Social Class, Culture, and Asian Social Positioning: Rethinking Education and Power in the New Millennium

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Abstract

The exclusions of Asians in public discussions on poverty has led to some scholars conclude that Asians presents a category crisis in the American conceptions of class and class mobility (Chang, 2003). In this article, I highlight the influence of social class, culture, and Asian social positioning on Asian immigrants' educational experiences. First, I provide a discussion on how social class matters in Asian students' early literacy development, their family resources and school achievement, and their college preparation, choices, and experiences. I then draw attention to issues related to social class, culture, and agency in Asian American education. By highlighting the power of social class and the actions and choices made by Asian Americans, this article provides a complete picture of the Asian Americans' educational experiences within the macro-structural and cultural critique. I conclude by raising a series of critical questions to help us rethink our positioning in the society and in educating our next generation.

Key words: Social class, social positioning, culture, Asian American, power, education

Introduction: Asian Americans in the Social Class Discussion

Asians, now outpacing Hispanics, have become the largest stream of new immigrants coming to the United States annually (Pew Research Center, 2012). Research on Asian immigrant students in general has focused on reporting and explaining the Asian success story, treating them as a single, undifferentiated homogenous group, especially at the secondary and post-secondary level (Kao & Thompson 2003; Sakamoto, Goyette & Kim 2009; Teranishi, 2010). This model minority image is further solidified by the reported high achievements among Asians in the annual Nations' Report Card and by researchers' use of Asians as comparison groups to explain the achievement gaps between Whites and Blacks and between Whites and Hispanics (e.g., Fryer & Levitt, 2004; Reardon & Galindo, 2009).

While the "Asian model minority myth" continues to circulate in the media and in the field of education, researchers such as Lee, 2009; Li, 2003, 2004; Ng & Lee, 2007) have reported counternarratives or counter stories of low achieving Asian students as well as the socio-emotional struggles of many high achieving Asian students. Researchers on Asian counternarratives also found that vast within-group diversities such as race, class, and gender exist among Asian subgroups and that there is a critical need to attend to these diversities, rather than seeing Asians as homogenous group free of social and educational problems. In this article, I highlight one of the often neglected issues within the Asian subgroups: the SES (socio-economic status) or social class issue.

As Asians, especially East Asians, have been constructed as high achieving educationally and hence socio-economically, Asian poverty issue and SES gaps are often absent in the national discussion on poverty or social class issues. In a recent Pew Research Center discussion on the wealth gaps in the U. S. for example, Asians were not mentioned in the report (Kochhar, Fry & Taylor, 2011). In fact, there exists a huge

diversity in the poverty rates among the Asian subgroups, with some groups' poverty rates surpassing the national average. According to the US Census in 2010, while 15.1% of the general population lived in poverty, 12.6% of all Asian persons lived in poverty, compared to 9.9% of all non-Hispanic White persons. Among the Asian subgroups, the poverty rates of some South-East Asian groups' poverty rates are even higher than the national average and those of the Hispanic (26.6%) and the Black (27.4%). For example, the poverty rate of the Hmong is 37.8%, Cambodian 29.3%, Laotian 18.5%, and Vietnamese 16.6%. The exclusions of Asians in public discussions on poverty has led to some scholars conclude that Asians presents a category crisis in the American conceptions of class and class mobility (Chang, 2003).

The Impact of Social Class on Asian Americans

So does social class matter for Asian immigrants? And how does it matter? According to Lareau & Conley (2010), class differences permeate the neighborhoods, the classrooms, the workplaces where we live our daily lives. Social classes matters in terms of how they raise their children, and how/what they socialize their children in daily lives, what kinds of schools they send their children to, and how they interact with schools. For Asian children, social class matters in their early literacy development, their family resources and school achievement, and their college preparation, choices, and experiences. In terms of early literacy, our research on early reading achievement from kindergarten to third grade drawing on four waves of data from the ECLS-K class of 1998-1999, shows that a persistent achievement gaps between low- and high-SES Asian groups, even among specific ethnic subgroups (Yang & Li, 2013).

