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Honors Thesis

OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE AMONG EAST, SOUTHEAST, AND MIXED ASIAN
GROUPS: EXPLORING HETEROGENEITY WITHIN THE MODEL MINORITY
NARRATIVE

by

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Submitted to Brigham Young University in partial fulfillment
of graduation requirements for University Honors

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ABSTRACT

OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE AMONG EAST, SOUTHEAST, AND MIXED ASIAN GROUPS: EXPLORING HETEROGENEITY WITHIN THE MODEL MINORITY NARRATIVE

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The phenomena of Asians exceeding Non-Hispanic Whites in education and income has been thoroughly documented and researched. However, existing research has often overlooked whether this achievement translates into access to prestigious occupations. Moreover, the predominant focus on East Asian perspectives with educational attainment and success frameworks neglects the experiences of Southeast or mixed Asian individuals. This quantitative study examines the unique experiences of East, Southeast, and mixed-race Asian Americans, in gaining entry to prestigious occupations. It seeks to understand the diversity within the broader Asian American population and dispel notions surrounding the homogeneity of the Asian experience.

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Introduction

The term “Asian American” was first coined in the 1960s during the civil rights movement to categorize the diverse ethnic groups in the U.S. and to spur solidarity within communities of people of color (Ruiz, Noe-Bustamonte, & Shah, 2023; Goh et. al., 2023). However, the degree to which Asian Americans identify as ‘Asian’, ‘Asian American’, or their specific ethnic groups remains highly subjective to the group or individual (Casarez et. al, 2022). In fact, Goh, Lei, and Zou (2023) argue that the term ‘Asian American’ overtime has come to encapture only East Asians (e.g. Chinese, Japanese, Korean) as South Asians or Southeast Asians tend to identify with or are identified by others with their separate ethnic groups rather than the pan-ethnic term ‘Asian American’.

Asian Americans have a long and complicated history with the U.S., including periods of expulsion, internment, and persecution (Pew Research Center, 2012). Increases in the population of Asian Americans has been exponential since the landmark passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 which abolished immigration quotas and preferred Asian immigrants who were well-educated or professionals (Ruiz, Noe-Bustamonte, & Shah, 2023; LBJ Library, n.d, Goh et, al, 2023). For example, in 1960, the United States Census reported 490,996 Asians were in the United States, that number rose to 824,887 in 1970 and 2,539,777 in 1980 (Gibson & Jung, 2006). Today, Casarez, Farrell, Bratter, Zhang, and Kaur Mehta (2022) estimate that Asian Americans are the fastest-growing ethnic group in the U.S. with the population overall increasing from 11.9 million in 2000 to 20.4 million in 2015.

This paper aims to highlight the distinct experiences of East, Southeast, and mixed-race Asian Americans regarding entry into prestigious occupations. Specifically, this research uses logistic regression analysis with data from the 2022 American Community Surveys to examine the likelihood of entering prestigious occupations based on Asian ethnic groups.

Literature Review

This section reviews major theories explaining bias toward and between Asian Americans. Due to the complexity within Asian groups regarding occupational prestige and prejudice the theories discussed will include; the construction of occupational prestige, Asian educational attainment and the labor market, the Model Minority Myth, and the Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype. These theories serve as a foundational framework for understanding both the Asian American experience and the variability of that experience.

Construction of Occupational Prestige

The purpose behind studying occupational prestige and its ranking system has shifted throughout the 20th and 21st centuries within sociology. The study of occupational prestige in sociology dates back to the 20th century, with studies attempting to rank occupations dating back to 1925 (Davies, 1952). Davies performed an empirical study of occupation rankings from 1935 and 1947 and found that occupations that participants found prestigious in 1935 found the same jobs prestigious in 1947 and 1952 (Davies, 1952). Davies' reason for studying occupational prestige was to define and place people in different social strata to

determine social mobility (Davies, 1952). In 1976, Treiman pushed to understand the international understanding of occupational prestige and its relationship with power and privilege (Treiman, 1976). Treiman (1976) said that since World War II eighty-five studies of occupational prestige in sixty countries had been performed. Other scholars at the time, like Kraus and Schild (1978), were interested in understanding how occupational prestige is understood in the sociological imagination and the collective consciousness.

