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# When Social Class Meets Ethnicity: College-Going Experiences of Chinese and Korean Immigrant Students

*Eunyoung Kim*

The decision to attend college is a complex process. It involves not only the college aspirants themselves, who prepare for, apply to, and choose a college, but also parents, families, communities, and school personnel. Research has shown that parental involvement and socioeconomic status (SES) exert a significant influence on students' educational aspirations and college admission processes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2000; Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999; Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). This influence may be complicated in a variety of ways. Financial, psychological, and structural barriers often limit working-class or low-income parents' involvement in their children's transition to college, while high SES parents are able to provide information about and resources on the process of navigating college admission through various means, such as private counseling and tutoring to prepare for college entrance exams (e.g., Buchmann, Condron, & Roscigno, 2010; Deil-Amen & Tevis, 2010; Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1997; Louie, 2001). For example, Louie's (2001) study found marked dif-

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ferences between middle- and working-class Chinese immigrant parents in the allocation of educational resources to facilitate opportunities for a college education and social mobility for their children, calling for additional research on the impact of social class on parental educational strategies, access to college information and transmission of knowledge about the college application process.

Parental involvement can also be complicated by race/ethnicity (Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005). Perna and Titus have suggested that greater contact between parents and schools concerning academic issues is more likely to increase African American students' chances of enrolling in a four-year institution than it is for White, Hispanic, and Asian American students. Teranishi, Ceja, Antonio, Allen, and McDonough (2004) found that both Chinese and Korean Americans were most likely to attend highly selective institutions, compared with other Asian ethnic groups (Filipino, Japanese, and Southeast Asian Americans). Students from high-income backgrounds in these groups were also the most likely to take SAT preparation courses; more surprisingly, the rates of college prep course attendance for low-income Korean Americans were notably higher than those for other Asian ethnic groups, suggesting variation in the impact of both socioeconomic status and ethnicity on postsecondary preparation, opportunities, and decisions among Asian ethnic groups.

While there is a growing body of research on the educational experiences and college choice process of ethnic groups in the Asian American population (Nakanishi, 1995; Park, 2012; Sue & Okazki, 1990; Takagi, 1992; Teranishi et al., 2004), scant attention has been paid, in particular, to how socioeconomic backgrounds affect the involvement of Asian immigrant parents in their children's postsecondary decisions and, conversely, how immigrant children negotiate their parents' expectations and involvement.

### WHAT ACCOUNTS FOR THE EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES OF ASIAN IMMIGRANTS?

As one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States, the Asian immigrant population has increased significantly, growing from 5% of the U.S. foreign-born population in 1960 to nearly 28% in 2009 (Batalova, 2011). It is expected to comprise 10% of the entire U.S. population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2009). The tendency of Asian immigrants to view college education as the key to achieving middle-class status and economic success becomes evident in this group's record of successful academic achievement (Kao, 1995; Louie, 2001). For instance, Asian immigrants who were 25 years of age and older were more likely than most immigrants to have earned a college degree; in 2010, 28.6% of adult Asian immigrants held a bachelor's degree,

compared with 15.9% of the overall immigrant population, and 18.1% of the native-born population (Patten, 2012). According to the 2008 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study, 66% of Hispanic undergraduates and more than 90% of Asian undergraduates who enrolled in U.S. postsecondary institutions in 2007–2008 were immigrant-origin students (including both first- and second-generation immigrants) and more than half of all Asian students were foreign-born (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

An analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Study (NELS:88) also points to marked variations in postsecondary enrollment choices by immigrant status and race/ethnicity (Hagy & Staniec, 2002). Researchers have observed that first- and second-generation Asians are significantly more likely than other racial/ethnic groups (e.g., White, Hispanic, and Black) to enroll in any type of postsecondary institution. In particular, first-generation Asian immigrants were much more likely to enroll in a public four-year institution than other immigrant minority groups—among whom 40.8% chose a public four-year college or university compared with 18.7% of Hispanics and 32.1% of Blacks within the first-generation immigrant group (Hagy & Staniec, 2002).

Since the mid-1960s, the “model minority” myth, which perpetuates the popular image of Asian Americans as a homogenous group of high academic achievers, has arisen from and reconfirmed the fact that Asian Americans often perform better in schools, excel in math and science, and attend college at higher rates than other racial groups (Fuligni & Witkow, 2004; Kao & Tienda, 1998; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). Such high levels of educational attainment are often attributed to the expectations of Asian immigrant parents (Kao, 1995; Louie, 2001). In his study of immigrant settlement and adaptation patterns in American society, Ogbu (1989) attributed Chinese Americans’ academic success to voluntary minority status (migrating to the United States by choice) and integration into Chinese ethnic communities that place a high value on education. The “model minority” stereotype associated with these trends buttresses the cultural deficit model, an idea that explains the achievement gap between minority and nonminority students by attributing the academic underachievement of minorities to a lack of individual hard work and placing little value on education (Lee, 1996, 2001). This thesis emphasizes the American meritocratic ideal while neglecting the challenges and special needs of Asian American students (Lee, 1996).

Because diverse Asian ethnic subgroups are often lumped into one monolithic group, the aggregated data not only fail to unmask the differences across ethnic groups but also disguise the nuanced educational experiences of Asian Americans who have been in this country for many generations, as well as those of Asian immigrants who have recently entered the United States (Ngo & Lee, 2007). Lew (2007) critiqued the monolithic portrayal of

Asian immigrants as high academic achievers, arguing that Korean students' educational experiences and challenges vary based on immigrant parents' socioeconomic backgrounds and the structural resources provided by schools and ethnic communities. For example, in spite of cultural and linguistic barriers, Korean immigrant parents whose children attended a magnet high school in an affluent neighborhood were more likely to communicate the importance of college education to their children than those whose children attended a community-based GED program. These parents could gain access to important information about colleges, using parental co-ethnic networks and hiring private tutors and counselors, unlike working-class parents, whose children often dropped out of high school (Lew, 2007).

