Research shows that Asian Americans, across social classes, widely share expectations for children’s high educational attainment as a strategy for upward mobility (Goyette and Xie 1999; Liu and Xie 2016; Tran 2015; Lee et al. 2024), which may explain weaker educational gradients in outcomes associated with family stability compared to Whites or other racial-ethnic groups. On the other hand, the muted role of education among foreign-born Asians is consistent with the hypothesis that positively selected immigrants may benefit less resourceful Asians through the spillover of mobility-promoting culture (Hsin 2016) or cultural norms that prioritize family stability, leading to Asians’ hyperselectivity argument (Lee and Zhou 2015, but see Kim and Kim 2023). The persistence of low nonmarital birth rates and high marital stability even among the least-educated foreign-born Asians suggests that the community-level resources and expectations fostered by hyperselectivity help buffer against family instability (Zhou 2008). In particular, the absence of educational gradients among South Asians illustrates how cultural stigma surrounding nonmarital fertility and high rates of racial endogamy may reinforce shared family norms, even in the context of acculturation (Bain 2015; Portes 2003).

The observed variation across Asian ethnic subgroups highlights the importance of disag-

gregating the Asian American population when examining family behaviors and their relationship to socioeconomic status. While all Asian subgroups show higher rates of family stability compared to Whites, the magnitude and pattern of educational gradients differ by ethnicity. These differences likely reflect variation in migration histories, cultural norms, and patterns of endogamy. For instance, South Asians exhibit uniformly high family stability across education levels, suggesting the role of strong cultural stigma surrounding nonmarital fertility and high levels of racial endogamy (Bain 2015). In contrast, Southeast Asians tend to show slightly steeper educational gradients, possibly due to different structural constraints and community resources. East Asians fall somewhere in between. This heterogeneity complicates any single narrative about Asian American family life and underscores how ethnicity, nativity, and interracial union intersect to shape family inequality and disparities. These findings also suggest that ethnic-specific community structures and cultural expectations can mediate or buffer the influence of socioeconomic status on family behaviors, reinforcing the need for nuanced, intra-group analyses in family research (Guzzo and Hayford 2020).

These patterns also complicate the predictions of the diverging destinies framework (McLanahan 2004), which has been widely used to describe the bifurcation of family behaviors by socioeconomic status. This framework accurately characterizes White families, where education strongly predicts family stability and child well-being. In contrast, our results indicate that it does not fully capture the experience of Asian Americans. Family formation among Asians, especially immigrants or endogamous unions, is associated with stability across the socioeconomic spectrum, suggesting that cultural and structural factors beyond individual socioeconomic status matter in shaping these family outcomes. It should be noted, however, that these protective patterns may weaken over generations. Among native-born Asians and those in interracial unions, educational gradients in family outcomes more closely resemble those of Whites, indicating that acculturation and structural incorporation

may erode the group-level buffers against family instability.

We recognize that there are several critical limitations in this study. One of them is that the NVSS data do not allow us to distinguish nonmarital childbirth from cohabiting mothers, which accounts for a majority of nonmarital childbearing in the United States (Lichter et al. 2014; Wu 2017), from cohabiting mothers to unpartnered mothers. The distinction is critical since the acceptability of childbearing within cohabiting unions has been growing, which is likely a main driver of the increase in nonmarital childbearing among college-educated individuals (Cherlin 2021). This suggests that nonmarital childbearing among cohabiting couples is increasingly similar to childbearing among married couples and thus may not be negatively associated with child well-being. Importantly, the share of cohabiting parents and unpartnered mothers is different across race-ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Kim and Raley 2015; Lichter 2012; Wu 2017). This study also could not distinguish between never-married and divorced parents. This distinction is important since children of divorced mothers are more likely to have involvement with fathers than children of never-married mothers (Carlson 2006). Although the NVSS data do not allow such a distinction, more research is thus needed to understand the mechanisms of significantly weaker educational gradients in nonmarital childbearing among Asians.

Additionally, this study does not provide a formal analysis of mechanisms that lead to the observed pattern—which awaits future investigation. In particular, it is critical to consider the role of migration processes. First, while the current interpretation of the Asian-White between-group residual differences as an indication of the racial and ethnic variation in shared norms and expectations assumes that Asians in America, especially recent immigrants, share similar norms and expectations with those in their origin contexts, the pattern we observed among Asians can be explained by the migration process per se (Van Hook and Glick 2007). To account for the role of the migration process, cross-national comparisons between US-based Asian immigrants and their

origin-country counterparts could help clarify whether observed patterns are due to migration selectivity or transposed cultural values. Second, the national-level Asian–White comparison may not be appropriate as the spatial distribution of Asians is different from other racial-ethnic groups and has been changing (Kye 2023). For example, more than half of Asians live in the ten richest metro areas while only 15 percent of Whites do so (Manduca and Furey 2026, this issue). It can also be the case that the impact of norms shared among the co-ethnics is further intensified through social cohesion in immigrant communities (Borjas 1992; Portes 2003; Smith 2024). Future studies thus benefit from a careful research design that considers the role of geography in explaining the Asian–White gap.

An important limitation of this study is that we are unable to distinguish between biological and stepparents in our analysis of family structure using the CPS-ASEC. This distinction is theoretically meaningful, as research shows that biological ties between parents and children are associated with greater stability and child well-being (Manning 2015). However, this limitation is particularly pronounced for our focus on Asian Americans, who represent a relatively small share of CPS respondents. The low prevalence of nonmarital childbearing and divorce among Asians suggests that stepfamilies are likely rare in this population. For example, nationally, only 3 percent of children born to married parents experience parental remarriage by age twelve (Brown et al. 2016), and this proportion is plausibly even lower among Asians. Combined with small sample sizes, these factors make it difficult to produce reliable estimates of variation by biological relationship to children within the Asian population. Nevertheless, this remains an important area for future research, particularly for understanding the diversity of family experiences beyond traditional two-parent married households. Similarly, while our analysis combines cohabiting and single-parent families into a single “non-intact” category, we recognize that these arrangements are distinct and may have different implications for child well-being. Due to the small number of non-intact families

among Asians in our sample, particularly among immigrants, we were unable to reliably estimate differences between these groups. Future research with larger or more targeted samples could explore these distinctions in greater depth, especially in light of changing family norms among younger and US-born Asian populations.

Our analysis adopts two indicators of family stability, namely, nonmarital childbearing and two-parent, married households, which have been widely used to examine implications for child well-being. However, we recognize that these measures are not neutral. Existing studies in family demography often treat marital stability as a proxy for child well-being, but this framing can obscure important questions about women’s experiences and agency within these unions. In particular, for women in immigrant or culturally conservative communities, staying in a marriage may involve substantial gendered costs, including limited autonomy, social pressure, or the endurance of unequal or harmful relationships (Espiritu 2001). While our findings are based on heterosexual families, future studies should include nonheterosexual families to provide further insights. Future research should also explore the quality and meaning of marital stability from the perspective of women and other marginalized family members, particularly across lines of race, nativity, and class.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the prior literature on racial, ethnic, and educational differences in family instability in two important ways. First, empirically, this is the first study to provide evidence of racial and ethnic variation in the educational gradient of family stability, with a particular focus on Asian Americans. Second, theoretically, it challenges the presumed universality of diverging destinies by showing that the interplay between socioeconomic status and family formation is contingent on cultural, generational, and marital contexts. Understanding sources and mechanisms of population heterogeneity is a fundamentally important question for improving demographic theories (Xie 2000). Findings from this study call for greater attention to within-group varia-

tion and the intersecting roles of race, immigration, and socioeconomic status for a nuanced understanding of Asian Americans' family stability.

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PART III

Strategic Adaptation, Variants, and Limitations

The Shift to Stock-Based Compensation and the Asian American–White Pay Gap Revisited



ANGELINA GRIGORYEVA

Financialization of the US economy has brought about major historical change in compensation practices. In addition to traditional cash wages, American employers increasingly provide workers with compensation based in part on company stock, and 23 percent of US private-sector employees now receive stock-based compensation. This study is among the first to examine the implications of this shift for Asian Americans' labor market attainment. Analysis of the General Social Survey (GSS) and the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF) shows that Asian Americans, on average, are more likely to receive stock-based compensation than Whites, in part because they are more likely to work in jobs where it is provided. However, the two groups are equally likely to receive stock-based compensation and similar amounts in these jobs.

Keywords: pay gap, stock-based compensation, financialization, inequality, race, Asian American

Research on Asian Americans' assimilation in the United States focuses on wages as a key indicator of their labor market attainment. However, in recent decades nonwage components of (pecuniary) compensation have grown in prominence (Kristal et al. 2020; Shuey and O'Rand 2004), underscoring the importance of moving beyond the narrow focus on wages for understanding patterns of Asian Americans' economic incorporation. This study is among the first to examine the shift to stock-based compensation and its implications for Asian Americans' labor market attainment.

In the course of financialization of the US

economy (Krippner 2011; Davis and Kim 2015; Lin and Neely 2020), American employers increasingly provide workers with compensation based in part on company stock (for example, stock grants, stock options). Estimates show that 23 percent of US private-sector workforce, or twenty-nine million Americans, now receive stock-based compensation. This form of compensation is now well represented across the US workforce, ranging from executives in Fortune 500 companies (DiPrete et al. 2010) to engineers in high-tech firms (Blasi et al. 2013) to even baristas in Starbucks (Sharf 2015). The focus on stock-

Angelina Grigoryeva is assistant professor in the Department of Sociology and an affiliate of the Data Sciences Institute at the University of Toronto, Canada.

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based compensation is important because it serves as an increasingly important pathway to economic mobility and wealth building (Kruse et al. 2021).

How do Asian Americans fare when it comes to stock-based compensation? Drawing on the literatures on Asian Americans' assimilation, racial inequality, and the sociology of work, my argument is threefold. First, I argue that, on average, Asian Americans will be more likely to receive stock-based compensation in part because they are more likely to work in jobs where stock-based compensation is more common, such as high-wage, "good jobs" in larger firms and within the high-tech industry (Neely et al. 2023; Kalleberg 2011; Xie and Goyette 2003). This employment pattern, in turn, reflects Asian Americans' higher educational attainment as strategic adaptation to the labor market (Lee and Kye 2016; Xie and Goyette 2003). Second, I argue that after accounting for job characteristics, Asian Americans will be equally likely to receive stock-based compensation as their White counterparts. This parity reflects the compensation setting process when it is stock-based. Specifically, stock-based compensation is usually provided on a company-wide or group basis (for example, by job title), thus equalizing across ethnoracial groups.

Finally, with respect to the amount of stock-based compensation, it is often determined by managers' discretion, thus making it more susceptible to discriminatory biases. However, the amount of stock-based compensation might be more readily negotiable. Whereas wages are directly subject to budget constraints, stock-based compensation does not immediately impact the company's cash flow, allowing greater flexibility for negotiation. If Asian Americans are more likely to select into jobs where stock-based compensation is provided as part of a broader strategic adaptation to the labor market, they may also be more likely to negotiate its amount to preempt potential discriminatory biases in managerial discretion, resulting in parity with Whites.

Using data from the 2002–2022 General Social Survey and the 2022 Survey of Consumer Finances—the only two nationally representative datasets that include questions on stock-

based compensation and separate Asian Americans as a standalone ethnoracial category—this study reports three key findings. First, Asian Americans, on average, are more likely to receive stock-based compensation than Whites. Second, although it might be tempting to interpret these findings as indicative of the Asian American advantage, multivariate analysis reveals that it is explained by differences in job characteristics between the two groups. Specifically, the analysis accounts for differences in employment in high-wage, good jobs in larger firms and within the high-tech industry. Thus, Asian Americans are more likely to receive stock-based compensation because they are disproportionately employed in jobs where it is offered, while receiving it at comparable rates to Whites once in those jobs. These findings suggest that the concentration of Asian Americans in jobs offering stock-based compensation may reflect their strategic labor market adaptation and pursuit of economic mobility. Third, the study finds parity in the amount of stock-based compensation between Asian American and White workers who receive it. This parity is notable given the susceptibility of stock-based compensation to discriminatory biases.

This study contributes to the literatures on racial inequality, Asian Americans' assimilation, and the sociology of work. The findings underscore the importance of moving beyond wages for understanding the dynamics of racial inequality in US finance-driven capitalism. Instead, this analysis points to stock-based compensation as an increasingly important site of racial inequality in the United States. The focus on the Asian American–White gap is particularly important for understanding the racial inequality consequences of stock-based compensation because Asian Americans are often overrepresented in jobs where it is more common. Studying this gap provides insights into whether representation in these fields translates into equitable compensation, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of economic outcomes of Asian Americans beyond the "model minority" stereotype. Without considering stock-based compensation, we miss a key site of racial inequality and Asian Americans' economic incorporation.

ASIAN AMERICANS’ LABOR MARKET ATTAINMENT

A notable pattern in Asian Americans’ socioeconomic incorporation is their exceptional educational achievements compared to all other ethno-racial groups, including native-born Whites. Asian Americans are significantly more likely to hold bachelor’s and advanced degrees, exhibit the highest rates of college graduation, and are disproportionately represented at highly selective colleges and universities. Moreover, they are more likely to pursue fields of study that lead to high-wage occupations, particularly in the high-tech and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) sectors (Neely et al. 2023). Scholars have interpreted the exceptional educational achievement of Asian Americans as a form of strategic adaptation to the labor market (Xie and Goyette 2003).

Yet, Asian Americans’ achievement in education does not appear to translate to a comparable advantage in the labor market (Lee and Kye 2016; Sakamoto et al. 2009). Some studies report that Asian Americans have reached earnings parity with Whites, particularly those who are native-born and US-educated. Other research, however, points to a persistent disadvantage, with Asian Americans earning lower wages than similarly situated White counterparts.

These mixed findings underscore the importance of moving beyond single-outcome measures to assess Asian Americans’ economic incorporation. Much of existing research on Asian Americans’ attainment in the labor market has focused on wages as a key indicator of economic incorporation. This focus reflects a broader emphasis on inequality in wages in sociological scholarship, motivated by its sharp increase in the United States since the 1980s (Kristal and Cohen 2017; McCall and Percheski 2010). Yet, in recent decades nonwage components of compensation have grown in prominence (Kristal et al. 2020; Shuey and O’Rand 2004). This study focuses on the shift to stock-based compensation as an increasingly important, yet understudied, dimension of socioeconomic attainment. How do Asian Americans fare when it comes to stock-based compensation? Do their educational advantages translate

into similar gains in stock-based compensation? Or do they fall behind? Or is there parity in stock-based compensation between Asian Americans and Whites? By addressing these questions, the study offers a more comprehensive account of Asian Americans’ labor market incorporation.

Studying the Asian American–White gap in stock-based compensation is especially important because it sheds light on emerging forms of labor market inequality that are not captured by traditional wage-based analyses. Given their exceptional educational attainment, Asian Americans might be expected to benefit equally, or even disproportionately, from stock-based compensation. However, if disparities exist despite these favorable characteristics, this pattern raises important questions about how newer forms of compensation reproduce racial inequalities. Focusing on stock-based compensation offers a more complete understanding of Asian Americans’ socioeconomic attainment in an evolving labor market.

BEYOND WAGES: THE CASE OF STOCK-BASED COMPENSATION

Over past decades, US companies increasingly provide workers with compensation based in part on company stock. In the early 1980s, fewer than one in eight workers received stock-based compensation (Davis 2009). By the late 2010s, more than one-fifth of employees received some of their compensation in company stock (Kruse et al. 2021; Kurtulus and Kruse 2017). For reference, this is three times more than the share of unionized employees (Rosenfeld 2014).

Many US companies across different industries and of different sizes now provide stock-based compensation. These include largest US corporations, such as Amazon, Apple, Coca-Cola, Exxon Mobil, General Motors, Microsoft, Morgan Stanley, Procter & Gamble, Southwest Airlines, and United Parcel Service, among others (Blasi et al. 2013; Kurtulus and Kruse 2017). Also, employees in many medium-sized companies receive stock-based compensation, such as at Chobani and Bob’s Red Mill (Blasi et al. 2013). Finally, stock-based compensation is increasingly common among smaller startup firms, especially in the high-tech industry. Data on venture-backed startup firms indicate that

three-quarters of them offer stock-based compensation to their employees (Hand 2008).

Stock-based compensation gained momentum after the Employee Retirement Income Security Act of 1974 because of its several advantageous features. For companies, stock-based compensation is attractive because there is no direct cash outlay or immediate budgetary impact. In addition, companies implement stock-based compensation because it can help attract, motivate, and retain employees. By definition, stock-based compensation is tied to the company stock price, thus incentivizing employees by directly linking their earnings to firm performance. Because stock-based compensation usually requires a vesting period typically of two years, whereby employees must wait between the award of stock-based compensation and the point at which they gain ownership, it can also help retain workers. Studies show that stock-based compensation improves a number of firm-level outcomes, including greater employee loyalty and lower turnover (Kruse et al. 2010).

From the employee perspective, the focus on stock-based compensation is important due to its wealth-building potential. Because stock-based compensation is linked to the stock market, it provides employees with an opportunity to benefit from value appreciation over time, thus facilitating greater wealth accumulation (Hayes and O'Brien 2020). Additionally, stock-based compensation can entail capital income from dividend payments and share buybacks alongside labor income in the form of regular wages (Nau 2013). Moreover, the US tax system treats stock-based compensation more favorably than wage earnings because the tax rate on income from capital gains is lower than that on earned income (Hacker and Pierson 2010; Spilerman 2000). As one employee in the high-tech industry put it, "The real wealth in Silicon Valley is generated through equity" (Luo 2018).

Importantly, the economic value of stock-based compensation is not negligible. The estimated mean is about \$82,000 and the median is about \$7,000, which is equivalent to 27 percent and 7 percent of annual pay, respectively, in 2016 dollars (Kruse et al. 2021).

The shift to stock-based compensation can be understood as part of a broader trend of

the financialization of the US economy (Caruthers and Kim 2011; Davis and Kim 2015; Lin and Neely 2020). Since the 1980s, the American economy has undergone a fundamental reorientation from manufacturing and service production to a finance-based capitalism (Krippner 2011). Financialization is evident in a broad-based reorientation toward a pattern of accumulation in which profits in the economy, including the finance industry and nominally nonfinancial firms, accrue increasingly through financial activity (Krippner 2011). That is, American firms increasingly derive profits through financial channels, as evidenced by a rise in the share of portfolio income from interest payments, dividends, and capital gains on investments to total corporate profits from under 10 percent to almost 40 percent during the same period (see also Lin and Tomaskovic-Devey 2013). One notable example is the Ford Motor Company. In recent years, this quintessential American manufacturing company generates most of its profits through financing car sales (as well as other financial operations) rather than through the sale of the cars themselves. The focus on stock-based compensation reveals that American firms increasingly rely on the financial sector not only to generate profits but also to pay workers.

More recent research suggests that the impact of financialization is also evident in the economic lives of households, as well. Over the past decades, Americans have become increasingly involved in finance and the stock market. In the 1980s, just one in five households was invested in the stock market, and by the mid-2010s, more than half of Americans owned stocks (Bricker et al. 2019). This increase was driven in part by the shift from defined-benefit to defined-contribution pensions (Davis 2009; Hacker 2006). The focus on stock-based compensation shows that it has become another important pathway through which Americans are invested in the stock market.

There is now growing empirical evidence that implicates financialization in widening economic inequality in the United States (Lin and Neely 2020; Davis and Kim 2015), including disparities between racial groups (Lin and Dominguez 2023). This study focuses on the financialization of compensation through pay in

company stock and its implications for understanding Asian Americans’ labor market attainment.

THE ASIAN AMERICAN-WHITE GAP IN STOCK-BASED COMPENSATION

Several institutional features of stock-based compensation suggest that it may have important implications for understanding Asian Americans’ labor market attainment. Unlike regular cash wages, stock-based compensation is not paid universally to all employees. Rather, its compensation-setting process reflects two stages: whether stock-based compensation is provided (that is, eligibility) and the amount of stock-based compensation awarded among those who receive it. Analytically, it is important to distinguish between the two stages because they may reflect different mechanisms and contribute in distinct ways to disparities between Asian Americans and Whites.

First, eligibility for stock-based compensation is usually defined by the type of job and a company’s overall compensation policy. Similarly to other pecuniary benefits such as employer-sponsored pensions (Kristal et al. 2020; Shuey and O’Rand 2004), decisions about stock-based compensation are generally not made on an individual basis. Instead, they are usually determined at a group level (using factors such as wage level, job quality, or occupation) or implemented company-wide (with variation by industry and firm size).