Social class also influences family resources, parental involvement, and academic achievement. Take two children from my qualitative research in two cities, Derin Liu (See Li, 2002) and Anthony Chan (Li, 2006) as examples. Derin Liu was an eight year old boy from a low-SES family. His family operated a Chinese restaurant in an inner city neighborhood. His parents, had very limited education, had to work long hours in the restaurant and, therefore, rarely saw him at home. He was left to watch TV all the time. He never went to a museum, library, or a park. He did not have many books (Chinese or English) at home or a computer. He did not have bedtime stories or anyone read to him. They don't have play dates or friends outside their family. In contrast, Anthony Chan, a seven year old from a middle class family with his mother as a registered nurse and father with his own business, had lots of books, computer, games, outings, as well as after school activities, kick boxing, piano, soccer, Chinese, English tutoring, and math. These differences in family resources shape these children's early learning experiences. In fact some researchers found that poorly performing students from high-status families do much better in many instances than talented students from less-advantaged families (see Goldthorpe & Jackson, 2010).

These class differences are also reflected in Asian students' college preparation, choices as well as their college experiences. In two recent reports by Chang and colleagues (Chang et al., 2007) and Teranishi (2010) found three trends in Asian American college students' experiences: One is that the trends do not support popular claims that Asian Americans are enjoying unprecedented, collective academic success in U.S. in higher education, as Asians still have to overcome a number of obstacles to gain access to and complete higher education. Second, the trends suggest that financial capacity plays a significant role in both the

college application and choice processes for Asian Americans. Third, Asian American students' postsecondary decisions, opportunities, and destinations vary across and within ethnic and SES subpopulations. These large scale analyses were supported by qualitative studies on Asian Americans' college choices and experiences. In Lew's (2003) study, for example, she found that many of the low achieving students are from low-SES working families, attending resource-poor, low-performing neighborhood public schools while many high-achieving, middle-class Korean American students attended a resource-rich, elite magnet school. Moving from high school and college, Vivian Louie's study is also very telling: She interviewed 68 American-born second generation and foreign-born "1.5 generation" Chinese Americans "who arrived in the United States by the age of twelve" (Louie, 2004, p. 201). The respondents were attending an Ivy League school associated with the "model minority" (Columbia University) and a four-year commuter college (Hunter College at the City University of New York). All of the Hunter respondents came from "the urban enclaves"—Manhattan Chinatown, and ethnically-mixed neighborhoods in Flushing and Brooklyn—while most Columbia respondents grew up in the "mainstream middle class suburbs," only "one fifth" coming from the urban enclaves. However, there are large within-group differences in both groups in terms of income, neighborhood, and parents' occupation. The low SES students, in making sense of their "ending up" at Hunter, some explained that they did not work hard enough, their parents lacked money, time, and cultural knowledge to get involved in their education, or they "didn't grow up in that typical Chinese household" because their parents "weren't strict." While the suburban respondents felt that their families played a central role in their journey to Columbia. Louie's (2004) study illustrates convincingly how the injuries of class (and race) happened in daily interactions and socialization at home and in school and that class does matter in powerful ways to Asian students and their families as they move through the American educational systems.

Social Class, Culture, and Asian Positioning

Since social class is "a complicated mixture of the material, the discursive, psychological predispositions and sociological dispositions" (Reay, 1998, p. 259), to fully understand social class, we must also attend to culture as well as individual and collective class identities and positioning. In terms of culture, the Bourdieusian concepts of cultural capital and habitus clearly suggest that people's articulation of classed identities is closely connected to access to cultural capital and resources including forms of knowledge, skills, education, and advantages that a person has (Bourdieu, 1986). Parents provide their children with cultural capital by transmitting the attitudes and knowledge needed to succeed in the current educational system. According to Bourdieu, cultural capital plays a central role in societal power relations. These power relations, in turn, shape individual's habitus of their social and class locations and positioning.

For Asian Americans, I argue that the historical marginalization of Asians as a minority group (e.g., as yellow peril, forever foreigner, or the honorary Whites), exclusion of Asians in major national discussions on class, and persistent social construction of the model minority image (see Lee, 2009; Tuan, 1998) that are mostly based on the cultural traits of the group have led to many Asians' unconscious acceptance of the socially constructed differences and hierarchies about them in the society, internalizing "a sense of

one's place" and exhibiting, sometimes unconsciously, practices of self-exclusion (Boudieu, 1984). These practices can be found in several interesting findings on Asians' educational experiences, such as in the aspects of language choice, culture identity, and parental involvement.

