

# The truth about Asian Americans' success (it's not what you think)

By Jennifer Lee

🕒 Updated 1:59 PM ET, Tue August 4, 2015



'Tiger Mom': Some groups are superior 03:44

## Story highlights

*Editor's Note:* Jennifer Lee is professor of sociology at the University of California, Irvine, and the author, with Min Zhou, of *"The Asian American Achievement Paradox"* published by the

Jennifer Lee: Asian immigrants do well in the United States largely because of "ethnic capital" -- institutions such as info-sharing networks and tutoring

She says this help passes from educated to low-wage workers; American schools should provide similar help to other immigrant groups

Americans on a sure path to success.



Jennifer Lee

elite groups of immigrants are among the most highly educated people in their countries of origin and are often also more highly educated than the general U.S. population.

*The Asian American Achievement Paradox*, published by the Russell Sage Foundation. Follow her on Twitter: @JLeeSoc.

**(CNN)**—Asian Americans are the highest-income, best-educated and fastest-growing racial group in the country. But not for the reasons you think.

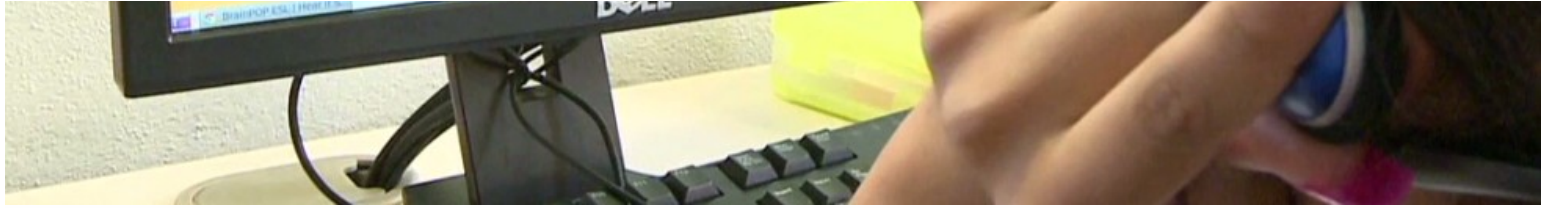
For too long, conservative pundits and the news media have pointed to Asian Americans as the "model minority." They cite the Ivy League admissions and educational success of many children of blue-collar Asian immigrant workers as evidence of a superior culture -- one of hard work and strong families -- that puts Asian

But it isn't Asian "culture" or any other attribute of ethnicity that is responsible for this success. Instead, it's a unique form of privilege that is grounded in the socioeconomic origins of some -- not all -- Asian immigrant groups. Understanding this privilege offers insights into how we can help children from all backgrounds succeed.

In our new book, *The Asian American Achievement Paradox* -- based on a survey and 140 in-depth interviews of the adult children of Chinese, Vietnamese and Mexican immigrants in Los Angeles -- fellow sociologist Min Zhou and I explain what actually fuels the achievements of some Asian American groups: U.S. immigration law, which favors highly educated, highly skilled immigrant applicants from Asian countries.

Based on the most recent available data, we found that these





## Can technology help Mexican education? 02:53

Take Chinese immigrants to the United States, [for example](#): In 2010, 51% were college graduates, compared with only 4% of adults in China and only 28% of adults in the United States. The educational backgrounds of immigrant groups such as the Chinese in America -- and other highly educated immigrant groups such as Korean and Indian -- is where the concept of "Asian privilege" comes in.

When highly educated immigrant groups settle in the United States, they build what economist [George Borjas](#) calls "ethnic capital."

This [capital includes](#) ethnic institutions -- such as after-school tutoring programs and after-school academies -- which highly educated immigrants have the resources and know-how to recreate for their children. These [programs proliferate](#) in Asian neighborhoods in Los Angeles such as Koreatown, Chinatown and Little Saigon. The benefits of these programs also reach working-class immigrants from the same group.

Ethnic capital also translates into knowledge.

In churches, temples or community centers, immigrant parents circulate invaluable information about which neighborhoods have the best public schools, the importance of advance-placement classes and how to navigate the college admissions process. This information also circulates through ethnic-language newspapers, television and radio, allowing working-class immigrant parents to benefit from the ethnic capital that their middle-class peers create.

