The Ethnic Effects of Household Structure on Children of Asian Immigrant Families

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As compared with European immigrants during the early 20th century, immigrant families today are more heterogeneous in terms of their background, resources and migration experiences—a situation which has set the context for divergent assimilation paths among the next generation of American-born children. Because of these differences, families are not similarly equipped to deal with the dislocating effects of migration. Within this context, past research has suggested that youth have taken on diverse roles and responsibilities within the immigrant household depending on class-based constraints, gendered patterns of socialization among sons and daughters, and unequal responsibilities emerging from diverse family structures. Research has yet to consider the implications of such intra-familial dynamics on the inter-generational transmission of ethnicity and culture among children of immigrants in their adulthood.

The objective of the research is to analyze the different ways in which sons and daughters of Asian immigrants negotiate their distinctive familial roles during the processes of migratory settlement and how this results in different decisions about ethnicity and culture in their own lives. In particular, I ask:

1. First, how do the diverse familial roles of children in Asian immigrant families facilitate or impede on the formation of ethnic identity and solidarity in their adult years?

2. Second, how do the gendered ways in which sons and daughters experience and negotiate bi-cultural tensions within the family affect the ways in which they would like to practice ethnicity and culture within their own lives?

Today’s presentation will address the first question and draw on 27 in-depth interviews I conducted over the past two years, with specific examples from 9 cases conducted with select sons and daughters of Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese immigrant families in the New York/New Jersey area.

Children in immigrant households

The dislocating effects of migration can have a devastating impact on the emotional and material lives of new immigrant families by uprooting them from the security of jobs, homes, families, and friends in the homeland and move to a foreign society that is often unwelcoming. Within this in mind, scholars have paid closer attention to the various institutional contexts that may work to mitigate some of the debilitating effects of migration for immigrant parents and their children. Several contexts have been shown to mediate the cultural, social and economic adaptation of children into U.S. society throughout their lives—namely, the family, the neighborhood/community, and the school/workplace. In general, the family and the ethnic community are the main repositories of cultural values and traditions and provide spaces for children to gradually transition into mainstream society. A child’s socialization into family and ethnic-based social structures reinforces the salience of ethnicity in his/her own day-to-day life by providing a strong network of support, a buffer against outside racial discrimination, and a
space for the preservation of cultural values (Rumbaut 1997; Portes and Zhou 1993; Zhou and Bankston 1998).

However, for migrants, the family itself can also be the source of considerable instability and change. Aside from juggling the multiple burdens of work and household responsibilities, more disadvantaged immigrant parents lack the human capital, English skills and familiarity with the workings of American institutions to assist their children to their fullest capacity. The dual-earning family structure may also evolve at the expense of children, who have less time to spend with their parents and must assume greater domestic responsibilities in their absence. In the current era of globalization, it is not uncommon to see immigrant households split in two or more countries, with one or both parents working and living in one country and the child raised and educated in another—a situation that adds more strain to childhood experiences (Chee 2003; Parrenas 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). More disadvantaged Asian families are limited in their capacity to build the kinds of relationship necessary for cultivating traditional values, providing social support, enforcing rigid family hierarchies, and maintaining structured patterns of obligation and reciprocity. Children of such immigrant families are particularly susceptible to social and economic vulnerabilities in the immediate environment, because they must straddle the burdens of adapting to the new culture and the pressures of childhood while carrying the weight of parental expectations, obligations and traditional values. Such hardships may contribute to increased depression and low self-esteem among second-generation children.

In order to deal with the challenges of migration, immigrant families have had to accommodate to unusual household structures and caregiving arrangements (e.g. *latchkey kids* who take care of themselves without parental supervision; *parachute kids* who are raised and educated apart from their parents in other countries; members of *transnational families* who live and work in different countries; and *alternative caregivers* such as extended kin and nannies)—all of which have added further strain on the social and economic development of children in these families (Chee 2003; Parrenas 2001; Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001). Changing family structures can open up new sets of responsibilities and burdens for younger members of the family. Studies demonstrate that among other things, migration may shift power relations between spouses and between parent and child, because of the marginalized status of minority immigrants as well as new educational and work opportunities that facilitate the independence of women and children in the family amidst new American norms about individualism and equality.

Children of immigrants are particularly important agents in family-related matters and can exercise a certain degree of power and autonomy in relation to their parents, because of their greater familiarity with the English language and American culture, educational advantages and increased responsibilities within the household. The peculiar strains of the migration experience can thus lead to a type of “role reversal” in the power of parent and child (Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Sung 1987). Among other things, children are called on to act as language brokers for their parents; mediators and advocates in outside disputes; surrogate nannies and tutors for their younger siblings; and financial consultants and contributors to the household (*Ibid.*). Depending on their family situation, second-generation children can thus act as “cultural brokers” by facilitating the integration of the immigrant family into mainstream society.