In terms of language choice and cultural identity, research has found interesting Asian paradoxes. On the one hand, many Asians have reported to have achieved high educational attainment and upward social mobility. On the other hand, Asian Americans, especially some East Asian groups such as the Chinese, have also reported rapid de-ethnicization effort to undo or distance from one's Asian ethnic identity, especially by forgoing their heritage language and other ethnic ties. First language loss among Asian American students has been widely reported even though many parents want to maintain their heritage language. Hinton (1999), in her examination of a set of linguistic autobiographies written by Asian-American college students in this author's classes, noted that it is commonplace for fluency in the first language to decline as English improves, so that by the end of the high school years, children are at best semi-speakers of their heritage language. While many socio-cultural and sociolinguistic factors may be at play, first language loss can be both voluntarily and involuntary (Hinton, 1999; Wong Fillmore, 2000). Tuan (1998), for example, reported that there was a general disinterest among Asian American parents (i.e. middle-class Chinese and Japanese Americans) to transmit cultural values on to their children in the hope to prevent racist remarks and attacks by abandoning any aspects of culture (such as their first language) that appear foreign.

An individual's language choice is closely related to one's ethnic identity formation and hence social positioning. Kasinitz, Mollenkopf, Waters, & Holdaway (2008) in their longitudinal study of second generation immigrants in New York tracked a group of working-class Chinese second generation immigrants (along with those from other ethnic groups) and revealed a surprising finding on the Chinese second generation immigrants' language use patterns and their ethnic identity affiliation. Kasinitz et al. (2008) wrote:

> The group experiencing the most dramatic upward mobility—the Chinese—is actually the least likely to retain the parents' language…The Chinese are also among the least likely to participate in ethnic organizations…At the same time, today's second generation does not seem overly concerned about shedding those ties or losing ethnic distinctiveness…(pp. 343-345)

Several other studies on Asian American's ethnic identities have revealed that becoming American is internalized by Asian Americans (often under the pressure of various discursive practices within the power hierarchy) as becoming Americanized, either to be ideologically blackened or ideologically whitened depending on their social positioning (Lee, 2005; Ong, 2003; Zhou, 2004). While many studies on East Asian immigrants (often of higher SES statuses) such as the Chinese in Kasinitz et al's (2008) study above are ideologically whitened, many Southeast Asians (often of lower SES statuses) are ideologically blackened. For example, Lee (2005) in her study on Hmong high school students' racial identity formation found that in the context of the school culture that privileges white academic and social achievement and others the Hmong students as inferior to Whites, the Hmong students themselves also engaged in self-labeling: the first-generation students identified themselves as "traditional" Hmongs who valued the Hmong culture and language while the second-generation

students identified themselves as "Americanized" and distanced themselves from the Hmong culture and language and exhibited oppositional behavior through attire, music taste, and attitudes towards school). Lee noted that these labels became categories that essentialized the behavior of Hmong American students to both the Hmong students and outsiders such as the White teachers and the principal. Similar findings are also revealed in Chhuon & Hudley's (2010) study on Cambodian students' ethnic options in a U.S. urban high school. Similar to the suburban high school in Lee's study, the school culture in the urban high school also whitened the "other Asians" such as the Koreans, Japanese and Chinese Americans who enrolled in elite magnet academies while it blackened the low-SES Cambodian students who were assumed to be poor, low achieving, and involved in crime. In this context, Cambodian students were actively involved in ethnic identity politics at their school: some identified with the pan-Asian ethnic identity that was often associated with the model minority profile as a means for attaining a positive academic image in the classroom in pursuit of their larger academic goals while others chose to reject the model minority stereotype and identify only as Cambodians. The latter group, however, were often centered on being "ghetto" and underachieving in school and were subject to severe discrimination from teachers and others in the school.

Asian's SES status also influences how Asian immigrant parents position themselves against mainstream schools, especially in immigrant parents' attitudes towards and interactions with schools. Studies on immigrant and minority groups' literacy practices suggest that Asian immigrant parents differ significantly in their cultural models of learning and their educational values, beliefs, and actions from their mainstream counterparts. Comparative research on Chinese and European American families' beliefs and practices on young children's education (e.g., Chao, 1996; Huntsinger, Jose, Larson, Krieg, & Shaligram, 2000) has concluded that culture shapes what parents believe and what practices they employ to socialize their children for academic achievement. Chinese immigrant parents are found to prefer more didactic methods for teaching mathematics, vocabulary, and reading, and often use them at home to supplement school learning. The Chinese parents' preferred teaching style is influenced by the cultural models of instruction in their country of origin that are characterized as teacher-centered, academic oriented, and test driven (Huntsinger et al., 2000).

