How Good Are the Asians?

REFUTING FOUR MYTHS ABOUT ASIAN-AMERICAN ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Understanding the truth behind the myths is essential for all learners, including Asian Americans.

BY YONG ZHAO AND WEI QIU

They have three to five times their proportionate share of college faculty, architects, scientists, teachers, engineers, and physicians. They are overrepresented among winners of National Merit Scholarships, U.S. Presidential Scholarships, Arts Recognition and Talent Search scholars, and Westinghouse Science Talent Search scholars. They are overrepresented at American's most prestigious universities (Flynn 1991), constituting roughly 50% of the freshmen at the University of California at Berkeley and 10% to 30% of students in many other elite universities (Arenson 2007). They score higher on the SAT and ACT, especially in math. In published "school report cards" mandated by the No Child Left Behind Act, they perform much better than other minority groups.

They are called "the model minority." They are Asian Americans.

But, at Cornell University, 13 of the 21 student suicide victims since 1996 have been Asian or Asian American, and a survey at Cornell in 2005 indicated that Asian-American/Asian students seriously considered or attempted suicide at higher-than-average rates (Ramanujan 2006). What is wrong with them? They should be content and happy. After all, they are the model for all other minorities and immigrants.

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Much of what has been said about Asian Americans is myth. In recent years, these myths have been strengthened by another set of myths about Asians, especially East Asians, because of their performance in international comparative studies and the economic achievement of these countries.

The myths hurt Asian Americans, a rapidly growing population in American schools. They mask the many problems Asian students encounter in school and society. They justify overlooking the many Asian students who do not fit the stereotype. The myths hurt other minority groups. They are used to deny racism — if the Asians can do it, then race is not a factor in America, so the logic goes. The myths also can hurt education in general as the Asian way of education is imitated — evidenced by the growing popularity of different versions of cram schools in the U.S. and praise for the Asian education system by American education leaders — without consideration of its negative consequences.

Thus, returning some truth to these myths is important.

MYTH #1: ASIAN AMERICANS HAVE SUPERIOR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT.

Some subgroups of Asian Americans, particularly East Asians, do perform better in a number of areas than other ethnic groups. Chinese Americans are overrepresented in many of the nation's elite universities, receive higher SAT scores in mathematics, are overrepresented among finalists of National Merit Scholars and other recognitions, and are less likely to lag behind their age group.

Other Asian subgroups do not have the same performance. For instance, the 2007 National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) data show that Cambodian and Hmong students had a higher dropout rate (7%) than did Chinese (2%) and Korean students (2%). Chinese young adults who were foreign born had higher dropout rates than did those of the same subgroups who were U.S. natives (NCES 2007).

■ *YONG ZHAO is University Distinguished Professor of Education at Michigan State University and director of the U.S.-China Center for Research on Educational Excellence. (E-mail: zhaoyo@msu.edu). WEI QIU is a doctoral candidate in the Department of Educational Psychology and Educational Technology at Michigan State University, East Lansing.*

Moreover, there is an issue of gender equity. According to the 2002 U.S. Census data, about 10% of Asian/Pacific Islander women have less than a 9th-grade education, more than twice the percentage for non-Hispanic whites (4%), while the percentages for Asian/Pacific Islander men are close between those for other Asians (5%) and whites (4%) (Reeves and Bennett 2003).

Refuting model minority myth

- Not all Asian-American students achieve academic excellence. We must make efforts to treat each student as an independent individual.
- Asian-American students' academic achievement is the result of conscious choice, not genetic determination.
- Asian-American students' academic excellence tends to mask their psychological problems, and thus we must work to acknowledge, identify, and address these problems.
- Asian-American students' academic excellence comes at the cost of other skills and knowledge, thus we must understand the costs and realize Asian-American students are not excellent in all areas.