Our Chinese interviewees described how their non-English speaking parents turned to the Chinese Yellow Pages for information about affordable after-school programs and free college admissions seminars. This, in turn, helps the children whose immigrant parents toil in factories and restaurants attain educational outcomes that defy expectations.

The story of Jason, a young Chinese American man we interviewed, is emblematic of how these resources and knowledge can benefit working-class Chinese immigrants. Jason's parents are immigrants who do not speak English and did not graduate from high school. Yet, they were able to use the Chinese Yellow Pages to identify the resources that put Jason on the college track.

There, they learned about the best public schools in the Los Angeles area and affordable after-school education programs that would help Jason get good grades and ace the SAT. Jason's supplemental education -- the hidden curriculum behind academic achievement -- paid off when he graduated at the top of his class and was admitted to a top University of California campus.

This advantage is not available to other working-class immigrants.

Mexican immigrants, for example, are largely less-educated, low-wage workers because they arrived to the United States as a result of [different immigration policies and histories](#). There is a largely low-wage labor migration stream that began en masse with the 1942 Bracero program and continues today.



Based on the most recent census data, [about 17% of Mexico's population are college graduates](#) compared with [5% of Mexican](#)



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undocumented migrants but later legalized their status, attain 13 years of education on average, and this difference remains even after controlling for demographic variables.

The two-year difference is critical in the U.S. education system: It divides high school graduates from high school dropouts, making undocumented status alone a significant impediment to educational attainment and social mobility.



Many Asian Americans enjoy a unique type of privilege, writes Jennifer Lee.

her to transfer to a four-year university and helped her with her application. As a result, Camilla ultimately went on to attend a top private university and later pursued a master's degree in social work.

Her educational mobility shows what is possible when schools provide adequate resources to support children's ambitions and potential. It is worth asking how much more Camilla and other children of Mexican immigrants might have attained had they had access to something like the "Asian privilege" of the children of Chinese immigrants.

How do we extend this privilege to students of all races and ethnicities?

Our research has made it clear to us that pundits should stop talking about Asian culture and start making supplemental education available to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Asian ethnic groups that

immigrants in the United States. As a less-educated immigrant group, they lack the resources to generate the ethnic capital available to Chinese immigrants, and they rely almost exclusively on the public school system to educate their children.

Yet, despite their lack of ethnic capital, the children of Mexican immigrants make **extraordinary educational gains** and leap far beyond their parents. They double the high school graduation rates of their immigrant parents, double the college graduation rates of their immigrant fathers and triple that of their immigrant mothers.

The legal status of parents is key to success.

On average, the children of Mexican immigrant parents who are undocumented attain 11 years of education. **By contrast**, those whose parents migrated here legally or entered the country as

Undocumented status affects other immigrant groups, **including Asians**. There are currently more than 1.5 million undocumented Asians in the United States, accounting for 13.9% of the total undocumented population in the United States. This comes as a surprise to many Americans, who equate undocumented status with Mexicans.

The children of Mexican immigrants who surmount the disadvantage of their class origins and legal status and graduate from college pointed to an influential teacher, guidance counselor, coach or "college bound" program that helped them make it to college.

Camilla, a second-generation Mexican woman we interviewed, is a case in point.

No one in Camilla's family had attended a four-year university, but a guidance counselor at her community college encouraged

supplementary education available to students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds, including Asian ethnic groups that lack ethnic capital and don't get a boost from this privilege, such as Hmong, Laotians and Cambodians.

Increasing funding for guidance counselors, coaches and college-bound classes is a start, but creating affordable after-school academies and tutoring programs in neighborhoods, for example, Los Angeles' Koreatown -- which is home to Angelenos from diverse background -- could give children of immigrants across racial, ethnic and class lines the resources they need to succeed.

This will help prepare them for the diverse college environments and workplaces that many will enter. Making supplementary education available to other working-class children will do more than level the playing field to make it to college; it will also help today's students succeed once they are there.

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**Louis Sun** Sep 6, 2015

Both of my parents had only elementary school education, same for many Chinese immigrants and Vietnamese refugees. Yet, both of them worked hard and archived in life. They are able to raise their children and give a roof over their family.

Self-denial. Is they one step to stop improvement.

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**Doug Fisher** Sep 2, 2015

Well, they also don't serve in the military and thereby can put more time and resources into their kids. When you put a generation of people that had their parents stop-lossed in the