Many firms rely on structured compensation bands to define eligibility for stock-based compensation by wage levels.¹ Higher-paid employees are significantly more likely to receive stock-based compensation, while lower-paid workers are often excluded from such benefits. For instance, during the COVID-19 pandemic,

Bank of America awarded company stock to employees earning more than \$100,000 annually, while those earning less received cash bonuses (Son 2021). Consistent with this case, Edward Carberry (2010) found that stock-based compensation is positively associated with employees’ base wages, although the study is limited by a large but nonrepresentative sample. In addition, good jobs are more likely to come with stock-based compensation, although empirical evidence remains limited, with most existing research focusing on other financial benefits such as employer-sponsored pensions (Kalleberg 2011; Kalleberg et al. 2000). Finally, stock-based compensation is most common in managerial and professional occupations, in part because it is used to incentivize performance (Kruse et al. 2010).²

Stock-based compensation is more prevalent in larger firms, partly because the fixed administrative and legal costs associated with implementing such programs can be more efficiently distributed across a broader employee base.³ However, stock-based compensation is also common among smaller high-tech start-ups, which often rely on such compensation to attract and retain talent in the face of budget constraints. Evidence from venture-backed start-ups shows that three-quarters of them provide stock-based compensation to their employees (Hand 2008). More generally, across industries, stock-based compensation is most common in the high-tech sector, followed by the finance industry. Almost half of employees (45 percent) in the high-tech sector receive stock-based compensation, which is double the national average, and almost one-third do so in finance (Kurtulus and Kruse 2017). High-tech and finance firms provide the highest levels of stock-based compensation primarily because

1. As with other nonwage components of compensation, stock-based compensation typically does not involve wage concessions from employees (Kruse et al. 2021). Employees are generally not given the option to substitute between base wage and stock-based compensation, as it is provided in addition to, rather than in lieu of, wages.

2. Nationally representative data from the General Social Survey (GSS) indicate that approximately 27 percent of managers receive stock-based compensation and about 22 percent of employees in professional roles do (Kruse et al. 2010). By contrast, service workers are the least likely to receive stock-based compensation (6.5 percent).

3. The GSS data indicate that approximately 40 percent of employees in large firms (that is, with 10,000 or more employees) receive stock-based compensation, compared to just 16 percent in small firms with fewer than 100 employees (Kurtulus and Kruse 2017).

they rely on it to incentivize performance and operate in sectors closely tied to the stock market.⁴

Thus, although the prevalence of stock-based compensation has become more common in recent years, its distribution in the US workforce remains highly uneven. Stock-based compensation is concentrated in higher-wage positions, good jobs that provide other pecuniary benefits, managerial and professional roles, larger firms with the capacity to absorb implementation costs, and industries such as high-tech and finance, where stock-based compensation is a normative feature of total rewards systems. At the same time, Asian Americans are disproportionately represented in the types of jobs and companies, particularly in high-tech and professional roles, where stock-based compensation is more commonly offered, in part reflecting their higher educational achievement and strategic adaptation to the labor market through acquisition of hard skills (Neely et al. 2023; Lee and Kye 2016; Xie and Goyette 2003). Given this occupational sorting, one might expect that Asian Americans, on average, will be more likely to receive stock-based compensation than their White counterparts.

To further theorize the Asian American–White gap in the likelihood of receiving stock-based compensation, it is useful to consider how it is structured within the types of jobs and companies that provide it. In most cases, eligibility for stock-based compensation is not determined on an individual basis; rather, it is automatically extended to employees occupying positions or roles where such compensation is provided. In other words, employees become eligible for stock-based compensation by virtue of being hired into or promoted into roles where it is routinely offered. Conversely, in positions or firms where stock-based com-

pensation is not offered, employees cannot receive it.

For instance, in the Bank of America example discussed earlier, stock-based compensation was awarded to all employees earning above a specific wage threshold. In other cases, federal regulations require that some types of stock-based compensation be provided to all employees meeting eligibility criteria. As a well-known example, Starbucks offers stock-based compensation through an employee stock purchase plan (ESPP), whereby workers can acquire company stock at a discounted price. Federal legislation requires that stock-based compensation through ESPPs be made available on a broad basis and provided to most employees. At Starbucks, employees are eligible following ninety days of employment. Even in the absence of federal requirements, many companies provide stock-based compensation on a broad basis. Turning again to Starbucks as an example, it also grants employees shares of company stock, and it does so on a company-wide basis.

Thus, when stock-based compensation is provided, it is often implemented on a broad basis or at the group level rather than individually determined, equalizing across racial lines. This discussion suggests parity in the likelihood of receiving stock-based compensation between Asian Americans and Whites who work in the types of jobs and companies where stock-based compensation is provided. Overall, one might expect that Asian Americans and Whites will be equally likely to receive stock-based compensation, after accounting for job characteristics.

Once eligibility for stock-based compensation is defined, its amount is determined.⁵ Compared to regular wages, the compensation setting process when it is stock-based often involves more discretion on the part of manag-

4. Notably, the manufacturing sector also shows a relatively high prevalence of stock-based compensation, at 29 percent (Kurtulus and Kruse 2017), likely reflecting the broader adoption of high-performance work practices in this industry (Kruse et al. 2010). In contrast, stock-based compensation is considerably less common in other industries. For example, it is among the lowest in the agriculture, mining, and construction industry group, where only 11 percent of workers report receiving such compensation (Kurtulus and Kruse 2017).

5. The amount of stock-based compensation is usually set at the time of hiring, promotion, or during so-called annual “refreshers.”

ers. Wage-setting typically follows more standardized human resources practices, such as benchmarking salaries against market rates. In comparison, the amount of stock-based compensation is often determined individually through the recommendation of direct managers. Additionally, there is inherent uncertainty around the value of stock-based compensation, as it is tied to stock market performance and may fluctuate over time. Greater discretion and valuation uncertainty may make stock-based compensation more vulnerable to discriminatory biases (Castilla 2008; Guseva and Rona-Tas 2001).

At the same time, because the pay-setting for stock-based compensation involves less standardization, it might offer more opportunities for employees to negotiate its amount (Sauer et al. 2021). As one employee put it, “I didn’t negotiate my base salary. I did, however, negotiate my [stock-based compensation]” (Luo 2018). Unlike regular wages, stock-based compensation does not require an immediate cash outlay, meaning that companies often face fewer budgetary constraints when determining the amount of stock-based compensation. As a result, employers might be more open to negotiations over stock-based compensation.

If Asian Americans are more likely to work in jobs where stock-based compensation is provided as part of a broader strategic adaptation to the labor market, they also might be more likely to negotiate for greater amounts. This negotiation pattern may serve to preempt potential discriminatory biases in managerial discretion, resulting in parity with White employees. While empirical research on Asian Americans’ negotiations for stock-based compensation remains limited, recent evidence on wages suggests that Asian Americans achieve comparable pay to Whites when they engage in negotiation (Lu 2023). Thus, one might expect that Asian Americans and Whites will receive similar amounts of stock-based compensation.

Empirical evidence on stock-based compensation and its implications for Asian Americans’ labor market attainment is limited.⁶ A notable exception, Carberry (2010) reports parity in stock-based compensation between Asian Americans and Whites. The study, however, relies on a nonrepresentative sample characterized by higher levels of stock-based compensation than in the broader US workforce, limiting the generalizability of its findings.

Overall, this discussion leads to the following expectations. First, it is possible that Asian Americans, on average, will be more likely to receive stock-based compensation. This advantage, however, will be explained by differences in job characteristics between Asian Americans and Whites, and the two groups will show parity in the probability of receiving stock-based compensation after accounting for job characteristics. Finally, with respect to the amount of stock-based compensation, one might expect that among employees who receive it, there will be parity between Asian Americans and Whites.

DATA AND METHODS

Data

A key challenge for research on stock-based compensation and its implications for understanding the socioeconomic attainment of Asian Americans is limited available data. Very few datasets contain information on stock-based compensation (Kruse et al. 2021) and include an adequate sample size of Asian Americans for reliable statistical estimates (Sakamoto et al. 2009). This study draws on data from the General Social Survey (GSS) and the Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF), the only two nationally representative surveys that collect detailed information on both stock-based compensation and race. Each dataset has unique strengths and weaknesses, and together they enable a more comprehensive analysis of the

6. Although there is ample scholarly work on stock-based compensation in the literature on labor relations and organizational research, it focuses primarily on employee performance and firm-level outcomes, rather than on distributional patterns. As a result, empirical evidence on racial disparities remains scarce. One of the few studies to explore this issue, Carberry (2010) finds that White employees are more likely to receive stock-based compensation than their Black and Hispanic counterparts (71 percent versus 58 and 39 percent, respectively), though the study is limited by a non-representative sample of US workers.

Asian American–White gap in stock-based compensation.

The GSS is a large-scale nationally representative cross-sectional survey of American adults conducted by the National Opinion Research Center (NORC) at the University of Chicago. The primary strength of the GSS for the present study is that it is considered to provide the best estimates of stock-based compensation in the United States (Kruse et al. 2010, 2). Information on stock-based compensation was first collected in the GSS in 2002, and every four years since then (that is, in 2002, 2006, 2010, 2014, 2018, and 2022). An important limitation of the GSS is that the questions about stock-based compensation are administered only to a random subset of respondents, resulting in a smaller number of Asian Americans in each wave. To address this limitation, the GSS data are pooled across survey waves. Also, although the GSS collects rich sociodemographic data, its earlier waves did not include detailed questions on job characteristics associated with stock-based compensation.⁷ For this reason, this study draws on the GSS waves from 2006 (the earliest wave with detailed information on stock-based compensation and its correlates) and 2022 (the most recent wave).

The SCF is a large-scale national cross-sectional survey of American households sponsored by the US Federal Reserve Board, and like the GSS, it is conducted by the NORC at the University of Chicago. The SCF is considered the gold standard for the study of household finances (Keister 2014, 350) because it collects the most detailed data on earnings, income, and wealth (Killewald et al. 2017), including information on stock-based compensation. The SCF estimates of stock-based compensation are highly consistent with those in the GSS (Kruse et al. 2021). However, a primary limitation of the SCF for the present study concerns its measures of race. Although the SCF has been administered triannually since 1989, its earlier waves did not include a separate category for Asian Americans. The 2022 wave is the first to separately identify Asian Americans, following a change in survey methodology (Moore and Pence 2021).

This study therefore draws exclusively on the 2022 SCF wave as the only wave that contains a separate category for Asian Americans.

Following existing research (Kruse et al. 2010, 2021; Kurtulus and Kruse 2017), my analytic sample includes individuals who are currently employed and work in the private sector. I focus on differences between non-Hispanic Whites and Asian Americans, and exclude other ethnic and racial groups from the analysis. The sample size is $N = 2,109$ in the GSS data and $N = 2,153$ in the SCF data.

A limitation of the data used in this study is the relatively small sample size of Asian Americans ($N = 104$ in the GSS and $N = 151$ in the SCF). This is a common issue in the literature on Asian Americans' socioeconomic attainment due to data constraints, and some previous analyses have relied on small samples of Asian Americans, particularly when disaggregated by ethnic group (for example, Kim and Sakamoto 2014; Kim and Zhao 2014). Although many large-scale surveys use oversampling techniques to ensure sufficient representation of minority groups, Asian Americans are often excluded from these targeted efforts (Sakamoto et al. 2009). Unfortunately, the GSS and SCF are the only available datasets with information on stock-based compensation and race, and neither oversamples Asian Americans.

Measures

My key outcome of interest is stock-based compensation. Following existing research (Kurtulus and Kruse 2017; Kruse et al. 2010, 2021), it is captured by ownership of stock in the employer company (either directly or through a pension plan at work) or stock options in the employer company. I use this measurement strategy for the analysis of both the GSS and the SCF data because the questions about stock-based compensation are similar across the surveys. Due to differences in compensation-setting processes, I use two measures of stock-based compensation: a dichotomous variable set to 1 if the respondent receives stock-based compensation and 0 otherwise, and a continuous variable for

7. Specifically, I do not include the 2002 GSS wave in my analysis because it does not contain information on the size of the company where a respondent works. My results remain the same when I include the 2002 GSS wave in my analysis and do not control for company size in my models.

its conditional amount (that is, conditional on receiving stock-based compensation).

An important caveat about the measurement of stock-based compensation in both the GSS and SCF is that it relies on respondents' self-reports, which may be subject to reporting error (for example, if a respondent receives stock-based compensation but does not report it in a survey). Neither the GSS nor the SCF includes data to address this possibility. I take advantage of the National Bureau of Economic Research (NBER) survey that contains employees' self-reports on stock-based compensation with matched employers' data (see Kruse et al. 2010). The NBER survey was administered between 2001 and 2006 to a large sample of employees ($N = 36,590$) in fourteen American companies with stock-based compensation. Although the NBER survey data are not representative, the sample covers American firms across different industries and of various sizes. Comparative analysis shows that the NBER data yields findings consistent with the nationally representative GSS. In the NBER survey, almost all employees (93 percent) correctly report receiving stock-based compensation.

As my main predictor of interest, I use a dichotomous variable that indicates whether the respondent identifies as Asian, with non-Hispanic White as the reference category. In the interest of consistency, the analysis relies on the race category the respondent identifies with most strongly in both the GSS and the SCF analysis. A limitation of the SCF data is that only information on the respondent's strongest racial identity is available. In the GSS, respondents can indicate up to three race-ethnic categories. My results remain the same when I use an alterna-

tive measurement strategy in the GSS data (for example, the respondent is coded as Asian if they list it in any of their race responses).

Finally, I control for job characteristics and sociodemographic attributes.⁸ Job characteristics include wage income,⁹ tenure, occupation, industry, job quality, and company size. Sociodemographic attributes include education, marital status, having children, age, gender, and being foreign-born. Most of these variables are coded in a consistent way across the GSS and SCF data, to the extent possible. Online appendix table A.1 summarizes the measurement of all variables used in the analysis across both datasets. Table A.2 presents descriptive statistics for the GSS data, and table A.3 for the SCF data.¹⁰

Analytic Strategy

I begin by presenting descriptive analysis of differences in stock-based compensation between Asians and non-Hispanic Whites. Due to differences in compensation-setting processes, I estimate separately an unadjusted Asian American–White gap in two outcomes: the probability of receiving stock-based compensation and its conditional amount. For the former, the outcome is a dichotomous variable set to 1 if the respondent receives stock-based compensation and 0 otherwise. For the latter, the outcome is the conditional amount of stock-based compensation (that is, conditional on receiving it), and this analysis is restricted to employees who receive stock-based compensation (that is, those who do not receive it are not included in this analysis). Next, I examine the gap in a multivariate framework, where I first control for job characteristics and then add sociodemographic attributes.¹¹ I use a linear probability model

8. To avoid overcontrolling (Elwert and Winship 2014) and small cell sizes (especially given a relatively low number of Asian Americans in the GSS and SCF), I include only theoretically relevant controls in the multivariate regression analysis. For instance, I include a dichotomous variable for the high-tech–finance industry, where stock-based compensation is more common and Asian Americans are overrepresented. However, I do not include variables for other industries, even though they are available in the GSS and SCF data. My results remain substantively the same when additional variables are included in the analysis (for example, other industries), but they proved not to be statistically significant.

9. Wage income does not include the value of stock-based compensation.

10. The online appendix for tables A.1 through A.4 can be found at <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/12/3/174/tab-supplemental>.

11. A concern in the multivariate regression analysis of Asian Americans' labor market attainment is the possibility of overcontrolling, if models include covariates that are themselves potentially impacted by minority status

(LPM) to estimate the probability of receiving stock-based compensation,¹² and an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression to examine its conditional amount (logged).¹³

RESULTS

I begin by presenting descriptive results that show the unadjusted gap in stock-based compensation between Asian Americans and Whites. I then move to multivariate analysis that accounts for job characteristics and sociodemographic attributes.

Descriptive Results: Unadjusted Asian American–White Gap in Stock-Based Compensation

Table 1 presents the probability of receiving stock-based compensation and its amount for Asian American and White workers in the General Social Survey and the Survey of Consumer Finances. Several findings stand out. First, there is a pronounced and statistically significant gap in the probability of receiving stock-based compensation between Asian Americans and Whites. Asian American workers are, as expected, more likely to receive stock-based compensation than their White counterparts (in the GSS, 32 percent versus 23 percent, respectively; in the SCF, 26 percent versus 16 percent, respectively).

There does not appear to be a statistically

significant difference in the amount of stock-based compensation between Asian American and White workers. Specifically, the difference in the amount of stock-based compensation is not statistically significant in either the total sample, or among employees who receive stock-based compensation. These results are consistent across the GSS and SCF data.

Finally, it is worth noting that the prevalence of stock-based compensation appears to be somewhat lower in the SCF compared to the GSS, consistent with prior research (Kruse et al. 2021). The gap between the SCF and GSS estimates likely reflects different units of analysis. The GSS sample targets individuals, whereas the SCF shifts the unit of analysis to the household level. The difference in the unit of analysis may have implications for stock-based compensation estimates if there is clustering of stock-based compensation reflecting assortative mating in family formation patterns. That is, stock-based compensation might be clustered in the same families if individuals with stock-based compensation are more likely to be married to those who also receive it, in part because stock-based compensation is associated with sociodemographic characteristics that are also associated with assortative mating. With respect to the amount of stock-based compensation, SCF estimates are also somewhat lower than those reported in the GSS for

(that is, endogenous variables) (Elwert and Winship 2014; Sakamoto et al. 2009). To address this possibility, a well-established approach in the literature is to include only sociodemographic covariates because they are not closely linked to labor market outcomes at a specific point in time (Sakamoto et al. 2009). Following this approach, I estimated the models only with sociodemographic attributes. My results remain substantively the same.

12. LPM regression is estimated as OLS regression for dichotomous outcomes. While logistic regression is often used for binary dependent variables, LPM and logit typically yield similar estimates for nonrare outcomes, as in this study. I present LPM results in the interest of interpretability, as the coefficients can be directly understood as changes in predicted probability. My conclusions remain the same when I estimate logit regression; these results are reported in the online appendix (table A.4).

13. For the conditional amount of stock-based compensation, I also estimated unadjusted median differences and conducted a median regression because this approach is less sensitive to skewed outcome distributions than comparisons at the mean, particularly in the context of a small sample size, as is the case in this study. My results remain substantively the same. Also, I considered using Heckman selection models (Heckman 1979). However, specifying a valid exclusion restriction proved particularly challenging due to the complexity of the selection processes involved: not only selection into employment (at the individual level), but also selection into jobs that offer stock-based compensation, which reflects both individual- and firm-level factors. Prior research shows that without a strong exclusion restriction, Heckman estimates can be less reliable than OLS (Wolfford and Siegel 2018; Winship and Mare 1992), especially in the case of a small sample size, as in this study. Accordingly, my analysis does not use Heckman's method.

Table 1. Unadjusted Stock-Based Compensation by Race, General Social Survey (GSS), and Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF)

Stock-Based Compensation	All	White	Asian	Difference
Probability				
GSS	0.231	0.226	0.317	*
SCF	0.165	0.158	0.257	***
Unconditional amount (\$)				
GSS	32,924.0 (328,375.5)	32,245.5 (327,210.6)	46,005.2 (351,503.7)	
SCF	23,419.3 (2,155,560.8)	19,320.4 (1,528,713.4)	77,880.3 (5,945,759.6)	
N				
GSS	2,109	2,005	104	
SCF	2,153	2,002	151	
Conditional amount (\$)				
GSS	239,437.2 (858,434.8)	236,821.4 (860,351.1)	281,443.5 (851,457.9)	
SCF	142,323.0 (5,313,489.0)	122,569.8 (3,849,925.0)	303,594.3 (11,700,000.0)	
N				
GSS	487	454	33	
SCF	366	326	40	

Source: Author’s calculations.

Note: Data are from the 2006–2022 GSS waves and the 2022 SCF wave. The analytic sample is restricted to White and Asian individuals who are currently employed in the private sector. The probability of receiving stock-based compensation and its unconditional amount are estimated on the total sample. For the unconditional amount of stock-based compensation, employees who do not receive it are assigned zero value. For the conditional amount, estimates are based only on employees who receive stock-based compensation. All dollar values are in 2022 US dollars. Standard deviation values are provided in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

the overall sample and for Whites but appear higher for Asian Americans. However, these comparisons should be made with consideration of the large standard deviations and differences in survey design.

Multivariate Results: Parity in Stock-Based Compensation Between Asian Americans and Whites

Moving to multivariate analysis, table 2 presents LPM regression results estimating the probability of receiving stock-based compensation for Asian American and White workers after controlling for job characteristics and sociodemographic attributes (logit regression

results are presented in table A.4). The Asian American–White gap in the probability of receiving stock-based compensation stops being statistically significant after accounting for job characteristics (models 2 and 5). It is worth noting that the coefficient on Asian American differs significantly between the unadjusted models and those controlling for job characteristics, indicating that the coefficient change is statistically significant after accounting for covariates. The Asian American–White gap remains insignificant after adding sociodemographic controls (models 3 and 6).

