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Parents' Aspirations and Investment: The Role of Social Class in the Educational Experiences of 1.5- and Second-Generation Chinese Americans

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Abstract

In this article, Vivian Louie examines how social class influences Chinese immigrant parents' expectations, strategies, and investment in their children's education. Her findings suggest that, across social class, Chinese immigrant parents have high expectations for their children, reflecting both immigrant optimism and immigrant pessimism about their children's outcomes. However, Louie finds significant differences in the resources and educational strategies pursued by working-class parents and their middle-class counterparts. Louie concludes that the role of the immigrant family is more multifaceted than suggested by previous theories on Asian American educational performance. (pp. 438–474)

The last thirty years have seen a remarkable increase in Asian immigration to the United States. In 1960, there were only 877,934 Asian Americans; by 1990, the number had increased almost tenfold, to 7.3 million, with 66 percent of this population being foreign born (Hune & Chan, 1997). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 10.24 million Asian Americans now live in the United States, representing 3.6 percent of the [population](#).¹ These high levels of immigration have been accompanied by high levels of educational attainment, which have contributed to the reputation of Asian Americans as a “model minority” — that is, a group that has achieved a rapid ascent up the socioeconomic ladder by virtue of its educational [success](#).² In the aggregate, Asian Americans have a higher likelihood than Whites, Hispanics, and Blacks of entering and staying in school. They outrank all other groups in GPA and math SAT scores, surpass the national average in college graduation rates, and are more likely to pursue further education (Espiritu, 1997; Hsia, 1988; Sue & Okazaki, 1990).

Researchers studying these achievement patterns have focused on the educational aspirations Asian immigrant parents impart to their children, and the particular strategies they use to foster their children's education (Kao, 1995; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Kao, Tienda, & Schneider, 1996; Schneider & Lee, 1990). However, researchers have paid little attention to the context that shapes those aspirations, such as the effects of class and ethnicity on the ways Asian immigrant parents strategize for their children's [education](#).³ Additionally, very little research has focused on how the parental lesson about education is received by immigrant children, and how these children come to interpret this message, particularly in the context of migration.

In this article, I attempt to address a gap in the research by providing an initial examination of how social-class background can account for the different educational experiences of Chinese Americans. Specifically, I examine the role that parents play in the educational experiences of working- and middle-class 1.5- and second-generation Chinese American students. Their parents are ethnic Chinese from Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and elsewhere in [Asia](#).⁴ Drawing on interview data, I address the following research questions: How does social class impact the educational experiences of 1.5- and second-generation Chinese American students? Do students from different social-class backgrounds have similar or different perceptions of their parents' expectations and strategies in their education? How do the students respond to their parents' expectations and investment?

In the next section, I introduce some educational data collected on Asian Americans in general and Chinese Americans in particular, and the theoretical perspectives that have emerged for understanding the data. I include the research focusing on Asian Americans, since such studies have often included the Chinese and generally point to relevant issues. I then discuss the research settings for the study and the particular methods that I employed. My discussion of the findings focuses first on the conditions shaping parental aspirations for their children's education and then moves on to the particular strategies immigrant Chinese parents developed, and their children's responses.

Research on Asian Americans and Education

In much of the educational research, Asian Americans have been regarded as a homogeneous racial group when in fact the population encompasses many different ethnic groups with distinct histories, socioeconomic status, and [cultures](#).⁵ These differences notwithstanding, there is evidence that the groups do share some common educational characteristics. For example, it has been shown that many Asian American ethnic groups share educational aspirations that are higher than those of Whites (Goyette & Xie, [1999](#)).⁶ Asian American parents and their children also differ from other racial and ethnic groups in their strongly expressed views of academic achievement as an avenue of social mobility and, quite possibly, as the only available avenue (Hsia & Hirano-Nakanishi, 1989; Steinberg, Dornbusch, & Brown, 1992).

Yet despite such common aspirations and outlooks on education as an avenue for social mobility, there is wide variation in outcomes between and within these groups that aggregate data tend to obscure. Studies show Asian Indians and Japanese students performing the best, on average, on standardized tests and other measures of academic achievement, followed by Chinese, Koreans, Filipinos, and Southeast Asians (Espiritu, 1997; Siu, 1996).

Among the Chinese, there is substantial in-group variation in terms of levels of education, particularly within the immigrant generation. Little more than half of Chinese immigrants have had some form of higher education, yet nearly three out of ten have less than a high school education, and 15 percent have obtained only a high school [diploma](#).⁷ For U.S.-born Chinese Americans, the educational divide was less stark, but still striking — nearly one in four had a high school diploma or less, with about 60 percent having either a

college degree or some college education (Weinberg, 1997).

To account for the high educational aspirations and attainments of Asian Americans, researchers have pointed to the immigrant family, and have provided two critical ways of understanding its role. The cultural explanation stresses the parents' cultural resources that shape high educational aspirations for their children and particular strategies to achieve them. The structural explanation, by contrast, puts the emphasis on the economic demand for certain types of labor in different historical periods.

Cultural Explanations

The dominant explanation has been the cultural thesis — that Asian Americans have access to cultural resources that prove conducive to high levels of educational attainment. It is well-documented that Asian American children are more likely than children of other racial and ethnic groups (such as Whites and Latinos) to equate good grades with parental satisfaction and to share their parents' expectations (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Pang, 1990; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Sung, 1987). These students also tend to put more effort into their schoolwork and to emphasize success due to effort rather than natural ability (Chen & Stevenson, 1995; Chen, 1996; Rosenthal & Feldman, 1991). Asian American parents are more likely than White parents to use their resources to enhance their children's education by such means as supervising their activities outside of school, assigning additional homework tasks, providing a place to study in the home, and investing in private lessons (Kao, 1995; Schneider & Lee, 1990).

Another type of cultural explanation points to immigrant optimism. In his cultural-ecological theory on diverse educational outcomes of different ethnic groups, Ogbu (1995) outlines two minority types with distinctive cultural frames of reference that interact in contrasting ways with upward social mobility. Because voluntary minority groups chose to migrate to the United States in search of a better life, they perceive the cultural and language differences between themselves and White Americans simply "as barriers to overcome," and thus as having little impact on their group identity. Involuntary minority groups, like African Americans, Mexican Americans, and Native Americans, on the other hand, arrived through enslavement or colonization and perceive their cultural distinctiveness from White Americans as stigmatizing. Many youths from these involuntary groups question whether education can serve as a channel of mobility. Both groups maintain a "dual frame of status mobility," but their vantage points differ, depending on whether there is a homeland that can serve as a frame of reference. For example, Ogbu (1995) characterizes Chinese Americans as a voluntary minority group that has found it possible to maintain a "positive dual frame of status mobility" (p. 200) since their life in the United States will likely surpass the status they had in their country of origin.

Other researchers, however, point out that the cultural explanation has several shortcomings. First, it does not adequately account for historical context. Given that certain Asian groups have a long history in the United States, it is striking that their academic and professional success is such a contemporary phenomenon. In the case of Chinese Americans, for example, Siu (1992) notes that "as late as the 1930s, more than 60 percent of all Chinese workers in the U.S. worked as cooks, waiters, domestics, and laundrymen" (p. 19). In 1940, Chinese Americans had a median of 5.5 years of schooling, compared to 8.7 years for Whites, and were "only half as likely to complete high school or college as Whites" (Weinberg, 1997, p. 23). Inferior schooling and other forms of discrimination contributed to these comparatively low levels of attainment (Siu, 1994; Weinberg, 1997). It was not until after World War II that the opportunity structure in the United States was opened to Asian Americans and mobility patterns started to change (Kwong, 1987; Nee & Wong, 1985).

Another criticism is that the cultural explanation does not explain variations in educational outcomes and perspectives within the contemporary Asian American population. Native status and social-class background shape different outcomes in terms of fields of study, time spent on schoolwork, and the time it takes to finish school (Glenn, 1994; Hune & Chan, 1997; Kwong, 1987; Wong, 1995). Additionally, Goto's (1997) study of Chinese American students at an urban California high school found that some 1.5- and second-generation Chinese American youth have adopted views similar to those expressed by their African American peers,

questioning whether education actually serves as a channel of mobility.

Structural Explanations

The structural perspective emphasizes the economy and the opportunity structure in explaining the educational achievement of Asian Americans. One such explanation points to the match between immigrant skills and the needs of the U.S. economy as determining who comes to the United States and whose children do well in school. Cheng and Bonacich (1984), for example, argue that the need to fill predominantly low-wage jobs prior to World War II shaped that era's immigration patterns. Along these lines, others have proposed that the social-class background and selective migration of post-1965 immigrants have been key determinants in Asian American academic success in the last few decades (Barringer, Gardner, & Levin, 1993).⁸ In the case of the Chinese, for example, Kwong (1987) contends that most of the Chinese children who have won academic awards and attend Ivy League universities are the offspring of middle-class professionals. It has been further argued that highly educated Asian immigrants realize that their skills do not seamlessly transfer to the United States, but that they expect their children to achieve mobility through an American education (Hirschman & Wong, 1981).

A number of researchers have argued that the ethnic economy, both in the past and today, has played a crucial role in providing alternative channels of mobility for Asian immigrants closed off from primary sector opportunities. According to this explanation, the ethnic economy supplies a basis for promoting academic achievement. Hirschman and Wong (1986) point to the ethnic economies formed by Chinese and Japanese Americans in the early twentieth century. These economies provided jobs in the trades and services, and allowed these groups to create economic opportunities for the next generation through investment in education. Similarly, Sanchirico (1991) contends that the cultural thesis does not take into account the continuing high concentration of small-business ownership among Chinese immigrants and how it can shape parental value systems. He finds that Chinese small-business owners, while having low levels of education, encourage and successfully provide their children with occupational independence and upward mobility through higher education.

