

# What Contributes to Asian Model Minority Academic Success? An Ecological Perspective

*Gulbahar H. Beckett, University of Cincinnati*

## Abstract

Asians in America are perceived to be model minorities and Asian American students are believed to be exceptional educational achievers. Some believe this is a “model minority” phenomenon that needs to be demystified as it is a stereotype detrimental to Asian American students’ social and psychological well-being. Some attribute Asian-American student academic achievement to factors such as parents’ and students’ attitudes and actions toward schoolwork, economic and ethnic status, human and social capital, family structure, community organization, and cultural and linguistic patterns. Others attribute it to factors such as self-perception, school expectations and organization, students’ cultural and background knowledge, and family socialization. While these are all important findings, none of the single studies capture the complexity of the issue under discussion. This paper reports and discusses findings of an ethnographic study conducted in Vancouver, Canada. The participants in this study were five secondary-school immigrant students from Taiwan, China, and Hong Kong. Analysis of data collected through interviews and observations suggests that the participants who shared the same ethnicity, culture, and first and second languages, were experiencing varying academic success at the time of data collection. But, the contributors to their success seemed to be different. In fact, findings of the study suggest that the same situation impacted different students differently. I argue that Asian academic success is a complex phenomenon that should be attributed to multiple factors and examined from an ecological perspective that can account for the complexity of the relevant issues. I discuss some social and pedagogical policy implications of the findings to the education of other American minority students. I conclude the paper with suggestions for further research and future practice.

*Key Words: Asian American, model minority, ecological perspective*

## 摘要

亞裔美國人被視為模範少數民族，而亞裔學生則被認作學習成績優異者。有些學者認為，這種模範少數民族現象應加以破除，因為這種定式思維對亞裔學生的社會交往和心理健康帶來危害。有些研究把亞裔學生的優異成績歸因於家長和學生對學習的態度和行動、經濟和種族地位、人際和社會關係資源、家庭結構、社區組織、以及文化和語言特點。另外一些研究則把亞裔學生的優異成績歸因於自我認知、學校期望值和結構、學生的文化和背景知識、以及家庭教育。雖然這些發現很重要，沒有任何一項研究觸及該問題的複雜性這一點。本文探討在加拿大溫哥華進行的一項人種學研究。本研究的參與者為五位中學生，來自臺灣、中國大陸、和香港。通過分析採訪和觀察得來的資料發現，種族、文化、第一語言和第二語言都相同的參與者，在本研究收集資料時取得了不同程度的優異成績。但是，他們成績優秀的原因似乎不同。事實上，本研究的發現表明，同樣的條件對不同的學生會產生不同的影響。本文認為，亞裔學生成績優異是一個非常複雜的現象，由多種原因造成；應該從生態學的角度去研究該現象，以解釋相關問題的複雜性。本文將探討該文發現的一些社會和教學政策的意義對美國其他少數民族教育之借鑒。文章最後對將來的研究和實踐提出建議。

關鍵字：亞裔美國人、模範少數民族誤區、生態學角度

## Background

Asians in America are perceived to be model minorities (Wong & Halgin, 2006), and Asian American students are believed to be exceptional educational achievers (Lee, 1996). The over-representation of Asian students at prestigious universities, such as Stanford, seems to reinforce this belief. The “model minority” phenomenon has attracted increasing discussion in recent years. Some argue that the model minority belief is a myth that needs to be demystified (e.g., Wang, in this issue) through studies that apply more sophisticated research methods (e.g., Pan & Bai, in this issue). Some also believe in demystifying this concept as the perception that Asians are overachieving model minorities is a stereotype detrimental to Asian American students’ social and psychological

well-being (Lee, 1994; Tang, in this issue; Tsunokai, 2005). Lee (1996) and Jo (2004) also point out the need for demystification of the model minority construct as they view it as a stereotype that has been used to promote a dominant White ideology. As such, it divides minorities and working-class Whites, encouraging them to compete against each other.

Many studies have been conducted to understand the possible contributing factors to Asian students' high academic achievement. Some attributed to parents' and students' attitudes and actions towards schoolwork (e.g., Fejgin, 1995), economic and ethnic status, human and social capital, family structure, community organization, and cultural and linguistic patterns (e.g., Schmid, 2001). Self-perception as well as school expectations and organization (e.g., Trueba, 1988), students' cultural and background knowledge are also reported as important factors for Asian students' academic success (Portes, 1999). More recently, Park and Uichol (2006) concluded that family socialization that emphasizes sacrifice, commitment to education, and Confucianism were strong factors that contributed to Asian students' academic achievement.

These are all important findings and together they show that many complex factors contribute to the academic success and achievements of Asian-American students. This paper reports and discusses findings of an ethnographic study that points to the complexity of the issue in a single study. Due to page limit, only a few excerpts from the data are presented. A more detailed report and discussion that capture the complexity of the issues are provided in a forthcoming paper (Beckett, forthcoming).