Also, results show that the probability of receiving stock-based compensation is associated

Table 2. Linear Probability Model Regression Results Estimating Probability of Stock-Based Compensation by Race, General Social Survey (GSS), and Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF)

	GSS			SCF		
	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
Asian	0.091* (0.042)	0.049 (0.040)	0.077 (0.046)	0.099** (0.038)	0.067 (0.037)	0.063 (0.040)
Income (log)		0.053*** (0.009)	0.042*** (0.010)		0.005*** (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)
Tenure		0.007*** (0.001)	0.007*** (0.001)		−0.001 (0.001)	−0.001 (0.001)
Occupational prestige score (GSS)		0.001 (0.001)	0.001 (0.001)		0.027 (0.016)	0.028 (0.018)
Managerial/professional occupation (SCF)					0.063* (0.030)	0.054 (0.031)
Finance/high-tech industry		0.031 (0.027)	0.027 (0.028)		0.135*** (0.018)	0.125*** (0.019)
Job quality		0.072*** (0.019)	0.065** (0.019)		−0.004 (0.023)	0.003 (0.023)
Company size 100 to 499 employees		0.073** (0.021)	0.075*** (0.021)		0.133*** (0.022)	0.138*** (0.022)
Company size 500+ employees		0.240*** (0.022)	0.237*** (0.022)			
High school			0.059 (0.038)			0.068* (0.030)
Some college			0.051 (0.046)			0.066** (0.024)
College degree			0.130** (0.042)			0.071* (0.028)
Advanced degree			0.106* (0.049)			0.048 (0.035)
Married			0.023 (0.026)			0.081** (0.029)
Divorced, separated, or widowed			−0.011 (0.029)			0.083* (0.038)
Children			0.018 (0.021)			0.027 (0.022)
Age			0.001 (0.001)			0.001 (0.001)
Male			0.025 (0.018)			0.022 (0.022)
Foreign-born			−0.076 (0.044)			0.011 (0.023)
Year	0.001 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.002)	−0.001 (0.002)			
Constant	−2.246 (3.246)	0.932 (3.018)	0.741 (3.057)	0.158*** (0.009)	−0.044* (0.018)	−0.202*** (0.039)
N		2,109			2,153	

Source: Author's calculations.

Note: Data are from the 2006–2022 GSS waves and the 2022 SCF wave. The analytic sample is restricted to White and Asian individuals who are currently employed in the private sector. The outcome is a dichotomous variable set to 1 if the respondent receives stock-based compensation and to 0 if the respondent does not. All dollar values are in 2022 US dollars. Standard deviation values are provided in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

with job characteristics and sociodemographic attributes. Employees with stock-based compensation are more likely to receive higher wages and be employed in good jobs as measured by employer-sponsored benefits; larger firms with more employees; and the finance, insurance, real estate and high-tech industries, although the latter is not consistently significant across all the models. Also, employees with stock-based compensation are more likely to have higher educational attainment. Interestingly, the coefficient on foreign-born does not appear to be statistically significant in either the GSS or the SCF data.

Table 3 presents OLS regression results predicting the conditional amount of stock-based compensation after controlling for job characteristics and sociodemographic attributes. Results show that the Asian American–White gap in the amount of stock-based compensation remains insignificant. Similarly to the probability of receiving stock-based compensation, its amount is associated with job characteristics and sociodemographic attributes. However, it is worth noting that the amount of stock-based compensation is negatively associated with company size, likely because smaller firms (for example, high-tech start-ups) are more likely to offer it to attract workers.

To summarize, Asian Americans, on average, are more likely than Whites to receive stock-based compensation, in part because they are more likely to work in jobs where such compensation is offered, such as high-wage, good jobs in larger firms and within the high-tech industry. However, within these jobs, Asian Americans and Whites are equally likely to receive stock-based compensation and receive similar amounts. These findings point to Asian Americans' strategic adaptation to the labor market through selection into jobs with stock-based compensation. It is possible that Asian Americans pursue economic mobility by strategically seeking jobs that provide stock-based compensation. In the same way, previous research suggests that Asian Americans strategically adapt to the labor market by attaining exceptional levels of education (Lee and Kye 2016; Sakamoto et al. 2009).

An important consideration in interpreting these findings is the relatively small sample

size of Asian Americans in my data. The observed parity in stock-based compensation between Asian Americans and Whites might reflect insufficient statistical power due to sample limitations rather than a true equivalence between the two groups. It is worth noting, though, that the coefficient for Asian Americans is consistently positive across all models. If this coefficient were statistically significant (for example, in a larger sample), it would suggest that Asian Americans not only sort into jobs that offer stock-based compensation but also strategically negotiate for it. Such a pattern would be consistent with the broader argument that Asian Americans may pursue stock-based compensation as a form of strategic adaptation to the labor market.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study is among the first to examine the shift to stock-based compensation and its implications for Asian Americans' labor market attainment in the United States. Combining data from two large-scale, nationally representative datasets, the General Social Survey and the Survey of Consumer Finances, the analysis reports three main findings. First, Asian Americans, on average, are more likely to receive stock-based compensation than their White counterparts. Second, the Asian American–White gap stops being statistically significant after accounting for job characteristics and remains statistically insignificant after adding sociodemographic controls. Third, there appears to be no statistically significant difference in the amount of stock-based compensation between Asian American and White workers who receive it. These results are consistent across the GSS and SCF data.

Taken together, these results offer important implications of interest to scholars of Asian Americans' assimilation, racial inequality, and the sociology of work. First, this study offers novel insights for our understanding of Asian Americans' labor market attainment. On the one hand, my study shows that Asian Americans, on average, are more likely to receive stock-based compensation. Although it might be tempting to interpret these findings as indicative of the Asian American advantage, further analysis reveals that it is explained by

Table 3. Ordinary Least Squares Regression Results Estimating the Conditional Amount of Stock-Based Compensation by Race, General Social Survey (GSS), and Survey of Consumer Finances (SCF)

	GSS			SCF		
	(7)	(8)	(9)	(10)	(11)	(12)
Asian	0.598 (0.729)	0.822 (0.654)	1.300 (0.731)	1.088 (0.683)	1.167 (0.687)	1.200 (0.773)
Income (log)		0.484** (0.157)	0.361* (0.163)		0.041 (0.106)	-0.010 (0.129)
Tenure		0.098*** (0.017)	0.067*** (0.018)		0.160*** (0.025)	0.135*** (0.035)
Occupational prestige score (GSS)		0.014 (0.013)	0.010 (0.014)		0.598 (0.538)	-0.459 (0.699)
Managerial/professional occupation (SCF)					1.552* (0.630)	1.443* (0.695)
Finance/high-tech industry		-0.258 (0.420)	-0.328 (0.413)			
Job quality		1.155** (0.431)	1.002* (0.422)		1.837* (0.815)	2.083* (0.837)
Company size 100 to 499 employees		-1.221** (0.429)	-0.835 (0.427)		-2.975** (1.102)	-2.962* (1.165)
Company size 500+ employees		-0.968** (0.369)	-0.598 (0.375)		-0.875 (0.876)	-0.504 (0.866)
High school			1.404 (1.147)			1.126 (1.415)
Some college			2.243 (1.250)			1.581 (1.255)
College degree			1.696 (1.168)			2.315 (1.191)
Advanced degree			0.746 (1.251)			3.434** (1.194)
Married			0.544 (0.489)			1.521 (1.172)
Divorced, separated, or widowed			0.754 (0.537)			-1.248 (1.533)
Children			0.749* (0.353)			-0.273 (0.694)
Age			0.034 (0.017)			0.043 (0.033)
Male			0.599 (0.327)			-0.464 (1.158)
Foreign-born			0.617 (0.828)			-0.434 (0.736)
Year	0.032 (0.027)	0.023 (0.025)	0.028 (0.025)			
Constant	-55.809 (55.435)	-43.703 (49.691)	-55.796 (49.861)	5.919*** (0.322)	2.695* (1.207)	-0.735 (2.780)
N		487			366	

Source: Author's calculations.

Note: Data are from the 2006–2022 GSS waves and the 2022 SCF wave. The analytic sample is restricted to White and Asian individuals who are currently employed in the private sector and receive stock-based compensation. The outcome is the conditional amount of stock-based compensation, estimated among employees who receive it. All dollar values are in 2022 US dollars. Standard deviation values are provided in parentheses.

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (two-tailed tests)

differences in job characteristics between Asian Americans and Whites. My findings suggest that Asian Americans are more likely to receive stock-based compensation in part because they are more likely to work in jobs where it is provided (for example, high-wage, good jobs in larger firms and within the high-tech industry). However, the two groups are equally likely to receive stock-based compensation in these jobs. This parity likely reflects how stock-based compensation is designed, with its eligibility defined at a group level (for example, by job title), thus minimizing differences across racial fault lines. My findings show that among employees who receive stock-based compensation, Asian Americans and Whites receive similar amounts. This parity is notable given that the process of pay-setting when it comes to stock-based compensation is based to a large extent on managerial discretion, and as such is more prone to biases and discrimination.

Second, this study's findings point to the important role of selection as a sociologically meaningful phenomenon. Reflecting its focus on the identification and isolation of causal effects (Abbott 1998), social science research largely views selection as a statistical nuisance. Accordingly, scholars have developed a number of statistical methodologies to account for selection (Heckman 1979). By contrast, this study shows that selection into jobs with stock-based compensation has important implications for understanding patterns of Asian Americans' labor market attainment. Specifically, this study suggests that selection into jobs with stock-based compensation might reflect Asian Americans' strategic adaptation to the labor market and economic mobility more broadly. Similarly, prior research suggests that Asian Americans navigate the labor market dynamics by pursuing exceptionally high educational credentials as a form of strategic adaptation (Lee and Kye 2016; Sakamoto et al. 2009).

Related to that, this study shows that sociological findings can be theoretically meaningful and substantively important even in the absence of statistical significance. Quantitative sociological research tends to place an emphasis on statistical significance, where results with *p*-values below conventional thresholds

are favored over null findings, and the latter are viewed as inconsequential (Firebaugh 2008). Yet, statistical significance is not equal to sociological importance; findings can be important even in the absence of statistical significance. Rather than a null finding, the lack of statistical significance in the analysis indicates parity between Asian Americans and Whites, which has implications for understanding racial inequality in stock-based compensation.

More broadly, this study introduces stock-based compensation as a novel site of Asian Americans' economic incorporation. My results suggest that in the course of financialization of the US economy, stock-based compensation has emerged as an important labor market mechanism for our understanding of Asian Americans' economic mobility. These findings further underscore the importance of moving beyond wages for understanding the dynamics of racial inequality and Asian Americans' socioeconomic attainment. By limiting the focus on wages alone, we miss the increasingly important role of nonwage components of compensation (Kristal et al. 2020; Kruse et al. 2010; Shuey and O'Rand 2004) and nonpecuniary job characteristics (Kelly and Moen 2020; Pedulla 2020; Schneider and Harknett 2019; Kalleberg 2011) in the (re)production of racial inequality. This study shows that without considering stock-based compensation, we overlook a key dimension of racial inequality and Asian Americans' economic incorporation.

Finally, this study underscores the importance of moving beyond the labor market and considering the role of financial markets for understanding Asian Americans' economic incorporation in the new stratification order of the US finance-based economy. Existing research places Asian Americans' socioeconomic attainment within the context of the labor market, largely reflecting classical sociological approaches such as the Wisconsin status-attainment model (Blau and Duncan 1967). However, during the financialization of the US economy, financial markets have grown to play an increasingly important role in stratification processes and outcomes. The focus on stock-based compensation reveals that the labor and financial markets have become increasingly intertwined, suggesting that Asian

Americans' economic mobility increasingly takes place within the context of financial markets.

My findings offer important theoretical and policy implications for understanding Asian Americans' labor market assimilation, but there are also limitations to my study that future research should address. First, this study relies on a relatively small sample of Asian Americans. Future research should aim to replicate the analysis using larger samples to strengthen confidence in the findings (Freese and Peterson 2017). More broadly, future research efforts should prioritize the collection of nationally representative data that include sufficiently large samples of Asian Americans to allow for meaningful statistical inference (Sakamoto et al. 2009), as well as a comprehensive set of socioeconomic indicators, including—but not limited to—stock-based compensation. In the absence of such knowledge infrastructure (Hirschman 2021), important insights into Asian Americans' socioeconomic experiences remain overlooked.

Second, future research should consider possible variation among different Asian ethnic groups. My findings show that stock-based compensation is linked to educational attainment, suggesting that there might be important differences between Asians who received their education in the United States versus abroad, as well as by English proficiency and years in the United States (Lee and Kye 2016). Although my analysis distinguishes between immigrant and native-born groups, data limitations did not make it possible to examine further heterogeneity among Asian workers.

Also, future research should examine stock-based compensation and its implications for Asian Americans' labor market attainment through the intersectional lens of race and gender. There is now a long line of sociological scholarship that shows that gender and race intersect in a meaningful way (Collins 2015; Leicht 2008; Browne and Misra 2003), including with respect to Asian Americans' economic incorporation (Lee and Kye 2016). Unfortunately, sample size limitations did not make it possible to disaggregate the analysis by gender and race in the present study, underscoring the importance of data collection efforts for under-

standing Asian Americans' socioeconomic attainment in the future.

Finally, this study is limited in its scope to stock-based compensation. Future research should move beyond compensation in stock to also analyze other novel types of compensation and how they contribute to Asian Americans' labor market attainment, such as payment systems emerging in the new sharing economy (Vallas and Schor 2020). Addressing these questions would offer important theoretical advancements as well as suggest possible avenues for policy interventions.

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Betting on Business: How Family Wealth and Ethnic Capital Shape Choices and Constraints for Chinese Americans' Entrepreneurial Pathways



JODY AGIUS VALLEJO AND LISA A. KEISTER

Entrepreneurship is a mobility mechanism for the immigrant generation, but second-generation Asian Americans are often assumed to shun business ownership in favor of entering the professional labor market. However, there is reason to believe that entrepreneurship is a common and important mobility pathway for the second generation. We explore this possibility by investigating second-generation Chinese Americans who bet on business. Using fieldwork and in-depth structured interviews conducted with second-generation Chinese American entrepreneurs, we ask: Why do highly educated Chinese Americans choose business over the professional labor force? How do family wealth, transnational connections, gender, ethnicity, and education shape their entrepreneurial pathways and experiences? We explore the choices and constraints that result in three ideal types of entrepreneurial experiences represented in our data: family business inheritors, family-funded entrepreneurs, and self-made business owners. Our examination of Chinese American business owners reveals a complex interplay between individual agency, intergenerational dynamics, structural advantages or disadvantages, and strategic adaptation. Ultimately, we find that second-generation Chinese Americans chart a range of business pathways and outcomes shaped by their class, ethnicity, and gender.

Keywords: Chinese American entrepreneurship, second-generation Chinese Americans, Chinese American wealth

In less than half a century, the United States has seen a remarkable increase in its Asian American population due to changes in immigration law that expanded entry opportunities

for non-European immigrants. In 1965, when Asians comprised less than 1 percent of the US population, the landmark Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated restrictive and racist

Jody Agius Vallejo is professor of sociology at University of Southern California, Los Angeles, United States. **Lisa A. Keister** is professor of sociology and public policy at Duke University, Durham, North Carolina, United States.

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national origin quotas that banned Asian immigrants from entering the US by creating two legal entry pathways, high skill and family reunification, that have eased the entry of Chinese immigrants into the economic and educational structures of the United States (Kasinitz et al. 2009; Xie and Goyette 2012, Zhou 2009; Lee and Zhou 2015). Today, Asian Americans comprise 7 percent of the US population, and Chinese Americans—including immigrants from Mainland China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan—are the largest Asian subgroup at 24 percent (Ruiz et al. 2023). As the Chinese American population has grown, researchers have documented that just over half of first-generation Chinese immigrants are highly educated (52 percent have at least a bachelor's degree, compared to 35 percent of US-born adults) and upwardly mobile on most measures of income and wealth following migration (Keister et al. 2016; Lee and Zhou 2015; Rosenbloom and Batalova 2023). There is also clear evidence that second-generation Chinese Americans have high levels of educational and occupational attainment (Jiménez and Horowitz 2013; Tran et al. 2019). As a result, both scholars and the popular press portray Chinese immigrants as well-established, with children—the second generation—who are likely to follow the same path (Lee and Zhou 2015).

Members of the Chinese immigrant generation have high rates of entrepreneurship (Abelmann and Lie 1995; Park 2005), and business ownership is an important reason that the first generation has adapted economically and has been critical to the development of diasporic communities (Zhou and Liu 2017). Although entrepreneurship is viewed as a mobility mechanism for the first generation, Chinese and Korean immigrants generally push their children into the white-collar labor market due, in part, to their perception that business is low-status and labor-intensive (Sanchirico 1991). Indeed, much has been made in the scholarly literature and media of the Chinese-American second-generation's integration into higher education and high-status occupations, a result, in part, of the immigrant generation's hyper-selectivity on education and income (Feliciano 2006; Lee and Zhou 2015; Tran et al. 2018). However, the exceptional outcomes of the Chinese-American

generation are not an artifact of hyper-selectivity alone. Jennifer Lee and Min Zhou (2014, 45) demonstrate that Chinese immigrant parents and their children adhere to a "success frame," shaped by ethnic networks and structures in the community, that support a mobility strategy of working in one of four professions: a doctor, lawyer, pharmacist, or engineer. Ultimately, research on the Chinese American second generation examines their educational aspirations, performance, and success frames (Louie 2004; Kao and Tienda 1995; Lee and Zhou 2014, 2015; Zhou and Lee 2017), racial-ethnic identities (Kibria 2000; Casarez et al. 2022), transnational cultural activities (Louie 2006), and continuing racialization (Lee and Sheng 2024; Lee and Kye 2016; Lee et al. 2024). Research thus documents how members of each generation fare both economically and socially, but the entrepreneurial pathways and experiences of Chinese Americans in the US attract little attention from researchers. To our knowledge, there are no studies of second-generation Chinese American entrepreneurs. Yet, there is reason to believe that entrepreneurship is an important mobility pathway and indicative of strategic adaptation for the second generation. We explore this possibility by investigating second-generation Chinese Americans who bet on business.

Using fieldwork and in-depth structured interviews conducted with second-generation Chinese Americans, we ask two questions: What motivates highly educated Chinese Americans to forego the success frame for self-employment? What choices and constraints prompt Chinese Americans to bet on business over the professional labor force? We find that second-generation Chinese Americans chart three ideal types of entrepreneurial experiences: family business inheritors, family-funded entrepreneurs, and self-made business owners. These pathways are shaped by choices and constraints. The ability to pursue one of these entrepreneurial pathways, especially the first two, is buttressed by family wealth as well as ethnic capital that allows the second generation to seize opportunities. However, we show that the choice to bet on business is also made under constraints, such as familial pressure to carry on the family business, or con-

cerns about labor-market discrimination, the latter of which points to a pattern of strategic adaptation. Ultimately, decisions to forego the success frame and choose entrepreneurship are shaped by agency, intergenerational dynamics revolving around family obligations, perceptions of discrimination or uncertainty in the labor market, as well as the class and structural advantages that propel entrepreneurship on the one hand, and the structural disadvantages that make is necessary on the other.

IMMIGRANT BUSINESS OWNERSHIP AND THE SECOND GENERATION

Most research on ethnic enterprise, including among Chinese Americans, investigates the immigrant generation. Early studies concentrate on the experiences and outcomes of Asian immigrants emphasizing the structural constraints that lead Asian immigrants to adopt self-employment as a survival strategy, often operating labor-intensive niche businesses in low-value markets in ethnic enclaves (Zhou 1992) or in niches as middlemen minorities (Bonacich 1973; Lee 2002). More recently, scholars have explored transnational Chinese entrepreneurs (Zhou and Liu 2015, 2017), Chinese immigrant tech entrepreneurs in Silicon Valley (Saxenian 2002) and millionaire migrants from China (Ley 2010). These studies challenge the presumption that immigrant entrepreneurship is primarily a last-resort economic adaptation. Regardless, business ownership is a calculated intergenerational mobility strategy for immigrants, especially those with high levels of human capital from China and Korea, who often face blocked opportunities in wage and salary employment resulting from discrimination and language barriers that prevent them from transferring their credentials to the receiving society (Raijman and Tienda 2000; Kim 2007; Zhou 2009). However, research suggests that Chinese immigrants do not want their American-born children to bet on business; instead, they advance a success frame that revolves around a specific mobility strategy (Lee and Zhou 2014, 2015). Chinese immigrants view academic achievement and the attainment of high-status, stable, and less labor-intensive professional jobs outside the ethnic economy as the primary avenue for socioeconomic mo-

bility and success (Abelmann and Lie 1995, 129; Zhou 2009; Lee and Zhou 2015), a preference with which their children purportedly agree (Steinberg et al. 1992; Zhou 2009; Lee and Zhou 2014, 2015).