In recent years, more research has been performed to understand the impact of occupational prestige on health, the psychological toll of prestige, and the role of collective consciousness in education. Hughes, Srivastava, Leszko, and Condon's (2024) research claims that because of occupational prestige's importance to both economic and social conditions, it should be included in calculating socioeconomic status. Fujishiro, Xu, and Gong (2010) found that, even when controlling for other SES factors like income and education, those with more prestigious occupations also reported higher health scores. Lynn and Ellerbach (2016) found that those with more education think more similarly about prestigious occupations than those with less education. Understanding the formation and nature of occupational prestige is essential for grasping the significance of entering a prestigious occupation for Asian Americans.

Asian Educational Attainment and the Labor Market

The differences in educational attainment between Asian Americans and Non-Hispanic Whites have been well-researched, however the debate on what

contributes to this phenomenon is ongoing. Lee and Zhou (2014; 2015) have coined what is known as the Asian American Achievement Paradox and believe that Asian Americans leverage cultural capital to create strict success frameworks of academic success. Juang, Baolin Qin, and Park (2013) conversely, dispel ideas of monolithic Asian parenting of the ‘Tiger mother’ claiming that so-called parenting does not actually achieve high academic outcomes. Finally, Hsin and Xie (2014) argue that greater academic achievement can be attributed to greater effort exerted in academic success and that effort will result in achievement.

While Asian educational attainment over Non-Hispanic Whites has been recorded of East Asians, disproportionate measures affect Southeast Asians. Lee and Zhou (2014) assert that a consequence of the strict success framework of academic achievement, is that ethnicities that do not have high levels of achievement are purposefully distanced from other high achieving Asian ethnic groups. Goh, Lei, and Zou (2023) describe in their study, that 83% of Taiwanese and 60% of Chinese Americans were college graduates while the Cambodian and Laotian American graduation rates were well below the national average.

Lee, Goyette, Song, and Xie (2024) found that although Asian Americans outpace all other ethnic groups in terms of education, including non-Hispanic whites, Asian groups face upward mobility and labor market entry bias and this bias is varied by Asian group. A compelling and recent example that demonstrates the relationship between education, occupation and heterogeneous Asian groups is that of the 2020 Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard affirmative action Supreme Court case (Lee, 2021). Similar to divisions explained above in

education and the labor market, Asian American students were divided on their support of affirmative action. For example, the main plaintiff of the case was a Chinese student who was rejected from Harvard. 59% of Chinese Americans support affirmative action, 82% for Korean Americans, and 80% for Indian Americans support affirmative action (Goh et. al. 2023; Lee, 2021). Thang Diep, an anti-affirmative action Vietnamese American who testified on behalf of Harvard University during the case, demonstrates the divided nature of affirmative action and which Asian groups more greatly benefit from affirmative action (Lee, 2021). This affirmative action case not only demonstrates the divide in Asian ethnic groups but Lee, Goyette, Song and Xie (2021) also argue that understanding affirmative action and therefore elite college credentials, helps to understand how Asian Americans preemptively prepare to overcome labor market bias. Understanding general trends in Asian American educational attainment and labor market entry is crucial for understanding access to prestigious occupations. However, it is equally important to acknowledge the disparities between East and Southeast Asians, as their distinct experiences in educational attainment and labor market entry will significantly influence who can enter prestigious occupations.

Model Minority Myth

The Model Minority Myth (MMM) is a term used to define Asian Americans as a successful minority through their hard work, dedication, and obedience, leading Asian Americans to be seen as a law-abiding and non-problematic group (Ruiz et. al, 2023; Shih et. al, 2019). The MMM was first

used in the 1960s to describe Japanese and Chinese Americans and continued to be reinforced into the 1980's where they were described as "whiz kids" in the New York Times (Ruiz et. al, 2023). Because of their high-achieving status, Asian Americans have been described as "honorary whites", especially in comparison to other ethnic groups (Yoo et. al., 2021). However, if Asian Americans fail to perform to the standards of the MMM they are seen as foreigners (Yoo et. al., 2021).

