

## ~ Preface ~

Following a recent public lecture in her hometown of Philadelphia, Jennifer Lee was approached by a female member of the audience who asked where she had gone to high school. The woman said that she was curious because, as a retired high school teacher, she wanted to know about Jennifer's educational background. Jennifer answered, after which the woman promptly seized the opportunity to convey her opinion of Korean students:

I was so happy whenever I had Korean students in my classes. They were my best students; they were so bright and worked so hard! And some of these kids, they have parents who don't even speak English.

The retired teacher's comment, unrelated to her original question, did not come as a surprise. Both authors had heard it many times before about Korean students and about Asian American students more generally. Positive comments such as these reflect a puzzle for many Americans about the academic achievement of the children of Asian immigrants (the 1.5 and second generation). How do the children of Asian immigrants and refugees—even those whose parents have only an elementary school education, do not speak English, and work in restaurants and factories—graduate as high school valedictorians, earn admission to prestigious universities, and hold high-status professional jobs? Vexed by Asian Americans' exceptional achievement outcomes, some pundits point to Asian culture: because Asian Americans possess the "right" cultural traits and place a high value on education, they claim, Asian American students outperform their non-Asian peers, including native-born whites.

Allow us to get personal for a moment and briefly reflect on our own experiences of growing up in a Korean immigrant family as a member of the 1.5 generation, and raising a child of the 1.5 generation as a Chinese immigrant parent, respectively. Jennifer's parents decided to immigrate to the United States because her father wanted to pursue his PhD at Temple University and work with a professor there whose research he admired. Her

mother—who was a nurse in Korea—obtained an immigrant visa for her family, including three-year-old Jennifer and her one-year-old sister, Stephanie, which was possible because the change in U.S. immigration law had opened the doors to Asian immigrants and gave preference to highly skilled applicants.

Upon settling in Philadelphia, Jennifer’s parents quickly realized that they could not adequately support a family of four based on a nurse’s salary alone, so they took an economic detour and decided to open a business in a predominantly African American neighborhood in West Philadelphia selling sneakers. With no savings or wealth to speak of, her parents borrowed money from family members until they had accumulated enough to open a business. After seven years of running the sneaker store, her father returned to graduate school and earned his PhD, while her mother continued to support the family by running the business alone. Jennifer’s parents earned enough to send both daughters to private high school and college, and both attained graduate degrees. Jennifer graduated from Columbia University and later earned her PhD there. Stephanie graduated from Boston University and the University of the Sciences in Philadelphia. Stephanie is now a pharmacist, and Jennifer is a professor.

While Jennifer’s parents raised their daughters to “try your best” in school, neither was a “Tiger” parent who employed strict, relentless, demeaning parenting practices. They did believe, however, that trying your best should result in straight A’s and admission to an Ivy League university. They supported their belief by providing their daughters with a wealth of class resources: a home in a middle-class suburb of Philadelphia, private school education, educational books, SAT prep courses, and extracurricular activities such as gymnastics and piano lessons (which lasted only a few years since neither daughter was interested enough in music to practice much before the weekly lesson). For Jennifer’s immigrant parents, being able to provide their 1.5-generation daughters with these resources was meaningful because such resources had been unavailable to them when they were growing up in Korea. Furthermore, her parents felt that it was their obligation to fully support their daughters, especially because they had the class resources to do so.

While Jennifer is a member of the 1.5 generation, Min Zhou is the mother of a 1.5-generation Chinese and the mother-in-law of a second-generation Vietnamese. Min’s parents, who still live in China, did not have the opportunity to go to college, but education for their children was always a priority and doing well in school was non-negotiable. Growing up in turbulent times during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Min could not attend college after graduating from high school, so she worked in a factory for five years before an opportunity to attend college presented itself. She was among the fortunate few to gain admission to college when China reopened its higher education entrance examination. After college, she migrated to the United States, leaving

behind her husband and ten-month-old son in China and having only a single \$50 bill in her pocket, to pursue her PhD at SUNY–Albany. Because of her foreign student visa, Min worked odds jobs under the table as a babysitter, housekeeper, hotel maid, restaurant dishwasher, and seamstress to make ends meet while she was in graduate school. After she attained a job as an assistant professor at Louisiana State University, she, like Jennifer’s mother, sponsored her family to migrate to the United States under the visa preference category favoring the highly skilled.