Another structural perspective, the segmented assimilation theory, has also emphasized the ethnic economy and ethnic ties in describing a possible path of mobility for some children of post-1965 immigrants. Portes and Zhou (1993) argue that rapid economic mobility can occur for those immigrant groups that are able to preserve their ethnic values and maintain social [cohesion](#).⁹ This can occur when an immigrant group circumvents structural impediments through ethnic capitalism and self-employment in their own community, and through networks in the ethnic community that provide resources for the second generation. Such resources can include private ethnic schools that "insulate children from contact with native minority youths, while reinforcing the authority of parental views and plans" (p. 86). Portes and Zhou (1993) cite the Cubans in Miami and the Punjabi Sikhs in Gibson's (1988) study as two groups that have benefited from a strong ethnic community. Studies have confirmed this hypothesis with a number of other Asian immigrant groups (Bankston, 1998; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Zhou, 1997).¹⁰

Another approach from the structural perspective has been to examine the role of perceived and actual barriers to mobility. The model minority image notwithstanding, there is some evidence that Asian Americans receive a smaller return on their educational achievement than Whites, and bear higher costs for comparable material rewards (Barringer, Takeuchi, & Xenos, 1990; Hsia, 1988; Hurh & Kim, 1989; Suzuki, 1989; Tang, 1993; Woo, 2000). Studies have shown that Asian Americans tend to have fewer chances for career advancement than their White counterparts with comparable training, skills, and experience (Tang, 1993; U.S. Commission of Civil Rights, 1988; Woo, 1994). Tang's (1993) study of engineers shows that this disparity is particularly pronounced for immigrants, as compared to U.S.-born Asian Americans (Tang 1993). For example, immigrant Asians earned 18 percent less than Whites and took six to eleven years to reach the same income levels (Tang, 1993).

Sue and Okazaki (1990) and others have proposed the so-called “blocked opportunities” thesis, arguing that Asian American parents invest in their children’s education to give them a head start in what they perceive as an unequal society. For similar reasons, these parents are thought to stress technical fields for their children since these fields are seen as offering more secure opportunities for employment (Hsia, 1988; Kwong, 1987; Lee, 1996; Lyman, 1974; Schneider & Lee, 1990).

A number of recent empirical studies have drawn from both cultural and structural theories to explain Asian American academic achievement. However, as I will show, they leave unexamined the effects both social class and ethnicity can have on the ways Asian immigrant parents develop educational aspirations and strategize for their children’s schooling.

Quantitative inquiries that draw on large-scale data sets, in comparing racial and ethnic groups (such as the National Education Longitudinal Study), support the immigrant optimism hypothesis and at the same time demonstrate the persistent effects of being Asian. There is, for example, a strong association between GPA and being the child of Asian immigrants (Rumbaut, 1997).¹¹ Kao and Tienda (1998) found that 40 percent of Asian eighth-grade boys expected to earn an advanced degree, compared with 23 percent of Whites and about 20 percent of Hispanics and Blacks, and identified a similar pattern among Asian girls.¹² Immigration status accounts for much more of the variation in educational outcomes among Asian Americans, as compared to other minority groups and Whites, with second-generation Asian youth outperforming their third-generation counterparts (Kao & Tienda, 1995).

While such quantitative studies suggest that being Asian and immigrant matters in educational aspirations and performance, field studies convey the idea that there is no single effect of “Asian-ness” that operates the same way for all the groups (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Kim, 1993).¹³ For example, Asian immigrant parents may share high educational aspirations, but these parents may differ along the lines of ethnicity in the specific types of aspirations they have for their children and how they transmit those aspirations. Consider Korean and Filipino immigrant parents. Kim (1993) has indicated that Korean immigrant parents, in this case largely middle class and highly educated, shared an outlook of immigrant optimism similar to the one outlined by Ogbu (1995). Korean immigrant parents believe that education, particularly at prestigious institutions, will lead to success for their children and free them from the cultural and language barriers that have been obstacles for the first generation (Kim, 1993). The Filipino immigrants in Wolf’s (1997) study, while similar to these Koreans in their middle-class status and high educational levels, nevertheless transmit a different set of messages to their children. For example, they expect their children to succeed in school, particularly in high school, but do not strongly value the prestige of their children’s undergraduate institution. For these parents, it is more important that their children remain nearby while attending college, even if that means attending a local community college, so they can be closely monitored.

It is worth noting, however, that such field studies speak to only one social-class population of an ethnic group, be it working or middle class. Qualitative and quantitative inquiries alike provide limited insight into how both social class and ethnicity can shape the role immigrant parents play in their children’s views on and experiences with education. Large-scale studies (Kao, 1995; Kao, Tienda, & Schneider, 1996; Qian & Blair, 1999; Rumbaut, 1997) compare Asian Americans to other racial and ethnic groups on the basis of socioeconomic status, but they generally do not focus on internal class dynamics, either between Asian ethnicities or within a particular ethnicity. Field studies (Bankston, 1998; Kim, 1993; Lee, 1997; Wolf, 1997; Zhou, 1997) generally focus on a single-class population within a particular ethnic group.

In sum, the literature has established that being Asian and immigrant somehow matters in educational aspirations and outcomes, but it remains unclear how it matters and whether it is a uniform experience among Asian groups. To address this gap in the literature, I have chosen to explore how Chinese Americans’ social-class background can shape the different educational experiences of 1.5- and second-generation Chinese American students. Drawing on student interviews, supplemented with a few in-depth parental

interviews, this study explores the role of social class in Chinese immigrant parents' involvement in their children's education. In particular, I examine the messages immigrant parents give their children about education, the investment they make in their children's schooling, and their children's responses. I also pay attention to the distinct class categories within an ethnic economic enclave and the ways they can influence [outcomes.](#)¹⁴

The Chinese American case is particularly well suited to an exploration of class differences, since the population is stratified by economic class, place of origin, generation, and date of entry into the United States (Hune & Chan, 1997; Sung, 1987). The post-1965 Chinese immigration has been polarized into what some observers have called the "Uptown Chinese" (highly educated professionals) and the "Downtown Chinese" (service workers with low levels of education) (Kwong, 1987). The middle-class, educated professionals have tended to settle in the suburbs, and working-class service workers end up near or in urban ethnic economic enclaves like New York City's [Chinatown.](#)¹⁵ Working-class families typically include husbands and wives with low levels of education who are employed in the secondary labor market, typically in labor-intensive jobs at garment factories and restaurants (Espiritu, 1997; Kwong, 1987; Wong, 1995). Middle-class families typically have husbands, and possibly wives, who are employed in the mainstream labor market in professional occupations. They include professionals and capitalists who left Hong Kong prior to its reunification with Mainland China (Wong, 1988) and Taiwanese students who came to the United States for advanced studies, particularly in the years prior to 1979, and chose to stay (Pang, 1990; Rumbaut, 1997).

Research Sites and Methods

This article draws on interviews conducted from 1998 to 1999 with sixty-eight undergraduates from Columbia [University](#)¹⁶ and Hunter College, both four-year colleges in New York City. These two schools were selected to tap a range of class backgrounds and class trajectories. Columbia is a highly selective, private residential college with fewer than four thousand students at the time I conducted my research. Fees and tuition were about \$30,000 per year. Hunter is a commuter college of more than 14,000 students and is part of the City University of New York (CUNY), a system of public undergraduate and graduate institutions founded to provide affordable and accessible higher education to the economically [disadvantaged.](#)¹⁷ A city resident attending Hunter full time paid \$3,200 in fees and tuition per [year.](#)¹⁸

I recruited interview subjects through administrative, faculty, and student contacts, and I made brief introductions of the project personally or through email at non-ethnic and ethnic organizations and in classes in various [disciplines.](#)¹⁹ All but one of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, and all were tape-recorded. The majority of the interviews lasted between ninety minutes and two hours. So as not to reify the views of the respondents in relation to their parents and other family members, I also conducted in-depth interviews with seven parents and two adult siblings. The majority of these interviews took place in the family home, were also tape-recorded, and lasted from thirty to ninety [minutes.](#)²⁰

Immediately prior to an interview, I administered a survey instrument to the student and was on hand to answer any questions the student had about the information requested. The survey was designed to measure class background by parental occupation, parental educational attainment, and the family's status back in the home country using these same indicators, since migration may have resulted in downward [mobility.](#)²¹ In the survey, I also asked for information about home ownership, neighborhood composition, and the number, sex, and age of siblings. Overall, the student interviews explored the following core issues: the respondent's experiences with education from elementary school through college, career aspirations, views on racial and ethnic stratification, and perceptions of family attitudes toward education. The family interviews probed

sibling experiences with education, discussed parental attitudes toward their children's schooling, their own experiences with schooling, migration, and work, and traced their views on racial and ethnic stratification in the United States. In addition, from September 1998 to May 1999, I conducted field observations three to five times a week at both Hunter College and Columbia University, in classrooms, libraries, cafes, and meetings of ethnic student organizations with significant numbers of Chinese Americans. I also spoke with professors and other students to gain further insight. Lastly, I drew on student demographic profiles provided by both institutions to develop a better sense of their overall student populations.