Daughters in particular feel the brunt of familial obligation and control, even as they are granted greater autonomy through these types of responsibilities. They are more responsible for household chores and care-taking roles in their mother’s absence and are more likely to act as cultural brokers for the family (Feldman-Bianco 2000). Indeed, many of the paradoxes of migration are most deeply felt by women in the family, who are taught to behave as the
embodiments of sexual purity, family honor and cultural authenticity as a counter-strategy against outside racial marginalization (Dasgupta 1989; Espiritu 1997; Toro-Morn and Alicea 2003). Such conservative views, restrictive rules and unequal treatment may alienate daughters from family traditions and practices, particularly in the early years of adolescence. At the same time, the daughter’s felt commitment to the family in her adult years may also be enhanced by deeper familial involvement and a developing sense of empathy for the mother’s burdens, especially in cases where the father exercises strong control over the family. Greater parental concern with daughters’ behaviors has been shown to decrease the likelihood of socially deviant behavior, improve educational performance, and promote greater interest in cultural traditions in more subtle and complex ways (Suarez-Orozco and Suarez-Orozco 2001; Dion and Dion 2004).

While much work has been done on the dislocating effects of migration, scholarly research has yet to fully explore how these changing conditions may affect a child’s transition into adulthood. I identify three types of familial roles that children may assume in Asian immigrant families:

1. **familial dependents**: those who continue to rely on parents for most functions as the “dependents” of the family;
2. **cultural brokers**: those who play an active role in assisting parents in supporting family and navigating mainstream institutions;
3. **autonomous caretakers**: those who raised themselves with minimal parental involvement.

For this presentation, I will examine how each of these different migrant family structures shape the interest of second-generation in holding onto their ethnic identities and passing on the cultural traditions of their parents ancestral homeland.

This research study is based on in-depth, semi-structured, 1.5-hour interviews with 27 second-generation Korean, Chinese and Taiwanese American men and women between the ages of 25-40 who live in the New York-New Jersey metropolitan area. I targetted a diverse interview sample both in terms of their individual characteristics (e.g. current income/occupation, birth order, religion) and their familial characteristics (e.g. marital status, race of partner, sexual preference/orientation, with or without children). I contacted interviewees through chain-referrals from my diverse contacts and acquaintances, internet communities/postings (e.g. craigslist), various clubs and events I attended (e.g. book clubs and parenting groups), and select community-based organizations.

The particular case studies I cite include five familial dependents, two cultural brokers, and two autonomous caretakers between the ages of 25-33, with an even balance of Korean (4) and Chinese American respondents (5). There is about an even number of men (5) and women (4), and a greater representation of respondents who were raised in middle to upper-class backgrounds (6) than those from lower to lower-middle-class families (3).

**General findings**

Familial roles can be shaped by a number of factors, including class background, status within the family hierarchy (e.g. gender and birth order), inter-personal relations among family members, and alternative networks of social support and control (e.g. extended kin and ethnic community). My research indicates that dependents are more likely to be Korean than Chinese, not the oldest child, and from middle to upper class families. Cultural brokers are more likely to
be women, the oldest child, and from working-class families. And finally, caretakers are more likely to come from working-class families.

In terms of ethnic outcomes, I find that family roles and relationships have a neutral effect on the ethnic identities of cultural dependents, a weakening effect on those of autonomous caretakers, and a reinforcing effect on those of family brokers. Depending on the roles they assume, children of immigrant families are dependent on and integrated into their families to varying degrees, which in turn shapes the child’s sense of empathy for immigrant parental sacrifices and corresponding interest in family traditions and values. I will briefly discuss my preliminary findings on each of these three categories.

**Familial dependents**

Cultural dependents are raised in a traditional Asian family structure where parents assume adult roles and responsibilities both at work and in the home and can properly function as caretakers for underage dependents within the family. Children in such household structures are thus socialized into the traditional Asian system of obligation and reciprocity that binds them in a relationship of dependency with their parents. However, because of the hierarchical nature of this relationship that minimizes inter-generational communication, the parent-child relationship is less based on an empathetic understanding of parental experiences than a vague, unarticulated sense of obligation. In such cases, the child’s relationship to their culture and ethnicity is less certain and depends largely on other outside contextual factors, such as their level of embeddedness within extended kinship networks and the broader ethnic community.

So the question here is to what extent their outside experiences can give them perspective on the values and traditions they learn from their parents, who rarely provide such insights from their Americanized frame of reference. This process of concretization may take place in college, during independent visits to their ancestral homeland, or through some other life-altering event that pushes them to apply what they had learned from their parents to their own lived experiences and re-conceptualize all of this within their own self-constructed framework of ethnicity. For example, those students who lived in neighborhoods or attended colleges with relatively larger Asian American populations were more likely to understand their parents’ values and perspectives and hence feel a stronger connection to their ethnic roots. Such outside factors help to bridge the gap between parent and child by helping them to understand their parents’ experiences through the lens of their own personal lives.

