

Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs
by Lisa Sun-Hee Park. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005. 169
pp. ISBN 0-8047-5248-6.

A significant amount of research about the children of immigrants has focused on determining whether and how these children are incorporating into United States society. Many of these studies have used measures of educational achievement and household income to define successful incorporation. Using these measures, they have also defined Asian American second-generation youth as a group that has happily achieved upwardly mobile incorporation in the United States, attaining the American dream (Hernandez & Glenn, 2003).

In *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs* Park takes a critical look at the lives of Korean American and Chinese American children of immigrant entrepreneurs. Park examines the struggles of these youth to define their identities within the context of the immigrant family business, and their strategic efforts to claim American social citizenship through conspicuous consumption. By attaining or presenting membership in a higher-class status, these youth try to assert their social citizenship, which remains elusive because of their racial “otherness.”

Unlike other studies, Park problematizes the system into which immigrant children are expected to assimilate—the same system that exploits their own parents by limiting them to a very exhausting and often unstable life of work without boundaries from family time. The image of the immigrant Asian entrepreneur is often used to support an American dream mythology. This image fails to show the high risk and investment of human capital (Coleman, 1988) some Asian immigrants bring from their native countries and the extreme hardships and multiple financial failures experienced by many of these Asian small business owners.

The youth in Park’s study idealize White, middle-class family life, and are very aware of how much their families do not fit such an ideal. In order to make sense of their lives in relation to the commercialized image of the ideal American family, Korean American and Chinese American children of immigrant entrepreneurs in Park’s study craft their parents’ immigrant stories as the classic Western tale, positioning their parents (mostly the fathers) as the lonesome heroes. Yet most of them hardly know any details of their parents’ migration experiences. Without the facts of their parents’ experiences, the children are able to construct narratives to inform their own identity formation in a way that is acceptable to mainstream America, providing more evidence of their worthiness of American social citizenship. In these tales, their parents are strangers who arrive in a new frontier. Through their own tenacity and self-sufficiency the Asian immigrant

entrepreneurs become heroes persevering through extreme hardships, carving out a place for themselves and their families.

Although Korean American and Chinese American children of immigrant entrepreneurs may not be aware of the details behind their parents' migration stories, they are very conscious of their parents' experiences with racism and xenophobia in the family businesses. These experiences continue to marginalize their families and parents as foreigners who have not attained social citizenship. Park suggests that these negative experiences motivate the children to work that much harder to prove their social citizenship, distancing themselves from these experiences through economic upward mobility, since they cannot escape their marginalized racial identity.

Some immigrant studies scholars would say that the college enrollment of most of the youth in Park's study provides the happy ending these youth desire (Ogbu, 1978; Bowen & Bok, 1998). This perspective negates the heavy human capital investment on the part of the Asian American families and racialized experiences and disparities in education. Park affirms that Korean American and Chinese American children of immigrant entrepreneurs understand their parents' sacrifices of family time in their businesses as investments for the future generation to achieve economic upward mobility that the immigrant generation could not realize.

The youth in Park's book narrowly define success as economic and monetary gains enabling luxuries like quality family time uninterrupted by the family business. Given this definition of success, they strategically choose majors and careers that will allow them to realize their "repayment fantasies"—materially showing gratitude and a return on investment of their parents' sacrifices. As college students, these youth select academic majors hoping to pursue careers that they presume will lead to economic upward mobility. Status-laden academic majors and professional career paths, if achieved, allow them to gain the economic upward mobility prerequisite for social citizenship and simultaneously bring their parents a return on their investments of sacrifice and hardships.

The strength of Park's study is based on the extensive data drawn from over 100 in-depth interviews. Her study explores how these children of immigrants understand their social positioning in racial, political and economic contexts, thus extending the existing literature on the children of immigrants beyond simple measures of incorporation.

At a few points in the book, Park seems to wonder out loud whether the experiences of these youth are truly distinct from other youth experiences of feeling teenage angst and conflict with parents. Indeed, many youth from all backgrounds often struggle with forming their own identities separate from their parents. Comparative studies across racial groups in the future might be able to determine whether these Asian American youth are uniquely different in their

behaviors. It would also be interesting for future studies to include the perspectives of Asian immigrant entrepreneurs regarding their parental strategies and aspirations for their children and social citizenship.

For education scholars and practitioners, Park's sociological study provides many insights into the racially and socioeconomically structured lives of children of Asian American immigrants. Throughout their educational experiences, the Asian American youth actively emphasize their social citizenship as Americans through conspicuous consumption. For example, many students selected their college major based on assumptions of financial return, not on their personal interests or skills. For some of these students, this choice may lead to poor academic performance and persistence issues. Educators must also keep in mind that while Asian immigrant small business owners like those in Park's study are heavily invested in their children's education, they have little time to be directly engaged in schooling in traditional ways. These parents and their children often experience linguistic and cultural barriers that inhibit communication, as shown in Park's study.

Overall, Park has provided a strong critical view into the process of identity construction with which Korean American and Chinese American children of immigrant entrepreneurs struggle. These youth and their entrepreneurial parents are often cited as living proof of the American dream ideology. By focusing on children of Asian immigrant entrepreneurs, she provides critical assessment of economic and racial hierarchies in the United States rather than simply providing an evaluation of whether these youth are incorporating in U.S. society.

References

- Bowen, W. G. & Bok, D. (1998). *The shape of the river: Long-term consequences of considering race in college and university admissions*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Coleman, J. S. (1988). Social capital in the creation of human capital. *The American Journal of Sociology*, 94, S95-S120.
- Hernandez, D. M. & Glenn, E. N. (2003). Ethnic prophecies: A review essay. *Contemporary Sociology*, 32(4), 418-26.
- Ogbu, J. U. (1978). *Minority education and caste: The American system in cross cultural perspective*. San Francisco: Academic Press.

Reviewer

Oiyan A. Poon is a doctoral student in the Social Sciences & Comparative Education (Race and Ethnic Studies) division of the Graduate School of

Education & Information Studies at the University of California, Los Angeles. Her research interests include race-conscious education policy and Asian Americans, critical race theory, and immigrant parental involvement in schooling. She is a Graduate Student Researcher for the University of California Asian American & Pacific Islander Policy Initiative (<http://www.aasc.ucla.edu/policy>).