Among more than 30 Asian ethnic groups, the "model minority" thesis distinctively positions East Asian immigrants—mainly those from China and Korea—at the core of the discourse on Asian American academic success; these students are often portrayed as hard-working, high achievers who attend prestigious universities (Goyette & Xie, 1999). Bearing in mind the Confucian value system, which emphasizes the importance of education and social status, research has observed that Chinese and Korean immigrant parents often impart standards of success to their children by encouraging them to embrace American meritocracy (Goyette & Xie, 1999; Lee, 2001). These parents stress "instrumental success—the skills, competencies, and social behaviors that are required to successfully make a living and contribute to a society" (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001, p. 156).

Little research exists, however, to document the realities of the transition to college for Chinese and Korean immigrant students. The educational success of Asian American students, considered as a homogenous group, often conceals the diverse experiences and complex challenges arising between and among Asian immigrant student ethnic groups, resulting in a lack of specific research and immigrant-targeted best practices. Therefore, in this study, I sought to fill that gap by examining how Chinese and Korean immigrant students negotiate their parents' expectations, thus illuminating in greater detail the role that parents play in the college-going processes of their children. More specifically, I examined how the educational experiences of 1.5 generation Chinese and Korean immigrant college-age students differed by socioeconomic background and ethnicity. The term "1.5" specifies students who immigrated as children or youth, in contrast to adult immigrants (first-generation) or youth who were born in the United States with immigrant parents (second-generation). I was particularly interested in 1.5 generation immigrants because these students often face the challenges of reconciling cultural differences and adjusting to the educational system of their host country, demonstrating different adaptation experiences compared to either their first- or second-generation counterparts (Hurh, 1990; Lee & Cynn, 1991; Lee, 2001; Rumbaut & Ima, 1988).

### THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

This study draws largely upon two theoretical perspectives—the cultural thesis and the structural explanation—in order to better understand the cultural and structural contexts in which class and ethnicity influence Chinese and Korean immigrant students' college decisions and educational outcomes. These two perspectives have occupied dominant theoretical positions in explaining Asian immigrant students' educational success over the past two decades.

To account for Asian immigrants' successful educational outcomes, the “cultural thesis” emphasizes the ways in which the cultural orientations of certain immigrant ethnic groups promote or discourage academic achievement (Kao, 1995; Schneider & Lee, 1990). For example, Asian immigrant parents use available resources to promote the education of their children; Asian immigrant students, equating academic success with parental satisfaction, try to measure up to their parents' expectations (Hao & Bonstead-Bruns, 1998; Kao & Tienda, 1995, 1998; Louie, 2004; Zhou & Bankston, 1998). This argument highlights the fact that different ethnic groups value different characteristics and traits and that these groups transplant homeland cultural values and practices to the country of immigration (Fukuyama, 1993). For example, prior research indicates that immigrant parents often believe that their lives, and those of their children, will improve after immigration to a new country (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozoco, 2001). Such optimistic cultural orientations may inspire the educational aspirations of newly immigrated children (Kao & Tienda, 1995; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Educational researchers have also adopted the concept of “cultural capital” to illuminate the extent to which middle-class norms and values are embedded in families and the school climate (Horvat, 2001; Lareau, 2001; McDonough, 1997). Lamont and Lareau (1988) define cultural capital as “widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods, and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion” (p. 156). In other words, it is the class-based socialization of culturally relevant skills, abilities, norms, and knowledge acquired primarily through family customs and education (Winkle-Wagner, 2010). Lareau's (1987) qualitative work examined how social class influenced the relationship between family and school and the ways in which low- and high-SES parents utilized their social network to obtain information about schooling. She concluded that parents' information about and participation in their children's schooling experiences were closely related to their social class.

This concept leads us to the structural explanation. Although this argument views ethnicity as one of the key determinants for social mobility, its basic premise is that modes of incorporation, premigration characteristics, and the economic status and opportunity structure of immigrant groups af-

fect children's educational success and mobility outcomes (Feliciano, 2005a, 2005b; Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009). When attempting to explain intergroup differences in educational and social mobility outcomes, this argument emphasizes the role of social factors such as an immigrant group's position in the class- and race-stratified educational system, patterns of residence, as well as labor market conditions in the host society (Louie, 2001; Zhou & Kim, 2006). Cultural values and related behavior patterns contribute to academic success and upward social mobility only when interacting with structural conditions (Zhou & Kim, 2006).

Sue and Okazaki (1990) accommodate both cultural and social factors when explaining the differences in educational achievement between Asian immigrant students and non-immigrant students. These scholars foreground the notion of relative functionalism, which postulates that education is a more salient vehicle for upward social mobility on the part of Asian immigrants, because they often encounter barriers to entering fields in which success is not always linked to an educational trajectory—sports, entertainment, and politics, for example (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). As a result, Asian immigrants often feel compelled to commit their time and energy to academic fields such as business, engineering, science, or medicine—those which they generally perceive as guaranteeing high financial payoffs and job security.

In seeking to understand immigration adaptation processes and educational outcomes, three relevant background factors that shape the experiences of immigrant students are worth mentioning: (a) parental levels of human capital, such as formal education and occupational skills; (b) family structure; and (c) the larger social context that the immigrant encounters in the new country (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009). The translation of parental human capital into “competitiveness in the host labor market and the potential for achieving desirable positions in the American hierarchies of status and wealth” (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009, p. 1079) depends on several factors. Portes and Zhou (1993) maintain that the context of reception plays an important role in immigrant socioeconomic outcomes. This context shapes how immigrants become involved in the host country's cultural, social, and economic practices. For example, research suggests that racial stereotypes might affect the assimilation paths of certain immigrant groups more than others (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Immigrants of color may assimilate less easily than White immigrants because of racial stereotypes. Because of this, the communal reception of members of an ethnic group affects the quality of co-ethnic communities and the extent to which these communities are present to support new members as they arrive in the host country (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009). Immigrants who live in geographic proximity to a similar ethnic community often have access to social and economic resources that help them build a life in the new host



country and help protect them from the stereotypes and prejudices of that country's society (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

In explaining various immigrant ethnic groups' markedly different educational outcomes, social capital is also an important concept. Such capital refers to the social networks and connections acquired through an individual's relationships with others embedded in a particular social structure (Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Coleman (1988) posits that parental involvement as a form of social capital plays a crucial role in establishing norms, trust, and authority in relationships between children and parents. Many immigrant parents and students have a limited understanding of the American school system, the school climate, and its role in personal development and educational attainment. Thus, the concept of social capital is particularly important for immigrant parents who are not well positioned to provide knowledge to their children about the host country's education system and higher education opportunity structure (Kim & Schneider, 2005; Stanton-Salazar & Dornbusch, 1995; Zhou & Kim, 2006).