In other cases, intergenerational communication—whether based on verbal or some other emotive tie—helped to differentiate between those cultural dependents who expressed a stronger sense of pride in their ethnicity and those who did not. Sometimes this bridge was created by other cultural brokers in the family even if the interviewee herself was raised as dependent. For example, Charles, a 35-year-old resident of Fort Lee, a Korean American suburb in NJ, was raised the youngest and only son in a divorced household as a cultural dependent but reported a relatively strong relationship with his mother. His occupation and community work involves regular contact with Korean immigrants and Korean Americans in both NY and NJ. He is also active in Korean American organizations, makes regular trips to Korea, speaks conversational Korean, and now has close friends and romantic partners who are mostly Korean. He is earnestly seeking to fulfill his parents’ wish for him to marry the “right” Korean woman.

In contrast, the two Korean American interviewees, Young and Jinah, who were less likely to socialize with co-ethnic friends and romantic partners, expressed an inability to connect emotionally with their parents and relate to what they saw as their parents’ “narrow-minded”
view of the world. For example, Jinah is a high-achieving 30-year-old young professional and middle child of four. She greatly values her autonomy from her parents, whose views and traditions she did not feel she quite understood and seemed parochial to her in some sense. Her parents are quite active within the Korean American community partly b/c her father is the elder of the church, but she says she wishes they could learn English better and integrate themselves into American society instead of confining themselves to this Korean American niche.

Although Korean American in her own way, she seemed to identify more with her “global” and “cosmopolitan” American identity and explained her disdain for people who try to “typecast” her as a certain type of Korean American. Her friendship network has become more racially diverse from her college days when she avoided Korean Americans but explains that she seems to develop friendships and romantic relationships more with internationals from around the world. She interprets her parents’ success through this American lens:

“So I mean, you know you always go through identity crises. And growing up, I only wanted to have blonde hair, blue eyes, I mean I wanted to look like everyone else, and it weighed on my confidence and everything. And then you kind of grow into your own. And I think just finally just sort of started growing up, becoming more confident, and I think it’s just about late twenties, early thirties, I was finally there. I was finally [like] this is who I am. I’m Korean, my parents immigrated from Korea with nothing, they brought up this great business, they gave their kids everything. I didn’t come from a lot of money, I didn’t come from a castle, and I’m really proud of it. And I love saying that I’m American. I love saying I’m American. And my parents are the American Dream and I’m sort of perpetuating that legacy, so it’s important for me.”

She says she wants to marry a Korean so she can be the “good daughter” but does not feel this will happen:

“Life’s not that easy that way. I haven’t been attracted to a Korean guy in a long time either and I think a lot of Korean guys don’t know what to do with me, because I’m not yam-jo-neh (gentle-mannered), I’m ambitious. I’m kind of more like a guy. I’m friends with people outside of being Korean, I think I’m pretty confident. I feel like I’m pretty comfortable in different settings. And a lot of Koreans who just like to hang out with Koreans, I don’t find them-, they stay within their niche because that’s where they’re most comfortable. And I think they see me and all these different groups and I’m pretty much the same.”

Proclaiming to be “American” more so than “Korean American,” Young conveyed to me how the pressures of being the only “male heir” among his female siblings and cousins made him rebel by dating non-Korean women and physically distancing himself from his overprotective parents. He also explains, “I mean I love my parents, but I guess I quickly run out of things to talk to them about. And so I mean some people are just really close to their parents, and they can just chit-chat the night away with them. But with me, there’s just not much of a topic of conversation.” He states:
“I don’t have anything really unpleasant other than you know, I wanted them to be more Americanized, I kind of always wanted them to speak English better and I didn’t want them to be different. I guess I wanted them to speak English better, I wanted them to fit in better, I wanted them to be more American but they weren’t. They’re in their own diaspora, they were hanging out with their own crowd, they made their own world and now I realize it’s fine, everyone has their own tradition.”

Autonomous caretakers

Children who fall under this category are forced to take care of not only household matters but also take care of themselves either because both parents are working long hours or otherwise absent or negligent when it comes to family. Autonomous caretakers usually have weaker emotional relationships with their parents, because the parents are rarely around to sustain even a basic parent-child relationship or because they have some other psychological/physical problem that impedes on this relationship (e.g. mental illness, physical/emotional abuse, etc.). Interviewees who fell under this category were more likely to feel not only detached from their parents but also, a sense of distance from their parents’ values and traditions. Some interviewees in fact blamed their parents’ problems on their Asian traditions.