Fields beyond sociology including; law, education, and psychology have criticized the MMM for wrongly perpetuating that racism is no longer a problem in the United States for the perceived achievement of a minority over Non-Hispanic Whites (Shih et. al, 2019). The MMM has also been critiqued for disregarding the diversity of experiences of Asian Americans and the psychological toll the MMM has on Asian Americans (Yoo et. al, 2021; Shih et. al, 2019). From the inception of the Model Minority Myth, it has centered on highlighting the achievements of East Asians and has excluded Southeast and South Asians from the "honorary white" status (Yoo et. al., 2021). The MMM also disregards the experiences of multiracial/multiethnic, queer, low-income, or religious minority Asian Americans (Yoo et. al.,2021). In a survey performed by the Pew Research Center to understand Asian Americans' experiences with the MMM, they found that 60% of U.S.-born Asian Americans said that using the MMM to describe Asian Americans to be 'a bad thing' (Ruiz, Im, Tian, 2023).

The MMM is psychologically harmful, particularly to youth and women. The psychological effects of the MMM on Asian American youth have been

studied by Russell and McCurdy (2023). They found that youth were particularly affected by the “sexual model minority” myth where Asian Americans are thought to be not sexually deviant, this was particularly challenging for LGBTQIA+ youth (Russell and McCurdy, 2023). Russel and McCurdy (2023) also found that Southeast Asian youth were disproportionately affected by bullying the most. Chou and Feagin (2015) show that other psychological tolls of the MMM show that Asian American men feel emasculated and women feel like sexual objects. Goh, Lei, and Zou (2023) found a similar outcome in their study that East Asian women felt pressure to be hyper feminine and struggled with self-esteem and general mental health. Understanding the Model Minority Myth (MMM) is critical for comprehending barriers and expectations for Asian Americans to achieve prestigious occupations. The MMM sheds light on the divisions in experiences between East and Southeast Asian communities, particularly concerning biases and expectations placed on different Asian American groups.

Perpetual Foreigner Stereotype

The perpetual foreigner stereotype refers to the idea that ethnic minorities in the United States may be seen as an out group or as “un-American” compared to the dominant Non-Hispanic White majority (Huynh et. al, 2011). Devos and Mohamed (2014) describe the American = White Effect to show that individuals assume a Non-Hispanic White individual is more likely to be an American than an Asian person even when information confirming the Asian person’s American identity was given. Goh, Lei, and Zou (2023) found that white Americans

consider East Asians to be more American than their Southeast Asian counterparts.

While the Model Minority Myth places Asian Americans at the top and as a successful race, their continued perception of foreigners is often overlooked (Shih et. al, 2019). Although the perpetual foreigner stereotype can be applied to all minority ethnic groups in the United States; Huynh, Devos, and Smalarz (2011) found that out of the Latinos, Black, and Asian Americans who participated in their study, the psychological toll of feeling foreign in their own home was highest for Asian Americans.

A recent and prominent example that highlights the quick shift in American sentiment of Asian Americans from the MMM to the perpetual foreigner was demonstrated through the COVID-19 pandemic. Between 2020 and 2022, 11,500 anti-Asian violent cases were documented, most targeted at Asian women (Goh et. al., 2023). Daley, Gallagher & Bodenhausen (2022) demonstrated that during the COVID-19 pandemic the Non-Hispanic White participants of their study determined Non-Hispanic Whites as most American on a face-rating measure. Li and Nicholson (2021) show that the pandemic demonstrated that although America may promise a color-blind society the anti-Asian hate of the pandemic mimicked that of the ‘yellow-peril’ of the pre-civil rights era (Li & Nicholson, 2021).