In examining the level of educational attainment among immigrants prior to migration, research has shown that Asian immigrant parents tend to preserve their ethnic values and maintain social cohesion through a strong sense of community (Lew, 2006, 2007; Louie, 2001, 2004; Min & Kim, 2009; Portes & Zhou, 1993). Conceptualizing the educational selectivity of immigrants as a form of ethnic capital that has been brought to the host country by immigrant parents, Feliciano's (2005b) study suggests that the degree of educational selectivity of immigrant parents may explain differences in academic achievement among children of immigrants. For instance, the more positive educational selectivity of Asian immigrant groups was associated with a college attendance rate that was higher than that of Whites, Blacks, and Hispanics.

Researchers also attribute the academic achievement and ascending mobility of Asian immigrant children to a vibrant ethnic economy and strong ethnicities (Louie, 2001, 2004; Park, 2012; Zhou, 2009). For example, churches, small businesses, cultural centers, and civic organizations play a crucial role in augmenting intra-class interaction and the exchange of social capital, which in turn allows for access to knowledge about college and ideal college-going behavior among Asian immigrants (Min, 1992; Park, 2012; Zhou & Cho, 2010; Zhou & Kim, 2006). For example, in a study of supplementary education in Chinese and Korean immigrant communities, Zhou and Kim (2006) pointed out that "ethnic community is a place where culture interacts with structure" (p. 5), highlighting the importance of the ethnic community's social structures in facilitating educational values and access to college. Taking this idea one step further, Park's (2012) study quantitatively explained the extent to which social class affects both Chinese and

Korean Americans' participation in supplementary education and how these groups use the "ethnically based network of business and civic organizations that facilitate the flow of information and resources" (p. 629). Park found that SES was a determining factor in Chinese Americans' access to SAT prep courses and played a significant role in increasing the likelihood of Korean Americans' participation in such SAT preparation. Korean Americans' high level of involvement in religious activities also likely influenced students' access to ethnic social networks and information about college, regardless of socioeconomic background. Of those low-income Korean Americans, students who attended religious services were more likely to participate in SAT prep than those who did not (Park, 2012).

In summary, ethnicity and socioeconomic circumstance both matter in East Asian immigrant students' educational outcomes. Asian immigrant parents maintain high educational expectations, establishing educational values and ethnic ties that shape their children's educational aspirations and outcomes. It remains unclear, however, whether this dynamic varies across Asian ethnic groups and socioeconomic levels. Given the recent bifurcation of the U.S. labor market into a top tier of knowledge-based occupations requiring advanced education and a bottom tier primarily occupied with manual labor (Portes, Fernández-Kelly, & Haller, 2009), recent immigrants can be divided into two distinct social classes: educated professionals who enter the country to work in professional and technical fields such as science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), and those who are poor and arrive in the United States as unskilled laborers seeking better opportunities for their families or a safe haven from political unrest in their home countries (Baum & Flores, 2011).

This pattern is also visible among recent Chinese and Korean immigrants. Those who migrated from Korea tend to be of high average socioeconomic status while Chinese immigrants tend to be of low socioeconomic status (Feliciano, 2005b). While educated professional immigrants can provide their children with the resources needed to achieve academic success, such as better schools, assistance with assignments, and knowledge and advice on how to navigate the educational system (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2009), the latter group consisting of working-class immigrants struggles socioeconomically as well as academically (Baum & Flores, 2011; Lew, 2006; Louie, 2004). However, despite considerable differences in overall socioeconomic status between Korean and Chinese immigrant parents, it is notable that the difference in average college attendance rates between Chinese and Korean immigrants is insignificant (Feliciano, 2005b).

Researchers have commonly observed the "immigrant advantage"—that Asian immigrants and children of immigrant parents are relatively more successful in their educational outcomes than natives. They note that

parents' immigrant status, parenting style, and parental expectations contribute positively to children's college enrollment decision and educational outcomes (Kao, 2004; Kao & Tienda, 1995; Lew, 2007; Louie, 2001). Yet we know little about how these relationships may differ specifically by ethnicity and social class: How do Chinese and Korean immigrant parents' social class backgrounds shape their children's college-going experiences? Do ethnicity and socioeconomic status matter in the ways in which Chinese and Korean immigrant parents influence children's college enrollment decisions? How does being an ethnic immigrant matter in educational outcomes and college aspirations? Past research has tended to focus on Asian immigrant youth in secondary schools, neglecting the higher education pathways of immigrant students among different Asian ethnic groups. My intent in this study is to illuminate the impact of parental involvement and expectations on college-going experiences for Chinese and Korean immigrant students in both cultural and structural contexts.

## METHODS

### *Research Site and Study Participants*

This study used qualitative methods, drawing upon a background survey and semi-structured interviews. Research was conducted in a large public university in the Midwest, which I call by the pseudonym of Midwestern University. I chose this institution because it is a flagship state institution with a disproportionately large Asian American student population and is located in close proximity to a metropolitan area where many Asian immigrants reside. At the time of the study, the undergraduate student body at Midwestern University was composed of 66.7% White non-Hispanic, 12.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 6.8% Black non-Hispanic, 6.8% Hispanic, and 7.3% unidentified. Immigrant students officially accounted for 3.6% of the total undergraduate population of approximately 30,700 at the research site, though this number does not accurately capture the total number of immigrant students at this university. The university enrollment management office defined immigrant students as those who self-identified as permanent residents (green card holders) at the time of admission, thus excluding both naturalized citizens and undocumented immigrants. Of those 1,114 immigrant undergraduates who identified as permanent residents (226 freshmen, 270 sophomores, 165 juniors, and 453 seniors by class level), the majority identified as Asian Pacific Islander (60.8%) followed by 21% White, 9.7% Hispanic, 6.1% Black, and 2.4% unknown.