Even East Asian Americans do not perform equally well in all subjects (Rohrlick et al. 1998). For example, their SAT verbal scores have been consistently lower than their scores in mathematics (Flynn 2007), though these results should be interpreted cautiously due to the confounding factors of language barriers and cultural bias. East Asian Americans earn 45,008 bachelor degrees in the social sciences and humanities, disproportionately fewer than whites (668,782), as well as blacks (84,568) and Hispanics (72,088) (NSF 2007), while they generally excel in quantitative skills and outnumber whites in engineering and computer science disciplines (Hune and Chan 1997). Meanwhile, their academic advantage seems to disappear in college. As indicated by a Cornell study in 2004, Cornell Asian and Asian-American students are more likely to require remedial work in English and reading and they tend to rate themselves lower in public speaking and writing ability (Cornell 2004).

Policy Implications. "Asian American" is a poor label attached to many drastically different subgroups, and not all groups are superior in academic achievement. The people who live in Asia have very different cultures and speak different languages, and their societies have different political systems and economic situations. Thus, Asian Americans differ tremendously in their backgrounds.

They also differ in many other dimensions. For example, some are born in the U.S. as second- or third-generation Americans, while others may have just arrived. Some were refugees; others came initially as students or employees. These differences all can have significant effects on their educational and economic attainment (Ogbu and Simons 1998).

These differences are overlooked in public discourse. Statements made about Asian Americans are usually overgeneralizations from one subgroup, or even a subgroup of the subgroup. As the research indicates, the model minority label is an overgeneralization from the academic and economic achievement of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Americans. Unfortunately, the U.S. Department of Education, along with other major institutions, usually groups all Asian-American students in their statistics (Magner 1993), even though the U.S. census recognizes over two dozen separate Asian and Pacific Island groups in the U.S. Moreover, these differences are sometimes overlooked even in scholarly writings. Few studies focus on the differences between various Asian-American groups (Lee and Zane 1998).

Meanwhile, attempts in the research to distinguish new immigrants from those of Asian origin who were born in the U.S. are growing but still are rather limited. This can be an especially important distinction for at least two reasons. First, depending on the age when they arrive in the U.S., newly arrived students from Asian countries have received education at various levels in their home country. In addition, their educational experiences and needs would be quite different from those born in the U.S. For example, language and cultural experiences would be essential for new immigrants, while U.S.-born Asian Americans may face challenges learning their heritage language and culture. Second, new immigrants make up a large proportion of the Asian-American population. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, two-thirds of Asian Americans are foreign born, and one-fourth of Asian children were foreign born, a larger percentage than any other race or ethnic group (NCES 2007). New immigrants come to the U.S. at different ages for different reasons with different educational and cultural experiences. Their academic achievement and educational needs naturally vary a great deal.

Thus education policies should not treat Asian Americans as a homogeneous group. The U.S. Census Bureau's categorization may not be easily changed, but educators can adopt a system of categorization that reflects differences within the Asian-American population.

Some researchers propose that the academic excellence of Asian-American students may be a "forced" phenomenon.

It is desirable to group Asian Americans based on how long they have lived in the U.S. and the age when they arrived in the U.S. This can be a sensitive indicator of educational needs because the longer a student resides in the U.S. and attends U.S. schools, the more likely that he or she will become "Americanized." Those who are born in the U.S. are certainly different from those who just arrived.

A more appropriate categorization might be the civilization-based framework suggested by Samuel Huntington (1996). Huntington divides the world into nine major civilizations: Western, Latin American, African, Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Orthodox, Buddhist, and Japanese. Excluding the Russian Federation, which is considered Orthodox, five of these civilizations are present in Asia: Islamic, Sinic, Hindu, Buddhist, and Japanese. Although most of the five civilizations encompass more than one country and education can differ among countries of a particular civilization, the differences within a civilization are likely to be much smaller than differences between civilizations.

A civilization-based framework better captures the

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educational differences for a number of reasons. First, education is driven by cultural values, and culture is more stable than political systems or political ideology. Culture defines social norms and sets priorities in a society. Although political governments may want to impose certain practices and policies, social norms and rules define people's interactions and behaviors in the long run. Culture thus has a more enduring influence over education than political systems do. For example, despite the different political systems in South Korea and China, the two countries have a lot more in common in their educational practices than do South Korea and India, which are both democracies. Second, though certain geographic regions may share the same civilization, it is not always the case. For example, Singapore, while located in Southeast Asia, has more in common in education with China and Korea than it does with its immediate neighbors, Malaysia and Indonesia. China, Singapore, and South Korea, despite their differences in political systems and geographic locations, are similar educationally because they all belong to the same civilization.