Methods

This research uses the 2022 American Community Survey Data (ACS) to understand occupational prestige among Asian groups. ACS is a national survey collected annually by the U.S. Census Bureau. The ACS utilizes a combination of mailed questionnaires, telephone interviews, and internet responses to gather information from a sample of households across the United States. The survey covers various topics such as demographics, education, employment, housing, and more, providing a comprehensive snapshot of the nation's characteristics and trends. The data collected through the ACS helps government agencies, businesses, researchers, and policymakers make informed decisions and allocate resources effectively (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023).

ACS data was taken from the IPUMS USA database, which provides free access to social and economic census and survey data (IPUMS, n.d.). The ACS 2022 dataset contains 3,373,378 respondents. Of those 252,872 self-reported as Asian American.

Measurements

Defining prestigious occupation was taken from the management in business, science, and arts variable from ACS data (raw codes from ACS data can be found in Appendix 1). This variable contained 20 different sectors included in the business, science, and arts. Race was constructed using the ACS race variable with its 253 detailed codes ranging from 100 to 997. Chinese was coded using ACS code 400, Southeast included codes 660 to 667 which included Cambodian, Hmong, Laotian, Thai, Bangladeshi, Burmese, Indonesian, and Malaysian. The

Chinese sample contained 47,962 respondents and the Southeast Asian sample contained 14,231 respondents. ACS had a preexisting White and Asian group so that group was used and remained coded the same, the code being 802 which contained 45,435 respondents in the sample. The preexisting Non-Hispanic White category contained 2,249,576 respondents and was code 100.

Control variables include age (in years), sex (male = 0 [ref.]), education (in years), citizenship (citizen = 0[ref.]), english speaking (speaks english = 0 [ref.]), time in the U.S. (in years), marital status (married = 0 [ref.]).

Analysis

A bivariate analysis was first performed to understand the relationships between management occupations and race with control variables. Then, three multivariate logistic regression models were generated to understand management occupation. Table 1 depicts descriptive statistics of independent variables about management occupations. Table 2 further explores the relationship between different Asian groups and management occupations in a logistic regression.

Results

Table 1 shows the descriptive statistics of the bivariate analysis of the independent variables in an ANOVA calculation of whether the respondent was in a management occupation or not. An ANOVA calculation was performed on each variable, and the p-values listed correspond to each calculation. All of the independent variables showed statistical significance of a p-value of 0.000. Chinese have the highest mean at 0.076 then Asian and white at 0.06 and

Southeast Asian at 0.051. The highest mean of ages is 45-54 with a mean of 0.134. The highest mean was four years of education with a mean of 0.149. As Table 1 demonstrates, there is statistical significance amongst different Asian groups. However, more rigorous statistical analysis is needed to more fully understand these results. To further explore this relationship a logistic regression is needed.

Table 1 Independent Variable Descriptive Statistics about Management Occupations

	<i>Observations</i>	<i>Percent</i>	<i>P-Value</i>
Race			0.000
Non-Hispanic White	2,249,576	95.43%	
Chinese	47, 962	2.03%	
Southeast	14, 231	0.63%	
Asian and White	45,435	1.93%	
Male	1,656,215	70.26%	0.000
Ages			0.000
18-24	286,046	12.13%	
25-35	441,252	18.72%	
36-44	366,467	15.55%	
45-54	400,458	16.99%	
55-64	478,725	20.31%	
65+	754,724	32.02%	
Education			0.000

High school or less	1,003,224	42.56%	
1 year college	366,908	15.57%	
2 years college	230,535	9.78%	
4 years college	556,018	23.59%	
5+ years	360,991	15.31%	
Citizenship	271,010	11.50%	0.000
Years in the U.S.			0.000
0-5 years	65,550	2.79%	
6-10 years	52,455	2.23%	
11-15 years	41,522	1.76%	
16-20 years	46,006	1.95%	
21+ years	259,508	11.00%	
Marital Status			0.000
Married	1,446,569	61.37%	
Separated	528,351	22.414%	
Single	1,398,458	59.33%	