I utilized a purposive sampling strategy to select individuals who would provide information-rich cases and also allow comparison of groups by ethnicity and socioeconomic background (Creswell, 2009; Patton, 2002). To

examine how social class influenced the college-going experiences of Chinese and Korean 1.5 generation immigrants, I limited my study sample to first-year students, because they had recently made the transition from high school to college and because, for 1.5 generation students who migrated to the United States during preteen or teen years, the length of stay in the United States can be closely associated with each participant's level of acculturation. Such acculturation may, in turn, influence the parent-child relationship, parental involvement in schools, and parental support.

Despite the ethnic diversity that exists among Asian-origin students, the university did not collect student demographic information on ethnic subcategory. As a result, disaggregate data on the immigrant undergraduate student body by Asian ethnic subcategory was unavailable. I therefore sent out a recruitment email to a listserv created by the enrollment management office, which included the entire 143 freshman immigrant students who self-identified as Asian, inviting them to participate in the research if they met the following background characteristics: (a) self-identification of ethnicity as either Chinese or Korean, (b) length of residence in the United States of 10 years or fewer, and (c) attended at least high school in the United States. In order to secure a larger sample with reasonably equitable distribution of students by ethnicity and social class, I expanded recruitment by contacting the Asian American Cultural Center and the Asian American student organization.

I administered a short demographic survey covering gender, parental educational levels and occupations, annual family income, and length of residency in the United States using Hollingshead's two-factor index of social position. This index is often used to determine socioeconomic status in sociological studies where it is necessary to obtain a comparable list of participants by socioeconomic background (Hauser & Warren, 1997; Miller & Salkind, 2002). I then used a composite score to sort out the students' social class backgrounds (working-class versus middle- or upper-class) by combining a ranking of educational categories (1 = less than 7th grade; 7 = graduate degree) with a ranking of the occupational categories of parents (1 = unskilled worker; 7 = high-level executive/professional) (Hollingshead, 1975). Given missing data on family annual income as self-reported by students, I did not include family income when calculating the SES composite score.

The sample revealed a relatively equal distribution of working-class and middle/upper-class backgrounds by ethnicity. The final student sample consisted of 37 students: 18 Chinese and 19 Korean students. There were 10 female and 8 male Chinese students, and 10 female and 9 male Korean students. My analysis of social class revealed that 11 (61%) Chinese and eight (42%) Korean students were from working-class families.

### DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

The primary data for this study were based on semi-structured, open-ended interviews which elicited rich, detailed accounts from student participants (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Interview topics included (a) students' precollege experiences and college aspirations, (b) perspectives on parents' expectations for college, (c) college enrollment decisions, and (d) relationships with parents. This interview format allowed me to interpret stories using the participants' own perceptions, understandings, and cultural frames of reference (Manning, 1992). The interviews lasted 90–120 minutes and were all digitally recorded. I transcribed all audio-recorded interviews verbatim, supplementing each with an analytic memo, recording relevant details on interview participants and themes related to the study (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Data analysis involved multiple-step coding schemes.

I began by treating each student as a case, developing an initial set of codes by analyzing student interview transcripts more generally, focusing on immigration experiences, precollege educational experiences, college-going processes, and relationships with parents during the transition to college. I also developed subcodes for each initial code. For example, factors influencing the college-going process consisted of several subcodes: parental expectations and involvement, college affordability, geographic location, peer influence, and school influence.

After developing the initial code set and subcodes, I created a codebook that detailed each case's summary codes and performed cross-case analyses (Miles & Huberman, 1984). The matrix captured students' college aspirations and expectations, the role of parents in college-going decisions, and students' negotiations with their parents' expectations. I then sorted these codes by ethnicity and social class backgrounds, identifying emergent themes, and noted relevant quotations that I used as evidence. Next, I read field notes on the interviews and created a set of codes that I matched with the matrix derived from the student interview data analysis. This matching process helped confirm my earlier coding decisions. Using within- and cross-case analysis, I analyzed coded data to identify the themes and/or descriptions emerging from participants' accounts. After organizing these emergent themes, I identified recurring themes and categories for conclusions and findings.

### ENSURING DATA QUALITY AND REFLEXIVITY

In qualitative research, “the researcher is the instrument” (Patton, 2002, p. 14) through which data are collected and interpreted. As Davies (1999) asserts, “Reflexivity means a turning back on oneself, a process of self-reference” (p. 4). As a first-generation Asian immigrant and scholar studying the experiences of minority immigrant students, I recognized that my own

immigration experiences, perceptions, and values informed my research process. Throughout the study, I made a conscious effort to engage in writing a reflective journal, uncovering my own biases and experiences.

The strategies I used to assure validity in this qualitative study included member reflections and peer debriefing. Member reflection is a collaborative process between researcher and participant allowing the researcher to share the study's findings with participants, providing opportunities for feedback, collaboration, understanding, and elaboration (Tracy, 2010). I also asked two colleagues to look over the elements of the study and evaluate my thinking on the research process, paying particular attention to interpretation and data analysis. One Chinese American doctoral student in education and one Korean American social worker who had experience working with Korean youths in a Korean ethnic community independently reviewed the initial coding scheme and provided me with feedback on the accuracy of data analysis and my own bias and assumptions.

### LIMITATIONS

Although the majority of the students interviewed were fluent in English, their ability to accurately understand interview questions in English may not have been the same as their ability to hold conversations in their native language. Given that East Asian culture is often hierarchical, the study participants might also have viewed me as a senior person and may have refrained from fully expressing their opinions or asking questions where their understanding was uncertain. Even if I had said something that the participant failed to understand, the participant may have seen it as inappropriate to interrupt me for clarification (Yook & Albert, 1998). They may have expected me to initiate communication, providing answers to questions only.