As [Table 1](#) indicates, the sixty-eight respondents were about evenly divided between the two colleges. The gender breakdown was skewed toward women, who represented about 74 percent of the respondents. About 60 percent of the respondents were second generation, and the remainder were 1.5 generation. About 40 percent of the thirty-five Columbia respondents were Taiwanese American, and 36 percent of the thirty-three Hunter students were from the Guangdong area of Mainland [China](#).²²

Overall, the respondents differed widely in parental socioeconomic background and the extent of their ties to an urban ethnic economic enclave. All the Hunter respondents had grown up in New York City, and more than half grew up adjacent to or in one of the city's three Chinese economic enclaves (Chinatown in Manhattan, Flushing in Queens, and Sunset Park in Brooklyn). Two out of three had parents who were involved with the Chinese ethnic economy, mainly in the restaurant business (as cooks or waiters) or with the garment industry (as seamstresses and [pressers](#)).²³ A few parents were entrepreneurs who owned or operated restaurants and other businesses in the ethnic economy. I classified them as having a middle-class status in the ethnic economy. Most of the parents of Hunter students had a high school education or [less](#).²⁴

The Columbia respondents, about half of whom grew up in the tri-state area of New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, were more likely to have grown up in the suburbs — 69 percent of the thirty-five respondents grew up in suburban, largely White neighborhoods — and to have parents in professional occupations such as engineering in private industry, chemistry, law, medicine, accounting, nursing, and computer programming. More than half of the fathers had advanced degrees, and 45 percent of the mothers had bachelor's degrees. A minority of the parents, however, experienced downward mobility with migration — they had held positions of higher prestige and income in their home country and had fewer resources in the United States than their educational credentials might have suggested. Another small group of parents worked in the Chinese ethnic economy, either in New York City or elsewhere. But unlike the Hunter parents, these parents had some college education (obtained either abroad or in the United States) and/or owned property and operated their own businesses. Thus, I infer that these parents held a middle-class status in the ethnic economy.

As the foregoing sections suggest, class membership for immigrants is not easily defined, but my fieldwork suggests that an important distinction should be made between the mainstream economy and the ethnic economy. As the section on parental strategies will make clear, these distinctions have important implications for the investment the Chinese immigrant parents in my study were able to make in their children's schooling.

Throughout the project, I drew on my role as an insider with both Hunter and Columbia students. Like many Hunter students, I was born in Manhattan's Chinatown, to which my family still has close ties, and grew up near Flushing, a satellite Chinatown in the New York City borough of Queens. My parents are immigrants, and they work in Chinese-owned and -staffed restaurant and garment businesses. However, in the data collection process, I found that my status as a Yale doctoral student distanced me from my Hunter respondents as much as it provided common ground with the Columbia [students](#).²⁵

I found it more difficult to recruit interview subjects at Hunter, in part because so many of the students were going to school, working, and commuting between home, school, and work. I encountered similar constraints

when trying to interview the Hunter parents. While Columbia students were enthusiastic about the idea of my speaking with their parents and encouraged me to contact them, the Hunter students were reluctant to have me contact their parents, and in some cases expressly asked me not to do so. Most of the Hunter students cited their parents' intensive work schedules (typically twelve hours a day, six days a week), their parents' lack of English-language facility, and the emotional distance they felt from their parents in general. In the end, I was able to interview only parents of the Columbia students.

Parental Expectations

Did all Chinese immigrant parents have high educational expectations for their children? The simple answer is yes. Despite the many differences in their backgrounds, the students related similar perceptions of their parents' educational aspirations: their parents expected both their daughters and sons to complete college, at the very least. [Melinda](#),²⁶ a Columbia student, matter-of-factly related her mother's counsel: "There's absolutely no question that education is the direct path, the only path." That Chinese immigrant parents shared a common understanding about educational attainment and its link to mobility is consistent with the literature on Asian American educational aspirations. One important finding of this study is that students whose parents came from diverse homelands, socioeconomic backgrounds, and patterns of settlement reported similar parental messages about education.

With only a few exceptions, students spoke of the Chinese cultural disposition toward education as a factor in their educational attainment, one they believed was particularly strong in immigrant families. The students voiced the idea that Chinese American parents encouraged their children to study hard in school to a greater extent than parents in other racial/ethnic groups, and that the children listened to their parents.

These were the views expressed by Victoria, a Columbia student and the daughter of a physician: "I think that immigrants from Asia, they are very hard working, trying to establish themselves. And so, then they teach their kids to be hard working."

Paul, a Hunter student and the son of a Chinatown contractor and a seamstress, had a similar outlook:

I'd say [Asians have a] work ethic. . . . I have seen so many people. I mean, Asian people are lazy too sometimes. . . . I have to admit, everyone has their lazy people. But I see so much other races, Hispanics, Blacks, Whites, they're lazy. I mean, someone who says like, Oh man, I got this due, and this and that to do. I can't study for this . . . when I get home, I got to sleep, I'm tired, this and that. I've been tired before. I do get tired too, but I still force myself to study. It's something that's required. You want to graduate, you want to pass, it's what you do. Other people just don't do it. It's terrible, actually.

Melinda thought that Asian parents had a distinct way of interacting with their children when it came to education, and identified this interaction as a central element in her own achievement. According to Melinda, her parents, both graduates of top-ranked universities in Taiwan, fuelled her motivation to do well in school:

Generally speaking, the standards between my mother's expectations and other Asian parents' expectations is much higher than those of many Caucasian friends I have or Hispanic friends or non-Asian friends. For example, I went home, and I got a 99 on a test, and my mother's reaction is like, "Why not 100?" And other parents are like, "Oh good, 99." You know, and I'm really happy looking back, because it was my parents [who] were pressuring me in school from the time I was really young that I got into succeeding in school. Because without them, I don't think I would have had the drive myself because in elementary school, especially, my friends were not doing so well. But generally speaking, the environment wasn't toward school. In fact, it was actually bad to do well in school. And my teachers, I liked them a lot, but I didn't find that they

were particularly motivational. They weren't helping me to get the big picture. Their big picture was graduating from elementary school, not eventually growing up to go here, here, here.

Speaking of her African American and Hispanic friends in elementary school, Melinda was careful to point out that she did not view the difference in their performance as a matter of intelligence, but rather in how they saw school. She found that doing well in school was not a high priority for her African American and Hispanic friends, and could even earn disapproval from them:

The main thing, it didn't seem very important for them to do well. I don't think they were trying very hard, and the teachers weren't that good. And it wasn't good to do well in school, it was so obvious. I mean, kids weren't even subtle. It was just being called a nerd if you did well. It's funny, because we'd be friends separately from schoolwork, but when it came to schoolwork, it was just so obvious. It's like they admired me for doing well, on the one hand. But on the other hand, it's also bad, both at the same time.

Melinda's recollections support Fordham and Ogbu's (1986) concept of an oppositional identity among involuntary minority groups such as African Americans. According to Fordham and Ogbu, this oppositional identity equates academic success with Whites, and often involves the censure of black students who do well in school for "acting White." But Melinda's recollections also highlight the more subtle contradictions that the concept of oppositional identity does not capture. Although her friends sanctioned Melinda for doing well, they nevertheless acknowledged her achievement. As she said, "It's like they admired me for doing well, on the one hand. But on the other hand, it's also bad, both at the same time."

The interviews that I conducted with seven Columbia parents supported the findings from the student interviews, and pointed to several factors that they believed contributed to a Chinese cultural disposition toward education. These factors included the historical legacy of China's imperial examination [system](#)²⁷ and its influence on cultural norms, the rigors of present-day education in Taiwan and Hong Kong, and the importance of education and educators in their native countries. While their comments cannot be generalized to the other immigrant parents, they provide an interesting, albeit small, window into how some middle-class suburban parents identified a concern with education as being particularly [Chinese](#).²⁸

Mrs. Wu, for example, appeared perplexed when I asked how she knew about Stuyvesant High School, the specialized public high school in New York City that her daughter Melinda had attended. Mrs. Wu explained that she knew about Stuyvesant's reputation as a top U.S. high school before she had even come to the United States. According to Mrs. Wu, Stuyvesant was common knowledge in her native Taiwan:

Stuyvesant very famous in Chinese society because we have a writer, his son is from Stuyvesant. So he wrote a book about his son, and then the cultural difference between father generation and son generation. So that school is very famous in Taiwan. And that school is very famous, I think all the Chinese parents know this school. Get a copy [of the book] in Taiwan.

Mrs. Chang perceived a similar preoccupation with "good schools" among Chinese immigrants in the United States:

I believe in good schools, okay. That's why I told [my children]. I guess a lot of Chinese people want their children to go to Ivy League or whatever. I think it's not because of the name. I think mainly it's because you want them to get a good education and learn with better or like smarter people or better value people, and you know, they can learn and inspire each other.

Mrs. Fan was an interesting example. After our formal interview concluded and the tape recorder was turned off, she started to talk about the various levels of traditional Chinese society and how they were valued in descending order, starting with nobles/scholars-officials, farmers, artisans, merchants, and soldiers. She

brought up the imperial examination system, and the popular belief that the Chinese valued education. But Mrs. Fan also made it a point to say that she had encountered Chinese people who did not necessarily value education. In the Taiwan that she remembered, the emphasis was on owning farmland, and in the Philippines, where she spent her teenage years, the emphasis for ethnic Chinese men was to become merchants and have their own businesses. In the United States, however, she said she has seen something different among her Taiwanese friends, who clearly value education and made their children's schooling an important part of their lives. Mrs. Fan specifically mentioned the SAT weekend preparatory courses her friends arranged for their children, and how that was the first time she had even heard of such courses.

Both the student and parent interviews also pointed to a set of structural circumstances that reinforced the vitality of a cultural tradition privileging education, regardless of class [background](#).²⁹ The first structural condition was the opportunities in the U.S. education system. Many of the immigrant parents came from Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan, all of which have relatively closed systems of higher [education](#).³⁰ By comparison, the U.S. system of education is remarkably accessible, with “low-cost, high-quality public universities,” and the children of immigrants have the chance to attend elite institutions of a caliber that would have been closed to them in their parents' countries of origin (Weinberg, 1997).

