Hyper-Selectivity and the Remaking of Culture: Understanding Asian American Achievement

Seminar by Professor Min ZHOU

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Abstract
Asian Americans comprise less than six percent of the U.S. population, yet about one-fifth of the entering classes in Ivy League universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, and more than a third of the undergraduates in the most prestigious public universities like UC Berkeley and UCLA. Pundits have attributed their extraordinary educational outcomes to cultural factors, underpinned by values or traits that are innately Asian. However, this cultural explanation fails to consider the pivotal role of U.S. immigration law which has ushered in a new stream of highly-educated, highly-skilled Asian immigrants. Based on a qualitative study of adult children of immigrants in metropolitan Los Angeles, which I collaborated with Jennifer Lee at UC Irvine, we find that hyper-selectivity (as opposed to hypo-selectivity) of contemporary immigration significantly influences the educational trajectories and outcomes in the members of the 1.5 and second generation beyond individual family or parental socioeconomic characteristics, leading to group-based advantages (or disadvantages) that are consequential. Our analysis of qualitative data shows that the children of hyper-selected immigrant groups begin their quest to get ahead from more favorable starting points, are guided by a more constricting success frame, and have greater access to ethnic capital than those of other immigrant groups. In turn, hyper-selectivity gives rise to stereotype promise — the boost in performance that comes with being favorably perceived and treated as smart, high-achieving, hard-working, and deserving students—that benefits members of the group so stereotyped. Our analysis also suggests that, while the so-called positive stereotype enhances the academic performance of Asian American students, the same stereotype reproduces new stereotypes that hinder them as they pursue leadership positions in the workplace. We suggest that Asian American professionals face a bamboo ceiling—an invisible barrier that impedes their upward mobility much like the glass ceiling does for women.

Biography
Min ZHOU, PhD, is Professor of Sociology & Asian American Studies, Walter and Shirley Wang Endowed Chair in US-China Relations & Communications, and Director of the Asia Pacific Center at the University of California, Los Angeles, USA. She was Tan Lark Sye Chair Professor, Head of Sociology Division, and Director of the Chinese Heritage Centre at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore (2013-2016), and Chang Jiang Scholar Chair Professor of Sociology at Sun Yat-sen University, China (2009-2012). Her main research areas are in: migration & development, migrant adaptation/integration, ethnic entrepreneurship, the new second generation, ethnic/racial relations, diaspora studies, and the sociology of Asia and Asian America. She has published widely in these areas, including 17 books and more than 180 journal articles and book chapters. She is a co-author of the award-winning book The Asian American Achievement Paradox (with Lee, Russell Sage Foundation Press 2015) and The Rise of the New Second Generation (with Bankston, Polity 2016) and editor of Contemporary Chinese Diasporas (Palgrave Macmillan 2017).

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