Additionally, although this study addresses gaps in the existing literature on Asian ethnic groups by examining how the college transition experiences might differ by socioeconomic backgrounds among Chinese and Korean immigrant students, these findings were based on a limited number of participants at a single institution. Therefore, it is best to interpret the study's results with caution when applying them to immigrant student populations at other types of institutions and under differing circumstances.

### FINDINGS

In the following section, I discuss how parental expectations and involvement are related to college enrollment decisions among 1.5 generation Chinese and Korean immigrants by highlighting four emergent themes and presenting supporting data. All students are identified by pseudonyms.

### ***College Aspirations: Shaping My Own Future Versus Fulfilling My Family's Hopes***

Both Korean and Chinese students believed that a college education was important, and explained that their parents had wanted them to attend college; parents expected them, at a minimum, to complete a postsecondary education, mainly because they believed this would provide them with financial security. Although both Korean and Chinese students underscored the importance of college education, their college aspirations and their understanding of the meaning of college education were shaped by different forces. Korean students clearly understood that their parents immigrated because they were motivated by better educational opportunities. In eight instances, Korean students had voluntarily asked their parents to consider coming to America.

As Victoria, a 19-year-old Korean, who came to the United States seven years ago, commented, "I wanted to avoid the college entrance examination hell in Korea. I was sick of that. It was too much stress to go to college in Korea." Another Korean student, Monica, revealed that, like other Korean students, she saw getting a college degree as strongly connected to individual values and meritocratic ideals:

I wanted to come here because I believed that there would be more opportunities here than Korea, where everyone is competing against each other like crazy. So, I thought that I could do well—a lot better—academically and [have] more options I can choose from as far as college is concerned. As long as I do well in classes, I am pretty confident that I will enjoy my life. I mean, I can choose what I want, what is good for me.

Coming to America is an escape from the education fever and extreme competition prevalent in Korea for many Korean 1.5ers; it provides alternative pathways to obtaining a college degree. These students held the view that their personal success and economic gains hinged on how well prepared they were for college and how well they performed academically in the United States.

On the other hand, Chinese parents' motivation to migrate from China to the United States was linked to the idea that living in the United States would improve their family's economic conditions and their children's educational and social mobility. The lack of educational opportunities in China and adverse immigration adaptation experiences once in the United States motivated Chinese students to do well in school, internalizing parental expectations as a means of repaying their parents' sacrifices and of reviving their parents' thwarted educational aspirations. Witnessing their parents working all day in a factory or a restaurant instilled in the children a profound sense of duty and a desire to live up to parents' expectations. With the exception of only two respondents, all Chinese participants spoke of the responsibility to give

back to their parents for providing their own educational opportunities, regardless of socioeconomic status.

For example, Gabe, a 19-year-old Chinese majoring in accounting, stated, "I got to study harder. I saw what my parents went through and their struggles. I could hardly ever pay back all the sacrifices my parents made for me. But I'd try my best." For Chinese students, college was not a choice, but an obligation. Parental values, hopes, and goals informed children's perceptions of college. Kelly who lived in a small apartment with five family members in Chinatown before coming to Midwestern University, explained that her parents constantly reminded her that she must study hard in order to avoid repeating their lives: "They [my parents] keep telling me that 'you know what? You have to work harder in school' and 'you don't want to be like us,' like I don't want to work like this [working as a cook]." Her comments on the value of and commitment to education that her parents expected reflect a set of beliefs held by almost all Chinese immigrant students who viewed a college education as "responsibility" and a means of moving away from the parents' low socioeconomic status.

Both Korean and Chinese students said their parents wanted them to attend a good college and excel academically. Both groups' college aspirations were connected to measuring up to parental expectations and the value placed on education. It should be noted, however, that Chinese students viewed college as key to the family's future as well as to their own. Korean students, in comparison, saw their educational aspirations as being more integral to their individual well-being.

### ***Educational Strategies: Co-Ethnic Networks and School Resources***

While both Chinese and Korean parents held high expectations for their children regardless of socioeconomic background, the strategies Korean parents developed to facilitate educational opportunities proved to be distinct from those of Chinese parents. Many of the Chinese parents worked full-time. They relied heavily on school resources to foster their children's transition to college. On the other hand, many Korean mothers were homemakers and played an active role in nurturing a positive educational outlook. Regardless of social class, almost all Korean immigrants opted out of urban areas, moving to the suburbs for access to a better educational environment. Several working-class Korean immigrant parents understood the importance of putting their children in competitive magnet or boarding schools, and took out loans from relatives or the bank. Providing their children with the best education was a primary concern.

Jeremy, a Korean out-of-state resident, recounted that he went to a high school in a New Jersey suburb where almost 30% of the students were of Korean descent. According to Jeremy, his parents thought that attending



a predominantly White high school would help him acquire a high level of English proficiency and increase his chances of attending a prestigious university: "My parents wanted me to study with smart kids so I can go to a *best* college." Jeremy also described his mother as actively involved in school activities. She served on the parent board and frequently volunteered at school events to optimize his educational opportunities. His comments illustrated that it was not uncommon for Korean immigrant parents to move to affluent neighborhoods with the motive of sending their child to a better school, perhaps one where academic standards are high and staff and teachers are properly oriented and trained.

Conversations with several Korean students revealed that church was a key source for educational resources such as supplemental education, college preparatory courses, and private tutoring. As many as nine Korean students attended private after-school academies or ethnic after-school institutions at local Korean churches, where they took college prep courses as well as classes in English reading and writing. The role of religious institutions was less pronounced for Chinese respondents. They tended to use Chinese community-based organizations in Chinatown instead. These sites provided basic social adjustment services such as information and referral on immigration and citizenship, employment services, youth services and financial resources for small businesses. Working-class Chinese parents derived many benefits from such organizations, and discussed the education of their children with other Chinese immigrant parents as well. James, a 20-year-old Chinese business major, described Chinatown as vital to providing not only economic resources, but also opportunities for college-related information-sharing to his parents:

All my parents' friends are Chinese and they meet occasionally in a Chinese community center in Chinatown. They talk about their children, school, college, jobs, housing, and so forth. My parents had a chance to talk to my schoolteacher who is Chinese American. My school teacher was invited by the center to talk about college. Otherwise, my parents don't have time to devote to my schooling. They can't even speak English.