Access to the U.S. education system proved to be a common theme expressed by the parents, and for some it became a driving force in the immigration narrative they shared with their children. Jannelle, the daughter of a Flushing taxi driver and deli owner, remembered:

My parents say they came here to give us a better education. 'Cause you know, in Taiwan it's so hard to get to college, you have all these tests. They thought here we could get further. Not that we could get further, but we wouldn't have all that pressure. Because in Taiwan, you start having tests when you're in junior high.

In contrast, there were seemingly inexhaustible opportunities for higher learning in the United States, where education was available for older adults as well as for children and adolescents. In the words of Mrs. Wu:

This is the part I love the best about the United States. Like I have a younger sister [here], she graduated from a very bad school, she was only a high school graduate, a very bad school. She [was] just not good in academic field. But she never stop continuous education. Taiwan, they don't have community colleges where you can go. In Taiwan, school is only for the young people. After you are married, have children, no such thing.

The second structural condition that reinforced the value of education for Chinese immigrants was the compelling economic payoff for schooling in the U.S. labor market. The increasing significance of the college degree to mobility has been well documented (Murnane, 1994; Wilson, 1999). Due to their limited English skills and schooling, Chinese working-class immigrants found the ethnic economy, with its long hours, unsanitary work conditions, and scarce benefits often associated with manual labor, to be their only option. Nonetheless, their children recalled how they pointed to distant relatives, who had been in the United States longer and had more education, as having better opportunities, and how they expected their children to have those too—provided their children did well in school. Lan, a Hunter student whose father ran a Chinese restaurant in lower Manhattan, recalled his father's advice: “He always says, ‘I have to work so hard. But if you get a good education, you can find a better job. You won't have to work like me in the restaurant, sweating.’ Every day, I mean, he says it over and over, it's in our head.”

For middle-class Chinese immigrant parents, education was the reason they did not have to work in the ethnic economy to begin with. Both middle-class parents and their children were aware of the ethnic economy's existence, and some took pains to distance themselves from the “poor immigrants” who lived and worked there. For most of these parents, Chinatown or any other ethnic economic enclave was just a place to buy

groceries and have an occasional meal; they had no real ties there. But these places were also a stark reminder to them of what their future in the United States would have been like without an education. For example, the mother of a Columbia student talked about how her husband briefly worked in his uncle's Chinese restaurant in Brooklyn as a college student newly immigrated from Hong Kong. As she told it, her husband went on to complete his master's degree ahead of schedule because he wanted to leave the world of low-wage work behind, even if it was on a part-time basis. She said, "He finished [his master's degree] in one year because he said he do not want to stay in the restaurant for all his life."

These findings are consistent with the literature detailing the high educational expectations of Asian Americans (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Pang, 1990; Schneider & Lee, 1990) and support Ogbu's (1995) characterization of Chinese Americans as a voluntary minority group that employs the homeland as a frame of reference for their experiences in the United States. However, immigrant optimism was not the only underlying view of Chinese immigrant families toward education — parents in the study also expressed immigrant pessimism. The source of this pessimism was perceived racial discrimination. Their national origins notwithstanding, immigrant parents understood that they all became classified as Chinese in the United States, with distinctions such as Mainlander, Taiwanese, or Malay having very little meaning, regardless of how they self-identified. Moreover, they perceived that being Chinese was a liability in the American racial hierarchy. Their hope was that education would blunt the edge of discrimination for the next generation (Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Tuan, 1998).

Mr. Chin, for example, described how his Chinese heritage made him a "second-class citizen" in Malaysia, and how those experiences prepared him for the racial hierarchy in the United States. It was a lesson that he wanted his daughter Diana to understand as well:

I made sure that we told her right from the beginning, right from day one, you know, when she was able to understand the issues. We say, "Look, let's face it. You're a minority. You're Asian. You're Chinese. You're a minority. There aren't too many of us here. And when you get on in this world, you have to get on with these people, you have to have a certain way of surviving. You've got to know how to get around it."

Mrs. Chang also talked about the problems that came with being Chinese, particularly immigrant Chinese, in the United States. This was surprising because, like Mr. Chin, who was an attorney and a Fulbright scholar, both she and her husband had impressive educational credentials: Mrs. Chang earned a master's degree from an Ivy League university and her husband graduated from National Taiwan University, known in Mandarin as Taida, and received his medical degree in the United States. These credentials notwithstanding, Mrs. Chang saw their status in the United States in marginalized terms:

I think there is discrimination, okay. . . . Like once my husband had a lawsuit. . . . Taida is considered to be like Harvard [but] they don't know that here. So my husband's sitting in a courtroom like very stupid. And they're like, like that. Actually, most Chinese people who came here to study came for higher education, they are the elite of our society. But people here, they don't know. They talk to you like dumb dumb. You don't understand, you don't speak English as well as we do. But we reverse that. You Americans go to Taiwan, they're dumb dumbs too.

This passage is particularly illuminating for what it says about the migration process and social-class background. By all indicators, the Changs belong to the highly professional stream of the post-1965 immigration, a group with such an impressive profile that Rumbaut (1997) describes them as the "most skilled immigrants ever to come to the United States." Yet their incorporation into American life has not been entirely seamless. Despite their comfortable house in the suburbs and a successful medical practice drawing patients from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, the Changs still believed that they were viewed and treated as ignorant foreigners.

In the interview, Mrs. Chang expressed some hope that the next generation would be treated better, especially since they would have grown up as native English speakers exposed to American culture. But the Changs' daughter, Victoria, remembered the "respect lessons" her mother taught her when she was young: "My mom would say to me, you know, you have to have respect for yourself because when you grow up, you may not have respect in society because you are a woman and you are Chinese. And she would prepare me for all of this."

This perception of racial discrimination overwhelmed any class differences among the Chinese immigrant parents of students interviewed in this study. Regardless of their educational background or their occupational status, the majority of the immigrant parents tended to call attention to the possibility of discrimination against their children. For example, interviews with four respondents from very different backgrounds revealed similar experiences. Sandra, the daughter of an engineering consultant and a student at Columbia, grew up in a small, predominately White suburban town outside of Boston:

My parents said if you want to get ahead in the world, being an Asian American, they always look at you, they always think you're not as good, so you have to be twice as assertive, you have to make your voice be heard.

Frances, the daughter of a hospital administrator and a physicist and a student at Columbia, grew up in a mostly White suburban community outside of New York City:

The way my father felt was that you need to be smart because you'll never be accepted or given the chance because you're Chinese. That's how my father felt. Being Chinese will never be a plus, it will always be something against you. . . . My father wanted us to be smarter, you have to be smarter than other people, than the majority, because unless you have 110, they're not going to take you. If you have 88, you know, they're not going to look at you and say, oh well, we'll take them anyway. It'll be like, we've got to take this guy because he's the smartest person. Your acceptance is through merit, merit-based acceptance; you'll make it in because you have the criteria, not because you're what they're looking for.

Paul, the son of a contractor and a seamstress and a student at Hunter, grew up in Chinatown:

I have a Chinese name, but it's not on the record. Officially on the birth certificate is Paul, my Chinese name, then Lee. We asked them that, why did we get American names instead? My mom goes, like, it's not acceptable to have a Chinese name as much as it is to have an American one. It was her way of pushing us to get accepted by society. But she does know that, you know, they don't like Chinese people. And a lot of people don't. And it happens. My father works, he gets around a lot, so he sees a lot of people saying things to him, commenting about his race and ethnicity.

Winston, the son of an electrical technician and a student at Hunter, grew up in a racially mixed neighborhood in Queens, New York:

My dad would say, there's not a lot of opportunities for Chinese, or you're not going to get this job because you're Chinese. You're going to be limited from this and that. You can't do this because you're Chinese. People expect you to do this because you're Chinese. People aren't going to expect you to do this because you're Chinese. You have to work harder because there is a lot of expectations about Chinese people, and they're going to look down on you. Yeah, like you have to be much better than Whites.

These recollections are strikingly similar in tone and language. Overall, the immigrant parents called attention to the disadvantages that came with being Chinese in the United States and sought to impress upon

their children the reality of racial stratification. The message was more or less the same, despite the parents' different socioeconomic trajectories and varying ties to the ethnic enclave (ranging from marginal to very strong). The parents taught their children to be mindful of racial discrimination, to work harder than other people for the same results, and to pay particular attention to education as a way to level (somewhat, at least) an unequal playing field.

To sum up, although the students came from diverse class backgrounds, they recalled growing up with remarkably similar parental aspirations for their schooling. The students themselves attributed their individual achievement and the achievement of the group to Chinese or Asian cultural values emphasizing hard work and education as a channel for mobility, and to the success of immigrant parents in transmitting those values to their children. Interviews with both students and their parents pointed to several structural conditions in the United States that gave meaning to these traditions. The first two were actual structural conditions — the widespread availability of postsecondary education (as opposed to the limited opportunities for higher education in the immigrants' countries of origin), and an American labor market that rewarded the holder of a college degree with higher income. The third was a perceived structural condition: Chinese immigrants discerned a racially and ethnically stratified opportunity structure and encouraged their children to pursue higher education to offset the effects of perceived discrimination.

Parental Strategies

While parents from both middle- and working-class backgrounds shared high expectations for their children, social-class background did emerge as a clear dividing line in the educational strategies that Chinese immigrant parents developed to foster their children's education. Despite their similar outlooks on schooling, Chinese immigrant parents relied on distinct ethnic-class strategies to promote generational mobility through education. It is here that social-class differences and, for working-class parents, differences in status within the ethnic economy took on significance. These differences influenced the scope and types of resources that Chinese immigrant parents could marshal on behalf of their children.