A small strand of research examines the Chinese and Korean second generation's relationship to business via the lens of labor-intensive family businesses such as ethnic restaurants and retail. In a study of Chinese immigrant take-away businesses in Great Britain, Miri Song (1997) finds that the second generation prefers wage work to the long hours and risk involved in running a take-away restaurant, in part because they have first-hand experience laboring in the family business as children. In a study of Korean-owned businesses, Dae Young Kim (2006) finds that the majority of the second generation do not enter business, but that the family business can serve as an alternative mobility path, and even a mobility trap, that is distinct from the professional route. Overall, the immigrant generation has a higher rate of self-employment than their US-born counterparts (Goldscheider and Kobrin 1980; Light and Gold 2000; Min 2008) and, among immigrant business owners, succession of low-value businesses in ethnic enclaves is not a priority, as business ownership is viewed only as a means to support their children's integration into the professional labor force (Wong et al. 1992).

However, given the US postindustrial economy, the marketization of China, and globalization, we expect that some Chinese immigrant parents build lucrative businesses that may be perceived as viable and desirable by the second generation. Thus, some Chinese Americans might succeed their parents in the family business rather than enter the professional labor market, expanding success frame theories and challenging the idea that entrepreneurship is a last-resort strategy to overcome labor market exclusion.

OTHER DETERMINANTS OF SECOND- GENERATION BUSINESS OWNERSHIP

What other factors might lead the second generation to bet on business? Ethnic, structural, or class factors, and their intersection, are dynamics that push American-born minoritized

people into entrepreneurship (Smith and Beasley 2011). Native-born minoritized groups may view entrepreneurship as the epitome of the American dream and as a pathway to autonomy in a society that values individualism and meritocratic ideals (Valdez 2011). Highly educated second-generation Latinos turn to self-employment because they experience discrimination and blocked opportunities in professional jobs and because they believe that the skills, networks, and financial capital obtained in professional occupations can be used to capitalize on the growing Latino population via “ethnoracial capitalism” (Agius Vallejo and Canizales 2016, 2023). Chinese Americans have high levels of education and occupational attainment on average and are lauded by some as attaining “honorary White status,” but Asian Americans continue to experience exclusion in society and racialization as model minorities and as forever foreign (Tuan 1999; Kim 2007; Lee and Kye 2016; Lee et al. 2024). In this vein, Pawan Dhingra (2012) finds that some native-born South Asian Americans turn to motel ownership—a niche in which South Asian immigrants concentrate—because they also perceive blocked opportunities in professional jobs. Some second-generation Chinese Americans may follow a similar path as some native-born Latino and Asian Indian entrepreneurs, where they pursue business ownership as a pathway to autonomy, or because they experience a “bamboo ceiling” in the professional labor market as they attempt to move up into managerial and executive positions, indicative of a pattern of strategic adaptation to perceived discrimination in the labor market (Lee and Zhou 2015; Lee et al. 2024; Kim and Zhao 2014; Sakamoto et al. 2009; Xie and Goyette 2003). Investigating the dynamics of the bamboo ceiling for Chinese Americans, Jackson G. Lu (2024) finds that lower perceived creativity made Chinese Americans less likely to be nominated and elected as leaders in study groups, even after controlling for characteristics like English proficiency and the motivation to serve as a leader. In another study, Lu (2022) finds that East Asians’ networks are characterized by high levels of ethnic homophily compared to other groups, limiting their advancement in multi-ethnic institutions.

The model that has dominated the research on ethnic entrepreneurship is the ethnic solidarity thesis, which emphasizes cultural traits and ethnic resources as the central factors that foster and sustain ethnic enterprise in enclave economies, the latter of which is an identifiable ethnic community with immigrants engaged in a range of business activities who have access to coethnic clientele, a supply of ethnic labor, and access to ethnic resources that may include credit and information (Portes 1987; Portes and Shafer 2007). This thesis locates entrepreneurship at the meso-level, thereby rendering entrepreneurial action as an outcome of features that are unique to a particular ethnic group (Romero and Valdez 2016). Asian immigrants are portrayed as drawing on ethnic resources, such as group trust and bounded solidarity, financial and social reciprocity exchanges, and coethnic embeddedness in business niches and entrepreneurial ethnic enclaves, and transnational connections, to facilitate enterprise (Portes and Bach 1985, Portes and Zhou 1992; Portes and Sensenbrenner 1993; Light and Bonacich 1988; Raijman and Tienda 2000).

The ethnic solidarity thesis has been questioned for privileging ethnic resources above structural factors that enable business entry and success (Valdez 2011; Romero and Valdez 2016). Critics of the ethnic solidarity perspective propose an interactive—or mixed embeddedness—approach that incorporates macro- and meso-structures of opportunity. This perspective emphasizes that structural and contextual factors, such as the local opportunity structure, the nature of markets, policy, technology, and informal and legal regulations, can hinder or facilitate immigrant enterprise (Waldinger et al. 1990; Kloosterman and Rath 2003; Valdez 2011). Ultimately, little is known about whether and to what extent the Chinese second generation engages in business in ethnic economies and whether ethnic resources are central to their trajectories and enterprises. If Chinese Americans have attained honorary White status because of their economic integration, business owners may be less likely to rely on ethnicity and ethnic resources and may target the general market. Alternatively, ethnicity may serve as a resource for the second generation, who may engage in ethnoracial capitalism

because they perceive that business opportunities stemming from ethnicity or race might be had in the market (Agius Vallejo and Canizales 2023), due to Chinese immigrant replenishment in the US or transnational connections given China's dominance in the global market.

Because the ethnic solidarity thesis has dominated the literature, scholars have only recently cast a spotlight on class resources, especially wealth, for facilitating minority business entry and success. Among the most critical mechanisms enabling minority enterprise is adequate access to financial capital that can be used to start and maintain a business (Fairlie and Robb 2008). This advantage is related to an individual's race and class position and their access to financial institutions, family, and co-ethnics that can be utilized for capital as well as personal wealth. Wealth is vital as it can be invested directly into the business or used as collateral to obtain loans, thereby hastening entry into small business ownership (Bates 1997; Keister 2000, 2005; Agius Vallejo and Canizales 2016; Agius Vallejo and Keister 2020; Agius Vallejo and Vasquez-Tokos 2024).

Economic development in China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, combined with US immigrant entry policies that prioritize immigrants with high-skill and education, means that some Chinese immigrants may arrive with financial capital or retain ties to family in the home country from whom capital can be obtained (Ley 2010; Zhou and Liu 2015; Zhou and Lee 2017). Indeed, recent research demonstrates that Chinese immigrants have extraordinarily high levels of wealth compared to native-born Americans, Latino immigrants, and all other Asian immigrant groups save for Indian immigrants, and that wealth increases with tenure in the US (Keister et al. 2016). The significance of wealth as a determinant of entrepreneurship among the Asian American second generation is unknown, but we expect that some second-generation Chinese Americans may be able to draw on their class position, especially parental or familial wealth, to fund their business ventures.

DATA AND METHODS

This research relies on twenty-seven in-depth interviews conducted with Chinese American

entrepreneurs. Three of the respondents are 1.5 generation, meaning they were born in China but migrated in childhood to the US, and twenty-four are US-born. The sample is diverse in terms of wealth, age, gender, and class. Respondents were sampled using snowball sampling. To assess the degree to which entrepreneurship contributes to wealth accumulation for immigrants and their descendants, all respondents filled out a face sheet where they supplied detailed data on their assets and wealth. Respondents received fifty dollars for participation. The interviews lasted between one and a half and two hours and usually occurred in a public place or the respondents' home or office. The interviews were conducted by two Chinese American research assistants. Detailed field notes and memos were recorded after the interviews. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and are contained within Dedoose, a secure qualitative analysis program that provides a methodical way to retrieve and analyze data, draw connections between interview respondents, and identify patterns.

All of the respondents hold at least a bachelor's degree, two respondents have a master's degree, two have JD degrees, and one has a PhD. The majority of respondents reported that they were raised middle or upper class, with two respondents categorizing their class background as working class. We did not purposefully select respondents with college degrees. It was challenging to interview women business owners—only three of our respondents are women. Self-reported net worth ranges from a few hundred thousand dollars to over ten million dollars. Net worth is drawn from businesses and real estate assets. Over 90 percent of the sample have assets in stocks, bonds, or mutual funds.

The Los Angeles metropolitan region (encompassing the counties of Los Angeles, Orange, San Bernardino, Riverside, and Ventura) is an ideal site for the study of Chinese American entrepreneurs. We selected the Los Angeles region because it has the highest concentration of Chinese immigrants (Greene and Batalova 2025), is the most entrepreneurial region in the US, and is home to more minority-owned businesses than any county in the nation (Fairlie 2012). Second, Los Angeles is a preferred desti-

nation for high net worth and highly skilled immigrants, a pattern driven in large part by the waves of wealthy and middle-class legal immigrants from the global Chinese diaspora who have settled in the region (Lee and Zhou 2015; Zhou 2009). Accompanying the high-skilled diaspora are resource-poor Chinese primarily from mainland China. Chinese immigrants with higher socioeconomic status are bypassing traditional Chinatown in favor of suburban ethnoburbs, which serve as hubs of social capital and transnational commerce (Li 1998; Zhou 2009). Areas of dense transnational linkages between Los Angeles and China are reflected by high-tech firms started by Chinese scientists and engineers who rely on resource-rich networks in the US and abroad to finance their businesses, as well as entrepreneurs involved in international trade who rely on business experience and networks in Asia (Zhou and Tseng 2001). Together, these characteristics allow us the opportunity to understand how class, wealth, transnational linkages, and ethnic capital are related to entrepreneurship. While Los Angeles is its own unique region, we expect that studies conducted in traditional destinations for Chinese Americans, like New York or the San Francisco Bay Area, may yield similar findings.

As data collection progressed and we continued to interview participants, we constantly referred to the field notes to ground the codes and hypotheses in the data (Glaser and Strauss 1967). In sum, we collected data from a variety of sources—in-depth structured interviews, observation, and participant observation—to guard against selective perception and interpretation (McCall and Simmons 1969). The use of multiple methods allows for comparison and continual evaluation of the relevance of the data (Emerson 2001).

RESULTS

How prevalent is entrepreneurship among second-generation Chinese Americans? Our analysis of the 2024 Current Population Survey shows that 13 percent of Chinese immigrants are self-employed compared with 10.5 percent of the US population. Notably, 10 percent of second-generation Chinese Americans are also self-employed—an unexpected finding given

dominant narrow success frame narratives. This pattern of second-generation self-employment extends to other Asian American groups: 13 percent of Vietnamese immigrants and 9 percent of the second generation, and 23 percent of Korean immigrants and 19 percent of the second generation, are self-employed. Also surprising is the fact that Chinese American entrepreneurs are highly educated: 61 percent of 1.5-generation and 91 percent of second-generation Chinese Americans who are entrepreneurs hold at least a bachelor's degree, compared to just 26 percent of the first generation. Together, these findings challenge prevailing theories that entrepreneurship is not viewed as a viable route for success or that it is merely a last resort mobility strategy for those with low levels of education. Instead, entrepreneurship could be a strategic adaptation choice, especially among highly educated Chinese Americans.

We find that second-generation Chinese Americans chart three ideal types of entrepreneurial experiences: family business inheritors, family-funded entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurial dreamers who claim to be “self-made” (see table 1). Family business inheritors are typically the first, or only son, and they are either “devoted” or “resentful” heirs who succeed their parents in lucrative family businesses. Family-funded entrepreneurs have access to high levels of human capital and family wealth and aim to attain the American dream via business ownership. Entrepreneurial dreamers have lower levels of financial capital and start small domestic businesses related to their ethnic origins or the gig economy and often view themselves as self-made entrepreneurs. We now turn to a discussion of what motivates highly educated Chinese Americans to forego the success frame to bet on these three business pathways, and the choices and constraints that shape them.

Business Inheritors: Devoted and Resentful Heirs

Scholars have long maintained that most Chinese family firms are short-lived, rarely extending beyond one generation, because of the second-generation's high levels of educational attainment, which increases their opportuni-

Table 1. Ideal Types of Second-Generation Chinese American Entrepreneurship

Ideal Type	Business Type	Wealth Source	Human Capital	Ethnic Capital	Motivation	Constraints
Family business inheritors	Established family firms (manufacturing, import-export) often transnational	Inherited business and family assets (homes, cars, education funded by parents)	Bachelor's degree or higher often from top universities	Transnational family connections	Filial duty Economic security Family pressure	Gendered succession norms Parental expectations Intergenerational obligation
Family-funded	Start-ups (tech, services, import-export)	Parental investments, trust funds, hidden wealth (office space, paid living expenses, seed capital)	Bachelor's degrees or higher often from elite or Ivy League institutions	Transnational family connections Coethnic networks	Desire for independence Surpassing parents' success	Risky, but cushioned by family wealth
Self-made	Small-scale or professional services (cafés, consulting, professional services)	Primarily self-funded (savings, credit cards), limited hidden support (tuition covered by parents)	Bachelor's degree, some with graduate degrees, a few from working- or lower-middle-class backgrounds	Local coethnic community No coethnic connections	Escape the bamboo ceiling Autonomy Dissatisfaction with professional tracks	Limited capital Class barriers Labor market discrimination Constrained social networks

Source: Authors' analysis from interview data.

ties in the mainstream labor market (Wong et al. 1992). Asian immigrant business owners also prefer that their children enter high-status and high-paying jobs in the professional labor market rather than take over the family business. This line of research generally concentrates on those who own small businesses in ethnic enclaves that are labor intensive and have low profit margins, such as ethnic restaurants or small stores. We find that some Chinese immigrants also own large and lucrative businesses that defy the mom-and-pop immigrant entrepreneur stereotype. These immigrants are generally highly educated individuals who entered the US on student visas as admits to graduate programs or on work visas as recruits in top US companies.

The immigrant parents of our second-generation sample have owned their businesses for longer than two decades on average, though a few started enterprises in the last decade. These businesses emerged from an interactive process of structural opportunities in the US immigration system that prioritize high-skill immigrants, ethnic resources, including transnational connections, and structural changes in global markets that have created avenues for transnational entrepreneurship. They were initially modest ventures funded with personal savings or small loans from relatives who lived in the US or the sending country. These companies “blew up,” as one of our respondents put it, as a result of broader changes in domestic and global markets, such as deindustrialization in the US and the opening of China’s manufacturing sector. With annual sales ranging from \$2 million to \$24 million, these firms are typically transnational and tied to the economic marketization of China or Taiwan, often relying on familial and fictive kin networks in China and Taiwan to manufacture or import goods in demand in the US, such as promotional products, toys, vitamins, and clothing.

Only a small proportion of the parents who started these businesses have stocks, bonds, and mutual funds, and the majority of their nonbusiness assets were either liquid (that is, monetary assets) or held in real estate. As befitting the class and educational background of the parental generation, the second generation have all attained at least a bachelor’s degree

from universities ranked in the top 50 nationally, with the majority graduating from campuses in the University of California system. In direct opposition to the success frame, Chinese immigrant parents who own lucrative businesses expect that one of their offspring—preferably a son—will take over the family business. This gendered expectation is not unique to Chinese immigrants as research on family succession shows that even when daughters work in the family business, sons are more likely to be chosen as successors (Ip and Jacobs 2006), but it is in line with the structure of Chinese diasporic enterprises in countries beyond the US that are generally patriarchal in nature (Zhou 2021). Of the ten business heirs in our sample, only two companies are run by women, and both are from families where they are the oldest child. Sons are generally elevated to director of operations positions whereas daughters are often relegated to hidden positions as accountants as parents slowly phase into retirement. The latter pattern is in line with studies of Chinese legacy businesses in other countries, which revolve around the family, institute a son in the top hierarchical position, and where women manage the financial side of the business (Zhou 1992, 2021).

The second generation in family legacy businesses generally do not receive exorbitant salaries—the median annual salary is \$80,000. However, wealthy parents often provide their children with additional compensation that entices them to work in the business and that also builds their wealth portfolios. Parents buy their adult children homes in affluent areas of Los Angeles, such as San Marino (an exclusive suburb in the San Gabriel Valley that attracts wealthy Chinese immigrants), they pay for their luxury cars, and they also pay all of their educational expenses. This means that business heirs graduate with little or no educational debt, placing them on a more secure financial footing as they begin their adult lives. As a result, the median net worth of the business heirs in our sample is \$3 million.

Heirs chart several pathways into the family business. First, in a pattern mirroring white-owned family businesses (Longenecker and Schoen 1978), parents may engage a socialization strategy, where offspring typically work in

the family business as children and during college and assume leadership soon after degree attainment. The intention is that the second-generation will eventually inherit the business as parents slowly phase out. Second, some graduate college and work in white-collar occupations before deciding to join the business. Finally, some heirs intentionally delay their entry into the family business by "sowing their wild oats" in their own entrepreneurial ventures or by obtaining advanced degrees. Typically, business heirs are placed in charge of daily operations as parents transition out. Importantly, parents of this generation generally expect that the second-generation will draw on their human capital skills, social networks, and "American generational resources" (Estrada 2013)—English language fluency, social media savvy, knowledge of American institutions—to act as agents of cultural innovation (Foner and Dreby 2011) where they combine aspects of their parents' culture with American culture to advance the business.

Regardless of the path, heirs make individual calculations about the short- and long-term rewards attached to working in professional jobs versus taking over the family business that are shaped and buttressed by family wealth. For example, some, along with their parents, view working in lucrative established family businesses as having greater economic rewards compared with white-collar jobs, especially among those who graduated college during or after the Great Recession. Some parents and adult children view the family business as a "fallback" or "safety net" when adult children seemingly underperform in education and the labor market. At the same time, these choices are also made under constraints shaped by intergenerational dynamics and familial expectations of duty, obligation, and debt adult children feel that they owe to their immigrant parents. Some relayed that they took over the firm because of a strong sense of filial duty and parental pressure despite wanting to pursue other careers. We distinguish between two types of heirs: they are either devoted or resentful.

Devoted heirs were eager to succeed their parents in part because they perceive economic returns from the established family business to be greater than what they would receive in

the labor market, a rationale that became more salient during and after the recession. After graduating from a top-ten university with a degree in architecture in 2006, Gary landed an entry-level position at an architecture firm. He earned a six-figure salary, but when the Great Recession coincided with his impending marriage, he worried about his future and economic stability, especially as the real estate market crashed. He always knew that he would one day take over the family business manufacturing and distributing auto parts and the recession was the opportune time to do it. As he explained, "I was in New York, and then the whole recession thing, and I was also getting married at the time. So I thought, 'Hey, it's a good break to start over in a way. Hey, let's give it a try, see what happens.' And here we are five years later." Gary's risk paid off. His family's business weathered the recession, and while he makes a relatively small annual salary of \$100,000 given his company's yearly sales of \$24 million, he has amassed \$10 million in stocks, bonds, and mutual funds, and he owns two properties with an estimated combined value of \$750,000.

Richard also bet on the family business after a short stint in a professional position. After receiving his master's degree at a prestigious private university in a health-related field, Richard worked as a research associate at a University of California health sciences lab with the initial goal of applying to doctoral programs. However, Richard's father constantly asked him to take a leadership role in the family business with the expectation that Richard would soon take over the business. The deal was sealed when he was promised a \$90,000 starting salary and significant long-term returns, which was far more attractive than several more years as a student followed by a job search on the competitive academic job market.

A: I just, I realized I did not want to pursue any more academic training.

Q: How come?

A: I didn't wanna be broke for another five years. No offense. And then my father's business was starting to take off, really take off. And then there was no one that he could fully trust to take over the daily operations.

So I kinda felt like there's an obligation for me to go back. At the same time, I'm presented with a better opportunity too.

Q: Why did you feel obligated?

A: It's just Asian children's sense of duty to family.

Parental wealth and the family business can also buffer against relatively low earnings potential for the second generation. In a pattern echoing research on second-generation Korean Americans who view the family business as a safety net, other devoted heirs fall back on the family business if they land jobs that their parents deem to be too low-status with low economic returns—as was the case with one respondent who was unable to find a high-paying job after graduating amid the recession. Others fall back after having sowed their wild oats with other entrepreneurial ventures. Robert exemplifies this pattern. Robert's parents were born in Shanghai, on mainland China, but moved to Taiwan during the Cultural Revolution, where they completed college. Upon arriving in the US, Robert's parents worked in the warehouse of a local packaging company and eventually parlayed the skills they gained into a similar business of their own, where they now net over ten million dollars a year. The packaging business is contained within a large office building with an attached warehouse and has since expanded beyond the original business. Robert's parents own two-thirds of a factory in China, where their products are manufactured. An impressive waiting room in the front office is filled with family photos of Robert's family with Chinese dignitaries, including the president of Taiwan. Cubicles, filled by sales staff speaking Mandarin and English, line the front room. Robert grew up in Southern California and developed a passion for import cars and, funded by his parents, he built street racing cars while in high school and college. He became well known on the national import car scene and started a magazine and other related ventures under the moniker "Chopstick Productions." When the enterprises failed to turn substantial profits, and as he entered his thirties, Robert made the choice to fall back on his family's lucrative manufacturing business, but also relayed that "it was the right thing to do" because

it was time for him to give in to his parents' expectations. His parents were ecstatic, as they wanted to phase out, and elevated him to the top of the organizational chain—above his older sister who had worked there for more than twenty years, and who was the backbone of the family business.