Raising her only child, Philip, who left China at age five, while supporting her husband’s graduate studies was no easy feat as the primary breadwinner on an assistant professor’s meager salary. Unable to afford a babysitter or extracurricular activities such as violin or piano lessons for Philip, Min took Philip to her Saturday classes and summer school classes that she taught to earn extra income to support her family. On weekends and school holidays, she also took him to bookstores and libraries, where Philip had unlimited access to books and other academic resources and where she could do her own research. Neither Min nor her husband is a Tiger parent; they did not push Philip into a pre-programmed pathway. Nevertheless, Philip graduated from MIT with a bachelor’s degree and a master’s degree in engineering and earned his PhD in computer science from Stanford University. He is now an assistant professor of computer science at the University of Rochester.

Min’s daughter-in-law Lisa, Philip’s high school sweetheart, has a similar experience. Lisa’s parents arrived in the United States in 1975 as penniless refugees from war-torn Vietnam. Her father was able to finish his undergraduate and graduate education in the United States, and he currently works as an electrical engineer. While her mother could have gone to college, she opened up a beauty salon instead because she had to earn a living and provide for her family. Like Min and her husband, Lisa’s parents never pushed their three U.S.-born children to pursue a particular career path, but they were adamant about doing well in school, which, for them, meant that their children should earn at least a B average. Lisa and her two brothers grew up spending a lot of time in their mother’s beauty salon, where a desk was set up for them to do homework together. Lisa graduated from UCLA and then UC San Francisco’s dental school, and she now works as a dentist.

No one would dispute these success stories. Some of our readers would adopt a narrative that attributes these educational and occupational outcomes to Asian cultural traits and values, but as we argue throughout the book, this narrative misses several critical elements, including “starting points” and “hyper-selectivity.”

How would the narrative change if we considered starting points and measured success by how much progress a child of immigrants or refugees makes from the position already achieved by his or her parents? Measured this way, Jennifer, Stephanie, Philip, and Lisa are not extraordinarily successful. Jennifer

and Philip achieved a level of education no higher than that of their parents. (Jennifer's father and Philip's mother have PhD degrees.) Moreover, Stephanie's and Lisa's level of education is actually lower, so should we consider them downwardly mobile—and therefore unsuccessful? Furthermore, that Jennifer and Philip both hold a PhD is unsurprising because, according to the status attainment model in sociology, the strongest predictor of a child's level of education is the parents' level of education. So whom should we consider more successful: a second-generation Asian American whose parents hold a PhD who also attains a PhD, or a second-generation Mexican whose parents have less than an elementary school education who graduates from high school?

As for hyper-selectivity, which reflects a dual type of positive selectivity—a higher percentage of college graduates among immigrants compared to non-migrants from their country of origin, and a higher percentage of college graduates compared to the host country—how would the narrative change if Asian immigrants had the socioeconomic profile of their counterparts who migrated at the turn of the twentieth century? Being members of hyper-selected immigrant groups today has affected the cultural frame that immigrant parents have constructed for themselves and their 1.5- and second-generation children, as well as the ethnic capital and resources that immigrant communities generate to help their children attain the success frame. Others' perceptions of Asian Americans, as well as of their skills, ability, and work ethic, have also been affected by their membership in hyper-selected immigrant groups. In short, hyper-selectivity has cultural, institutional, and social psychological consequences, which we detail in our book.

Rather than shying away from the thorny and contentious relationship between culture and achievement, we tackle it head on and address the question: what is cultural about Asian American academic achievement? In the process, we unveil the many paradoxes that accompany high achievement, high expectations, and positive stereotypes among 1.5- and second-generation Asian Americans. Combining the literature in sociology and social psychology in a novel way, we have aimed to write a book that is more than the sum of its disciplinary parts, in a style that will appeal to a wide audience.

Reflecting on the long process of conducting interviews, collecting and analyzing data, and writing the book, we find ourselves humbled by and grateful for the numerous people who have helped shepherd our study to completion. Our first order of gratitude goes to the Russell Sage Foundation for funding the research on which our book is based, and especially to Eric Wanner, then the president of the foundation. Eric had the foresight to support a project in which a team of researchers proposed to collect original survey data on the adult children of immigrants in Los Angeles, which would later become the Immigration and Intergenerational Mobility in Metropolitan Los Angeles (IIMMLA) survey. Without Eric's steadfast support, the continued support of the foundation's new president, Sheldon Danziger, and the

support from the foundation's board of trustees, this book would not have been possible.