Educational Strategies of Suburban Middle-Class Parents Working in the Mainstream Economy

Chinese middle-class parents in this study had the resources to explore many different options, thus the choice of school for their children was of primary importance to them. Private school was the province of those parents who could afford it or, in isolated cases, who could qualify for financial aid. Parents often learned of the private school option from friends, teachers, and administrators, and believed it would provide a richer curriculum and a chance for their children to form friendships with academically oriented and well-off peers. These networks, however, differed from the kinds employed by urban parents working in the ethnic and mainstream economy, which I will detail in the next section, in that they were not exclusively ethnic networks. Other parents who could not afford the price tags of private schools or would not qualify for financial aid opted to move into the best public school districts they could find. One mother moved her family to a different part of Sacramento so that her daughter could attend the area's top-ranked high school. Middle-class parents residing in New York City concentrated on locating public schools with magnet programs that allowed them to accept students living outside their designated boundaries. However, finding these schools was a task that involved delving into the Byzantine bureaucracy of New York City public schools, scouring newspapers and journals, and having countless conversations with teachers and school administrators — a daunting prospect even for native-born parents, let alone for immigrants.

Chinese middle-class parents, however, did not rely solely on schools. It was equally important to them that the learning process extend well beyond what could be gained in a school setting. The general consensus was that time away from school had to be used for some gainful intellectual pursuit. In the words of Mrs. Chang:

I come from Taiwan. Always have lots, lots of homework, you know. We don't have time for

ourselves. But here they don't have anything to do, right. After school they can finish your homework in twenty, thirty minutes and nothing to do, right. So I think they have too much free time and I hate to see kids waste their time. You know, I don't think that life should be like that, you know, waste time.

Thus, Chinese parents monitored their children's free time (in one case, installing locks on the TV room), assigned supplementary homework, and offered help in math and science. In those subjects, the fact that the parents were not native English speakers was not an obstacle. They enrolled their children in music programs, summer programs, and academic tutoring programs. Classical music, in particular, emerged as a key element in the childhood and adolescence of middle-class respondents (piano and violin were quite popular).

Many of the Chinese middle-class mothers in this study worked only part-time, if at all. Mrs. Chang was one of the mothers who stayed at home when her children were young, and she found that monitoring her children's progress in school was a time-consuming daily activity. As the following passage indicates, she became involved in the routine details of her children's schooling. She took a particularly active role with her son, since he was more problematic in school:

When my daughter was little, like first or second grade, I'd sit with her and we'd do everything together, make sure she does her work right. I spend my time with her. I'm not that active in the PTA but I just make sure when there is conference I always be there. Oh, but my son, yes. For my son kind of involved because he's naughty. He usually gives the teacher a hard time, like make faces or something like, not organized. So I manage to communicate with the teacher. We had a notebook. I write notes to the teacher and the teacher writes back to me. And I have to make sure what kind of homework we have, you know. Like, what did you do wrong today? And I also write to my son almost every day or every other day, "Make sure you have a good day (or something like that). I love you very much." I still keep that book.

This kind of involvement extended well beyond the early years of schooling into college. Not only did many Chinese middle-class parents take their children on summer tours of various colleges, but they were also very engaged with the college application process itself and participated actively in choosing some schools and discarding others. In my interviews, parents spoke about these experiences in more detail and at greater length than did their own children, who rarely referred to this process (although I asked). The Chins, whose daughter Diana attended Columbia, are one example. Mr. Chin said, "So we did the tour, and Columbia was not even on the list. If I remember, that was in the junior year." Mrs. Chin added:

Diana made a list herself. At that time, Johns Hopkins was number one on the list. And the University of Virginia was also somewhere up there. So we did all the way down, but as we went down [from Boston], we had to pass New York. I think we had to go in. So her daddy said, "Since we are here, we might as well have a look." And we did look. And then we rushed to UPenn, and then we rushed to, and so on and so on. . . . When she went to Georgetown, she fell in love with the whole town. She absolutely fell in love with it. And she liked Georgetown. It was not on her list.

Mr. Chin had this to say about how Diana eventually came to Columbia:

It's between Georgetown and Columbia. And finally, she chose Columbia. And that's basically because, first of all, it's an Ivy League college. It's a smaller college. It's something she wants. She wants an urban university with a lot of multicultural people, diversity. And also, she's got a very active social life. She wants to know a lot more people. And she found that the Georgetown crowd, although they're very good, Georgetown is very good but the students, they were more like yuppies. So she went to Columbia. And one of her reasons was that they have a real good

core curriculum. The core curriculum basically gives her a broad liberal education without making her into a professional, you know, like you're in hotel management, like at Cornell.

Mrs. Leong is another example of how parents engage with the college application process. She remembered how her daughter Sandra had her heart set on attending the Cooper Union for the Advancement of Science and Art in New York City, sight unseen, because of its emphasis on the arts. But Mrs. Leong did not want her daughter to apply only to one school or to rely on brochures or word of mouth for her impressions of any school. She encouraged her daughter to visit not just Cooper Union but a few other schools as potential back-up choices:

And all along, she [Sandra] just wanted that school. But I heard about that school, it has no campus. It's not what she thinks. Because we are worried about this, all her life, she just lived in this little town. So we said, first of all, there's no guarantee you can get in. Second, you might not like the environment there. I insist, you should go to the open house. Even when you look at pictures, it's something different. The last open house, she went. We said, even if you apply to the school, would you please take a look at the campus? I said, if you make a trip there, why don't you go to NYU and Columbia?

Sandra made the trip and ended up not even applying to Cooper Union. During her visit to the school, she discovered that it did not have a traditional campus environment, and she was unsure if she wanted such a rigorous arts curriculum. She decided to apply to Columbia instead, since it was a place where she would have a liberal arts education and at the same time could major in the arts.

When some of the middle-class families found that putting a child through private school and/or a private college stretched their means, they sought alternative ways to meet the costs. Denying their children the educational opportunity was rarely considered. In one family the father started working two jobs — as a hospital administrator during the day and as a laboratory technician at night — to fund his four daughters' music lessons and private college tuitions. The mother, meanwhile, started to work as a nurse to help support the household. Another family restructured the family budget to meet the added financial burden when their son gave up a \$10,000 scholarship to transfer to Columbia.

In this study, I found that Chinese immigrant parents from middle-class suburban backgrounds steered their children toward the best schools, invested in academically oriented private lessons for their children, and were actively involved in their schooling. These findings are consistent with previous studies, which suggest that Asian American parents employ their resources in very specific ways to foster their children's education (Kao, 1995; Siu & Feldman, 1994; Schneider & Lee, 1990; Wong, 1990). Kao (1995), for example, shows that Asian American and White parents of similar income levels had different patterns of involvement with their children's schooling, with Asians more likely to save for their children's college education and to offer activities and create conditions conducive to study. However, I found such strategies to be the norm with *middle-class* Chinese immigrant parents. In the next section I discuss working-class Chinese immigrant parents who have developed a different set of strategies, which have received comparatively little attention.

Educational Strategies of Urban Parents Working in the Ethnic and Mainstream Economy

In this section, I address the strategies adopted by urban Chinese immigrant parents, who were either working class or middle class in the ethnic economy, or lower middle class in the mainstream economy. Although there were distinctions that I highlight below, their strategies were more similar than different, and contrasted clearly with those adopted by suburban middle-class Chinese parents.

Like their suburban middle-class counterparts, these parents wanted to send their children to the best schools. However, since they were unable to move out of urban neighborhoods with poor schools or to afford private school tuitions, they pursued different strategies. In some cases, Chinese working-class immigrants sent their

children to neighborhood parochial institutions, which they believed were better. For example, Grace, a Hunter student and the daughter of a garment factory worker and a restaurant worker, recalls her mother's efforts to search out the best educational opportunities in Chinatown, including a stint at a Catholic school, even though the family was Buddhist:

I went to a Catholic school, the Catholic one on Mott Street. I went there from fourth grade to eighth grade. My mom kept changing me. I remember being changed to a lot of public elementary schools, like the one behind Allen Street, the one near Pathmark, near Pell Street, and 124. I went all over.

Other immigrant parents also channelled their children into a variety of public elementary and junior high schools in search of the best one.

Chinese parents working in the ethnic economy and those with jobs in the mainstream economy relied on informal ethnic networks as a valuable source of information on the city's public educational system. They learned about school rankings (not just in their neighborhood, but in relatively distant places) from friends and families who may have been in the United States longer and were economically better off. In some cases they were able to use the address of a friend living in a more upscale neighborhood to enroll their child in the school located in that neighborhood. Through these networks, they also heard about New York City's specialized high schools, Stuyvesant, Bronx Science, and Brooklyn Technical, which admitted students on the basis of an examination. Many parents regarded entrance to these schools as crucial to their children's future, given the schools' excellent college placement records and their overall levels of achievement. Bronx Science High School, for example, boasts more finalists in the acclaimed Westinghouse science competition than any other high school in the nation, and includes five Nobel Prize winners among its alumni (Forero, 2000). These social networks were accessed in worksites like restaurants and garment factories, as well as through extended family members, and served as a way for parents to gauge their children's performance relative to other people's children. Zhou (1992, 1997) argues that such networks facilitated the formation of social capital for Chinese immigrants and their children.