Resentful heirs often feel guilt tripped into their positions by parents who have worked extremely hard to build a successful business and now want to retire, which demonstrates the constraints under which choosing to take over a family business is made. Resentful heirs dream of pursuing careers in the professional fields and delay their entry into the family business as long as possible. When they do assume a leadership position out of duty, they harbor deep feelings of resentment that they cannot pursue their passions. At twenty-eight years old, Scott's experience is a case in point. Scott's heart was set on pursuing a career as a lawyer or professor. However, his parents and sisters had other plans for him. As the only son, Scott's parents expected him to carry on their successful toy manufacturing and distribution business. His sisters also work in the family business, but in positions behind the scenes, and they pressured Scott to fulfill his duty to take over. Against his parents' wishes, and only because one sister intervened on his behalf, Scott pursued a graduate degree in international relations, in part because he knew it would provide skills and networks that would help their transnational business, but also because it was an attempt to stall and buy time before taking over the reins. As he relayed:

Well, they weren't so supportive of me going to grad school. My sisters just kind of convinced them. You know, "You have Scott. Just let him get it out of his system. And what's the harm in some extra schooling?" And you know, I really wanted to be a professor. I wanted to be a lawyer. Because I just—I have no passion for toys. Like, you know, my dad yelled at me. He was like, "Well, you think I have a passion for selling toys? No, I wanted to be a journalist. I was supposed to be a news anchor, but no. Now I'm doing this. I chose this." Because you know, like when you're little, like your parents will give you a lot of

choices, or maybe you don't have any choice at all. So then it just seemed, you know, I was like a second generation. I wanted to choose for myself. And then you know, obviously he chose, he claims he chose to do this, so now he's doing it, that's his choice. Not necessarily my choice, but anyways. I ended up going to grad school, international management, because I figured I'd buy time. I think at that point I more or less was resigned, or accepted the fact that I would be in the family business.

Scott's path illustrates how familial obligations can bind, constraining one's choices. Having been born and raised in the US with American ideologies, Scott relayed that he feels “culturally distant” from the “Chinese people” who work in the factory in China. Scott also wanted to “follow his passion” and choose his own career path but eventually relented because he felt a sense of filial obligation to his parents and was also pressured by his sisters. Similarly, Sienna, who runs her parents' architecture firm after graduating with a degree in architecture, as was expected of her, dreams of one day working in the entertainment industry as a screenwriter.

All of the heirs describe feeling indebted to their parents who have made the ultimate “immigrant sacrifice” of coming to the US in the name of their children's education and mobility. But, resentful heirs give up their own ambitions and experience an intergenerational bind where they feel like they must let go of their individual desires to maintain the business that families rely on.

Ultimately, family wealth, gender, economic factors, and intergenerational dynamics shape the choices and constraints of highly educated Chinese Americans who succeed their parents in the family business. Because most members of the second generation today are still relatively young, little has been written about relations with their immigrant parents as they move through the life course (Kasinitz et al. 2009). These findings make a useful contribution to immigrant integration literature as they demonstrate that, despite high levels of economic incorporation among the American born, the larger family unit continues to shape

decision-making and the economic integration of the Chinese second generation well after they transition into adulthood.

Making It Big: Family-Funded Entrepreneurs

The second ideal type describing the entrepreneurial pathways of the Chinese second generation is family-funded entrepreneurs, who have the resources to pursue start-up businesses shortly after college. These Chinese Americans tend to come from affluent backgrounds where they have access to trust funds or have wealthy parents who are willing to invest in their often risky first-time business ventures. Some of the parents of this group are business owners themselves—from transnational manufacturers to professionals with their own successful firms. In contrast to business heirs, however, some immigrant parents may not have businesses to bequeath to their children. Instead, immigrant parents with enough wealth resources often provide the financial capital for their children's new business ventures, which broadens their children's entrepreneurial choices. This group typically enters entrepreneurship during or straight out of college and may have a track record of small, failed ventures. Parents may support their children's desire unconditionally or on a conditional basis after they have proven themselves through degree attainment or other measures of success, such as running a small business.

When they start their businesses, family-funded entrepreneurs benefit from direct financial support or hidden resources, or both, that pave the pathway to business. For example, some receive direct financial support in terms of seed funding and hidden support, like office space. The steady stream of parental financial support allows some in the second generation to weather the start-up phase and reach a stage of fiscal sustainability in business. Immigrant parents sometimes choose to become a co-investor in their children's business ventures if they see potential for future growth. This tends to be the case for second-generation Chinese Americans who are launching large-scale start-ups who need multiple rounds of funding resources.

Twenty-six-year-old Charlie exemplifies the first pattern. Charlie was born in Los Angeles

but moved to Mexico along with his family as a child, where his parents operate a multi-million-dollar sneaker manufacturing enterprise. Having been born in the United States allowed Charlie to benefit from the perks of “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999)—having the power and position to choose multiple citizenships to advance economically and socially. After having attended international school in Mexico, Charlie was able to use his US citizenship to go to college in the United States while living in his parents’ home in San Gabriel, California. Charlie attended the University of California, choosing to study economics to “groom himself” to take over the family business. However, Charlie changed his plans after attending university in the US and aimed to make his own name separate from the family business, a choice that was buttressed by his parents’ wealth, allowing him to take an entrepreneurial gamble.

Charlie’s entrepreneurial trajectory began with a costly project that failed before he was able to create a sustainable business. Charlie’s desires to start his own company separate from his father’s pushed him to take an opportunity in Taiwan with his uncle in a bakery start-up. The bakery was based in Taipei and started out with four initial locations. Charlie states that his father did not encourage him but that he viewed his uncle’s offer to partner as an opportunity to “start doing something” and gain business experience. For Charlie’s bakery start-up, his father invested \$100,000 in the business. Charlie also withdrew \$100,000 from his million-dollar trust fund. However, Charlie’s time in Taipei lasted less than one year because the business was starting to show signs of flopping, including the closure of two of the four branches, and because he said he did not like Taiwan. He remarks: “I guess all my friends were in Mexico and the US. I don’t know, the food . . . it was good at first but then after a while it’s, I couldn’t get used to it anymore. I just didn’t see a growth potential where the bakery could be like a big hit, like an international hit, so I just decided to back away from it and just do something else.”

While Charlie stayed on board as an investor, he folded his work in Taiwan and returned home. Upon returning, Charlie was able to re-

connect with two of his Taiwanese American friends from college who had capital and were interested in starting up an import-export trading company. However, they were missing a marketable sales product. Charlie realized that he could rely on his experience and connections built from his family’s business by attending trade shows in China with his partners. Growing up, Charlie remembers attending trade shows in Asia with his father, accompanying him on business trips. His father had told him that it would be a great place to start looking for a trending sales item. Charlie relayed, “It was just me and one business partner at first. We just decided to work together, we didn’t know what we wanted to do. So I guess our parents suggested to us to go to Asia and try to source some products, so we decided to do that. We went to several trade shows in China . . . and we saw the vitamin C shower head, that was our first product. We were like, ‘Oh, let’s get into it.’ So that’s how we started.”

Charlie and his friends decided to invest in vitamin C showerheads as their main staple product “mostly because the product was unique.” With three business partners, Charlie did not have to front as much money as the bakery start-up with each partner contributing around \$50,000 into a seed fund of \$155,000. For his current business, Charlie pulled out another \$40,000 from his trust fund and obtained \$10,000 from his parents. After starting the business, Charlie’s company’s annual sales have reached \$200,000 as one of the few companies that specializes in vitamin C showerheads in the country. Charlie now plans to expand his business into other types of bathroom fixtures. Charlie’s choice to follow an entrepreneurial pathway was shaped by his parents’ wealth and the leveraging of ethnic capital to seize transnational business opportunities.

Twenty-eight-year-old Nick demonstrates how parent financial capital, social capital, and educational networks meld to shape the choice to pursue business. After graduating top of his class in high school, Nick enrolled in biochemical engineering at an Ivy League college. Although he initially considered a career in medicine like his father, Nick decided against it in college because seeing his father in the profession showed him that this career path did not

measure up to his standards for success (Lee and Zhou 2015). “I’ll be kind of blunt—so I realized that I could make a lot more money not being a doctor [laughter] and actually being on the business side of it, of medicine.” At the same time, Nick also did not want to work for a large company because he did not want to do the same thing “day in and day out.” As he explained, “I definitely knew I wasn’t going to go to work for a large company managing one product for ten years.”

Although Nick knew that his end goal was some kind of start-up, during college he and two of his colleagues started a tutoring business out of his dorm. Netting \$150,000 per year, Nick’s tutoring company lasted throughout college and grew to being bicoastal. The business was based out of his college dorm room, where Nick and his partners recruited tutors with Ivy League degrees online or at school and managed and brokered their tutoring with their clients in both regions. At one point, they had thirty to thirty-five tutors on contract. After graduating, the partners decided to fold the business. Nick did not want to go work for a big firm, and he decided to start his own company, taking consulting jobs on the side to invest in his medical device business, a feat made possible by the hidden financial support he received from his parents, who paid his living expenses in full. Eventually, Nick met his business partners—a beta systems engineer and a neurosurgeon—through his Ivy League college network. A medical device start-up is extremely costly, with traditional medical device start-ups taking about \$10 million to \$15 million to get to the market. Nick and his collaborators decided to start with \$4 million. After the founders put in their own round of personal funding of \$10,000 each (totaling \$30,000), they started the next round of funding, often referred to as FFF (friends, families, and fools). “So you go to your parents, your cousins, your rich uncle and you go, ‘I want to start this company we can put in like \$50,000,’ stuff like that.” During the second round of investment, Nick’s family gave him \$100,000, all while continuing to support his living expenses.

Respondents in our sample who follow this pathway of entrepreneurship directly out of college receive, on average, a \$100,000 financial

investment from their parents. Parental support also goes beyond providing a capital infusion or paying for living expenses. For example, one respondent’s parents used their wealth to purchase an office building so that he could have the space to run his business. Thus, parental wealth—in the form of investment capital or other resources or as a safety net—can make the choice to take a risk on business possible and easier.

Because of their frame of reference, which is highly educated parents with high levels of wealth, the risk of entrepreneurship is sometimes viewed as the way to move beyond the status of one’s parents, who have integrated into the highest echelons of the labor market or who own successful businesses themselves. And these young entrepreneurs are right. Among individuals in the US who have achieved extraordinary economic success, the self-employed are disproportionately represented (Keister 2014; Keister et al. 2021). For those who exemplify this ideal type of Chinese American entrepreneurship, class, familial wealth, and ethnic capital are pivotal to shaping their business choices.

Self-Made Entrepreneurs

The third ideal type of second-generation Chinese American entrepreneurship that emerged from our data are those who view themselves as “self-made” entrepreneurs. In contrast to business heirs or trust-fund entrepreneurs, those who claim to be self-made start different kinds of businesses depending on their pathways into entrepreneurship. First, they may be second-generation Chinese Americans who have left professional jobs to bet on business, exemplifying a form of strategic adaptation to perceived discrimination in the labor market (Lee et al. 2024; Xie and Goyette 2003). Respondents relay that they experienced a “bamboo ceiling” in professional jobs due to racial discrimination, or they perceive that they will if they were to work in corporate America. This finding is consistent with research demonstrating that while second-generation Asian Americans have attained high levels of occupational attainment, they are subject to a bamboo ceiling that prevents them from attaining high-level and lucrative corporate executive posi-

tions (Chin 2020; Huang 2021; Lu 2022, 2024; Tran et al. 2019; Lee and Zhou 2015). Self-made entrepreneurs who leave professional careers to bet on business aspire to make “big money” and they lament that their choices may be constrained because they cannot draw on parental wealth to fund their businesses. Some even saw access to familial businesses as a form of privilege that the self-made did not have. However, although this group claims to be self-made and unable to tap into parental wealth to fund their business ventures, a closer look shows the operation of hidden wealth at work that allows them to activate entrepreneurship as a form of strategic adaptation. For example, most of the parents of these Chinese Americans have college degrees, and many have advanced graduate degrees. While their parents did not have the ability to fund their business ventures, nearly all graduated without college debt, as their parents were able to fund expensive college degrees. Some of these respondents have started now lucrative import-export businesses, typically relying on ethnic capital and using personal savings to fund their ventures. Others have built professional services businesses as lawyers or business consultants after working in large firms. Other have built tech companies, funded by venture capitalists, enabled by networks forged in college.

The majority of the second-generation Chinese Americans in our sample hail from upper-middle to upper-class backgrounds, and their class position and family wealth shapes their entrepreneurial pathways. But, three of our respondents were raised in working-class or lower-middle-class families with parents who have low levels of wealth. These respondents have all attained college degrees but had dreams of entrepreneurship and self-funded their businesses. All rely on coethnics for clientele. One respondent, Peter, owns a café that sells boba drinks, a business that he started with credit cards. Another, Donna, a famed pianist, has a lucrative business providing piano and music theory lessons and college admissions services to wealthy coethnics, although she is adamant that she is very disconnected from her ancestral roots and not connected to the ethnic community. The third person, Earl, is a computer consultant who received training

in computer science from a trade school after graduating from college. At age thirty-nine, Earl lives with his parents, and he claims on his website to be a multimillionaire, but he reported his net worth at less than a million dollars, attributed, in part, to the home he will inherit.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Entrepreneurship is considered a mobility mechanism for the immigrant generation, but scholars often assume that second-generation Asian Americans—especially children of the highly educated who attain college degrees themselves—exhibit a strict success frame in which they shun business ownership in favor of entering the professional labor market (Abelmann and Lie 1995; Park 2005; Lee and Zhou 2014) and that Chinese parents steer their children into specific professions to buffer them from discrimination (Lee and Zhou 2015). However, we complicate theories of minority business ownership and integration by demonstrating that second-generation Chinese Americans do bet on business, often at their parents’ urging or with their assistance, expanding conceptions of the Asian American success frame and contradicting prevailing theories that entrepreneurship is typically a last resort strategy. Our examination of Chinese American business owners reveals three ideal types of entrepreneurial pathways: family business inheritors, family-funded entrepreneurs, and self-made business owners, which are shaped by choices and constraints that lead some to forego the success frame in favor of business. Family business inheritors are typically the first or only son, and they are either devoted or resentful heirs who succeed their parents in lucrative family businesses. These businesses, often transnational in scope, emerged from an interactive process of ethnic resources and structural changes in global markets. They were initially modest ventures funded with personal savings or small loans from relatives who lived in the US or China. These companies “blew up” as a result of broader changes in domestic and global markets, such as deindustrialization in the US and the opening of China’s manufacturing sector. Resentful heirs are those who view the family business as a fallback or safety net

when they are perceived as underperforming in higher education and the labor market. The decision to take over the family business also illuminates the constraints that some in the second-generation experience, as this choice is made in the context of the family unit, and they are influenced by the duty, obligation, and debt adult children feel that they owe to their immigrant parents.

Second, some second-generation Chinese Americans are family-funded entrepreneurs and start their own companies to attain the American dream. These respondents have access to family wealth, and sometimes trust funds, that support their entrepreneurial risks. Some of these individuals have worked in the professional world for several years before starting their own business ventures. A number of those who have left professional jobs have complained about the inability to earn enough income at their professional job and wanting to "make big money," alluding to the bamboo ceiling Asian Americans experience in mainstream corporate sectors. In addition, because of their frame of reference, which is highly educated parents with high levels of wealth, the risk of entrepreneurship is viewed as a way to move beyond the economic status of one's parents, especially in a discriminatory labor market. Finally, some second-generation Chinese Americans are self-made, operating smaller-scale sole proprietorships or professional services companies. These entrepreneurs are less likely to rely on familial wealth and often strategically adapt to perceived discrimination in the labor market via entrepreneurship.

The ability to choose one of these three entrepreneurial types is buttressed by class and family wealth, ethnic capital, transnational connections, and high levels of educational attainment. However, these choices are also made under constraints. Familial obligations can bind one to business ownership, and experienced or perceived discrimination, as well as perceptions of success when measured against highly educated parents, also influence the choice to pursue entrepreneurship. Our research thus reveals a complex interplay between individual agency, intergenerational dynamics, and class and structural advantages or disadvantages in shaping entrepreneurial path-

ways. We also demonstrate the significance of familial and intergenerational wealth transfers as a determinant of the three ideal types of entrepreneurial pathways, demonstrating the centrality of familial wealth to second-generation Chinese American entrepreneurship and, more broadly, an accelerated pattern of adaptation (see Keister et al. 2016).

The Chinese second generation is engaged in businesses that characterize both the primary and secondary sectors of the economy, ventures that rely on ethnic connections and are tied to global markets, as well as the gig economy. The class position of families is vital to understanding the choices of second-generation Chinese American entrepreneurs. Access to family wealth, especially from transnational family-owned businesses, allows some Chinese Americans to accumulate extraordinarily high levels of wealth that chart a path into business ownership. Ethnic resources and transnational connections also serve as a resource for the second generation, who can seize opportunities and capitalize on China's increasing dominance in the global market or the growth of the Asian American population.

As we show, other second-generation Asian national origin groups perceived as adhering to a strict success frame have surprisingly high levels of entrepreneurship. The ideal types that emerged from our data might be relevant in helping to explain these unexplored outcomes, helping to further expand our understanding of minority entrepreneurship. Future research should continue investigating the entrepreneurial ventures of the second generation across racial groups and by gender, and how entrepreneurial pathways and experiences are shaped by wealth—a familial-level variable that we demonstrate has significant impacts on entrepreneurship and the reproduction of racial inequalities. The mechanisms facilitating wealth-building for second-generation business ownership, particularly access to family wealth, cannot be mobilized by a broad range of immigrant, ethnic, or minoritized groups. The entrepreneurial experience of Black Americans (Gold 2016), and second-generation Latinos from low-status groups (Agius Vallejo et al. 2016; Valdez 2011), differ significantly because

of class position and experiences of racial inequality.

This research has implications for studies of immigrant integration. For too long, scholars have focused on the exceptional educational and white-collar career outcomes of second-generation East Asian groups, arguing that entrepreneurship, especially ethnic entrepreneurship, is a viable mobility option for the first generation, but not the second generation, who favor employment in the white-collar labor market. We demonstrate that second-generation Chinese Americans do not always shun entrepreneurship and that business ownership can be a pathway of strategic integration, thereby expanding our knowledge of integration pathways and experiences of second-generation adaptation. In direct opposition to existing research, we show that entrepreneurship that relies on ethnic capital continues to serve as a springboard for mobility and adaptation for the second gen, especially when it revolves around ethnoracial capitalism. Our findings also challenge the narrative that minority entrepreneurship is a mobility strategy adopted only out of desperation. These findings also make a useful contribution to immigrant integration literature as they demonstrate that, despite high levels of economic incorporation among the American-born, the class and ethnic resources and expectations of the larger family unit, along with structural constraints, continue to shape the decision-making of the Chinese second generation well after they transition into adulthood. This process highlights new mobility pathways beyond the white-collar labor market for the Asian American second generation.

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The “Bamboo Ceiling” in Law: Asian American Perceptions of Inequality in the Legal Profession



SHIH-CHUN “STEVEN” CHIEN, GOODWIN LIU,
AND AJAY K. MEHROTRA 

Although Asian Americans are the fastest growing racial minority groups in law schools and the American legal profession, they are underrepresented in leadership positions compared with their overall numbers within the profession. What explains this disparity? The existing literature on the “bamboo ceiling” highlights how social stereotypes, cultural biases, and workplace dynamics have hindered the occupational advancement of Asian Americans. But there is a dearth of such research on the legal profession. Using survey data and focus group interviews, we examine Asian American perceptions of inequality in the legal workplace. Our data show that while Asian American lawyers perceive some leadership barriers that are similar to those faced by other racial minorities, they also report that pervasive social stereotypes perpetuate beliefs that Asian Americans lack the traits typically associated with leadership. By identifying and analyzing these workplace challenges, this article contributes to research on the bamboo ceiling and informs efforts to promote greater workplace equality.

