



Vivian S. Louie

Immigration, Education, and Opportunity among Chinese Americans

Compelled to Excel

Compelled to Excel

IMMIGRATION, EDUCATION,

AND OPPORTUNITY

AMONG CHINESE AMERICANS

Vivian S. Louie

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California 2004

Stanford University Press
Stanford, California

© 2004 by the Board of Trustees of the
Leland Stanford Junior University.
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted
in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including
photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or
retrieval system without the prior written permission of
Stanford University Press.

Printed in the United States of America
on acid-free, archival-quality paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Louie, Vivian S.

Compelled to excel : immigration, education, and opportunity among
Chinese Americans / Vivian S. Louie.

p. cm.

Based on the author's thesis (Ph.D.—Yale University).

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8047-4984-1 (acid-free paper)

ISBN 0-8047-4985-x (pbk. : acid-free paper)—

1. Chinese Americans—Social conditions. 2. Chinese Americans—
Economic conditions. 3. Children of immigrants—Education—United States.
4. Chinese Americans—Education. 5. United States—Race relations.

I. Title.

EI84.C5L685 2004

305.895'I073—DC22

2004011167

Original Printing 2004

Last figure below indicates year of this printing:

13 12 11 10 09 08 07 06 05 04

For my mother

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There are many stages to researching, writing, and publishing a book, and at each one I drew on the intellectual and emotional support of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family. I began this journey at the Department of Sociology, Yale University, where I wrote the dissertation that eventually became this book. I owe special thanks to Kai Erikson, who provided my introduction to the field of sociology. Kai has been a source of invaluable mentorship and friendship. The opportunity to learn from someone so well-versed in capturing the complexities of human societies with insight, creativity, and grace has been a great gift. The fieldwork sequence that he and Joshua Gamson taught, and my participation in an international fieldwork project led by Deborah Davis, gave me a whole set of tools with which to pursue sociological inquiry. They were the sources of ample direction and encouragement throughout my graduate student career.

I was also fortunate to benefit from the guidance of mentors at institutions besides my own. I owe a special debt of gratitude to William Julius Wilson, whom I met during the earliest stages of thinking through my ideas for the dissertation. As an exchange scholar at Harvard, I gained admittance to Wilson's popular class on Sociological Perspectives on Racial Inequality. The course contributed immeasurably to my development as a scholar, opening up important ways for me to think rigorously about and study social life. Wilson's support of my work thereafter, in the midst of his many public and scholarly obligations, speaks to his generosity as a person and as a scholar. Later, after I had moved back to New York City to start my dissertation research, I was fortunate to work for the Second Generation Metropolitan New York Project at the CUNY Graduate Center, under the direction of John Mollenkopf, Mary Waters, and Philip Kasinitz, who provided wonderful re-

search training, insightful career advice, and, always, a great sense of humor about life. Working with them was a deeply rewarding experience. The project and all the researchers involved, in particular Jennifer Holdaway and Nancy López, pointed me to new and exciting ways of thinking about and doing research on immigration.

It was Mary Waters's heartfelt encouragement and guidance, especially in that crucial year after finishing my doctorate, which led to a new and fruitful journey at Harvard University. This journey began as a lecturer in the Department of Sociology, where I benefited from the stimulating intellectual environment. Nearly a year later, I was quite fortunate to join the Harvard Graduate School of Education, first as a Harvard Postdoctoral Fellow and then as a faculty member.