## Methods

The data reported here are from a large study conducted in Vancouver, Canada to explore English as a Second Language (ESL) immigrant students' educational experiences. The participants discussed in this paper were five secondary-school immigrant students: one Taiwanese boy (Taotao), one Taiwanese girl (Tiantian), one Chinese boy from China (Chenjian), and two girls from Hong Kong (Hongmei and Honglian, sisters). They all spoke Mandarin Chinese as their first school language and were attending the same secondary school in English. Data sources include over two years of classroom observations, three semi-structured interviews, and several unstructured, informal interviews (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). Data were analyzed using open coding (Straus & Corbin, 1998), axial coding, and selective coding strategies for emerging

themes (Spradley, 1980).

## Findings

Analysis of the data suggests that the participants who shared the same ethnicity, culture, and first and second languages, were experiencing varying academic success at the time of data collection. The contributors to the students' success, however, seemed to be different. In fact, findings of the study suggest that the same situation impacted the students differently. For example, Taotao was from a wealthy family, living in a mansion with his mother and sister while his father worked in Taiwan. He seemed bright, motivated, proficient in English, and well-behaved, but did not do very well in school. During one of the interviews, he said:

My parents sacrifice a lot, for my sister and me. My mom's here taking care of us. My dad, in my country (Taiwan), taking care of his company, making money for us, to go to university. ...My mom said I need to go to Princeton. So, my dad need to make more money. ... My mom like Taiwan. She can't stay there because my sister and I go to school here. ... I feel sad. Sometimes I can't study because I'm very sad.

Tiantian was from a middle-class family and lived with a relative in Vancouver while her parents and brother remained in Taiwan. She too was bright, motivated, not completely proficient in English, but did very well at school. She said:

My parents give me money to go to school here. They say I should go to university in Canada. They want me to get As. They give me a car if I get into good university. My father said that. I'm happy. I study hard.

Chenjian lived with his parents, who were both graduate students, in student housing with minimum financial comfort, proficient in English, and excelled in school. According to him, studying hard is something he's supposed to.

I have to study hard. My parents said I should. They study very hard, too. We all study very hard. Why not? Studying is good. It gets you to good universities and good jobs.

Hongmei and Honglian, were from a middle-class family and resided by themselves in Vancouver while their parents were in Hong Kong. They were both bright, responsible, highly motivated, not completely proficient in English, but Hongmei struggled with her academic work while Honglian excelled. Hongmei explains:

My father works in my uncle's company. His health not very good. My mother stay in Hong Kong,

take care of my father and my brother. I study here with my sister. My sister study very hard. She take care of me. She's good, study hard. All As. Me, not so good. I study hard, too. But, I think about my father and mother. I miss my brother. I think my sister's tired. She make sure that I'm good. She cooks, buy vegetables, go to banks, call my parents, take care of me. I worry. I think she's tired. She can't go out with her friends because she take care of me.

## Discussion and Implications

Findings of the study suggest that students' cultural background (Portes, 1999), belief in the value of and dedication to education, linguistic capital, and family income and socialization (Park & Uichol, 2006) may contribute to immigrant Asian students' academic success. They also suggest that learner aptitude and attitude (e.g., Fejgin, 1995), motivation, as well as family and self expectations (e.g., Trueba, 1988) can be strong contributors also as suggested in the literature. However, they seem to impact people differently. For example, all five participants in the present study shared the famous "Asian commitment" to education and had high expectations for academic achievement. They all understood that their families made "sacrifices" for their education (e.g., families living apart) and made various investments in their education (financial and otherwise), and expected them to do well. They, too, seem to want to do well. However, while Chenjian thrived with all these commitments and expectations in a less-than-optimal financial situation, Taotao and Hongmei felt burdened by various expectations, "sacrifices" made for their education, and a responsibility to succeed, which seemed to have impacted their success negatively.

These findings seem to indicate that Asian academic success is a complex phenomenon that should be attributed to multiple factors and examined from an ecological perspective (Hu, 2005) that can account for the complexity of the relevant issues. This perspective necessitates examining the learning environments (Slaughter-Defoe, Nakagawa, Takanishi, & Johnson, 1990), the ideological and theoretical orientations that dictate those environments, educational culture, and philosophy. Family socialization, socioeconomic status, student motivation and investment, and student aptitude should be taken into consideration in research on Asian academic success (Park & Uichol, 2006). Such an examination of the model minority myth/stereotype is necessary because the stereotype has serious social, psychological, policy, and pedagogical implications for Asian American as well

as other minority students and communities. Such discussion can extend the current debate of the Asian American academic success myth/stereotype and shed some light on the academic achievement disparities among students of various ethnic backgrounds.

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### Author

Dr. Gulbahar H. Beckett is an Assistant Professor of Sociolinguists and Applied Linguistics in the University of Cincinnati Literacy/TESL Graduate Program. Her research interests include the impact of sociolinguistic and sociocultural issues on the educational achievement of language minority students.