Unlike suburban middle-class parents, who had their own knowledge and research about schools to draw on, urban Chinese parents often found these networks to be their sole resource, rather than an additional resource. It is here that status in the ethnic economy becomes important. Respondents whose parents were laborers in the ethnic economy remembered that their parents did not really know how to direct them, short of suggesting that they take the exam for the specialized high schools. In the absence of official and unofficial information about the other good public high schools in New York City, and not knowing how to access such information, the students relied on chance knowledge gleaned from friends or followed their friends to a particular school. Some students ended up frequenting a number of different high schools, unsure of where they belonged.

Even if they were able to use ethnic networks to locate better schools for their children, most Chinese immigrant parents working in the ethnic economy found they had limited ability to help their children in school because of the time constraints of their labor-intensive jobs, their own lack of education, lack of financial resources, and poor English-language skills. Most of these Chinese parents were also unable to provide the "extra" lessons that middle-class suburban parents could afford more easily. For example, the musical experiences of respondents whose parents worked in the ethnic economy typically began with the public junior high school band, rather than with private lessons, as was the case for many of their middle-class suburban counterparts.

It is important to point out, however, that not all respondents had the same experience; there were differences according to one's status in the ethnic economy. Jade, a young woman attending Barnard, spoke of the disparities in her own extended family. The most telling difference between Jade's father and her aunts and uncles was that he managed a noodle factory while they labored at manual jobs as waiters and seamstresses

and brought home significantly less income. Jade's parents could invest in their children's education in ways that her aunts and uncles could not:

My parents are like crazy believers in, "You must be going to school. And you must excel academically." But the rest of my family, my uncles and my aunts, there's not that much of an emphasis for them for their kids. I think it's because my parents make more money. So they have the leisure of saying, "Yes, this is what you can do." Because they spend a lot of money for my brother to go to tutorials. They're, let's see, probably \$800 for like a month and a half. It adds up. And he used to go like continuously, to cram for exams or just to get ready for school. Like the year before, he'll learn the stuff that he's going to do next year. And my aunts and my uncles just aren't willing to put the money into this, because first of all they just don't have it. They don't have that leisure.

This is not to say that parents like Jade's could furnish the types of advantages available to middle-class children living in the suburbs. Since both parents still worked long hours, they could not closely supervise their children's progress; they also did not have the necessary language skills and educational background (they were high school graduates) to help with their children's homework. But what this story illustrates is that the strategies of Chinese parents working in the ethnic economy varied according to their occupational status in the ethnic economy.

I found that respondents whose parents worked in the mainstream economy had similar experiences, even though they had some additional advantages. Lois is one such example. Lois's parents immigrated to the United States during the 1950s as young children, and grew up in Chinatown. They attended New York City public schools and obtained their high school diplomas. By the time Lois was born, they had bought a two-family house in Brooklyn's Canarsie section, then a largely White, lower-middle-class neighborhood. Lois's father started a computer parts business and her mother worked in data entry for a Wall Street firm. Lois recalls a comfortable childhood complete with piano lessons (taken in Chinatown) and a piano given to her by her parents.

Lois's family background was clearly different from the majority of Hunter respondents, insofar as her parents worked outside the ethnic economy (although they retained strong ties to the enclave), owned their own house, and lived in what was a predominately White neighborhood, although that began to change soon after they moved in. Yet, similar to the other Hunter respondents, Lois remembered a childhood mainly spent alone: her parents were busy working (in this case, trying to maintain their income level and status, rather than struggling for survival) and had little time to be around. Nor did they seem to have a clear sense of what their role should be in their daughter's schooling:

Growing up, I remember my father hardly being home because he just started his business and he spent a lot of time at the office to start things off, and to work late because there was only a handful of employees. But so he never really had the time to spend with me. So it was just more or less my mom that took care of me, helping with my schoolwork and whatnot. But when it came to like my regular schoolwork, besides math, my mom wasn't really able to help me because her English, her grammatical skills weren't all that good. I don't think they knew how to because their parents were that way. It took years and years for my father to like realize, "Maybe I should ask her how she's doing," and stuff like that.

Financial concerns were ever present for all the respondents with working-class parents, which shaped their paths to and experiences in college. College may have been a clear goal, but the application process often seemed to occur in a void. Family visits to potential colleges were not an option, due to parents' lack of time and money, and tuition was a factor. Several respondents made college decisions based on which ones "looked nice in the brochures" (and, understandably, often regretted the decision afterwards). Many of them took a circuitous path to the bachelor's degree, with stints at different institutions (at both community and

four-year colleges) and exits from the educational system altogether. Financial concerns, both their own and their family's, affected students' educational trajectories in other ways, such as scheduling classes around shifts at the family restaurant or scheduling additional work time to pay for school.

It is clear from my sample that urban Chinese parents working in the ethnic and mainstream economy were very preoccupied with their children's schooling. At the same time, they confronted structural disadvantages in translating their aspirations into reality. To compensate for these disadvantages, such as poor-quality urban schools, they drew on ethnic networks to learn about New York City's public school system, in particular the specialized high schools. Yet, the experiences of these parents were not monolithic. Chinese immigrant parents who had higher status in the ethnic economy (e.g., ran or owned a business) could afford to supplement their children's education with Chinese-run cram schools, for [example](#).³¹ By the same token, urban Chinese immigrant parents who worked in the mainstream economy could also devote more of their financial resources to their children's schooling. All these parents, however, lacked the financial resources, educational background, and the time that middle-class professionals living in the suburbs could offer their children. Middle-class suburban parents chose from a much wider range of high-quality schooling options, invested in private lessons, and assumed a more active role in their children's schooling on a daily basis.

Children's Responses to Parental Expectations and Investment

As Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, and Johnson (1990) observe, Asian American parents have received a greater share of scholarly attention than their 1.5- and second-generation children. What remains unclear is how these children make sense of and respond to their parents' aspirations. In this section, I show that an analysis of children's responses involves more than just the explanation of their parents' expectations; rather, it demands a closer look at the immigrant experience and at how immigrant children interpret their parents' expectations in light of a family journey framed in terms of loss and sacrifice. Social class made a difference in how this immigrant narrative of loss and sacrifice was experienced and reported.

The Migration Context

Bearing witness to their parents' migration and adaptation to a new country — the loss of language, status, and an internal map of the way the world worked — underscored the lesson about education for 1.5- and second-generation Chinese immigrant children. Working-class respondents had only to look at their parents' circumstances for a glimpse of a future without higher education. Even children whose parents had high levels of education and financial resources understood their migration in terms of a struggle with language and new cultural mores and, consequently, thought of education as a way to avoid those kinds of obstacles and as a more certain way to achieve socioeconomic stability.

Kao (1995) argues that the parent-child relationship in Asian American families is characterized by a reciprocal sense of duty — parents are obligated to provide for their children's well-being and education, and children understand that their primary responsibility is to perform well in school. Bearing witness to their parents' loss of status instilled in children a profound sense of obligation. Immigrant children sought to ensure that the interior world of the family, at least, remained true to their parents' expectations. The themes of loss, sacrifice, and obligation figured prominently in Joseph's report of his family history. Joseph, a Columbia student, viewed his parents' lives in the United States as the sum total of toil, his father as a laboratory technician, his mom as a small-business owner, and when that failed, as a garment factory worker. He contrasted their existence of toil to their former lives of comfort:

My dad was really well off in Hong Kong and so was my mom, then, after she met him. And he basically threw everything away, he fled the Communists, basically. That's why they came over. My dad threw all that away, came here, started at the bottom of the totem pole, and didn't have much money, and they just had to kind of work their way up to where they are now. So my

parents actually sacrificed almost everything for myself and my brother. I think that's one of the reasons why I feel that I kind of owe a lot to them. So I try to respect them, and do what they say, and work my butt off in school, and not party all the time. Make something of my life just to say thank you to them.

This need to give back something in exchange for the visible sacrifices made by parents proved to be uniform across class.

Jannelle's family also experienced downward mobility after coming to the United States in 1982. Jannelle's father, who was in the Taiwanese army, now worked as a car service driver, and her mother, formerly a bank teller, owned a small deli. Arguments between the parents, who eventually divorced but still lived together for financial reasons, often centered on their reduced circumstances. They focused on who was responsible for their current situation: Who was working harder (or less)? Whose idea was it to come in the first place?

The one part of their journey that did work out as intended was their children's schooling and careers. Jannelle's brother graduated from college with a business degree and was working in finance; her sister received an engineering degree and was working on a master's degree. Jannelle was at Columbia and looking toward law school. All the children had surpassed their parents in educational attainment. Reflecting on her parents' immigration experiences, Jannelle said: "I think that [our educational success] is what keeps them going. You know, we're working in school, and my brother has a good living, and my sister is going to have her living. You know, I don't talk to my parents that much, but I still feel really close to them. You know, because we've been through the same thing."

On the other hand, many respondents' family fortunes improved with immigration. In these cases, a similar kind of obligation emerged. Children considered it their duty to make use of the material opportunities and basic freedoms of the United States (the specter of discrimination notwithstanding), if only because those very opportunities had not been available to their parents in the homeland, which was remembered as a hardscrabble place. The following story related by Joan, a Columbia student, speaks to this. Although Joan's father was a garment presser, her mother was able to attend some college, learn English, and eventually found a job doing accounting work for a small midtown firm. Joan's parents had recently purchased a two-family home that they rented out for additional income, and were on a path of upward mobility. Still, they impressed upon their children that this mobility was hard-won, and that their American-born daughters would never know the kind of struggle that they had experienced back in China. As Joan explained:

Recently, while we were renovating the apartment, it got really late at night, and we were still laying down the new kitchen floor. And my mother started talking about how lucky my sister and I are, because in America we never had to consider being separated, whereas in China life was touch and go all the time, and she would have to be separated from her mother and brothers, and she was never sure when they would all meet again. And it was very lonely. The chief distinction my parents draw is that we're very comfortable in America. We've always been in America, there's always been enough to eat. We don't know what it means to suffer.