The fellowship, and I mean this on many levels, that I found at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, a vibrant interdisciplinary community of thinkers, has been the key to the actual creation of this book. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, long familiar to me as a public intellectual but someone I never expected to meet, led an inspired writing and professional development seminar, where I first realized this could be a book. Sara was unflagging in her conviction that this was a book and that I could actually write it, offering encouragement and advice with her trademark combination of warmth and wisdom. I owe thanks to all my colleagues in the writing seminar, and to several colleagues for their support throughout the process and for suggestions of work that I found very helpful: Kurt Fischer, Howard Gardner, Wendy Luttrell, Kathy McCartney, Gary Orfield, Robert Selman, Judy Singer, and Catherine Snow. I owe special thanks to Marcelo Suárez-Orozco and Carola Suárez-Orozco, who served as my mentors during my postdoctoral fellowship. I am only one of many who can speak to the fullness of heart as individuals, their profound engagement with scholarly inquiry, and their support of scholars at the beginning of their careers.

As I was writing, it was useful to share my ideas, and several individuals were so helpful in this regard. I remember calling Joshua Gamson, who had just moved back to San Francisco, started a new job, and was still living amid boxes, but who somehow found time to listen patiently to the story I wanted to tell, and as always, provide insightful feedback. After assuring me that I was indeed making sense, he simply said, "Now, go write it." I did just that, and three months later Fabienne Doucet graciously read several chapters of

this early draft and offered wonderful comments. Margaret Chin was kind enough to read this first version in its entirety and bring her discernment to bear. Patricia Katayama, then at Stanford University Press, was an early and kind supporter of this work, and Nazli Kibria and an anonymous reviewer offered very helpful comments. When Patricia left the Press, Alan Harvey and Muriel Bell did a terrific job of ensuring a smooth transition. Kate Wahl soon expertly took up the reins, and along with Tim Roberts, ably shepherded the book through production. I also owe thanks to Ruth Steinberg's copyediting and Carmen Borbon-Wu, for her careful management of the publication process.

I am especially grateful to my student respondents and their parents and siblings for all their time, patience, and good humor. Without their willingness to open up to me about their experiences, and to fit me into their already hectic lives, this work would truly not have been possible. Many students who did not fit the respondent criteria still gave generously of their time and insights. Among the many faculty members and administrators who assisted me with this research or with the mysteries of the publication process I wish to pay particular thanks to Shirley Hune, Philip Kasinitz, Peter Kwong, Roger Lehecka, John Lie, Gary Okihiro, Ruth Sidel, Chi-Ping Sobelman, and Min Zhou. Ann Fitzpatrick ably assisted me with the transcription of some interviews. Matthew Slayton provided wonderful support in preparing the manuscript for publication.

This work was supported by a Yale University Dissertation Fellowship, a dissertation grant from the National Science Foundation, a dissertation fellowship from the International Migration Section of the Social Science Research Council, which also provided a wonderful community of intellectual support, a China Times Cultural Foundation Scholarship, and the Harvard Fellowship on Race, Culture and Education.

Several other people enriched my journey: Arline McCord, who provided much advice; Joanna Erikson, who, along with Kai Erikson, opened their home and lives to me with their characteristic grace; Yun Fan, Annette Chin, and Jennifer Mathis, who all listened to me endlessly as I negotiated the processes that went into this book.

Mark J. Zimny deserves special mention. Mark and I began our journey at Yale at the same time, quite by chance, and I am honored to still be with him. Yale has given me so many gifts, and he is the best one. He has enor-

mous reserves of patience and strength and never fails to brighten up my day with much-needed laughter. He is also a brilliant researcher and writer, whose words of advice were always on target—write from the heart as well as from the mind.

Finally, I wish to express my gratitude to my family, who has offered support in countless deeply felt ways. Chester Lee has been a staunch supporter of my work, and it was his extensive contacts at Columbia University that helped me actualize my research question into a viable research project. Daniel Yee has always been there to listen and offer guidance and wisdom. From Stephen Louie, who predicted I would be a writer, I learned to take chances in life. My brothers, Danny and David, did not enjoy the same opportunities that I did; nonetheless, they have achieved success in their own right against much higher odds. I have long relied on my sister-in-law Nancy's common sense, caring, and good humor to keep me grounded. I simply have no words that would adequately convey my thanks to my mother, who has persevered, working nearly forty years in Chinese garment factories until failing eyesight made this impossible, to provide for our family. My generation and the next owe everything to her. My only wish is that she knew enough English to read this book, or that I knew enough Chinese to translate it to her in its entirety.