Keywords: diversity, Asian Americans, American legal profession, race, gender, workplace inequality

Shih-Chun “Steven” Chien is associate professor of law at William S. Boyd School of Law, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and affiliated scholar at the American Bar Foundation, Chicago, United States. **Goodwin Liu** is Associate Justice of the California Supreme Court and affiliated scholar at the American Bar Foundation, Chicago, United States. **Ajay K. Mehrotra** is professor of law and history at Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois, and research professor at the American Bar Foundation, Chicago, United States.

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From 1990 to 2010, Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders (AAPI) were the fastest-growing racial minority group entering US law schools (Chung et al. 2017; Li et al. 2020).¹ In the wake of the global financial crisis and Great Recession (2008–2009), the number of AAPI law students declined precipitously—more so than any other racial or ethnic group. But recently the numbers have rebounded, with women driving an increase in Asian American law school enrollment (Li et al. 2020; Leipold 2025). As a result of these long-term trends, Asian Americans have been the largest racial minority group in private law firms. They made up more than 13 percent of all 2024 law firm associates, compared with roughly 6 percent for African Americans, 7 percent for Latinx, and less than 1 percent for Native Americans (NALP 2025).² More broadly, Asian Americans have penetrated nearly every aspect of the American legal profession, from large law firms to the judiciary, to general counsel offices of large corporations, to the public and nonprofit sectors and the legal academy.

Despite these gains, Asian Americans are underrepresented in nearly all leadership positions compared with their overall numbers within law schools and the broader legal profession. In 2021, they comprised 8.7 percent of graduates of the top thirty law schools (compared with 6.2 percent for Black students and

8.9 percent for Latinx students), but less than 6 percent of all federal judicial clerks (Dang et al. 2022). Similarly, although Asian Americans have high entry rates into law firms,³ few advance to the ranks of equity partners—the highest rung of advancement in private law firms. Furthermore, Asian American associates leave private practice at a higher rate than any other racial or ethnic group.⁴ As a result, the share of partners who are AAPI compared with the share of associates who are AAPI is lower than comparable shares for all other racial or ethnic groups—a finding that has been consistent for roughly two decades (Dang et al. 2022).⁵ Overall, the upper echelons of private law practice remain predominantly White, with few minority attorneys occupying the highest positions of power and prestige (Leipold 2025).⁶

Although there have been notable increases recently among Asian American federal judges and general counsel at Fortune 1000 companies (Dang et al. 2022), Asian Americans continue to lag behind in other areas. There is perhaps no greater sign of the advancement obstacles faced by AAPI lawyers than the low figures of elected prosecutors and Senate-confirmed US Attorneys: in 2019, only 8 out of 2,396 elected prosecutors identified as Asian American (0.3 percent), compared to 69 identifying as Black (2.9 percent), 35 as Hispanic (1.5 percent), and 2,270 as White (94.8 percent).

1. Throughout this paper, we use the terms *Asian American*, *Asian American and Pacific Islander*, and *Asian* in accordance with their usage by cited sources. The terms are not necessarily interchangeable and may reflect variation in the included subgroups. For example, the term *Asian* may include foreign nationals, and *Asian American* sometimes but not always includes *Pacific Islanders*. For other racial groups, we similarly rely on the terminology used by cited sources.

2. In 2024, the proportion of Asian Americans in law schools (9.5 percent) was slightly higher than in the general US population (7 percent) (Krinsky 2024; Im 2025).

3. In 2020, 65 percent of Asian law school graduates obtained jobs in private practice, compared with 46 percent of African American graduates, 58 percent of Latinx graduates, and 57 percent of White graduates (NALP 2021).

4. In a 2019 survey, Asian Americans comprised 10 percent of attorneys who left their firms that year. By contrast, African Americans left at a rate of 6 percent and Latinx at a rate of 5 percent (Vault/MCCA 2020).

5. In 2020, the share of associates who were AAPI was three times the share of partners who were AAPI; the ratio was approximately 2:1 for African American and Latinx attorneys, and less than 1:1 for Whites (MCCA 2021).

6. The most recent National Association for Law Placement (NALP) report indicates that in 2024 White men still dominated the ranks of partnership; 24.8 percent of equity partners were women, and 10.2 percent were people of color (NALP 2025).

Similarly, fewer than a handful of the 93 US Attorneys in recent years have identified as Asian American (Dang et al. 2022).

Asian American women, in particular, have faced significant career hurdles in the legal profession, as in other parts of the American labor force (Gee and Peck 2017; Yu 2020; NALP 2024). In 2023, the percentage of Asian American women partners in US law firms surpassed 2 percent for the first time, but the ratio of AAPI women associates to partners remained higher than that of other racial groups (NALP 2024). Similar figures abound in the corporate sector. Women account for less than 6 percent (38 out of 682) of all chief executive officers (CEOs) at Fortune 500 and S&P 500 companies combined; of those 682 CEOs, only three were Asian women (Yu 2020).

What explains the persistent disparity between the significant number of Asian American entry-level lawyers and their limited presence in the leadership ranks of the profession? The literature on Asian Americans in the workforce frequently points to the “model minority” myth to explain why the challenges Asian Americans face in reaching leadership positions have been overlooked (Museus and Kiang 2009; Yu 2020). The pervasive stereotype that Asians have achieved universal success in educational attainment and occupational mobility—the misguided belief that Asian Americans are the unproblematic model minority—has obscured the reality of restricted professional advancement, including limited access to leadership opportunities.

While Asian Americans have achieved high levels of educational success, this advantage has not fully translated into success in the US labor market (Lee and Kye 2016; Lee and Tran 2019). The literature on the bamboo ceiling explains this lack of success by highlighting how social stereotypes, cultural biases, workplace dynamics, and other systemic obstacles have hindered the career progress of Asian Americans (Hyun 2005; Chin 2016; Gee and Peck 2018). For example, recent research has found evidence that East Asians are under-selected for leadership positions partly because they are stereotyped as lacking creativity (Lu 2024; Dang et al. 2022). Other research has identified social

network effects and degree of assertiveness (real and perceived) in explaining the differential success of South Asians compared to East Asians in attaining leadership positions (Lu 2022; Lu et al. 2020). While quantitative research on Asian Americans’ limited success in US labor markets is growing (Woo 2000; Yu 2020; Lu 2024), few studies examine the existence of a bamboo ceiling in the legal profession. Likewise, there are few qualitative studies that draw on Asian American lawyers’ lived experiences and perceptions of the workplace to illuminate the mechanisms of inequality and obstacles to career advancement.

In this article, we provide a novel exploration of such perceptions of workplace inequality among Asian American attorneys. Existing studies have provided important insights into how others—including supervisors, evaluators, and peers—have perceived Asian Americans in the employment context (Lai and Babcock 2013; Lu 2024; Lu et al. 2020). But our knowledge about workplace inequality is incomplete without a better understanding of Asian Americans’ self-perceptions. How Asian American attorneys perceive their workplace can shed light on how bias is interpreted, how everyday behavior is shaped, and how discrimination is experienced. In short, self-perception plays a significant role in how individuals navigate and respond to their professional environments.

More specifically, we examine Asian American lawyers’ self-reported perceptions of racial bias, social stereotypes, cultural preferences, and other obstacles to advancement in the legal profession. We use descriptive statistics from survey data and qualitative evidence from several focus group interviews with Asian American lawyers at different career stages to identify and analyze what these lawyers see as barriers to upward professional mobility. Because our qualitative data can be disaggregated by gender, we probe more deeply the challenges and opportunities faced by Asian American women at different stages of their legal careers.

Drawing on this empirical evidence, we provide several findings about Asian Americans’ perceptions of inequality in the legal work-

force, some of which are not unique to Asian Americans. Like lawyers of other racial or ethnic minority groups, Asian American lawyers perceive structural barriers to career advancement. Our survey participants identified the top barriers to advancement as “lack of formal leadership training,” “inadequate access to mentors and contacts,” and “work going unrecognized.” Asian American women respondents, in particular, identified family demands (for example, caring for children or aging parents) as one of their top obstacles, a finding that is common to women throughout the profession. Moreover, Asian American lawyers, like other minorities, perceive racial bias at work. Where existing data are available, we make comparisons between Asian American lawyers and other minority lawyers.

Asian American lawyers also face distinctive obstacles. Our survey data show that they believe others in the profession associate them with social stereotypes, such as introversion and passivity, that are generally not associated with conventional leadership traits, such as assertiveness or creativity. When we compare data over time, we find that the most significant self-reported challenges for Asian American lawyers have persisted across both surveys and focus groups. Furthermore, our evidence shows that women believed they were often associated with gendered Asian traits, such as being quiet, docile, and reserved. Importantly, we complement our survey data with evidence from focus groups, which forms the bulk of our qualitative evidence showing the more nuanced and subtle ways in which Asian Americans perceive and experience disparities in the legal profession.

Documenting Asian American perceptions of inequality in the legal profession is significant for several reasons. It helps us understand what Asian Americans believe to be the contours of the bamboo ceiling and what obstacles they see as holding them back from the highest echelons of leadership. It also helps debunk the myth of the model minority. Moving beyond educational attainment to examine obstacles to career advancement elucidates the fallacy of treating Asian American lawyers as part of an idealized model minority when in fact they struggle with challenges in the legal work-

force—challenges that are rooted in the existing power hierarchies within legal organizations. By identifying and analyzing these challenges, this study seeks to promote greater workplace equality, which may in turn affect the health and well-being of AAPI lawyers, their career satisfaction, and their willingness to remain in the profession (Nelson et al. 2023). Finally, because lawyers occupy a vital place in our democracy and system of justice, it is essential for the legal profession to reflect the diversity of the people it serves. Lawful efforts to promote such diversity can improve the development and administration of our laws and increase trust in our democratic institutions (Gerring et al. 2018).

This article begins with a brief overview of the literature, describing research on Asian Americans in the US labor force before turning to studies on diversity in the legal profession. Much of the extant literature provides a useful theoretical framework for studying Asian American lawyers, and we highlight this study’s contributions to the literature. We then describe our methods and evidence, explaining how we selected our survey and focus group participants and details of our data-gathering process. Finally, we discuss and analyze our main findings, drawing on quantitative data from our surveys to identify patterns and then turning mainly to qualitative comments from our focus groups. We conclude by summarizing key findings and discussing implications for future research and policy reform.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

A rich and growing social science literature has identified a bamboo ceiling limiting leadership opportunities for Asian Americans in the US labor force (Hyun 2005; Gee and Peck 2018). Research has shown that Asian Americans have quickly become the largest racial cohort of professionals in the US labor market, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) as well as health care (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022; Min and Jang 2014). Despite these gains, Asian Americans remain the least likely among all racial and ethnic groups to become executive leaders in the private or public sectors—espe-

cially Asian American women, who face the greatest obstacles (Yu 2020). The bamboo ceiling reflects a combination of individual, cultural, and organizational factors that together obstruct the advancement of Asian Americans into the highest echelons of the workplace.

Scholars from various disciplines have been exploring the persistence of such a bamboo ceiling. Some have used national survey data to explore how the family backgrounds and academic expectations of Asian Americans might lead them to gravitate toward fields that are perceived as more reliable and stable, which can inadvertently limit their exposure to leadership opportunities (Xie and Goyette 2003). Similar data have been used to investigate the prevalence of perceived discrimination in Asian American promotion decisions (Yu 2020; Ramakrishnan et al. 2018). Others have relied on interviews and related empirical evidence to show how social stereotypes have negatively labeled Asians as lacking the social skills, such as being extroverted and assertive, that are deemed necessary for leadership by mainstream Americans (Lai and Babcock 2013; Gee and Peck 2017; Zhou and Lee 2017).

Still others have conducted field experiments to show that many Asians are frequently identified as lacking creativity and the social skills and networks necessary to become effective leaders. This research also examines interethnic differences among Asians, suggesting that East Asians are often perceived as less assertive than South Asians (Lu 2022; Lu 2024; Lu et al. 2020). This emerging literature on potential subethnic differences among the broad group of Asian Americans indicates that the bamboo ceiling might be more porous for some subgroups. While the growing social science literature has advanced our understanding of the obstacles faced by Asian Americans in the overall labor market, there is little evidence on the specific challenges that Asian Americans face in the legal profession—a profession that plays a unique and vital role in safeguarding our democracy and the rule of law.

Although research on diversity in the legal profession has expanded recently, only a few studies have focused on Asian American lawyers (Quan 1988; Chew 1994). Scholars of the

American legal profession have long recognized the social stratification of the bar in terms of race, gender, and class. From the pioneering studies of the Chicago bar (Heinz and Laumann 1982) to more recent investigations of inequality in the profession (Nelson et al. 2023), scholars have demonstrated how a fundamental cleavage between large law firm attorneys and small or solo practice lawyers continues to define many aspects of the US legal profession, including the opportunities available to women and racial minorities.

With the rising number of women and racial minorities in the profession, researchers have also shown how the profession’s hierarchical structure, power asymmetries, and stratification process have led to lower earnings, higher attrition rates, and lower job satisfaction among women and underrepresented racial minorities (Dixon and Seron 1995; Wilkins and Gulati 1996; Epner 2006; Payne-Pikus et al. 2010; Nance and Madsen 2014; Sterling and Chanow 2021; Nelson et al. 2023). Moreover, this research illustrates how the work environment and culture of many legal organizations can be unwelcoming and challenging for women and racial minorities who experience lack of mentorship and limited networking opportunities. Scholarship on women in private practice, in particular, has demonstrated the many ways that women are undervalued in earnings by a “motherhood penalty” and are frequently denied promotions to partner because they are “counseled out” or terminated by firms (Gorman and Kmec 2009; Sterling and Reichman 2016; Owens and Rivera 2025). In addition, research has shown how gender and racial identities together, especially for young women lawyers of color, affect professional success (Collins et al. 2017; Crenshaw 2013).

Leaders of the US bench and bar have acknowledged the need for greater gender and racial diversity, particularly at the top ranks of the profession (Rhode and Ricca 2015). But there remains a disconnect between the profession’s goals of greater representation of women and minority lawyers and the persistent hierarchies of race, gender, and class (Headworth et al. 2016). Women, for example, have made tremendous gains in law school enrollment and entry into large law firms in the past few

decades. Yet relative to those numbers, women remain underrepresented at the most senior ranks of law firms (Owens and Rivera 2025). In 2024, they comprised more than half of new law firm associates but less than one-quarter of equity partners nationally (NALP 2025). Similar disparities hold for lawyers of racial and ethnic minority groups. That same year, African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, and Native Americans accounted for almost one-third of all law firm associates, but only 10 percent of equity partners (NALP 2025). Asian Americans, as we have seen, have the highest ratio of associate share to partner share and the largest attrition rates among underrepresented minority groups (NALP 2025).

Against this backdrop, our study makes several theoretical contributions to understanding the contours of the bamboo ceiling in law. First, many of our respondents have compiled a great deal of achievements within the “success frame” of their Asian American families and communities (Lee and Zhou 2015); they have excelled in educational settings, attained a job in a desirable profession, and achieved other success markers as understood within and supported by the networks of particular ethnic communities (Lee et al. 2024; Huang 2020). Our respondents have graduated from top colleges and law schools and are working in the coveted field of law. They have relied on “strategic adaptation” to select an occupation that requires advanced educational credentials and licensing, and applies specialized knowledge and competence (Xie and Goyette 2003; Lee et al. 2024). Yet our findings suggest that strategic adaptation to a success frame has limitations, particularly when it comes to advancement in the legal profession. Educational or other advantages achieved through the success frame seem to slip away in the legal workplace, especially in advancing to leadership positions.

The second contribution that our study makes is to our understanding of how Asian American lawyers have responded to the constraints of their occupational settings. Building on recent scholarship on how second-generation Asian American professionals have

negotiated the workplace (Huang 2020), our research not only identifies a similar set of challenges but also analyzes the coping strategies that Asian American lawyers have adopted to address these challenges. Like other Asian American professionals, our respondents noted that they lacked the mentors and social and professional networks of their White peers, which in turn inhibited their ability to advance their careers in law firm settings. They responded by seeking out their own mentors and sponsors, and by creating their own social support groups and peer networks. Similarly, when Asian American attorneys have experienced racialized incidents or negative social stereotyping, they have responded by minimizing the role of race—in some cases, by “acting White” (Carbado and Gulati 2013)—and by distancing themselves from such stereotypes.

Finally, our study provides a foundation for future research on subgroup differences among Asian American legal professionals. Other scholars have identified cultural differences among Asian American subgroups that might translate into different perceptions of social identity affecting leadership opportunities (Lu et al., 2020; Lu 2022). Although our data do not allow definitive conclusions about ethnic subgroup differences, our study offers a starting point and framework for future inquiry into these questions.

METHODS AND EVIDENCE

In this section, we explain the methods and evidence used in this article’s discussion and analysis of Asian American attorneys’ self-perceptions of workplace inequality. Our data are drawn from two sets of studies conducted under the auspices of the National Asian Pacific American Bar Association (NAPABA) and the American Bar Foundation (ABF), with support from other legal organizations and individuals.⁷ NAPABA is the country’s largest professional organization representing the interests of Asian Pacific American attorneys. Given its large membership, NAPABA was particularly instrumental in helping us gather data and produce the two original studies that form the basis of

7. For a full list of the financial sponsors and other supporters of this research, please see the ABF website page for this project (American Bar Foundation, n.d.).

our research (Chung et al. 2017; Dang et al. 2022). The ABF is an independent nonpartisan research institute focused on the empirical and interdisciplinary study of law. One of the ABF's hallmark studies, “After the JD” (AJD), is a national longitudinal study of legal careers (Nelson et al. 2023). Data from the AJD project on diversity in the profession were used in the two earlier studies. This article integrates the quantitative survey results from the two studies with new qualitative data mainly from focus group interviews conducted in 2021.

The two surveys were conducted in 2016 and 2022 through NAPABA and its affiliated networks. Both were online Qualtrics surveys distributed via email to NAPABA members.⁸ The first survey, conducted in 2016 and found in the online appendix, consisted of 68 questions completed by roughly 600 respondents, with a response rate of approximately 30 percent.⁹ The respondents were 57 percent women and 43 percent men; 11 percent were under the age of 30, 41 percent were ages 30–39, 30 percent were ages 40–49, 12 percent were ages 50–59, and 7 percent were aged 60 or older. Of respondents, 66 percent were born in the United States, and 34 percent were born abroad. The ethnic makeup consisted of 35 percent Chinese, 22

percent Korean, 11 percent Filipino, 11 percent Japanese, 10 percent Taiwanese, 8 percent Vietnamese, and 8 percent Indian, and roughly 7 percent reported other ethnicities.¹⁰ By employment sector, 46 percent of respondents were in private practice at law firms or solo practice, 25 percent in government positions, 20 percent as corporate counsel, and 6 percent in nonprofit organizations or academia.¹¹ This survey gathered data on basic demographics, parental education, law school experiences, career choices, political participation, future aspirations, and, most importantly for this article, experiences in the legal workforce.

The second survey, conducted in 2022, was an online survey distributed via email and had over 700 respondents, with a response rate of roughly 15 percent.¹² It received responses from a broad cross-section of NAPABA members that was demographically similar to the first survey and representative of the broader population of NAPABA members; in this sense, our data collection methods followed the best practices for survey research as recommended by the American Association for Public Opinion Research (2025). The second survey had slightly more women: 61 percent of respondents identified as women, 39 percent as men, and 1 percent as an-

8. In using NAPABA's professional network to conduct the two surveys, we acknowledge that our sample is likely to be skewed. Because respondents were all NAPABA members, they likely have a stronger interest in Asian American identity or more strongly value the opportunities afforded by Asian American affinity groups than the overall population of Asian American lawyers.

9. All online appendix material can be accessed at <https://www.rsfjournal.org/content/12/3/211/tab-supplemental>. The survey was distributed via two separate emails in July and August 2016 to 1,951 individual NAPABA members, with 600 respondents completing the survey. There is no detailed data on how many of the 1,951 individuals might have opened the email but not taken the survey.

10. The ethnic and gender composition of our survey respondents is roughly representative of NAPABA's broader 2022 membership, with approximately similar subgroup composition in both NAPABA membership and our survey respondents. The gender comparison is nearly identical. In this sense, our survey follows the best practices for survey research (American Association for Public Opinion Research 2025).