Through achieving in school, these children sought to compensate their parents for the struggles they endured *both* in the homeland and in their adopted country.

In the end, such parental hardships, whether represented by downward mobility upon migration or upward mobility acquired in piecemeal fashion, were presented to their children as necessary to provide a better life for them. In all cases, education was cast as the key to that better life. The student respondents did not necessarily envision their educational trajectories only as a way of recouping lost family status but, rather, as a way of compensating for the struggles faced by their parents and the opportunities denied to them. As Joan put it, "I know my dad, he's a smart man. But he doesn't have an education so he is going to spend the rest of his working life probably as a garment presser. And I don't think it's his fault." Or in Jannelle's case, though

it was acceptable for her to help out at the coffee station and the cash register in her mom's deli during her childhood and adolescent years, it became less acceptable to her mother as she became a college student looking toward a professional career: "[My mom] probably doesn't want me at the store because, you know, she thinks it's not right for me to be there anymore. [She] thinks she's not educated or something. And I just think she thinks I'm all educated now."

But understanding academic performance as the key to success brought with it a particular set of pressures for these children, regardless of class background. Childhood was often remembered by respondents as a time spent shrouded in anxiety about what the future would hold. In Joseph's words:

I remember when I was young, my mom would tell me, "Oh, you know you have to study hard, you know, be successful in life so that you can drive around in nice cars." That's when I was five. She would tell me that. And I would think about it. Sometimes at night, I would kind of cry thinking, "Oh, what happens if I don't make anything of myself, I'll be a bum living on the streets."

When respondents (many of whom were working class) fell short of their parents' expectations, there was a mixture of shame and resentment. As Julia, at age twenty-five a re-entry student at Hunter, told it, there was little margin for error in one's educational trajectory:

There's this way of thinking for Chinese Americans that you have to do better, and you have this idealized look on life that you should be doing, and if you don't achieve that, it's like, "Okay, well, then, I'm garbage. I can't do that." And you are expected to do a lot of things, being a Chinese American from Chinese, traditional China parents. You know, they come here and they expect you to do certain things so. Education to them is really important because they didn't have it. And for all three of us [kids] to finish is like a miracle, you know. And since I'm the last one, and they feel like I'm taking a long time, it's a lot of pressure. And the only thing I would say is the bad thing about being Chinese Americans is that they put a lot of pressure on themselves.

Other working-class students remembered an adolescence punctuated by arguments with their parents about their lackluster school performance and resentment at being pressured to bring home high grades. These students, however, never doubted the importance of education. The conflicts had less to do with incompatible attitudes toward schooling than the way working-class parents imparted the message. Working-class Chinese parents were more likely to favor an authoritarian style of parenting, and their children were consequently more likely to complain of a lack of parental communication. This communication gap proved part of an overall distancing from working-class parents, whose busy schedules left them little time to be with their children.

To sum up, a general loss in status (whether temporary or permanent) and parental sacrifice characterized the immigrant family narratives recalled by students of diverse class origins. The students framed their achievement in school as the payoff for their parents' migration journeys. Yet this interpretation of education as important on both a personal and familial level also had psychological costs, particularly for working-class children who found it difficult to meet their parents' expectations.

Conclusion

This article examines how social-class background affects the messages Chinese immigrant parents give their children about education, the investments they make in their children's schooling, and the responses these children have to their parents. The story told here is one of complexity and variability on many levels. I have shown that students of diverse social-class origins recalled similar parental aspirations for their education.

Based largely on student interviews supplemented with several parental interviews, I have demonstrated that these aspirations derived from a cultural legacy that privileged education and structural conditions that made this legacy meaningful in the United States. For example, I found that the widespread availability of post-secondary education in the United States, in contrast to the limited opportunities for higher learning in the immigrants' countries of origin, and an economy that potentially rewards the holder of a college degree with higher income were consistent with the immigrant optimism hypothesis. But the parents' view of higher education as a way for their children to offset the effects of perceived discrimination underscored that parental aspirations were not grounded in immigrant optimism alone. Rather, these aspirations reflected a deep strain of immigrant pessimism.

Despite their common aspirations, the immigrant parents pursued different strategies and provided their children with different routes to a four-year college. Middle-class parents living in the suburbs sent their children to private schools or well-funded public schools, and they were actively involved in their children's study and learning in and out of school. In contrast, urban Chinese parents who worked in the ethnic or mainstream economy drew on ethnic networks to compensate for their structural disadvantages, but remained limited in their involvement with their children's education by the long hours they worked and their lack of formal schooling and English-language facility. It is also important to note that, while parents who held a middle-class status in the ethnic economy and urban Chinese parents who worked in the mainstream economy had access to more resources than manual laborers in the ethnic economy, they still lacked the advantages of their middle-class professional counterparts living in the suburbs.

Thus, this study provides insight into how class differences can shape the educational experiences of the children of Chinese immigrants. The generalizability of the findings, however, are limited, since the focus is 1.5- and second-generation Chinese American children who have already gone on to higher education, specifically a four-year college. A study of children who exit the educational system, whether in high school or in college, will shed additional light on the effects of class and migration in educational outcomes among Chinese Americans. Moreover, this study relies mainly on students' perceptions of their parents' educational expectations and strategies, supplemented by a few parental interviews. Future research on this subject might draw from a greater number of parental interviews.

An additional limitation of this study derives from its focus on Chinese immigrants and their children. Without another ethnic group as a comparison, the study cannot delineate which of the findings can be attributed to class, ethnicity, or native status. For example, the study cannot answer whether working-class Chinese immigrant parents are enacting a script that is shared by other immigrant working-class ethnics, Asian or non-Asian. This is, of course, an important question to address, and should be better answered in the future by two ongoing large-scale immigration projects, the Harvard Immigration Project and the Project on the Second [Generation](#).³² So far, a pilot study conducted by the Project on the Second Generation in New York City suggests that Chinese immigrant parents, some of whom have little education, low English-language facility, and work in low-wage jobs, are somewhat distinctive in that they have more extensive knowledge of the city's high schools, partly through their ethnic networks (Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, Lopez, & Kim, 1997).³³ Further research might also investigate social-class differences in immigrant parents' use of ethnic networks.

The policy implications of this research are considerable, insofar as some immigrants — such as Asians — have been held up as “more assimilable” than others — such as Mexicans and Dominicans (Rumbaut, 1997). Researchers must continue to disentangle the roles of ethnicity, class, and immigration in the educational outcomes of different groups. Given the heterogeneity in the Asian American population alone, disentangling these factors is certainly important when trying to account for the group's educational success. Given the continuing high levels of post-1965 immigration and the differing socioeconomic incorporation of various immigrant groups, this task is compelling on a broader level as well. Comparative ethnographic research and comparative quantitative research are both necessary to explore the importance of these factors and to

introduce and investigate other factors that may be more relevant for one group than for another.

Notes

1. As defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, the term *Asian American* refers to people who trace their descent to the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent. According to the 2000 Census, an additional 1.7 million people reported being Asian and at least one other race. Thus, approximately 11.9 million people, or 4.2 percent of the population, reported being Asian alone or in combination with one or more other races.
2. For a more detailed discussion of Asian Americans as a model minority, please see Lee (1996), Osajima (1988), Suzuki (1989), and Wong, Lai, Nagasawa, and Lin (1998).
3. It should be noted that this article does not look across ethnic groups; rather, it discusses different classes within one ethnic group, for example, Chinese Americans.
4. I define the second generation as the American-born children of immigrants, and the 1.5 generation as foreign-born children who immigrated to the United States before the age of eleven, and hence were educated and socialized here.
5. In this article, I use the term *Asian American* to refer to a racial category imparted to people of various ethnic groups, such as the Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, South Asians, and Vietnamese. See Omi and Winant (1986) for a discussion of how this racialization process occurred. See Tuan (1998) and Espiritu (1994) for a discussion of how some second- and later-generation Asian ethnics have responded to this racialization process by developing a racial consciousness that transcends ethnic boundaries.
6. Goyette and Xie (1999) drew on data from the National Educational Longitudinal Study and studied the following groups: Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, Southeast Asians (Cambodians, Laotians, Hmong, and Vietnamese), South Asians (Asian Indians and Pakistanis), and “other Asians,” who selected this “category or who identified themselves as Asian by race but did not choose an ethnic category” (p. 26).
7. According to Weinberg (1997), the specific percentages were the following: 17 percent of Chinese immigrants had some college; 20 percent had a bachelor’s degree; 13 percent had a master’s degree, and 6 percent had a doctorate.
8. The Hart-Celler Act of 1965, which took effect in 1968, opened immigration to the United States from all countries, discontinuing previous policies based on national origin that had favored Northern and Western Europe. Preference was given to family reunification and occupational skills, the latter of which would shape the class character of Asian immigration patterns.
9. Segmented assimilation outlines two other possibilities for the children of the post-1965 immigrants: integration into the middle class or, conversely, assimilation into the underclass and permanent poverty.
10. Bankston (1998), for example, has found that ethnicity helps to keep Vietnamese high school students in school and doing well through community norms regarding schoolwork and family cooperation. Similarly, Hao and Bonstead-Bruns (1998) show that the ethnic economy and ethnic networks among Chinese and Korean immigrants contribute to high educational expectations on the part of both parents and children and promote high academic achievement. In her work on New York City’s Chinatown, Zhou (1997) has found that networks in the ethnic community facilitate the formation of social capital for immigrant families that provide a means of social control and a sense of shared obligations. For example, Zhou argues that parents pass on a strong work ethic to their children, who are taught to value schooling as a way to “move out of Chinatown.” Community organizations, which she says are made possible by the ethnic economy, reinforce

such messages by furnishing “a protective social environment” for immigrant children against crime, drugs, and teenage pregnancies.