The flows of immigration that have at once characterized and given shape to the previous American century have entered a unique period since the post-1960s. One legacy of the unprecedented era of the 1960s social movements that transformed America has been a dramatic shift in the national opportunity structure. In the wake of the civil rights and women's movements, the channels of upward mobility—access to higher education and employment in major corporations, the government, and the academy—have opened up to white ethnics, blacks, other ethnic and racial minorities, gays, and women of all groups (Farley 1996). Only forty years ago, someone's race, ethnicity, and/or gender would have been enough to bar that person from an elite school, a prestigious position, or a neighborhood. Today, equality of opportunity is not only mandated by law but also supported by strong public sentiment that lends validation to its existence as a cornerstone of our society. Consider the Immigration Act of 1965, itself born of ethnocentric aims and the point of departure for the new, large-scale immigration that continues today. Even when it became apparent that the arrivals were largely hailing from Latin America, the Caribbean, and Asia, rather than Europe, as lawmakers had originally envisioned, the United States allowed the new immigration to continue and, indeed, to expand (Alba and Nee 2003).

Yet, despite such remarkable strides, equality of condition has proven elusive. Racial inequality continues to exist, albeit in different forms, giving rise to new racial paradoxes. In the case of blacks, for example, there is cause for optimism. For the first time in American history, middle-class black families can pass on their advantages to their children with little difficulty (Hochschild 1995). There is also cause for pessimism, as blacks are still sub-

ject to residential segregation and suffer income disparities compared to whites, even when educational levels are taken into account (Massey and Denton 1993; Conley 1999). Race continues to matter in the daily life of middle-class blacks (Lawrence Lightfoot 1994; Hochschild 1995; Patillo-McCoy 1999), and poor blacks have actually done worse over time, slipping further into poverty (Wilson 1987, 1997). Nor are the effects of the past so easily cast off, as historically derived inequalities in wealth along the lines of race continue to shape black-white differences in life outcomes among those born in the post-civil rights period (Conley 1999).

This context, of equality alongside persistent inequality, is what post-1960s immigrants have encountered. It is equality of opportunity, however, and notably the open opportunity structure available to immigrants, that mostly resonates in the national imagination. Hence the term “immigrant strivers” (used by at least one national newspaper—see *New York Times*, 2 August 2001, B2; and 7 October 2001, sec. 1A, p. 39),¹ which is sometimes utilized to distinguish immigrants from native-born minority groups who apparently are not striving enough themselves. This book focuses on Asian Americans, who, as a group, arguably hold a special place in the American collective consciousness as one of the quintessential immigrant strivers, especially in education. This popularly held belief has some basis in fact. In some Asian American families, children acquire higher education and enter elite educational, social, and institutional settings at an unprecedented pace for immigrant minorities (Takagi 1998). Asian Americans have been typified as a model minority, one that can supposedly offer lessons to everyone, but especially to other racial minorities, native and immigrant, on how to achieve upward mobility in today’s America. To those who have argued that race no longer matters, or that class and culture (e.g., motivation) are more relevant today than race (Takagi 1998; Schuck 2003), the story of Asian Americans and education contradicts the very idea that race and class can influence educational opportunity and life outcomes.