MYTH #2: ASIAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS ARE BORN SMART, ESPECIALLY IN MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE.

The truth, of course, is that not all Asian Americans are good at mathematics and science. In a longitudinal comparative study, Stevenson and his colleagues (1993) found no general differences in cognitive functioning in math between Asian students and American students; cognitive capabilities are not the reason behind Asian students' superiority in math. Flynn (1991), through careful analysis of the performance of one subgroup, found that Chinese Americans' high-status positions could be better explained by their group pride, high family incomes, and family influence.

Studies show that Asian-American students benefit from such cultural factors as students' effort in and outside of school, parental expectations and involvement, self-confidence in mathematics and reading, frequency of computer use for activities other than gaming, frequency of book use besides mathematics textbooks, the tendency for hard work and deferred gratification, and the desire for intergenerational social mobility (Coleman 1988; Pearce 2006; Stevenson and Stigler 1992).

Some researchers even propose that the academic excellence of Asian-American students may be a "forced" phenomenon (Du 2008). This echoes Sue and Okazaki's (1990) observation that education is useful for upward mobility when other venues are closed, and Asian-American students choose to make a heavier investment in academic life than in nonacademic activities. "Facing the open or hidden racism and discrimination, there were not many choices left other than the 'hard' way of striving for academic achievements. It was one of the few options that were left open through which they could possibly 'make it'" (Du 2008).

In conclusion, Asian-American emphasis on academic achievement seems to be either the will of individual students and their parents or a choice imposed by their social environments. Either way, the research unanimously suggests that Asian American's academic excellence is really a matter of "choice," not a matter of biological imperative.

Policy Implications. This conclusion should be no surprise to informed educators, but the attribution of academic excellence to biological factors continues to occur in the media and society. An important implication is that educators and policy makers should seriously fight the tendency to attribute academic excellence to racial differences. Effort, not genes, matters in student achievement (Stevenson and Stigler 1992).

This raises the question of whether it is a good idea to categorize academic results by racial background. Although NCLB requires schools to conduct subgroup analysis to identify and bridge achievement gaps, publishing such data can convey the impression that certain ethnic groups always perform better than others. Without further information and deep understanding of the complex web of factors influencing student achievement, it leads to the simplistic interpretation that racial differences account for the academic differences, rather than differences in cultural values, structural conditions, and student and parental efforts.

Unnecessary pressures can fall on Asian-American students and hinder the performance of other ethnic groups if public reports continue to reinforce the stereotypical view that race matters more than effort. Stanford psychologist Carl Steele (1997) discovered that black students and females who are aware of this stereotype perform significantly lower than those who are not aware of it, even though intellectually they are no different. Given this finding, we should keep more students from falling into this stereotype trap.

While many Asian-American families choose to invest in academic performance, others do not. Educators should not be surprised or disappointed when they meet Asian-American students who are not academically excellent or do not excel on all tests. They should also support Asian-American students who

A large proportion of Asian students are either new immigrants or born in families of new immigrants, so these students require special attention to issues of adjustment and identity.

make other choices and encourage them to excel in areas outside the core academic subjects.

MYTH #3: ASIAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS ARE TROUBLE-FREE KIDS.

The seemingly superior academic performance of Asian students leads to the belief that they are "super kids," free from psychological and social problems. But Asian students are not trouble free. Despite their superior academic performances, even the successful "model minority" students go through difficult educational and psychological experiences.

Academically, a major stress on Asian-American students is associated with the "model minority" stereotype. For example, Cheryan and Bodenhausen (2000) found that the more conspicuous the stereotype, the lower Asian Americans performed on mathematical problems. In addition, Golden (2006) revealed that colleges held Asian-American students to a higher standard than whites. Golden concluded that some Asian-American students who would have been admitted if they were of any other ethnicity got rejected — often for reasons based on stereotype — to make room for "more desirable" students. Consequently, Asian-American students face by far the lowest admissions rate of any ethnic group (17.6%, compared with 23.8% for whites, 33.7% for blacks, and 26.8% for Hispanics) (Shea 2006), despite the fact that they constitute great numbers of students in some prestigious universities.