11. For more details on the composition of the 2016 survey respondents, see Eric Chung and colleagues (2017, 7).

12. This survey was delivered via three separate emails in March, April, and May 2022 to 9,956 individual NAPABA members. A maximum of 4,672 individuals opened the email, and a total of roughly 1,032 clicked on the survey. To be conservative, we have used the maximum number of individuals opening the email as our denominator for the response rate, leading to a 15 percent rate (700 of 4,672). If one uses the number of individuals that clicked on the survey as a denominator, our response rate is roughly 68 percent (700 of 1,032). For more on the declining response rates of online surveys distributed via email and the accompanying challenges, see generally Amany Saleh and Krishna Bista (2017); M. Siva Durga Prasad Nayak and K. A. Narayan (2019).

other gender identity. Respondents were older: 5 percent were under the age of 30, 30 percent were ages 30–39, 33 percent were ages 40–49, 17 percent were ages 50–59, and 15 percent were aged 60 or older. The self-reported country of origin was nearly identical to the first survey, with two-thirds born in the United States and one-third born abroad.¹³ The ethnic composition and parental education levels were also similar to the first survey: with 42 percent Chinese, 20 percent Korean, 11 percent Japanese, 9 percent Filipino, 10 percent Taiwanese, 7 percent Indian, 5 percent Vietnamese, and 5 percent other ethnicities. In terms of parental education, 23 percent reported that neither parent had a bachelor's degree, 21 percent had both parents with graduate degrees, and 5 percent had at least one parent with a law degree. Finally, the occupational distribution was similar as well: 43 percent of 2022 respondents were from private practice in law firms or solo practice, 20 percent from government, 18 percent from corporate counsel, 7 percent from the non-profit sector, and 2 percent from academia.¹⁴

The 2022 survey instrument, which can be found in the online appendix, consisted of 92 questions, replicating many items from the original survey and adding new ones about identity in the workplace, mental health, and current events. The instrument measured the experiences and perceptions of our respondents, with many items using a 5-point Likert scale. The survey had three sections. The first explored law school experiences, probing motivations for obtaining a law degree and experiences in law school, including mentorship opportunities. The second section examined employment experiences, asking questions about workplace diversity, perceived discrimination, and related topics. The third section focused on respondents' future ambitions, their sense of identity in the workplace, engagement with political activities, mental health, and views on recent political events.

While our survey data are not longitudinal, the use of NAPABA's membership to conduct

both surveys suggests some overlap between the two groups of respondents. The 2022 respondents were demographically consistent with those from the 2016 survey across a range of characteristics, including age, gender, ethnicity, immigration background, and professional setting. Although our study does not survey the same human subjects across time, the demographic consistency suggests that the respondent pool remained broadly representative of NAPABA's membership.

With that said, we acknowledge the inherent limitations of survey-based research, particularly in the context of declining response rates for online and email-based surveys. Prior methodological research indicates that response rates for such surveys typically range from 25 percent to 30 percent (Shih and Fan 2008); by comparison, our response rates were 30 percent for the 2016 survey and 15 percent for the 2022 survey. Further, we recognize the potential for nonresponse bias. Such bias occurs when those who choose to respond differ in meaningful ways from those who do not (Groves and Peytcheva 2008). Certain perspectives—especially from members less engaged with NAPABA or more marginalized within the profession—may be underrepresented in our sample. Our respondents may tend to reflect those individuals within the population who felt they had “something to say” about the topics at issue, while individuals who had less well-formed views or who were content with their career or workplace circumstances may have been less motivated to respond. Finally, our sampling frame (NAPABA members) limits our ability to make firm claims about Asian American lawyers writ large.

In this study, we rely less on the survey data to support our claims and more on our qualitative focus group evidence. In using the survey data as a baseline to identify key patterns of self-perceived inequality in the legal workforce, we treat this source of evidence as large-scale qualitative data rather than as a representative sample of Asian American lawyers overall. Our

13. The second report contains more detailed information on the birth and immigration status of the second survey's respondents, see Tyler Dang and colleagues (2022).

14. For more details on the composition of the 2022 survey respondents, see Dang and colleagues (2022, 9).

focus group data, moreover, corroborate the patterns identified from the surveys; they provide narrative depth, nuance, and context to the patterns, illustrating the experiences of Asian American attorneys. This triangulation between methods helps mitigate concerns about the use of the survey data and supports the overall validity of our conclusions.

The focus group evidence is drawn from the 2022 study. In December 2021, our research team conducted eleven in-person focus group interviews with a total of seventy Asian American attorneys at the NAPABA annual convention in Washington, DC.¹⁵ Each respondent volunteered in advance to participate. The groups were organized by practice setting (for example, large law firms, corporate counsel, government, and public interest), ethnicity, gender, and seniority in the profession. There were six to eight participants in each group, and they were interviewed as a group. The interviews lasted roughly one hour and followed a standard script to canvass attorneys’ experiences with race, identity, and activism over the last five years (see focus group script in the online appendix). We also raised questions about mental health and perceptions of the workplace, including obstacles to professional advancement and perceived discrimination. Our script included open-ended questions about how racial or ethnic identities influenced their professional interactions and the barriers they perceived to career advancement. We also asked how recent events—including immigration restrictions, the COVID-19 pandemic, and increased anti-Asian violence—have shaped their professional attitudes and behaviors. The focus group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed, and analyzed by our research team. The qualitative evidence guided modifications to our 2022 survey instrument and informed our overall findings.

We recognize the potential for social desirability bias in our focus group data. To mitigate this bias and elicit more candid and authentic responses, we took several steps grounded in fundamental social science approaches

(Krueger and Casey 2000). First, we assured all participants anonymity and confidentiality in their responses, which we maintained throughout the collection and analysis of data. Second, we carefully composed the focus groups to create more comfortable environments; we separated groups by seniority, for instance, to ensure that law firm partners were not in the same group as junior associates. Third, we triangulated the focus group data with written anonymous responses from our open-ended survey questions. With these steps, we have greater confidence in the validity and accuracy of our focus group evidence. In this article, the bulk of our original evidence consists of anonymous quotes from the December 2021 focus group participants and open-ended survey questions. As in other sociolegal studies on diversity in the legal profession that rely primarily on qualitative data, our focus groups provide insights into the lived experiences of Asian Americans in the legal workforce, thereby painting “a detailed picture that is invisible in tables of quantitative data” (Garth and Sterling 2018, 128).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Together, our survey results and focus group interviews identify some of the common experiences of inequality observed by Asian Americans in the legal workforce. Some of our findings and analysis apply to all racial minorities, such as the lack of mentoring and leadership training opportunities, while others are unique to Asian social stereotypes, such as perceptions that Asian Americans are diligent workers but not leadership material. In this section, we first examine the perceived primary obstacles to professional advancement. We next explore the pervasive stereotypes that Asian American lawyers believe are frequently attributed to them. Finally, we investigate the self-perceptions of overt and implicit discrimination observed by our participants.

Obstacles to Advancement

Both surveys document similar perceived impediments to career advancement, with female

15. The research team consisted of the authors and a team of graduate research assistants. The authors moderated the first few focus groups to model neutral and nonjudgmental facilitation, and then the graduate research assistants conducted the remaining focus groups.

respondents noting additional barriers and more pronounced challenges. The top three obstacles identified in the two surveys were the same: “lack of formal leadership training,” “inadequate access to mentors and contacts,” and “work going unrecognized.” In both surveys, “lack of formal leadership training” was identified as one of the leading barriers to career advancement, with roughly 40 percent of respondents selecting this choice in both surveys. “Limited access to mentors and contacts” was identified as a barrier by nearly half of the respondents in 2016 (the top choice) and by 37 percent of respondents in 2022. And approximately one-third of respondents cited “my work goes unrecognized” as a barrier in 2016 and in 2022. Thus, the survey results show persistence of the same set of observed hurdles (see figure 1). The same gender disparity appeared in both surveys. Women reported more barriers than men in both surveys, and they more frequently cited family demands (for example, taking care of children and aging parents) and lack of recognition for their work (Chung et al. 2017; Dang et al. 2022).

In some ways, these findings are not surprising. They match what other scholars studying diversity in the legal profession have noted, especially the lack of mentoring and networking opportunities (Nelson et al. 2023; Payne-Pikus et al. 2010) and the particular challenges faced by women of color (Collins et al. 2017). Yet the qualitative data from our studies demonstrate the depth and distinctive nature of the bias that Asian American lawyers face. Our focus group data provide additional evidence of the main barriers to professional advancement. The anonymous quotes below are drawn mainly from our 2021 focus groups; where relevant, we have included respondents’ gender, seniority, and practice setting.

Although the focus group participants did not use the specific term “formal leadership programs” in their comments, several law firm attorneys noted that they received little encouragement to learn more about business development or generating new clients—what is colloquially referred to in the profession as building “a book of business.” Bringing in new clients and retaining existing ones are often prerequisites to promotion to equity partner-

ship, which is the domain of firm leadership (Wilkins 2001). As a Korean American male partner at a mid-size firm reflected: “I wanted to develop my own book. I wanted to have my own clients. And I remember I really tried hard. I tried saying, ‘Okay, I’m now at a point in my career where I want to do this. I want to start bringing people in.’ And I didn’t get much support for that” (Senior Career Stage, Law Firm FG7, Speaker 8, 13). Although this respondent did become a partner, it was only after leaving his initial law firm.

A male Vietnamese American mid-level associate described a similar experience: “In fact, I had a lot of partners coming up to me, trying to discourage me from doing a lot of things.” This respondent noted that he understood the importance of generating clients and that he spent “an extra five to six hundred hours a year, on top of what I billed, doing business development.” Ironically, when he became successful, the same partners turned to him for advice. “What was interesting was that the partners that essentially discouraged me from bringing in business, as soon as I brought in the business, would come up to me and [ask me] ‘Would you be willing to come to the next partners’ meeting and give us a presentation on how you brought in work?’” Despite his success, he added, no program or mentor had been available “to help me with that” (Vietnamese FG, Speaker 4, 12–13).

Business development is not just about getting new clients; it is also about maintaining and expanding long-standing client relationships, which frequently entails passing a book of business to a junior colleague or having confidence that a junior colleague will perform well with clients (Nelson et al. 2023). Many respondents believed that there is a racialized component to this important transition. As one male Chinese American partner at a large firm noted: “I really do think that even today there are significant advantages that Caucasians, White people, both men and women benefit from at large firms that do not benefit minorities, including African Americans, Latinos, and Asian Americans. And one example of that is, as I look back at my career, I have never been handed an institutional client in any big law firm. All of my clients that I represent today are

Figure 1. Barriers to Career Advancement, 2016 and 2022 Survey Responses

Source: Chung et al. 2017; Dang et al. 2022.

my clients [that] I've developed and generated" (Senior Career Stage, Law Firm FG7, Speaker 11, 10).

The same respondent observed a racial pattern. "I have White colleagues who [represent] X company," this respondent stated. When "that partner retires, it gets passed to another White guy. So, their books of business grow and grow just by sitting there, and the firm just hands them clients. And I have never had that experience at any law firm." This lack of support, in turn, affected his decision to stay at his large law firm. "So, my career, I think, has been hindered compared to Caucasians at a big law firm. And it's affected my career in terms of why I've moved law firms" (Senior Career Stage, Law Firm FG7, Speaker 11, 10–11).

Client transitions often occur through mentoring relationships. Having a powerful mentor has long been recognized as an important element in law firm success, especially for racial minorities (Dobbin and Kalev 2022; Kay and Gorman 2016). In many organizations, mentoring occurs in a variety of informal ways that are inaccessible to racial minorities and women.

Hence the importance of formal mentoring programs: There is evidence that when such programs are made available to everyone, they are often disproportionately utilized by women and minority employees who otherwise lack access to informal mentoring opportunities. These structured programs thus help level the playing field for promotion and advancement (Kalev and Dobbin 2024).

Echoing findings from prior research (Rhode 2018; Nelson et al. 2023), our focus group respondents noted that mentors were important for several reasons, including serving as role models for future success. As one female litigator at a small firm observed, she felt "very lucky" that when she started her career "one of the partners . . . actually the only female partner" was a Chinese American woman who "became [her] mentor":

It showed me, it allowed me to see myself in someone who looks like me, with similar backgrounds. It showed me that if she's able to be a good litigator, to be successful as a litigator, why can't I do the same? I think it

really does help to be able to see yourself in someone else who's been able to make it. She has always been very supportive, always reaching out, exposing me to opportunities, and introducing me to clients, helping me to build my own practice. I consider her my most important mentor, and now a friend (Vietnamese FG, Speaker 3, 11).

Mentors can be effective role models, especially when they provide guidance and inspiration on how to navigate professional challenges as a member of a racial minority (Leipold 2025).

Without such representation at the top, many Asian American lawyers have little confidence they will break into the exclusive partnership ranks. "It's hard to be like, 'Oh I'll make partner,' when there's nobody who looks like me who's made partner in the last few years," a South Asian woman associate at a large law firm remarked. "It's tough because then you're like . . . to be the first, there's a lot more effort than to be a follower, so I think that's one of the big challenges of retention because if there's another opportunity, I might take it because I don't see people who have made it who look like me" (Female, South Asian FG3, Speaker 3, 16).

Several respondents emphasized that the lack of Asian American leaders perpetuates a cycle where up-and-coming lawyers do not see role models who look like them and, as a result, diverge from the leadership track. "I had discussions with a guy," one senior associate at a large international law firm noted, "the Asian American who was one year above me and we talked about it and we both said, 'Well, do we really trust that [the firm] is going to make one of us the first Asian partner at the firm?' And we said, 'No, probably not.' So, he left a year before me." Our respondent soon followed suit. "I left because none of us could trust that they were really going to treat us fairly at the end of the day. Even though they said they would, I just, in my gut, I was like, 'Is that really going to happen?' So, it has affected my career just by being Asian American" (Senior Career Stage, Law Firm FG7, Speaker 11, 10–11).

Effective mentors are not just role models; they are also sponsors who champion or "go to bat" for their mentees (Zahraiddin-Aravena

2020). Typically, sponsors are senior leaders in an organization who have power, authority, and influence within and outside of the organization. They frequently use their gravitas and political capital to support a junior colleague's advancement. "Mentors may provide guidance and support only when you meet with them," one junior lawyer noted. "Sponsors, on the other hand, advocate for you when you are not in the room" (Nguyen and Patel 2019, 10). In this way, sponsors go beyond mentors by investing their social and political capital to directly support a younger lawyer's career advancement.

Our respondents uniformly noted the importance of such sponsorship but had mixed experiences. The Vietnamese female respondent who celebrated having a Chinese American woman litigator as her mentor noted that she "had a male attorney, a managing partner of [the] firm, who was also someone I consider a mentor . . . because he went to bat for me with other attorneys, and especially with the other partners." This participant noted the challenges of balancing work and family and how her male sponsor helped her navigate those challenges to partnership:

I wanted certain accommodations and arrangements, so that I could be both a good, successful attorney at the firm and in the community, as well as being able to be a good mom at home to my kids. That was very important to me, as an attorney, and to be fulfilled in my profession. Because he was able to go to bat for me, and was willing to go to bat for me, it allowed me to stay in my profession to do what I enjoy doing, and to continue to move forward, and to progress, and to become a partner (Female Vietnamese American Partner FG, Speaker 3, 11).

Effective mentoring and sponsorship relations are frequently formed not just by working closely together but also by interacting in social activities. Yet Asian American lawyers, like other minorities, often feel excluded from such activities (Garth and Sterling 2018). "Asians work hard and do not say no to their superiors," noted one female Asian American associate. "With that, somehow I was the only one staying

back to cover the team assignments when the others went out for yoga and wine” (Chung et al. 2017, 31). Although social activities vary, AAPI lawyers noted that they often had a hard time relating to many of them, as one South Asian male associate at a midsize law firm explained:

Most of the partners that I work with are huge hunters. I mean they go to like Montana, and I’ve never had interest in hunting . . . fishing. . . . So, it’s challenging to kind of get that caseload because a lot of talk does happen during those [events], when the associate and the partner might go hunting or go fishing or things [like] that. And you get left out because you don’t do those things and it’s weird for me to go and like, I’m just going to tag along. . . . And these are hobbies that are like. . . . They’re not cheap hobbies. . . . Our parents did not have money. As an immigrant, you’re not going on ski trips. . . . I mean, you’re not going fishing because these are all luxuries (South Asian FG3, Speaker 4, 14-15).

Social activities thus reflect not only cultural differences but also class distinctions.

Respondents also believed that they lacked the social and professional networks that could help them generate business—often an essential criteria for making partner (Galanter and Henderson 2007). “The other thing we are lacking, I think, is we don’t have the connections that a lot of the White partners and associates have,” noted a male junior associate. “Our communities don’t have those contacts because we’re all immigrants” (South Asians FG3, Speaker 3, 20). Although not all our respondents were immigrants, they nearly all believed that others benefited from deeper social networks that gave them access to potential clients, which could lead to credit for originating new business. Another male respondent said:

If one partner has a client because they’re best buds or fraternity brothers from college, then every case that comes after is theirs, then every associate, minority associate who’s working on it, they’re getting hours, but they’re not getting any credit, like origination

credit. And then from law firms for promotion, a lot of it depends on how much this person has brought into the firm. . . . If you want to be partner and if you want to be at the helm of the ship, you have to be a rainmaker at a law firm, you have to have origination [credit] (South Asian FG3, Speaker 4, 17-18).

These comments reinforce what other scholars have found about the importance of social network explanations for the bamboo ceiling (Lu 2022).

Some Asian American lawyers concede that cultural factors may be hindering their long-term success in developing the social and professional networks essential to advancement. “We are not as comfortable asking,” acknowledged one male senior associate. “I have good friends who are in-house, but it’s always awkward to be like, ‘Hey, send me work.’ It’s just not who we are, and I think that’s a drawback that we have, where my White colleague might just be like, ‘Hey, just call them up . . . ask them for work.’ I’m like, ‘It’s not what we do’” (South Asian FG3, Speaker 3, 20). Such cultural self-perceptions may further entrench the bamboo ceiling. Many Asian Americans report being raised with cultural values that stress humility and modesty, which can make them reluctant to self-promote or be assertive in seeking clients (Yu 2020).

When these perceived obstacles to advancement are combined, there is often a sense of self-doubt that appears to shape the views of our respondents. “When I did not get something that I thought I deserved, how much of that can be attributed to my own failings versus implicit bias?” one respondent asked. “So, there’s always that unanswered question, right, of like, well, do I fall short because of me? Or do I fall short because of other reasons? And you can never really be sure” (Korean FG6, Speaker 5, 11). This sense of uncertainty was even more pronounced in this respondent’s self-reflections about promotion:

The first year I was up for partner, I didn’t get it. And I was surprised. And then I looked at the candidates, and I’m like, “Okay, well, I’m just as good as those people, right?” So, one on one comparison, like, okay, well, I under-

stand why so and so made it, because that person's got this person in their corner. . . . But looking from a one to one, a technical comparison, I was like, “I'm just as skilled, I've done just as much casework, been to trials, we've done this. They don't have any skills that I don't have, I've generated this much business. So, is it because of me? Or is it because of these other factors and the politics that are involved?” So, I don't know. Maybe it's both, I don't know. But so that's always going to be something that's just going to stick with me (Korean FG6, Speaker 5, 11).

The obstacles to professional advancement identified by our survey respondents and the detailed experiences recounted by our focus group participants demonstrate one set of challenges faced by Asian American lawyers. An additional set of challenges arises from stereotypes that participants believed their peers in the legal workplace attributed to them.

Stereotypes

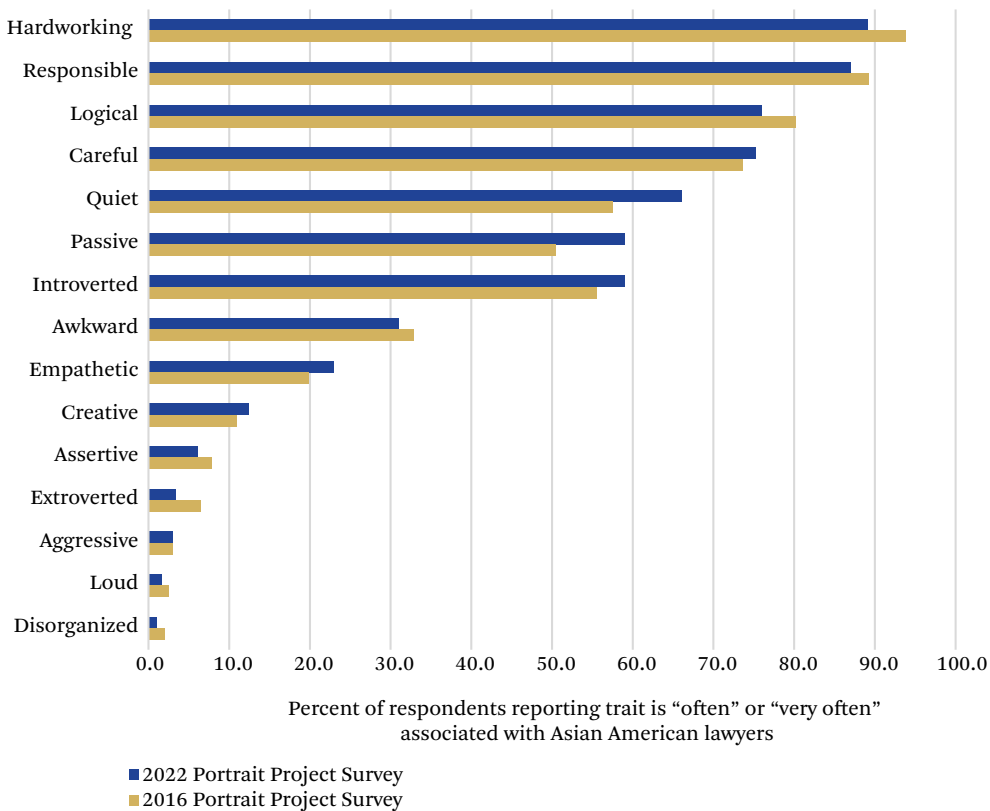
Many of the obstacles to career advancement identified by our respondents are not distinctive to Asian Americans. The existing literature has documented how other racial minorities and women have been hindered by similar impediments (Nelson et al. 2023). But social stereotypes about Asians are a unique part of the experience of Asian American inequality in the legal workplace. These stereotypes perpetuate the model minority myth and help entrench the bamboo ceiling by pigeonholing Asian American lawyers to narrowly defined roles—diligent and responsible employees yet perceived as lacking leadership potential. In both sets of surveys, our respondents identified several traits that they believed other members of the American legal profession have associated with Asians. The responses were nearly identical across the two surveys (see figure 2). A vast majority of survey respondents answered that in their experience the following traits were “very often” or “often” associated with AAPI attorneys: “hardworking” and “responsible” (greater than 80 percent) and “logical” and “careful” (over 70 percent). While these qualities are generally valued, they also align with

perceptions of Asian American lawyers as competent and compliant “worker bees” rather than leaders.