This story also adheres to the popular cultural narrative about class and upward mobility, namely, that one can easily rise from humble origins to prominence through hard work (Newman 1999; *New York Times*, 12 January 2003, Arts and Leisure, 1). Before the civil rights movement, it was understood that one had to be white to qualify for such a meteoric rise, and for a long period, whiteness necessarily meant being Protestant and Anglo-Saxon.²

Post-civil rights, however, class mobility is thought to be fluid for all Americans, regardless of race and ethnicity. Seen from this perspective, Asian American educational success is all the more compelling because it appears to be both a middle- and working-class phenomenon. The working-class aspects are evident in the demanding academic preparatory weekend and after-school programs that have sprung up in the Chinese and Korean immigrant communities of Los Angeles (Zhou 2001b) and New York City. Parents who speak little English and who often have only gone as far as middle school themselves enroll children as young as ten in so-called cram schools, in the hope that the cram schools will set them on the path to a top-tier college (*New York Times*, 10 October 2001, D9). With each tale of an Asian American family transcending humble beginnings through education, the assumption that race and class do not matter in upward mobility is confirmed.

But does the story of Asian Americans and education really call to mind an American society where race and class are no longer relevant, as is frequently claimed? The goal of this book is to explore this question through looking at educational experiences among the children of Chinese immigrants. At its heart, the story of Asian Americans and education, both in the media and in scholarly work, is a story of the immigrant family.³ Countless studies have shown that the Asian immigrant family plays an important role in shaping children's educational aspirations and achievement. It is how this happens that is a matter of debate. Some scholars emphasize the ethnic cultures of Asian immigrants, as transported from their homelands, and in particular, Confucian values. This ethnic cultures model, widely reported on in the popular press, draws on the idea that there is something distinctive about Asian cultures that leads to academic achievement among immigrant children. Other observers have looked to economic forces, specifically, how different immigrants are incorporated into the American labor market. Such structural explanations highlight the pull factors that attract certain types of immigrants and the various ways in which they are incorporated in the United States to explain why some Asian immigrant children do so well.

Noticeably absent from such accounts are matters related to race and comparisons across class. The goal of this book is to address this gap through examining how race and class matter in the educational messages that the children of Chinese immigrants hear from their parents and in the paths that the children take to college. Despite the attention paid to the Asian immigrant

family, we know surprisingly little about how the children themselves situate the influence of the family in their schooling, and how it fits in with their own understandings of the social world they live in. I focused on the U.S.-born and/or U.S.-raised children of Chinese immigrants (what social scientists like to describe as the second and 1.5 generations, respectively⁴), as they are regarded as the best positioned to achieve, due to their native, or near-native, English facility and their parents' immigrant drive.⁵

To more fully explore the range of Chinese American experiences with higher education, I looked at students attending a non-elite college and how their perspectives and paths compared to those of students at an elite college. There are, in fact, many different Asian American student populations today. One would not know this, however, from looking at media and scholarly accounts, which have both tended to focus on students who are at the top of their class, have won prizes, and are bound for or are already enrolled at elite postsecondary institutions. The notable exception is the growing number of studies on the risk of school failure among Southeast Asians, who, generally speaking, have lower levels of educational attainment (Siu 1996). The attention being paid to Southeast Asians is highly necessary and long overdue. At the same time, there is a tendency to see other Asian groups, particularly East Asians like the Chinese, through the prism of high academic achievement and to overlook any lines of variation therein.

As a way of examining this variation, I drew my sample from two very different four-year institutions along the private/public and residential/commuter spectrum: Columbia University, an Ivy League school, and Hunter College of the City University of New York (CUNY), a public commuter school. The decision to draw respondents from these two schools also allowed me to tap into social-class background, which is often correlated with the type of postsecondary institution attended (Kwong 1987; Weinberg 1997). In short, I expected that my Hunter respondents would tend to come from working-class backgrounds and my Columbia students to come primarily from suburban, middle-class families, although I expected some from working-class backgrounds as well. Through interviews with sixty-eight students and fieldwork conducted during 1998–99,⁶ I examined how respondents from such diverse class backgrounds understood the role of the family in their paths to such different colleges. As I argue in the pages to come, my respon-

dents' understandings of education are indeed centered on the immigrant family, but they are in decided contrast to conventional wisdom; as it turned out, race, class, and gender do matter, and in particularly powerful ways.