As James's narrative illustrates, most Chinese students reported that they had relied on schoolteachers and guidance counselors when choosing colleges, rather than parents or peers. For example, Laura said that her English teacher facilitated her college application process:

I am the first person who was going to college in my family. I was really serious about going to college in my junior year. I didn't know what I should do to get into college. I couldn't ask my parents or my younger brother. I didn't really talk to anyone in school, I mean Black kids. I had a few Chinese friends I regularly talk to. But we didn't talk much about college. My English teacher

was really helpful in telling me what to do. She asked me about what schools I want to apply [to] and what I want to study in college. She was there for me like every step of the way, go online and look at stuff for me whenever I needed.

For Chinese students, school staff played an important role in providing information about college; the relationships these students had with their guidance counselors and teachers facilitated the college-going process.

### ***Students' Conflict with Utilitarian Parental Expectations for College Majors***

More than half of the Korean and Chinese students in this study described their relationships with parents as “disjointed” and “disagreeable” during the course of college application. Although high parental expectations contributed to these students’ academic achievements, they also created emotional distance and decreased communication. Heather, a 20-year-old Chinese student who majored in human nutrition, spoke of a broken relationship with her mother:

My mom is very much like academics or nothing, you know, that’s all . . . that’s all you need. We didn’t get along at all. It was like a horrible, horrible year for me. I think my mom tells me what to do. I don’t know if this is really what I want to do.

Similarly, for at least 13 Chinese participants, the feeling that parents had sacrificed to afford them the opportunity for a better life intensified the pressure to succeed. Dropping out or failing was not an option, a feeling that was constantly reinforced by the parents. Others simply feared disappointing their parents.

Several Chinese and Korean students in this study explained that they were afraid of an open confrontation. Abigail, a Chinese student, decided to study computer science at Midwestern University because the program was known for quality and excellence, even though she wanted to study psychology. She further commented that she had a strong desire to change her major to psychology during sophomore year, but she worried about confronting her father’s disappointment. Similarly, Daniel, a Korean, said that his parents had pushed him to major in accounting: “My parents run a small cafeteria in Kansas, working from 5:00 a.m. until late evening every day. They really want me to become an accountant, working in a big financial firm, making a good living.” Daniel further noted that he did not see himself as “good college material,” intimating that he feared he could not keep up a good academic standing by maintaining a B+ or above in accounting. He seemed uncertain about whether he could continue to manage intensive, competitive, and rigorous academic work in accounting. Mismatches between parental expectations and the student’s ability and academic intention, like Daniel’s,

began to manifest as an additional burden the participants struggled with even after college matriculation.

Many Chinese and Korean parents wanted their children to choose a major that guaranteed job security and high earnings. Immigrant parents steered their children toward academic disciplines that were deemed instrumental in fostering economic gains. Of the students in my study, only two students chose humanities or education majors. Both of them commented that they had to constantly explain their educational goals and career aspirations to their parents, who were unfamiliar with studies in humanities and education. Laura, a Chinese education major, said, "My parents kept asking me what I am going to do with [my] education major. My response is always the same, I want to be a teacher." For Laura, whose decision-making appeared to be at odds with her parents' wishes, the decision to pursue a major in education was driven by personal goals. Her experiences illustrate the ways in which many of the study's participants were pressured by parents to pursue academic careers that would readily translate into returns on an educational investment.

### ***Choosing the Right College: Financial Affordability Versus Academic Prestige***

Among participants, two factors emerged as particularly important in making decisions about which college to attend: (a) academic reputation/prestige, and (b) financial affordability. Notably, Chinese students from low SES backgrounds who attended predominantly minority high schools mentioned that many of their peers ended up attending community colleges, but these immigrant students perceived attending community college as poorly linked to providing future employment opportunities or boosting their socioeconomic position. In these cases, having educational aspirations bolstered by high school teachers proved pivotal in the decision to apply to Midwestern University, as illustrated by Nicole's account: "My Chinese bilingual teacher, Mr. Wong, said Midwestern is my best choice because if I go out of the state, the tuition is higher, especially for us immigrants. We don't have enough money to pay for tuition."

Academic reputation and prestige played an important role in determining college destinations for Korean immigrant students. While the parents of all participants except for two were not U.S. college-educated, Korean immigrant parents, regardless of SES, provided their children with information about college and often relied upon national university rankings such as *U.S. News and World Report* and average SAT/ACT scores as determinants of institutional prestige. Korean parents even hired private counselors, who helped their children choose the best college to attend. They guided their students to apply for colleges based on academic ranking and the reputations of programs or majors, whether the school was in-state or out-of-state. (Ten out of the 19 Korean students in my study were from out of state.) Also of

secondary importance was affordability. Even low-income Korean students from out-of-state explained that being admitted to particular high-ranking universities was their parents' primary concern.

For example, Patrick, who was accepted at Midwestern's School of Business, said he was hesitant to attend Midwestern because the out-of-state tuition was quite burdensome for his family, but "My mom said, 'Don't worry about the cost. We'll pay. All you need to do is to go there and study hard. That's all we expect from you.'" All Korean students indicated that concerns about paying for college were secondary to their chosen institution's academic reputation. In contrast, 15 of the 18 Chinese students in my study were in-state residents. Of those 15 students, 12 of them had also gained admission to prestigious out-of-state private colleges but had ultimately declined these offers. Justin noted:

My parents thought that Midwestern is a very good school, the flagship university in the state. I could have gone to Stanford or Cal Tech if my family had enough money. In the end, I could live with my decision on coming down here because it is known for its academic prestige in engineering programs.

With only a few exceptions, the close proximity of Midwestern to their home was an important factor for the majority of Chinese 1.5ers. Heather, a Chinese student, offered this typical explanation:

I don't want to leave home. I mean, I don't want to go to [a] college that is too far from home. Also, my mom wants me to go to college that is close enough to home so I can go home every weekend to help her out, you know, billing, calling, taking care of my younger sister and brother.