Many Asian parents also accept the model minority profile of Asian students and regard the Asian methods of teaching as superior to those in the mainstream schools. As a parent in Li's (2006) noted, "It is our belief that Orientals are effective at math and computers…I think it is actually the method of teaching. I think there is a lot of memorizing for the oriental way of teaching math…" Li (2004, 2006), in her research on middle- and upper-middle-class Asian immigrant parents and mainstream Canadian teachers' battles over what considers the best literacy instructional method, reports that mainstream teachers prefer a whole language approach to literacy instruction with added components for basic literacy skills such as vocabulary and phonics instruction. Although the Chinese parents liked the practicality and flexibility of the mainstream teachers' approaches, they expressed overriding concerns about lack of discrete skills instruction (i.e., reading and writing strategies, grammar, and vocabulary), and homework (i.e., the nature and the amount of assignments). They opposed the integration of different subject areas and preferred that they be taught separately. When these

concerns were not addressed by school, the parents took actions outside school (e.g., sending their children to private tutoring classes) to pursue their own beliefs. Consequently some Asian children were enrolled in many academic classes outside school—attending a school after school.

The Asian parents' positioning against mainstream schools in turn affects what parents do at home with their children to compromise with mainstream schooling. For example, Chinese parents often ask their children to not only repeat reading a story in order to memorize, but also ask them to copy the texts several time in order to practice writing at home (Chao, 1996). Li (2002) discovered that middle-class Chinese parents also help their children's English language learning by directly teaching them reading and writing skills including new vocabularies. They use a variety of tools and strategies such as using flash cards, visuals, and their children's knowledge in Chinese to target unknown words. In addition, they also "educationalize" their children's learning at home by sending them to a variety of study activities after school (Li, 2006, p. 207). These activities include math, English, piano lessons, Chinese classes, and sports activities. In Li's (2006) study, some Asian children even took the after-school classes more seriously than their regular classes at school.

In contrast to intense parental involvement outside school, Asian parents around the world are found to have limited involvement in school settings and are passive in building social relations with teachers and schools. They are less likely to communicate with teachers, volunteer to help in school, or participate in decision making. Further, low-SES parents are found to be even less likely to involve in these things than the high SES groups. Several studies such as Wang (2008), Zhang (2012), and Zhou (2012) on middle-class Asian immigrant parents' involvement in their children's school experiences all found that Asian immigrant parents have limited involvement in school settings and are passive in building social relations with teachers and schools. For example, Zhang (2012) compared levels of involvement between Chinese immigrant parents and English-speaking non-Chinese parents in early childhood education and found that Chinese immigrant parents were less likely than non-Chinese parents to communicate with teachers, volunteer to help in school, or participate in school decision making. While there are practical reasons: Parents' lack of English language proficiency, education, and inadequate knowledge of the mainstream school system and host culture, but there are some deeper reasons that have to do with how the parents position themselves as immigrants. In a discussion on why she did not get involved in the school to help address some of the concerns she had regarding her son's education, a middle-class parent in Li's (2006) study commented:

> But now we have to accept it because the school system here…But I think we just have to…respect…his teacher, and we respect what she has to do…. we have to respect what the education system is, we leave it to the system to teach him, especially as we don't have time to do so many things with him.

Therefore, by positioning themselves as a guest to the mainstream educational system, Asian parents like this one have unconsciously embraced the "forever foreigner" identity and placed themselves at a powerless position. For those from low-SES groups, they are even less likely to challenge the status quo.

Rethinking Education and Power in the New Millennium

How do Asian Americans remove the

"immigrant shadow" (Lee & Zhou, 2004, p. 13) and change their social positioning as "forever foreigners" (Tuan, 1998)? In this article, I highlight the influence of social class, culture and the agentic aspect of the Asian immigrants' educational experiences. Attending to both social class and agency of Asian immigrant children and their parents is important as the construct of agency highlights the actions and choices made by the students and families within certain contexts. Lack of attention to their social positioning and agency often leads to silenced voices and an incomplete picture of Asian Americans' educational experiences within the macro-structural or cultural critique. The multifaceted influences outlined above suggest that we need to rethink our positioning in the current power hierarchy. In conclusion, I raise three questions to help us rethink our positioning in this society and in educating our next generation. First, we need to evaluate the second generation language and identity lost. In what ways we can help our next generation "inheriting the city" without having to deny who they are and give up the language that they speak? Second, we also need to critically examine the so-called Asian methods and Asian achievement. What factors are actually contributing to their success or failure? Are those methods promoting learners with high scores and low ability? Are they stifling creativity and academic risk taking? Another question is: Are the methods really good for the next generation given the widely reported psychosocial stress and intergenerational conflicts among Asian American students? Finally, how should Asian parents position themselves in relation to mainstream schools and society? Should we remain as the forever foreigners or the uninvited guests or should we move from the margin to the center and become leaders, shakers and makers?

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