IIMMLA brought together an interdisciplinary team to design and implement the survey, including Frank Bean, Rubén Rumbaut, Susan Brown, Leo Chavez, Louis DeSipio, and both of us. While we have thanked the members of the IIMMLA team in person for this collaborative effort, we would like to publicly acknowledge our gratitude to each of these scholars, from whom we have learned so much. After the survey data were collected, the Russell Sage Foundation also supported the collection of in-depth, life-history interviews for a separate project that we spearheaded, on which much of our book is based. This allowed us to hire a stellar group of graduate research assistants to help collect and analyze the data: Jody Vallejo, Rosaura Tafoya-Estrada, Leisy Abrego, James Bany, Kris Noam, Ada Lingjun Peng, Yang Sao Xiong, and Chengwei Xu. We were fortunate to have had the opportunity to work with such a superb group of young scholars, most of whom have since graduated and are making a name for themselves in their careers.

There would have been no interviews to conduct had there not been willing respondents from the IIMMLA survey to agree to be reinterviewed. Our interviewees gave generously of their time and shared their multifaceted experiences of growing up American. Some of them shared narratives that were humorous and happy, while others shared experiences that had been profound and painful. For many, this was the first time they had openly shared such intimate accounts, and each gave us so much more than we had expected. Their unbridled candor inspired us to write a book that reflects their experiences by identifying patterns, acknowledging disconfirming evidence, and drawing from theory and previous research to help explain our findings. Because we must protect their privacy and identity, we used pseudonyms throughout the book. We acknowledge our gratitude to these young Asian Americans who let us draw on their personal life histories to enrich social science research. We hope that when they read the book, they will feel that we recounted their life histories accurately.

Another invaluable asset at the Russell Sage Foundation is senior program officer Aixa Cintrón-Vélez; she helped us develop the project from its initial inception and provided key theoretical, empirical, and analytical insights, resulting in a much richer book. Aixa also leads the Russell Sage Foundation's Working Group on Cultural Contact and Immigration, of which Jennifer is a part. Joining together researchers from sociology, political science, geography, and social psychology, the working group aims to produce novel, cross-disciplinary perspective approaches to studying the effects of immigration in the United States. It was her participation in the working group that sparked Jennifer's interest in social psychology, especially in the effects of stereotypes and mind-sets on achievement among the children of immigrants. Several of the book's chapters bear the intellectual imprint of the members of the working group.

Director of publications Suzanne Nichols is a superb editor who knows precisely how to motivate us with her judicious balance of fair and warranted criticism, staunch support, and keen advice, all of which she delivers with razor-sharp humor. All authors should be fortunate to work with an editor as incisive, candid, and patient as she. We also thank Suzanne for suggesting a gifted copyeditor, Cynthia Buck, who made our writing immeasurably clearer and more accessible yet managed to retain our voice in the process. And we are grateful to partner with David Haproff, the foundation's director of communications, whose commitment to reaching a wide and diverse audience for our work matches ours.

The Russell Sage Foundation also supported Jennifer Lee as a visiting scholar during the academic year 2011–2012, which provided unfettered time to begin writing the manuscript in a milieu that can only be described as “academic mecca.” One of the advantages of spending a year at the foundation is being among a community of interdisciplinary scholars whose research and perspectives help sharpen one's own. While grateful to the entire 2011–2012 Visiting Scholar cohort for the stimulating exchange of ideas, Jennifer is especially indebted to Rucker Johnson and Karthick Ramakrishnan, who continue to inspire with their pathbreaking research and their collegiality.