*Asian Americans and Race: Model Minorities
and Honorary Whites?*

That race is largely missing from previous discussions of Asian Americans and education is, on one level, surprising. I should say that race is defined here as a system of power structured by socially constructed labels in the interests of the dominant group. Along these lines, the very term "Asian American" (and "Oriental," its predecessor) identifies a racialized ethnicity and subsumes individual group differences under an externally imposed racial label. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, "Asian Americans" refers to people whose ancestral origins lie in such diverse and extensive geographic environs as the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent.⁷ Yet, apart from the work of Tuan (1998) and Kibria (2002), we know little about how children interpret their parents' perceptions of racial hierarchy in the United States and the extent to which such parental understandings of race factor into their views about education.

The absence of race in previous discussions is even more telling, when we consider that race is strongly implicated in when and how the story of Asian Americans and education, as we know it, came into being. The model-minority myth was introduced in 1966 at the height of the civil rights movement, a time of great racial transformation. As with all transitions, there were those who did not welcome change, particularly the claims of injustice voiced by blacks and Latinos and their supporters. Seen from that light, the model-minority myth was an effective way of disciplining such claims of inequality without ever naming the dominant group's vested interest in the existing paradigm of race relations. The model-minority myth does this by brilliantly articulating the popular belief that ours is an open society where success is attainable by dint of hard work alone. The very success of Asians implicitly speaks to the question of why other minority groups are struggling and having a much harder time entering the ranks of higher education. If the model-

minority hypothesis is to be believed, the relative lack of mobility of those other groups is due to individual or group-level cultural failings (e.g., an unwillingness to work hard and value education) rather than an opportunity structure blocked along the lines of race and class (Steinberg 1982; Osajima 1988; Nakayama 1988; Slaughter-Defoe et al. 1990; Glenn and Yap 1994; Lee 1996; Kim 2000). If Asians can make it, why can't everyone else?

The empirical origins of the model-minority hypothesis can be traced to the mobility experienced by the descendants of the first wave of Asian immigrants, largely Chinese and Japanese, who arrived in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Most of these immigrants and their children faced considerable discrimination that as late as the 1930s meant that more than four-fifths of all Chinese workers in the United States were relegated to manual labor as cooks, waiters, domestics, and laundrymen (Siu 1992a, 19). In 1940 Chinese Americans had a median of 5.5 years of schooling, as compared to 8.7 years for whites, and they were "only half as likely to complete high school or college as whites" (Weinberg 1997, 23). After World War II, however, the opportunity structure in the United States was opened to Asian Americans, and mobility patterns started to change; over the next two decades, Chinese and Japanese Americans started to move into more integrated neighborhoods and employment (Nee and Wong 1985; Kwong 1987; Siu 1992a; Chen 1996; Alba and Nee 2003). It was this mobility in the face of prior adversity that formed the initial empirical thread of the model-minority myth.

The years since the 1960s have brought a set of ironies with regard to the model-minority hypothesis: on the one hand, it has been actively challenged in some quarters,⁸ while on the other, a confluence of factors has given rise to enough mobility among Asian immigrant families to reinforce and, indeed, even enhance its claims. The key to understanding the latter trend is the post-1960s historical context, occasioned as it was by a dramatic lessening of formerly extreme levels of exclusion. Enrollments in postsecondary educational institutions, for example, steadily grew, and there was a twofold increase in their number, fueled largely by the influx of women and racial and ethnic minorities (Lucas 1994, 227–29; Brubacher and Rudy 1996, 399).