By contrast, the personal characteristics conventionally associated with effective leadership received relatively low ratings in our surveys. The prototypical leader in many US professions is frequently identified as being “assertive,” signaling confidence, motivation, and conviction (Lu et al. 2020). Central to our justice system is the adversarial process, and the characteristics of being “aggressive” and “extroverted” are identified with leadership in the legal profession. In our surveys, consistent with the “worker bee” stereotype, the traits “assertive,” “extroverted,” and “aggressive” were each selected by fewer than 10 percent of respondents, and the traits “empathetic” and “creative” were each selected by roughly 20 percent of respondents. Being perceived as docile or passive was particularly pernicious for Asian American women, as our qualitative findings below indicate. Because the practice of law, especially in firms or practice groups that focus on litigation, has often been dominated by a culture that values aggression and assertiveness, those deemed to lack such characteristics are often overlooked as managers and leaders (McGinley 2012).

Several of our focus group participants commented on how they had to actively challenge the “worker bee” Asian stereotype to demonstrate they could be good managers and leaders. “The perception of me being a doer and not a manager was something I consistently had to push against, even though I was able to get the first non-lawyer promoted to a level manager director in the department,” remarked one in-house counsel. “I had to constantly demonstrate that I had managerial aspects of things in terms of human capital management, like managing transactions . . . you can do the substance, but can you do the people piece? And I felt like that's something which goes into the model minority stereotype” (In-House FG5, Speaker 3, 15).

Given the pervasiveness of these stereotypes, some of our participants indicated that they had to disguise parts of their identity for fear of being deemed as not a good “fit” for the

Figure 2. Traits Associated with Asian American Lawyers, 2016 and 2022 Surveys

Source: Chung et al. 2017; Dang et al. 2022.

prevailing organizational culture. “Sometimes your identity holds you back because you feel like you must cover parts of yourself that are different in order to fit in. But it actually holds you back when people recognize there’s something culturally not right. Like they recognize you’re not being forthright” (Women FG2, Speaker 1, 9). This respondent, an Asian American woman, described how the “reticent” nature of Asian American lawyers was viewed as insufficiently “forthright” for the firm’s culture. This was one reason she believed that an Asian American colleague was not promoted to partner.

These stereotypes frequently reflect ascriptive characteristics rather than social or cultural upbringing, as recent research has shown (Nelson et al. 2019). One of our focus group participants, a woman of Korean ancestry who was

adopted by a White family, expressed frustration with this type of racial bias:

I look Asian, but I didn’t grow up Asian, right? So . . . all the interactions that I get from other people are based solely on perception of who they think I am, not at all about who I am, because I grew up in White America with White parents, White cultural values. I don’t have any of that Asian cultural stuff that people talk about when they talk about sort of cultural values that maybe impact Asian Americans’ abilities to sort of, in the workplace, like I don’t have that, right? It’s all based on how other people see me. And so, I’m constantly facing other people’s perceptions of what an Asian woman is like, what they can and can’t do in terms of litigation, leadership, management, all of those things,

and it's all just solely based on my looks, and not at all based on any internal value system or cultural experience (Korean FG6, Speaker 2, 8).

This participant was not alone. Others reflected on how their upbringing did not always match racial identity. "My parents were White hippies, so they just wanted me to be happy," remarked another Korean adoptee. "I also didn't get a lot of career direction either. . . . We weren't guided toward anything specific. But my dad's a lawyer, so then I became a lawyer somehow" (Korean, FG6, Speaker 4, 14).

While these stereotypes were consistent across gender categories, Asian American women frequently reported being perceived as too passive or docile to be leaders or even effective lawyers. As other scholars have shown, the dominant cultural script in many aspects of the legal profession is that of a highly assertive male (Pierce 1996). These implicit rules and norms frequently compel women and other groups to conform to that script to succeed, especially in the adversarial field of litigation. "Throughout my career, people just assumed I was too passive to be a litigator, like I just didn't have the skills to be a litigator, and they just assumed that as an Asian woman I would be submissive and passive and just not assertive enough," one participant noted (Korean FG6, Speaker 2, 8).

Such cultural scripts or unwritten guidelines surfaced even in some of the most banal settings where the combination of race and gender seemed to influence social interactions. One female participant recounted:

I was at a deposition with a White partner and the opposing counsel; we were trying to order lunch. It was our deposition, and the opposing counsel was filling out the lunch form. And I just took it over from the opposing counsel and said, "I'll run this." Then I gave it to the hotel. And the White partner was like, "No." After the deposition, he was like, "No, you cannot do this. I don't ever want you to take lunch orders from the opposing counsel. They're grown a— people, and they can do this. . . ." Sorry, excuse me. "They can do this themselves." And that was seen as . . . maybe

it was a racial moment for him. . . . Or gender, and he had a gender thing. Exactly. Where I'm an Asian woman, so I was catering to the needs of these other people that I was too nice and whatnot, but to me, I didn't even register it that way. It was just something that I was taught to do that I'm going to [be a] considerate person who helps others (In-House FG5, Speaker 4, 13).

This interaction reveals a dilemma for Asian American women lawyers: conformity to a dominant cultural script is frowned on as lacking toughness or being too accommodating, while nonconformity can readily be perceived as lacking social grace or being rude. No clear script is available for Asian American women to demonstrate the requisite "people skills" essential for promotion and advancement.

Other female participants reported a similar type of shortsightedness when it came to how their White male colleagues perceived their legal skills, including during difficult negotiations. My colleagues "thought I wasn't being aggressive enough in my negotiations with the counterparty," one participant recounted. "Three White male directors had it in their head that I just . . . 'She's too docile and submissive,' which was not the case." Her superiors tried unsuccessfully to replace her with her male cocounsel. She concluded: "I'm fully convinced that if a White man had been the lawyer, and had taken the tack that I had taken, that it would not have been viewed as a move of weakness the way that they thought that they interpreted what I was doing" (Female Korean FG6, Speaker 6, 12–13).

To counter these perceptions, Asian American women lawyers reported being more self-conscious about asserting their professional status and role, yet even this did not always work. "When I go into court, when I go into a settlement conference, a mediation, I'm always having to think of what to do to take control, to assert myself, and to communicate that I'm the one in charge, or at least, I'm the attorney for this client," one litigator noted. "But I've had to learn, I've had many experiences, in which people assume . . . people assume that I was the interpreter, a court reporter, assistant, even though I'm in full suit, and I'm standing right

next to my client” (Female Vietnamese FG, Speaker 3, 9). Misidentifying and underestimating Asian American women were common themes among our participants. “Yeah, I constantly still get mistaken to be the court reporter, the translator, the paralegal when I walk into a courtroom,” remarked one respondent (Female Korean FG6, Speaker 2, 8). The expectation of Asians being more passive and less assertive appears to be more pronounced for Asian American women, confining them to cultural scripts that are not conducive to advancement and penalizing them for deviating from such scripts. Indeed, such stereotypes associated with Asian American women hinder recognition of their role as lawyers at all.

At the same time, Asian American women have reported that when they are assertive, they are often cast negatively as an overly aggressive “dragon lady” (Ramiro 2022; Gee et al. 2015). Whereas men displaying similar behavior are portrayed as powerful and confident, the “dragon lady” stereotype demeans Asian American women as haughty and overbearing. As one researcher has explained, Asian American women often face a no-win situation, even when attempting to exercise their agency: “They are either sweet and docile or Tiger Mom or Dragon Lady—and those are not favorable notions of what lawyers should be” (Chen 2022). These observations from the existing literature together with our findings underscore the importance of examining race and gender together when analyzing diversity and inclusion in the US workforce.

Perceptions of Discrimination

In addition to stereotypes and related barriers to professional advancement, Asian Americans, like other racial minorities and women, continue to face overt and implicit discrimination in the legal workforce. In recent years, some have contended that most workplace discrimination is limited to implicit bias and similar forms of subtle unequal treatment (Green 2007). Our findings suggest that Asian Americans experience both explicit and implicit workplace discrimination. The rise in anti-Asian hate during the COVID-19 pandemic likely heightened awareness among our most recent participants. Still, the 2021 focus group

data complement the survey findings and reinforce what other research has noted about the effects of perceived discrimination on the career trajectories of lawyers (Nelson et al. 2019).

Among our 2022 survey respondents, 41 percent perceived overt discrimination because of their race “sometimes,” “often,” or “very often”; among 2016 survey respondents, that figure was 30 percent. As for implicit bias, 64 percent of respondents in 2022 said they experienced such discrimination because of their race “sometimes,” “often,” or “very often”; compared to 58 percent in 2016. Moreover, there was no substantial difference in rates of perceived racial discrimination by ethnic categories, gender, or immigrant generation (Dang et al. 2022). Several factors may explain the increase in reported perceptions of discrimination from 2016 to 2022. The rise in anti-Asian sentiment and reported hate incidents, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, may have spread to the legal workplace or may have produced heightened sensitivities to stereotyping or discrimination. Greater social and political attention to racial injustice, especially in the wake of the 2020 George Floyd murder and subsequent protests, also may have led to increased awareness of discrimination. Relatedly, the heightened visibility of racial injustice may have encouraged more Asian Americans to feel empowered to report their experiences of discrimination. Indeed, our 2022 survey data shows that over the previous two years, respondents became more engaged in social and political issues and had a greater desire to change and improve society (Dang et al. 2022).

Regardless of the cause, the qualitative evidence illuminates the kinds of experiences that undergird such perceptions. Our focus groups revealed that such discrimination occurs at all different stages of the profession, from the recruitment of entry-level lawyers to experiences at some of the highest levels of the bar and bench. One junior associate at a litigation firm described his experience interviewing for a position: “In an interview for a summer associate position, the interviewer said ‘we are a very aggressive firm, and we do a lot of litigation. You are obviously an Asian person, and that’s not something that you all do. How would you deal with that?’ And I remember how incapable I

was of thinking of anything to say because I was so offended—and I also wanted the job. I didn't hate the comment enough to walk out" (Dang et al. 2022, 57).

Other focus group participants reported that prominent law firm leaders tasked with recruiting and staffing do not know how to treat Asian American candidates. "When I came to [my] firm, there was one woman partner who just refused to put Asian people on her cases," recounted a Taiwanese American female partner. "For like seven years running, even if seven of our associates were Asian out of ten, she would always pick the three non-Asians." She continued: "[The female partner] was head of recruiting and was like, 'Are Asians counted?' She sat me in a room with the partners and was like, 'Are Asians minorities? Like, tell me straight.' And I was like, 'Oh, God.' And this happened, right? At a big, progressive New York law firm. I would say a lot of partners don't know if Asians are minorities. I was like, you're head of recruiting, now?" (Women FG2, Speaker 1, 5). The status of Asian Americans as an "invisible" or "forgotten" minority continues to shape perceptions within the legal profession.

Explicit and implicit forms of discrimination were not limited to private practice. Asian American lawyers working in the public sector shared similar experiences. "For me being in government, I experienced way more racism, sexism, harassment, than anyone should have," recounted a female Vietnamese American lawyer.

I was one of maybe three or four Asian attorneys out of a department with about 250 attorneys in that particular government agency. For a lot of people, I was the first Asian professional they had worked with. I would walk into a room; they would not think I am the attorney in the room. I was either the secretary or the admin assistant. So, there were all these questions tied to the fact that I was a young woman, I was Asian. And there would always be these comments about, 'Oh, so have you been to Panda Express?' I had a manager who called me 'Oriental' at some point (Vietnamese FG, Speaker 2, 8).

Other participants said they were told that their ascriptive traits were justifications for why they were not promoted. "I was passed over for a promotion that I felt I deserved and worked for. The reason I was given for not being promoted was that the position entailed a lot of interacting with the public and I 'didn't have the right face' for the position" (Dang et al. 2022, 57).

More prominent in our focus group discussions was how unconscious bias manifested in the legal workplace. Numerous participants described colleagues repeatedly mistaking them for other Asian coworkers. "People at the firm were confusing me with the other Asian female associate and then when she left, another Asian female associate joined and then they confused me with her," one female in-house attorney remarked (In-House FG5, Speaker 7, 15). Against the backdrop of claims that our society is or ought to be colorblind, many of our focus group participants reported that workplace colleagues could not see past their racial and gender identity to recognize their individuality.

Other respondents noted that while greater attention to diversity has led to some increased opportunities, it has brought with it a kind of "tokenism" that can be offensive and akin to explicit discrimination. One in-house antitrust litigator described such a situation:

I have found that in the workplace, my colleagues do not point out my racial identity or the fact that I'm a woman of color, except more recently where there have been initiatives by judges and courts to diversify panels, for example, in the selection of lead counsel for plaintiffs' antitrust cases. . . . I, at my last firm, noticed that as I did more antitrust work and would occasionally try to get involved in some of the plaintiff's side work, I would be told, "You can come, and you'll be invited. We'll put you on there because we need to have an Asian or we need to have diversity, or else we as a firm have nothing to contribute or we're unlikely to get this leadership role." And so, it felt very weird because I was expressly being told many times in pitches and the like and during meetings with other counsel that were trying to put together panels to be submitted to the court, that I would be in-

cluded only because I was an Asian woman essentially. I knew that it was also that I had the goods, that I could do the work, but it's strange because it's the only time I've had anyone comment on and explicitly tell me, “You're included only because of the way you looked and the boxes that you check.” (In-House FG5, Speaker 8, 17-18)

Participants also reported experiencing discrimination through acts of professional disrespect. Again, the intersectionality of race and gender was evident in the treatment of some of the profession's top members. One female respondent said: “As a judge, as a woman on the bench, I get sassed a lot more than my male colleagues do. [On one occasion,] I was saying ‘Well, counsel, I have this question,’ [and the lawyer I was addressing] said, ‘No, you wait until I'm finished.’ It was like, ‘No. No. I'm sorry. Last time I checked, I was the judge. And so, I get to decide who speaks when’” (Dang et al. 2022, 57).

Several focus group participants described strategies they developed to navigate racial and gender challenges in the legal workplace. As other scholars have shown (Huang 2020), Asian Americans who had relied earlier in their lives on ethnic networks to achieve educational success frequently lacked the career advice and professional connections needed to advance in non-STEM career fields. When they were unable to find supportive mentors or sponsors, they sought social solidarity from peers. “What I have found is, in my career, it's not necessarily mentors that have helped me,” remarked one participant. “It was more of having friends that were empathetic, and that shared similar values” (Vietnamese FG, Speaker 2, 13).

Despite these workplace challenges, Asian American lawyers are generally satisfied with their decision to become lawyers. The ABF's AJD study has demonstrated that approximately three-quarters of Asian American lawyers, like other racial minorities, reported be-

ing “moderately” or “extremely satisfied” with their occupational choices (Nelson et al. 2023). The level of career satisfaction among Asian Americans is lower than other racial groups, including White respondents, but overall Asians appear content that they became lawyers.¹⁶ Nevertheless, our 2022 survey shows notable variation in satisfaction among Asian Americans by practice setting. Whereas over 80 percent of respondents in academia and 70 percent of judges said they were “very satisfied” with their current employment, less than 35 percent of big law firm attorneys, prosecutors, and public defenders expressed the same level of satisfaction. In between, a majority of federal government lawyers (55 percent), solo practitioners (53 percent), and small law firm attorneys (53 percent), as well as half of public interest legal professionals (50 percent) reported being “very satisfied” with their current employment (Dang et al. 2022, 47).

CONCLUSION

Although Asian Americans have been the fastest-growing racial group entering US law schools and the legal profession in recent decades, they remain underrepresented at the highest levels of leadership, particularly at law firms. Building on the existing literature on the bamboo ceiling, this article synthesizes quantitative survey data with original focus group qualitative evidence to explore the disparity between the large number of entry-level Asian American legal professionals and the comparatively small number in leadership roles.

Our study presents three principal findings. First, Asian Americans share with other racial minorities and women some of the same barriers to advancement in the legal profession, such as lack of formal leadership training, inadequate access to mentors and networks, and lack of recognition for their work. Second, our study participants reported facing unique obstacles related to social stereotypes about Asians. They noted that others in the profes-

16. Across the AJD's three waves of data collection, 75 percent of Asian American respondents on average were “moderately” or “extremely satisfied” with their decision to become lawyers. The comparable average figure across the three waves for African Americans was 80 percent, for Latinx lawyers it was 81 percent, for Native Americans it was 75 percent, and for Whites it was 77 percent (Nelson et al. 2023, table 14.1).

sion ascribe to them traits not typically associated with leadership. Finally, our study finds that a substantial majority of Asian American lawyers in our surveys reported continued overt and implicit discrimination in the legal workplace. Such perceived bias cuts across the profession, from recruitment to staffing to everyday treatment of Asian American colleagues in the profession, particularly for Asian American women.

Our findings contribute to the evidence base for considering what policies or practices might mitigate challenges that hinder the advancement of Asian American lawyers. In the wake of acute national attention to issues of racial justice in 2020, many organizations, including law firms, pledged new or expanded efforts to combat racism and promote equity. These efforts included establishing diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) offices and initiatives, as well as continuing practices such as implicit bias training and anti-harassment training. After the presidential election of 2024, and even before, many of these efforts have been rolled back and, in some organizations, eliminated. While our study does not address the efficacy of such initiatives, it does suggest that Asian American lawyers' experiences of stereotyping and discrimination are harmful and real, and are unlikely to be remedied by simply purging law firms of DEI efforts or terminology.

At the same time, it must be acknowledged that many DEI initiatives have not proceeded from a firm evidence base as to what policies or practices actually work. As a result, they have been criticized as performative, "woke," or merely virtue-signaling, and in some cases shown to be ineffective or even counterproductive (Kalev and Dobbin 2024; Paluck et al. 2021). To the extent that organizational leaders remain committed to ensuring a fair and equitable workplace, the current climate of skepticism toward DEI initiatives should motivate organizations, especially well-resourced organizations like large law firms, to undertake rigorous research and evaluation efforts to learn and document what works and what does not before implementing policies or initiatives at a larger scale.

Robust and reliable data collection is crucial

to such efforts. The genesis of this study, dating back to our 2016 survey, was a realization that there were no comprehensive data at the time on the progress of Asian Americans in the legal profession. The largely descriptive nature of our research has sought to remedy the invisibility of Asian American lawyers' experiences. By providing a systematic and textured account of those experiences through mixed quantitative and qualitative methods, our study gives shape and content to workplace challenges and inequities and makes them more difficult for decision-makers to overlook or ignore. As the adage goes, "what gets measured gets managed." Organizations such as the American Bar Association, NALP, Law360, and Minority Corporate Counsel Association have contributed significantly to our understanding of these issues by compiling and maintaining important data series across the profession, and our hope is that those efforts will continue. At the level of individual firms and legal organizations, an important question to ask is what data these groups collect to measure progress or to monitor the efficacy of its policies and practices.

In sum, our research contributes to the growing literature on the bamboo ceiling by documenting how Asian American lawyers have faced the challenges of cultural biases, negative social stereotypes, and workplace dynamics that limit their leadership opportunities. By promoting greater awareness of these challenges, we contribute to debunking the model minority myth that occludes recognition of the barriers to greater inclusion of Asian Americans in a profession that is essential to a well-functioning democracy.

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