All writing, even that which is published, is work in progress. Ideas continue to evolve through critical reflection and dialogue, and we have benefited immensely from the reflection and dialogue that unfolded while presenting our research at colloquia and conferences. We were fortunate to have been invited to present our research to diverse and multidisciplinary audiences in the United States and abroad, including at the Academia Sinica (Taiwan), the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences, Columbia University, the CUNY Graduate Center, Hong Kong Baptist University, Hong Kong Chinese University, Huazhong Agricultural University (China), Huazhong University of Science and Technology (China), National University of Singapore, Pennsylvania State University, Population Reference Bureau, Princeton University, Russell Sage Foundation, Stanford University, Stockholm University (Sweden), Sun Yat-sen University (China), Syracuse University, Tsinghua University (China), University of Amsterdam (Netherlands), UC Berkeley, UC Davis, UC Riverside, University of Chicago, University of Hong Kong, University of Notre Dame, University of Osnabrück (Germany), University of Saskatchewan (Canada), University of Toronto (Canada), and Weelock College (Singapore). We also benefited from lively exchanges with our colleagues within our institutions: UC Irvine, UCLA, and Nanyang Technological University (Singapore). The insightful and critical comments, questions, and critiques we received challenged us to make our work better. We are also grateful for our home institutions for providing invaluable financial support, including research grants from the School of Social Sciences at UC Irvine,

the Walter and Shirley Endowed Chair's fund at UCLA, and a research grant from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Nanyang Technological University.

We also presented our ideas while teaching our classes at UC Irvine and UCLA and benefited from the insights and thoughtful questions from our students, both graduates and undergraduates, many of whom were fascinated by and vexed about the role of culture in explaining Asian American achievement. Teaching our ideas to our students forced us to be clearer about them. We thank our students for indulging us with their patience, inquisitiveness, and perceptiveness. For many of our students who are the children of immigrants, this is a story about their lives of growing up American. We hope that they too feel that we have told it accurately.

Several colleagues read the full manuscript and offered discerning comments that strengthened it beyond measure: Philip Kasinitz, Van Tran, and Mark Vanlandingham. We are grateful for their close reading and candid assessment of an earlier draft, as well as for their astute suggestions about how we might improve it. Comparing the first and final drafts provides indisputable evidence of their intellectual imprint, for which we are deeply indebted. We are also fortunate to have a cadre of smart, critical, and supportive colleagues who were gracious enough to read portions of the manuscript and discuss our ideas at various stages of the book's development, all of which helped strengthen the final product. We thank Richard Alba, Jacob Avery, Carl Bankston, David Card, Prudence Carter, Margaret Chin, Yoonsun Choi, Maurice Crul, Michael Dawson, Kay Deaux, Sean Drake, Patricia Fernandez-Kelly, Nancy Foner, Eric Fong, Herbert Gans, Douglas Hartmann, Amy Hsin, Tomás Jiménez, Grace Kao, Vivian Louie, John Mollenkopf, Letta Page, Giovanni Peri, Alejandro Portes, Andreas Pott, Steven Raphael, Cecilia Ridgeway, Sarah Rothbard, Jens Schneider, John Skrentny, Mario Small, Robert Smith, Edward Telles, Christopher Uggen, Jody Vallejo, Roger Waldinger, and Harriet Zuckerman. A mere thank you seems inadequate to express our gratitude for their role in helping the book come to fruition.

We end on a personal note by extending our gratitude to our families, who provide unconditional love and support. Jennifer thanks her mother and father, Wonja and Sangrin Lee; her sister, Stephanie Lee; and her brother-in-law, Chris Larson, for providing a bedrock of security, cheering her on enthusiastically, and fueling her with incessant laughter. Min thanks her father, Leiming Zhou; her mother, Yaoping Yao; her brother, Jining; and sister, Sujuan, who live on different continents but continue to serve as her source of inspiration and emotional support and remain the backbone of her life and career. Min also thanks Philip and Lisa for offering their nuanced insight into the complex world of our study's subjects and Lisa's parents, Liem and Phuong Mai, for being always ready to lend a helping hand.

As the saying goes, one does not get to choose one's family, but if we had the choice, we would have chosen ours. We did, however, have a choice of husbands, and in this regard we chose wisely. Our life partners, Michael Zimmerman (Jennifer's husband) and Sam Nan Guo (Min's husband), provide immeasurable and unfailing support in all of our professional and personal endeavors. The patience, care, and humor with which they encourage us have allowed us to complete the book manuscript in a timely manner while also relishing the time apart from it. Because they give unconditionally to us, we dedicate this book to them, as a small and symbolic gesture of our love and appreciation. Michael and Sam, our deepest gratitude to you!

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