Source: American Community Survey 2022. N = 2,357,204

Table 2 shows the results of a logistic regression analysis. Model 1 shows that when compared to Non-Hispanic Whites, Chinese are 7% less likely to be employed in a management occupation (OR = 0.93). Similarly, Southeast Asians are 20% less likely to be occupied. The mixed Asian group is no more or less likely to be employed compared to Non-Hispanic Whites and it is not statistically

significant. Being male makes being in a management occupation more likely by 70% when compared to females. Respondents in the age group 36-44 are 2.89 times more likely to enter a management occupation and those in the 45-54 age group are 2.90 times more likely than the reference group of 18-24. When compared to Highschool, each year of additional education made entering a management occupation more likely by 24% (OR = 1.24). Those with citizenship status are more likely to be occupied by 14%. Those who speak English are 2.05 times more likely to enter management occupations than non-English speakers. This is conducive to research from Kim and Sakamoto (2010) who found that Asian immigrants who did not speak fluent English found reduced opportunities in the labor market and bilingualism did not demonstrate a significant advantage in the labor market. For each year living in the U.S., entering a management occupation is more likely by 5% (OR = 1.05). When compared to being married, being separated makes entering a management occupation less likely by 13% and being single less likely by 27%.

Table 2 Logistic Regression of Asian Penalty of Management Jobs

	<i>Odds Ratio</i>
Race	
Chinese	0.93**
Southeast	0.80***
Asian and White	1.00
Male	1.70***

Ages	
18-24	-
25-35	2.26***
36-44	2.9***
45-54	2.91***
55-64	2.45***
65+	0.92
Education	1.24***
Citizenship	1.14***
English Speaking	2.05***
Years in the U.S.	1.05***
Marital Status	
Married	-
Separated	0.87***
Single	0.73***

Notes: * $P < .05$, ** $P < 0.01$, *** $< .001$.

Source: American Community Survey 2022. $N = 2,357,204$

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times more likely to enter a management occupation and those in the 45-54 age group are 2.91 times more likely than the reference group of 18-24. When compared to Highschool, each year of additional education made entering a management occupation more likely by 24% (OR = 1.24). Those with citizenship status are more likely to be occupied by 14%. Those who speak English are 2.05 times more likely to enter management occupations than non-English speakers. This is consistent with research from Kim and Sakamoto (2010) who found that Asian immigrants who did not speak fluent English found reduced opportunities in the labor market and bilingualism did not demonstrate a significant advantage in the labor market. For each year living in the U.S., entering a management occupation is more likely by 5% (OR = 1.05). When compared to being married, being separated makes entering a management occupation less likely by 13% and being single less likely by 27%.

Discussion

This research examines the likelihood of entering a prestigious occupation, defined as a management occupation in business, science, or arts, dependent on Asian group status and moderated by various independent variables. Overall, the results of the above study are consistent with past scholarly findings indicating that Asian groups have historically faced marginalization from entering prestigious occupations. Lee, Goyette, Song, and Xie (2024) found that although Asian Americans outpace all other ethnic groups in terms of education, including non-Hispanic whites, Asian groups face upward mobility and labor market entry

bias and it is varied by Asian group. My research substantiates these claims by demonstrating that Chinese face labor market entry bias at a decreased rate than Southeast Asians. Zhou and Kim (2014) found that although prior research showed that Asian women outpaced white women in labor market performance, Asian women were more likely to be unemployed and less likely to be in supervisor positions. The above regression analysis validates this assertion by illustrating that even when education is kept constant, Asian groups are less likely to be employed in prestigious occupations. Examining the likelihood of entering management professions is crucial for understanding the distribution of power in America and identifying access to social class.