Additionally, 14 of the 18 Chinese students took out loans and applied for scholarships to lighten their parents' financial burden. For example, Gabriela's parents, who worked at a Chinese restaurant, could not afford private college tuition. Her parents strongly encouraged her to attend a public, in-state university to reduce costs:

I told my parents, and they just basically gave me in-state tuition money. They didn't say anything, so I felt like I didn't have anything. So I started applying for scholarships. I kept telling my counselor the only reason I'm going to make it through is if I find a scholarship that pays for the whole thing; there's no way I'm going to make it by myself.

As many as 12 Chinese students expressed frustration with lack of financial support from their parents when they began their college application process and were concerned about how they would pay for college education without putting too much of a financial burden on their parents. These students all considered that going to an in-state public institution was a way

to compensate for their parents' meager resources. Attending an out-of-state institution would cause financial stress for the entire family and provide additional pressure to succeed academically.

### DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATION

How did immigrant parents' expectations and involvement influence Chinese and Korean students' decisions about college attendance, and how much did social class matter to the educational strategies used by parents and their children to facilitate the college transition process? Consistent with research suggesting a positive relationship between attaining a college education and social mobility (Baum & Ma, 2007), regardless of socioeconomic background, both Chinese and Korean immigrant students valued the importance of college education. Overall, being Asian and having immigrant parents were both important in shaping participants' decisions about college attendance. In accordance with the cultural thesis, students attributed their academic achievement to family traditions and cultural values emphasizing hard work and education as a means of social and economic mobility (Portes & MacLeod, 1996; Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Specifically, Chinese students' college-going processes were facilitated by internalizing family values, understanding their parents' sacrifice, and drawing on school resources and co-ethnic support. For their part, Korean students interpreted parental expectations for college as reflecting the value that their parents had placed on academic success and as their own understanding of the individual benefits they might reap from a college degree. For Chinese students from lower-class backgrounds who lacked a college-going family history and did not attend prep school or a more affluent suburban high school, teachers' encouragement and positive assessments of their academic abilities seemed especially vital to the decision to attend college.

Research has shown that parental support is an important factor in academic achievement and educational outcomes (Cabrera & La Nasa, 200, Hossler, Schmit, & Vesper, 1999, Perna, 2000; Perna & Titus, 2005; Phinney, Dennis, & Osorio, 2006; Rowan-Kenyon, Bell, & Perna, 2008). In general, Asian immigrant parents tend to exert more influence on the postsecondary enrollment decisions of their children than the parents of other ethnic groups (Hispanic, Black, and White) as well as children's career decisions (Kao, 2004). Likewise, this study supports the conclusions of earlier research that parental expectations and involvement play a critical role in influencing decisions about college attendance for both Chinese and Korean immigrant students. Nearly all participants indicated that parental expectations contributed to the decision to attend college. Whether middle-class or working-class, both Chinese and Korean immigrant parents placed a high value on college educa-

tion, reaffirming their perception of education as the most critical means of achieving social and economic mobility (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Further, Kao's (1995) characterization of the parent-child relationship in Asian American families as one involving a "reciprocal sense of duty" was supported by this study's finding that Chinese immigrant students viewed performing well in school and going to a prestigious college as a primary responsibility. Chinese students with working-class backgrounds attached particularly high value to education as a result of observing their parents' struggle to overcome various obstacles. Conversely, Korean students viewed going to college as normative, driven by individualistic ideals and private good.

Despite high expectations for college choices and success held by both Chinese and Korean parents, these two groups of parents utilized different sets of educational strategies based on socioeconomic background and co-ethnic social ties. Korean parents were actively involved in their children's school activities and the college application process, while Chinese parents left their children to navigate the process on their own. For Chinese immigrant students, interactions with school personnel and encouragement from teachers facilitated the process of translating postsecondary educational aspirations and values into college attendance.

In examining the role of parental involvement in the college transition experiences of East Asian immigrant college students, Louie (2004) and Lew (2007) pointed out marked differences in the allocation of educational resources between middle- and working-class Chinese and Korean immigrant parents, highlighting the importance of structural factors such as social class and ethnic communities in immigrant students' college enrollment decisions. My study's results corroborate Louie and Lew's conclusion. Although the parents of the students in my study either lacked any experience with postsecondary education (or had attended college in a foreign country), utilitarian advice was extremely instrumental in the participants' decisions about college. Norms and values emphasizing educational achievement among both Chinese and Korean immigrant families were activated and redefined upon arrival in the United States. In general, East Asian immigrant parents tend to be profoundly concerned with education, viewing it as a way for their children to gain a head start in society. These parents emphasize majors in science and technical fields because they believe that these professions offered better employment opportunities and high-paying salaries (Lee, 1996; Louie, 2001, 2004; Song & Glick, 2004; Schneider & Lee, 1990). In this study, guiding children into science, engineering, and business fields was the norm for both Korean and Chinese immigrant parents. This finding reaffirms relative functionalism, which points out that Asian Americans experience limited opportunities for upward mobility in non-educational fields, such as politics, entertainment, and sports (Sue & Okazaki, 1990). Because Chinese

and Korean immigrant parents perceived that mobility was blocked in these directions, they encouraged their children to pursue careers in professional and technical fields associated with high social and economic benefits.

In previous research, Kao (2004) found that first-generation Asian American children had a higher level of academic achievement (higher grades and test scores) than their native-born White counterparts despite their relatively disadvantaged socioeconomic circumstances; the parents of first-generation Asian American children often have a lower SES, both in terms of education and family income, than parents of second-generation and third-generation Asian Americans. Her research is useful in expanding our understanding of how race/ethnicity and generational status affect the extent to which immigrant parent-children relationships are conducive to positive educational outcomes. However, the impact of parental social class and the parent-child dynamic on immigrant students' college-going behaviors in Asian ethnic groups remain understudied. In this study, I found that regardless of socioeconomic level, Chinese and Korean students worked to fulfill their parents' expectations for academic achievement but also perceived these high expectations as a negative element in their relationships with their parents. Tensions arose from a mismatch between students' college aspirations and their parents' expectations, resulting in emotional distance and intergenerational conflict. Some students were confused about whether their parents' expectations or their own desires played a stronger role in important decisions about college and career. In several cases, a sense of tension led respondents to feel reluctant to communicate with their parents.