11. The Asian groups studied by Rumbaut are the following: Filipinos, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Hmong, Laotians, and “other Asians” (e.g., Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Indians).

12. In Kao and Tienda’s (1998) study, the Asian groups studied included the following: Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Southeast Asians, South Asians, Pacific Islanders, and West Asians, such as Pakistanis and Turks.

13. Goyette and Xie (1999) conducted one of the few quantitative studies that examines ethnic differences among Asian Americans, specifically testing for socioeconomic and background characteristics, tested academic ability, and parental expectations as factors shaping students’ educational expectations. They find, for example, that “socioeconomic and background characteristics explain much of the differences between the educational expectations of the Filipinos, Japanese and South Asians, and those of the Whites, but none of the differences in expectations between the Chinese and Southeast Asians and the Whites” (pp. 32–33).

14. Such categories include the owners of large factories, companies, hotels and restaurants, small-business owners, the new middle class (e.g., professionals, civil servants, and doctors), and workers (Chen, 1992). It is also important to be mindful of the socioeconomic distinctions between ethnic economic enclaves. In New York City, for example, Flushing, Queens, has been the focal point of much of the Taiwanese immigration, and immigrants who have settled there tend to be more affluent than immigrants, many from Mainland China, who have ended up in Manhattan’s Chinatown (Chen, 1992; Zhou, 1992).

15. In this study, I draw on a definition of the ethnic economic enclave as a “segmented sector of the larger economy, constituting a distinct labor market” (Zhou, 1992, p. 4) that is highly differentiated. Please note, however, that I am not engaging in the debate over whether the ethnic economy facilitates mobility for immigrants. In the Chinese case, for example, Zhou (1992) argues that New York City’s Chinatown is an example of how immigrants are able to use ethnic resources and ethnic ties to achieve mobility. Kwong (1987), on the other hand, sees Chinatown as a polarized community comprised of a small, elite class engaged in internal exploitation of working-class co-ethnics and limiting mobility. For a more detailed discussion of the role of the ethnic enclave in the mobility process of post-1965 immigrant groups, please see Portes and Bach (1985), Sanders and Nee (1987, 1996), and Waldinger (1993, 1995).

16. My research draws mainly on interview respondents from Columbia College, but included three respondents from Barnard and four from the Engineering School. Barnard and the Engineering School maintain their own faculty, curriculum, administration, operating budget, and admissions. Both Barnard and engineering students, however, can take classes at Columbia College, and participate in the same undergraduate organisations.

17. The CUNY system is comprised of ten senior colleges, six community colleges, a technical college, a graduate school, a law school, and a medical school.

18. Another difference between the two schools was the admissions criteria. Columbia accepted only 17 percent of more than 11,000 applicants in 1997, and the total mean SAT score for matriculated students entering that year was 1,346 out of a possible 1,600. Hunter is open to high school graduates who had at least an 80 percent average, or were in the top third of their class, or scored at least 1020 out of a possible 1600 on the SAT. Applicants who had a G.E.D. score of at least 300 were also eligible for admission to Hunter.

19. Since I could not obtain access to the names and addresses of all the Chinese American students enrolled at either school, I was unable to obtain a random and representative sample. I still strove, however, for a diverse pool of respondents. Toward that end, I recruited from a number of courses and student clubs (ethnic,

non-ethnic, religious, professional, women's groups, magazines). My recruiting in classes involved contacting the professors and getting permission to make an initial pitch in the class and circulate a sign-up sheet so that interested students could provide their contact information. Generally, a few days later, I would contact the students via phone or email and try to set up an appointment for an interview. I introduced the project to classes in the following fields of study: economics, sociology, geography, Chinese language, and Asian American Studies. Those who decided to participate majored in a variety of fields in the humanities, the sciences, and social sciences. My recruiting from student clubs involved emailing the head of the student organization and asking that person to circulate information about my project and my contact information, or contacting students personally at the various club offices and circulating a sign-up sheet, much as I did in classes.

20. I spoke with the adult sister of a respondent over the phone, and communicated with the adult brother of another respondent via email.

21. Although I did not have data on family income, I used the parents' education and occupations as proxies.

22. Other parental countries of origin included Hong Kong, the Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Burma, and other parts of Mainland China.

23. Thirty percent of the Hunter families worked outside the ethnic economy and had what I define as lower-middle-class status. These parents worked in the mainstream economy in the postal service, or for the city (e.g., as a bus driver or engineer), or for private firms in teaching, data entry, janitorial services, and cashier work. These parents had settled in working- and lower-middle-class New York City neighborhoods that were racially and ethnically mixed and had substantial immigrant populations. While they had more financial resources and were more likely to own their homes than the other 70 percent of the Hunter families, they had strong kinship and social ties to an ethnic economic enclave and were not as well off or well educated as the parents of most of the Columbia students.

24. Seventeen (52 percent) of the mothers had a high school education, earned mostly in the home country. Four (12 percent) had some college or a bachelor's degree earned in the United States, and another two (6 percent) had some college in the country of origin. But eight (24 percent) had only a grade school or junior high school education. Seventeen (52 percent) of the fathers were reported to have gone to high school, again mostly in the home country. Seven (21 percent) went only as far as grade school in the country of origin, and two as far as junior high. Three (9 percent) had some college; one earned a bachelor's degree and another completed a master's degree, both in the United States. Several of the Hunter students attributed their parents' limited schooling to the Cultural Revolution, which interrupted the education of many mainland Chinese during the late 1960s and 1970s.

25. In our interviews, the Hunter students proved to be well-aware of the model minority stereotype and, more importantly, how that image did not correspond to their family's financial struggles and their own experiences in school. They were attending one of the best CUNY schools, but in their eyes it was still a public university and they had not done well by themselves or their parents in going there. In the words of one woman, the daughter of a cook and a garment worker: "The media is always portraying [Asian Americans] as people who have it well off. Always talking about people who make it to Princeton, Harvard, or Yale. And if you have kids in Yale or Harvard, you must be doing well." Another woman explains how these stereotypes shaped the way her classmates viewed her: "Americans sort of have this stereotype of, 'Oh, you're Chinese. You're supposed to be smart. You're supposed to be an A student, and stuff like that. So what happened to you?' It's like, 'Excuse me?'" It is important to note that none of the students told me directly that I represented the model minority (at least, at the level of my educational background). Rather, they talked in general about Asian American Ivy League students, whose lives were so different from theirs that they could not relate. In one case, one respondent told me that the mere mention of Harvard and Yale was just a "turn-off" to the Hunter students I was trying to recruit. I should add that once they agreed to

participate, my Hunter respondents were unstinting with their time and very open to sharing their experiences.

The Columbia students, on the other hand, had an immediate comfort level with me on the basis of my educational history. In general, the fact that I was a Ph.D. candidate set me apart from my respondents, but I found that the Columbia students did not necessarily see that as a barrier since many of them were thinking of applying to law, business, or medical school, or to Ph.D. programs in other fields. In fact, they often asked me what I had done after finishing college and how I ended up at graduate school, and what advice I had for them. During our conversations before and after the interview, Columbia students would often underscore what they saw as our shared educational experiences with comments like, “But you must know how it is, being at Yale,” or “Things must be the same at Yale.”

26. I use pseudonyms for all my respondents to protect their identities.

27. Until it was formally abolished in 1905, the examination system channelled male scholars to positions of authority within the imperial government. Despite the many social inequities associated with it, the examination system was imagined as a meritocracy in which success derived from achievement, not ascription (Siu, 1992).

28. The exception was Mrs. Wu, a single mother. Mrs. Wu explained that since she often worked long hours as a computer programmer, she chose to settle in Flushing, an urban neighborhood that gave her children easy access to public transportation and services if, for example, they needed to get somewhere like the library without her, or to pick up groceries on their own.

29. There are parallels to be drawn from the experiences of American Jews. Similar to Asian Americans, Jews supposedly have a high regard for education that brought them upward mobility and over-representation in such fields as law and medicine. It has been noted, however, that while Jewish immigrants arriving in the United States after the 1880s were indeed laborers, they also had a middle-class orientation, high rates of literacy, and occupational skills well suited to industrial labor (Slater, 1969; Steinberg, 1981). Thus, in comparing the Jewish and Asian experiences with education, Steinberg (1981) observed: “It was because education carried with it such compelling social and economic rewards that the traditional value on education was activated, redefined, and given new direction” (p. 138).

30. According to Siu (1992), 5 percent of the applicants in China pass the rigorous examination for admittance to the university level; the figure is 35 percent in Taiwan.

31. In New York City’s Chinatown and Flushing, there are after-school tutoring and test-preparation programs that are run by Chinese entrepreneurs and are widely advertised. These programs provide additional academic preparation for the children enrolled.

32. The Harvard Longitudinal Immigrant Student Adaptation Project is a study of schoolchildren in the Boston and San Francisco areas, whose origins are in Central America, China, the Dominican Republic, and Haiti. The Project on the Second Generation in Metropolitan New York examines adults, aged eighteen to thirty-two, who are either native-born (Whites, African Americans, and Puerto Ricans) or second-generation (Dominicans, West Indians, Chinese, Russian Jews, Colombians, Ecuadorians, and Peruvians).

33. The authors of this pilot study caution that the results are preliminary and serve more as themes to explore in their larger project than as findings.

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