Those who do not conform to the stereotypical white appearance of Americans, face an Asian penalty in prestigious occupations. Goh, Lei, and Zou (2023) found that white Americans consider East Asians to be more American than their Southeast Asian counterparts, this may describe the finding in this study that Southeast Asians were least likely to enter management occupations. Another possible explanation for this phenomenon is the perpetual foreigner stereotype which was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Daley, Gallagher & Bodenhausen, 2022). Further evidence for perpetual foreigner bias against Asian groups in the labor market is demonstrated through the finding that those of mixed-race backgrounds, particularly those with white heritage, experience benefits similar to those of Whites over Asians in management occupations. Those who are non-white continue to be excluded from opportunities for wealth

and prestige because of their ethnic background, even when other variables, like education, are accounted for.

This study suggests the importance of understanding the unique experiences of different ethnic groups in relation to the likelihood of entering a prestigious occupation. For example, Chinese are more likely to enter into management occupations than Southeast Asians. However, in American society, Asians are often grouped into one large homogeneous group. A historical example could be shown through the U.S. Census where Asian groups have been traditionally misscategorized (Gibson and Jung, 2005). Yang and Charles (2021) found similar findings that although Americans often view Asian groups as monolithic, different cultural and ethnic Asian groups have distinct opinions and experiences relating to sexuality, gender, and politics. When this type of categorization is done valuable information about the unique experiences of distinct groups is not accounted for or valued. Policies that champion the Model Minority Myth harm Asian American youth because they define them as “high-performing and low-risk” and do not take into account the individual needs of each ethnic community (Russell and McCurdy, 2023). Other research in the field indicates that when cultural differences were taken into account, there were different health outcomes for different Asian groups (Sadler et. al 2003). As my research confirms, there are varying levels of occupation bias towards different Asian groups; Southeast Asians receive a different degree of prejudice than Chinese. This important distinction could not be found without understanding that Asians are not heterogeneous.

The results of this paper have important conclusions for diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts (DEI) in assisting minority groups to achieve equal access to prestigious occupations in management professions. Asians have been consistently misrepresented in DEI efforts and a call to support Asians is already underway in the STEM field (Yeo, Jeon & Jin 2022; Iporac, 2020). Asian groups are being left behind at different rates, as the above results demonstrate Southeast Asians are being left behind more so than Chinese and mixed-race individuals experience a similar likelihood as that of non-Hispanic whites. Efforts to individually target the unique needs of Asian subgroups should be considered in DEI efforts, instead of aggregating DEI resources around the idea that Asians are one homogenous group.

Conclusion

The above study sought to highlight the unique experiences of East, Southeast, and mixed- race Asian Americans through the likelihood of having a prestigious occupation. This study found that although Chinese and Southeast Asians were both less likely to enter into prestigious occupations, Chinese faced far less barriers than Southeast Asians. Mixed-race individuals were no more or less likely to enter into a prestigious occupation further demonstrating an Asian bias in the labor force. The findings of this research contribute to the growing research aimed at dismantling the ideology that portrays Asians as a monolithic group, instead highlighting the individual experiences of various Asian groups within the labor market.

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Appendix 1: Codes of Management Occupations

Code	Label	2022 acs
	MANAGEMENT, BUSINESS, SCIENCE, AND ARTS	
0010	Chief executives and legislators/public administration	X
0020	General and Operations Managers	X
0030	Managers in Marketing, Advertising, and Public Relations	X
0100	Administrative Services Managers	X
0110	Computer and Information Systems Managers	X
0120	Financial Managers	X
0130	Human Resources Managers	X
0140	Industrial Production Managers	X
0150	Purchasing Managers	X
0160	Transportation, Storage, and Distribution Managers	X
0205	Farmers, Ranchers, and Other Agricultural Managers	X
0220	Constructions Managers	X
0230	Education Administrators	X
0300	Architectural and Engineering Managers	X
0310	Food Service and Lodging Managers	X
0320	Funeral Directors	.
0330	Gaming Managers	.
0350	Medical and Health Services Managers	X
0360	Natural Science Managers	X
0410	Property, Real Estate, and Community Association Managers	X
0420	Social and Community Service Managers	X
0430	Managers, nec (including Postmasters)	X