

# The Myth of the Superior Asian Student

BY  
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There is a notion with a good deal of currency, that students of Asian descent are, in one or another way, superior to other students.

The popular press reports feats of Asian students with a mixture of pride and chagrin – “Jenny X just won the national spelling bee; she is 12 and came here at age 9 from (an East Asian country). She is a 4.0 student in the ABC Middle School.” If Jenny is living with her entire Asian family, it is not uncommon to have the proud parents explaining how they encourage their children to study hard. There is an implication that the family’s Asian cultural heritage underlies Jenny’s success – uncomfortable, but at least politically acceptable these days.

The Academy has handled this supposed superiority differently. The superior-culture motif is not infrequently supplemented or supplanted with the superior-race line, expressed overtly or otherwise. Michael Levin, at City College, is one of the noisier – if also more rueful – proponents of this view (roughly, Asians are smarter than Jews, who are smarter than northern Europeans, who are smarter than Mediterranean and Hispanic folks, all of whom are smarter than folks of African descent). The *Bell Curve* crew has a variation on the theme.

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Though sound biological scholarship dismisses this approach, it is accepted by an influential minority (Levin's tripe is published in all the best places) and is widely countenanced even by academics who would choose to disassociate themselves from such a view, if pressed directly. [E. g., Levin's views have been countenance – and tacitly endorsed – by the senior salaried instructional staff and administrators of New York's City University.]

Asians themselves seem to be of two minds: On the one hand, there is a certain – dare I say, smug? – acceptance of the notion of Asian academic superiority: "We may not have much political clout, but we're smarter and we work harder and we achieve better even at the games you Western Devils have established." Some Asian academics seem particularly inclined this way.

On the other hand, there is the anguish reported by Asian authors, whose characters do not think themselves more accomplished, who find the mere assumption that they might be, marginalizes them, and that the "received opinion", held up to them both by the larger community and their own immediate family, is crippling in more than one way. Amy Tan's characters in *Joy Luck Club* admit of this view, and the novel is in no small part about their rising past the limits of the ordinary view of things.

In any case, classroom experience suggests the common notion of the superior Asian student is at least a gross oversimplification, if not altogether wrong.

I've been teaching undergraduates for around three decades. Because I entered upon the enterprise when I did, whence I did, I have

taught a wider variety of students, in a range of schools, than is the case for the older generation of university teachers whose teaching careers have been rather – sessile?

I find I cannot predict with any degree of accuracy the performance of my students simply on the basis of obvious racial background and commonly associated preconceptions of cultural or familial nurture.

Somewhat to my surprise, I find this equally true for the more rudimentary accomplishments – skills, the sorts of things learned in the grades, then (hopefully) re-learned properly in more sophisticated ways in lower-division undergraduate study – as it is for properly intellectual accomplishments – analysis and subsumption of particular cases under received, “universal” principles, and more demanding still, the transcendental suspension of such dogmatic procedure in the critical moment.

Things seem pretty much the same, regardless of subject taught, regardless of how rigorously I set my exams, and so on. There is a degree of consistency in grades earned by my students since I started teaching in the mid-'70s (plotted out, the top of the curve falls somewhere in the C+ range, edging toward B-) regardless of my focus on taught skills or learned higher-order intellectual accomplishment. Students of different heritages are as likely to score well or poorly.

Nor does this seem to vary dramatically where there are issues of language familiarity. Students of Asian heritage, but raised here in English-speaking homes and utterly fluent, and seemingly well-assimilated to the culture of their peers, perform no better than their

peers. This is not surprising. Asian students, having come here from abroad, either as foreign students or as immigrants, and having acquired the language formally in addition to their native tongue, seem to do no better – or worse – taken altogether. This is as true for East Asian students, as it is for South Asian students. That is surprising (and suggests, among other things, that some of the concern expressed in those parts of the Academy which are most concerned with developing and reinforcing such skills may be misplaced).

It isn't even the case that Asian students are going to be more dedicated to doing things properly. My experience has been, Asian students bend the rules (indeed, to the breaking point) no less often than do students from other heritages.

All this appears to hold true for Chinese students, regardless of *which* China they claim as "home." It holds for students from the Indian subcontinent – regardless which of the cultural bases is "home". I have had only a few Korean students, and students from Southeast Asia; they seem to fit the profile. If there is a partial exception, it may lie in the community of Japanese students; I am hard-pressed to account for their matriculation where I teach, in any case. Even here, the better-than-average performance has been only slightly more so. [I have only had one student from Mongolia, and she seemed remarkably well assimilated to New York, and generally, EuroAmerican norms.]

In short, in a very mixed group of students – and trust me when I say, my classrooms are filled with a very mixed crew – I have no reason to expect that the students in, say, the top ten percent, or even top twenty percent will necessarily include or exclude *any* of my Asian

students.

If this be the case, then the notion of the superior Asian student may be actively harmful to students, as well as provocative of seriously wrongheaded policy within the Academy.

The issue of wrongheaded academic policy is important: The Academy has often acted unwisely to exclude populations for one ostensibly good reason or another. There is substantial evidence that the policies of geographical diversity originated to assure a white Protestant majority among entering classes in older, more established establishment colleges, when they found that "too many" of their most desirable candidates for admission were of Jewish heritage. There is blatant and extraordinarily well-documented grounds from which to assert that "community colleges", especially in urban environments, were developed in large measure as socially limiting educational environments for working class young people, especially those from traditional minorities. There is excellent evidence that similarly limiting policy decisions anent Asian students are being taken, both in private and public institutions. It is not even the case these are malevolent – just manifestations of monumentally poor judgment.

The possibility of a superior-Asian-student myth actively harming students in that category is even more obvious. Being an undergraduate, not to mention graduate, student is hard enough. Add the pressure of expected performance levels beyond the norm, and all sorts of social, psychological and even physical ills are fostered.

Of course, all this is anecdotal, and such evidence is really only enough to make one doubt the received opinion, not to establish a

contending view. [The anecdotal evidence is not unconvincing, however, when taken in light of more general science, that suggests that people, taken altogether, at any given time, are pretty much the same, intellectually and otherwise. All members of a species possess equally the specific difference, if you will.]

On the other hand, the received opinion, however one rings the changes on it, is not all that well-founded. At best, it rests on dubious interpretations of merely statistical data. What is lacking is serious inquiry, with properly modeled testing and experimentation, to supplement and get beyond the limits of statistical and anecdotal evidence. It would be interesting to see if an organization such as AAHEC could foster an inquiry which strikes at the heart of what seems on the surface an opinion, the reception of which does little good, and may actually be harmful to all sides.

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