It was also in 1965 that lawmakers reformed previously exclusionary immigration policies (Farley 1996; Alba and Nee 2003),⁹ setting into motion a

new wave of large-scale immigration. As Asian Americans were gaining a reputation as academic exemplars, they were also becoming more visible nationally as one of the nation's fastest-growing ethnic groups, due to high levels of immigration. In 1960, there were only 877,934 Asian Americans in the general population; by 1990, after more than two decades of immigration, the number had increased almost tenfold, to 7.3 million, and included a far wider range of Asian ethnic groups (Hune and Chan 1997). In the 2000 census, approximately 11.9 million people, or 4.2 percent of the population, identified themselves as Asian, either solely or in combination with one or more other races.¹⁰ Vis-à-vis Asians and education, this immigration has had two significant outcomes. First, it has brought substantial numbers of mobile Asian immigrants, who come to the United States for higher education or who already have postsecondary and/or advanced degrees. Second, less-educated Asian families benefit from the open and accessible K-12 educational system, which offers their children the possibility for some kind of mobility through education.

In other words, the fruits of the civil rights movement along with the class selectivity that has characterized aspects of Asian immigration, combined with the immigrants' own efforts and family resources, have created a unique experience. It is true that no other group has done as well as quickly as Asian Americans, at least in the aggregate. As I will soon discuss, the disaggregate picture is more complex. It is equally the case, and this is the part that often goes unsaid, that key institutional changes have made this possible. If we keep this in mind, we can better understand why, historically, Asians have achieved mobility at a faster rate than other immigrant groups. Consider American Jews—the immigrant success story of the first great wave of immigration that occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It has been pointed out that Asian Americans today are assimilating even more quickly than Jewish immigrants of the previous century. And yet, should we be surprised, given the challenging circumstances confronted by American Jews until after World War II—namely, high levels of exclusion and a largely closed opportunity structure? A significant proportion of the contemporary Asian American population has benefited from the much more inclusive context of immigration that has characterized the period from the mid-1960s through to the present day.

The overall high levels of post-1960s immigration have inserted Asian

Americans into a debate about immigration that both draws from and expands the model-minority image, with important consequences for inter-group relations. The immigrant-striver image, for example, has been accompanied by pointed comparisons between immigrants from Latin America and Asia, the two largest sources of contemporary immigration. In public discourse, Asian immigrants are routinely portrayed as having “good culture,” in essence, they are seen as hard-working strivers who make good use of their opportunities in the United States. Latino immigrants, on the other hand, are routinely portrayed as having “bad culture,” as likely to turn to crime, to have too many kids, to seek out welfare, a group that is ultimately doomed to failure in the United States (Fukuyama 1994; Espenshade and Belanger 1997; Rumbaut 1997).

We see this counterpoint in national opinion surveys that ask Americans to rank their preferences for immigrant-sending countries; Europe consistently comes out on top, Asia in the middle, and Latin America at the very bottom (Espenshade and Belanger 1997). Even Americans who believe the nation is letting in too many immigrants generally view Latin Americans as “less desirable” than Asians (Espenshade and Belanger 1997). Thus, whether compared to native-born minority groups or to immigrant groups, Asian Americans seem to arrive at the same outcome, honorary white status (Tuan 1998), and they function as a rebuke to those unable to do the same.

And yet, for all the claims of an honorary white status, Asian Americans are still subject to racial discrimination and marginalization (Lowe 1996; Espiritu 1997). We know that Asian Americans are often seen as perpetually foreign, with their loyalties constantly in question and thus inauthentically American (Lowe 1996; Tuan 1998; Kim 2000). As Kibria notes, the campaign-finance scandals of the late 1990s highlighting the involvements of Asians are continuing evidence of the “challenges to the legitimacy of their membership and belonging in dominant society” (2002, 13). Indeed, all the public attention given to the supposed acceptance of Asian Americans overlooks the fact that they continue to be the subjects of hate crimes (National Asian Pacific American Legal Consortium 2002). In 1982 a Chinese American man, mistaken as a Japanese was beaten by two white, laid-off auto workers in Detroit; they blamed Japanese corporations for the decline of the American automobile industry.¹¹ It was the ensuing legal aftermath, when the two men were convicted of manslaughter but were given a sentence of