Previous research has shown that immigrant parents have lower levels of involvement in academic matters compared with their U.S.-born counterparts (Tierney & Auerbach, 2005), but also indicated higher levels of contact with children generally (Wolf, Sax, & Harper, 2009). Despite a high level of contact with parents, miscommunication about academic matters might lead to generational conflict between immigrant parents and their children (Kim, 2008; Zhou, 2009); in particular, Korean 1.5ers seem to adopt values that emphasize individual contentment. In this study, both Chinese and Korean immigrant parents seemed to have retained authoritarian values, emphasizing that parents know what is best for their children and expecting children to follow parental advice.

Overall, parental involvement and expectations were instrumental in students' decisions with respect to colleges and academic majors. While both Korean and Chinese parents emphasized the value of education, the degree to which they actualized its value depended on their social position and financial resources (Kao, 2004; Lew, 2007; Louie, 2001, 2004; Park, 2012). Immigrant parents who had relatively higher socioeconomic status tended to provide their children with safe neighborhoods, quality schools, and various

extracurricular activities. This finding reaffirms the structural argument, demonstrating that a relatively advantageous social status and higher financial resources on the part of parents can facilitate children's educational success (Sue & Okazaki, 1990; Zhou & Kim, 2006).

However, as previous research has also suggested, working-class and middle-class Korean families had less variability in providing the economic and structural support necessary for the college application process as compared to that of Chinese families (Park, 2012; Zhou & Kim, 2006). In other words, despite linguistic and economic barriers, working-class Korean immigrant parents were still able to access college information through Korean church organizations and after-school academies, allowing them to provide more structural support for their children, while working-class Chinese immigrant parents tended to rely on school resources and provided mainly emotional support and encouragement. In particular, ethnic churches served as important social networks among Korean immigrant families. Although working-class Chinese students had less access to resources than their Korean counterparts, due in part to their parents' lack of knowledge about college, community-based organizations served as a platform for working-class Chinese parents to exchange educational information. Teachers and administrators also played a prominent role in fostering the college-going process for Chinese immigrant students.

Prior research shows that, among immigrants, postsecondary enrollment behaviors largely depend on the socioeconomic status, generational status, and race/ethnicity of parents. Foreign-born Asian immigrants are more likely to enroll in a four-year institution, and especially a public four-year school, than U.S.-born Asian Americans (Hagy & Staniec, 2002). Although existing large-scale research shows an association between immigrant status and college enrollment decisions and also shows variation in these decisions by race/ethnicity, it inadequately shows how the decision-making process might differ by ethnicity and social class background.

It is worth noting that the public four-year school was the best college enrollment option for the majority of participants in this study. In fact, among Chinese students from low socioeconomic backgrounds, affordability appeared to be the pivotal determinant when selecting a college. Yet most Korean students were not concerned about whether there would be sufficient funds for them to attend college regardless of their parents' financial circumstances. Both Chinese and Korean students viewed college attendance as something they were expected to do; however, the meaning of college attendance also seemed differ by ethnicity. Korean students regarded college attendance as a means of individual and career mobility, whereas going to college was less a means of improving employability or mobility among Chinese students than as a way to improve the economic and social circumstances of their families.



This study sheds light on how parental expectations and involvement shape the decisions of immigrant students associated with college attendance. Results indicate that parental encouragement, involvement, and support are related to college enrollment decisions and that parenting practices extend their influence well into the academic careers of these students after entry into college. The study also reveals both notable differences and also commonalities in parental involvement across ethnicity and social class. Besides parental expectations, the ability to pay for a college education and the geographic location of institutions under consideration also influence immigrant students' postsecondary choices, especially those from working-class families (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Walpole, 2003). Financial concerns were prevalent among low-SES Chinese students. Like previous research, which indicates that Chinese Americans with a low SES are less likely to attend private institutions than low-income students from other ethnic backgrounds (Teranishi et al., 2004), this study also suggests that socioeconomic background appears to be a major constraint for Chinese students with an interest in attending out-of-state or private institutions. These students frequently experienced a lack of parental engagement in helping them navigate college options. Chinese and Korean students, even in similar economic circumstances, showed some variation in college enrollment decisions. Chinese students more sensitively responded to issues of college affordability, perhaps because they felt more obligated to try and improve the family's economic and social position.

Drawing on both cultural and structural perspectives and taking into account both ethnicity and social class, this study fills a void in current research on East Asian immigrants' academic success and college-going experiences. Often aligning with the structural argument, which posits that the economic status and opportunity structure of immigrant groups, modes of incorporation, and premigration characteristics affect children's academic achievement and educational outcomes (Feliciano, 2005a, 2005b; Hirschman & Wong, 1986; Portes et al., 2009), this study suggests that Chinese students, especially those from low social-class backgrounds, seem to be relatively disadvantaged when it comes to decisions regarding college attendance. These students encounter issues associated with access to college information and access to financial aid, and a lack of parental involvement, thereby limiting their range of options in the college enrollment decision-making processes. This study's findings suggest that future research on how postsecondary enrollment decisions vary by social class and ethnicity is needed, and that one should not assume that the interaction between social class and postsecondary enrollment behaviors and the process of college decision plays out uniformly across Asian immigrant groups.

However, this study's findings are not intended to represent the entire population of Asian immigrant students. Its focus is on 1.5-generation Chinese

and Korean immigrants who already attend a four-year institution. Because this study was based on a limited sample, future research may continue to illuminate the educational experiences of this unique group of students. The experiences of students who drop out of high school or college, or who take a different path to postsecondary education, such as community college or elite private institutions, also merit further investigation. How do other Asian ethnic groups choose a college? How would Asian immigrant students attending a community college differ in terms of demographic profile when compared to those who enroll in a four-year school? Given the considerable diversity within the Asian immigrant population, future research on Asian ethnic subgroups is necessary to examine the nuances of ethnicity, class, and the family dynamics of each, as well as how the intersection of these factors influences immigrant students' educational experiences and college choice.

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