Asian-American college students often show increased risk of depression and anxiety, especially among the newly arrived or foreign-born (Chen 1999; Chun et al. 1998). For example, Asian-American students at Cornell are more likely to report significant difficulties with stress (41% vs. 31% overall), sleep difficulties (30% vs. 24% overall), and feeling hopeless (44% vs. 36% overall). They are twice as likely to report being in a sexually or physically abusive relationship, which is a strong predictor of suicidal behavior (Cornell 2004). Even more worrying is that these Asian-American students are least likely to report depression.

The stereotype of "model minority" and cultural reservations about counseling combine to hinder the educational and psychological needs of Asian-American students. A recent analysis of 379 National Institute of Mental Health-funded psychiatric clinical trial studies published between 1995 and 2004 found that Asian Americans made up only 0.6% of the patients studied — the lowest representation of any ethnic group (Morain 2007). In addition, Chinese immigrant students with special needs encounter numerous difficulties, including poor interpretation, lack of professional attention to their needs, culturally insensitive treatment, and a shortage of Asian special educators (Lo 2008).

Policy Implications. Schools, teachers, and the general public need to be aware of the psychological and educational needs of Asian students. Asian children not only face similar psychological and educational needs as their non-Asian peers, they also must deal with their own complicated issues, including the burden of being a model minority.

Raising awareness is a difficult task, but the risks are becoming greater as the Asian population increases rapidly in this country. Educators should work on communicating the urgency and importance of this task through professional magazines, practitioner conferences, and school visits.

Schools also should educate their staff members about how best to meet the needs of Asian students.

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For example, the nature of a student with high academic achievement is certainly different from those with low academic achievement. Similarly, a student burdened with overly high expectations for academic performance should be treated differently than a student who has too little family support or suffers from low expectations.

Asian students must also deal with the burden of being a model minority.

Finally, a large proportion of Asian students are either new immigrants or born in families of new immigrants, so these students require special attention to issues of adjustment and identity. New telecommunications technologies help new immigrants stay in close contact with their home country and relatives left behind. In addition, there is likely to be travel back and forth between two countries and thus two different cultures — families sending children to be educated in their home country temporarily or families visiting their home countries for extended periods before returning to the U.S. These trends can pose different challenges in cultural adjustment. Thus, schools need new procedures, practices, and policies to help these children and their families.

MYTH #4: ASIAN-AMERICAN STUDENTS ARE GOOD AT EVERYTHING.

Because Asian students and their families invest their efforts and resources in academic achievement, they have fewer resources available for other activities (Cornell 2004; Sue and Okazaki 1990). As Dai argues, "For all the good learning outcomes they have obtained from schooling, there are underdeveloped skills essential for living productively and effectively in the contemporary society" (2008, p. 178).

While their high academic performance may help Asian students get access to higher education, especially prestigious universities, they may lack the creativity and independent thinking skills that make an individual successful in the real world. That also could explain why they begin to lose their competitive edge over other ethnic groups after they enter college (Rohrlick et al. 1998).

Policy Implications. While we admire the academic excellence of Asian-American students, we must recognize the costs associated with it. We should not simply generalize academic performance to other areas and thus believe Asian students are equally strong in all skills and knowledge domains.

More important, the admiration in the U.S. for Asian students' academic excellence mirrors the admiration Americans have for education in Asian countries. The high scores Asians students have obtained in such international tests as TIMSS and PISA have led many Americans to hold up these nations as the model of excellent education (see Stevenson and Stigler 1992, for example). These attitudes ignore the negative aspects of Asian education even as these countries have struggled to abandon those negative aspects (Zhao 2007). We should consider the negative outcomes and costs of these practices and the opportunities lost while chasing academic excellence. And we must consider the harm that stereotypes cause both for Asian students and for others. K

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