Thus, autonomous caretakers developed an enhanced sense of autonomy and individuality and were rarely exposed to the cultural influence or pressures of their parents. In addition, their heightened responsibilities made at least one interviewee associate extended kinship and ethnic social structures with burdensome obligations and restrictive forms of social control. If anything, he states, the fact that they had essentially raised themselves meant they deserved to be free of such undue familial obligations and had the right to make their own life decisions.

Cindy, a 26-year-old Chinese American, had been raised by a neglectful absentee father and was instead raised by a series of domestic workers, chauffeurs, and an abusive stepmother in different phases of her life. She went through extraordinary struggles throughout her life because of this dysfunctional household, including abandonment, sexual and emotional abuse, and drug addiction among other things, but had finally reached a point in her life where she could seek help. The vast majority of her friends and romantic partners are White American with only a handful of Asian Americans. In the preliminary questionnaire, she states: “I have no ‘real’ Chinese ethnic identity. I am a twinkie/banana. Too "white" to fit in with the Asians.”

Jasmine, a 27-year-old Chinese American language program assistant, was raised in a low-income African American neighborhood in Connecticut. Her parents worked long hours and were not acculturated enough to provide guidance for her on school matters, so she states that essentially her “sister raised her.” She had no extended relatives with whom they had close relations, was not part of any ethnic community, and not religious enough to go to church. In addition, the two sisters took care of their own meals and household bills as they got older. She states that about 40% of her friends are Asian American and the rest White and Latino but most of her partners have been Jewish. In addition, she struggled considerably with her racial identity and states that she felt ashamed of being Asian, because she had been racially taunted and harassed by her classmates throughout high school with no support network to rely on. She states:
“I mean I hated the way I looked, I hated the way my parents spoke Chinese to me. Just because I hated how loud they sounded when they spoke Chinese, I hated how everyone turned their heads, as if we were like some aliens from somewhere.”

She says that she worked on hanging out with Asians when she reached college but seems wary about becoming too attached to any type of identity. In this sense, her experience is defined not so much by her “assimilation” but rather by her “isolation” from any type of community:

“I’m very independent, meaning I cut people off really easily. And so I never had big groups of friends, so I never figured how people can be normal in a group. Just because I’ve always been such an outcast. I think it was like this mentality always of um you have to figure out how to form your own identity when you don’t have a community. So you try to form an identity by being…you want to feel special and so you craft a very individual identity that’s pretty fragile because when you don’t have whatever person that makes you feel special, then you realize you can’t really survive that much outside of the group.”

Cultural brokers

Cultural brokers tend to be more involved and are more integrated into the family structure because of their role as intermediaries between the family and outside institutions (broker) and their responsibility as family caretakers that can continue on into adulthood (caretaker). As with caretakers, cultural brokers can exercise a greater sense of power and autonomy from parents more so than cultural dependents. The difference is that they are not necessarily “on their own” as with autonomous caretakers but are actively involved in assisting both parents and children of the family in numerous capacities—whether or not this role is assumed willingly or unwillingly as youth. As youth, many cultural brokers expressed anxiety, frustration, and resentment in having to assume “adult” responsibilities for their parents. For example, some interviewees conveyed some of the difficulties they experienced in having to wake up early in the morning as children to go help out at the business or assuming the awkward position of bargaining with merchants when they went shopping with their mothers.

Although some of these feelings may persist as they transition into adulthood, these interviewees seemed to develop a notable appreciation for their parents’ sacrifices and hardships as they got older. In their constant negotiation between two worlds, cultural brokers seem to develop a greater sense of empathy for the vulnerable status of their parents and their discrimination from dominant society. In addition, they are more likely to learn about the traditions and tribulations of their parents, concretizing their sense of ethnic and cultural identification in the process. As part of their duties, they are also expected to become more involved with the larger ethnic community, ties which continue on as they transition into adulthood. In this sense, they are not only cultural brokers and family caretakers, but also, the “cultural keepers” of family traditions.

Probably the best example of this is Mark, one 27-year-old Chinese American male who’d immigrated from the Philippines at age 3. Although the oldest son of the family, he was responsible for taking care of both household chores (e.g. laundry, cleaning the floor with rags, preparing meals) and parental caretaking responsibilities, because his sister was too young at the time. As an adult, he now provides financial assistance to his sister and he’s noticed how his
parents turn to him for advice on major family decisions. In terms of his ethnic identity, Mark is quite proficient in Chinese and most of his closest friends are Asian Americans and all his romantic partners Asian. He states:

“I guess you can say I relate more to the Chinese than the Filipino side. *In what ways?* More I think in the mentality um…in terms of how I make decisions. A lot of times it’s very family-based, whether it’s career or simple things like daily events. A lot of times family comes into play, and I find that being more of a Chinese role. Not that the Filipino side’s *not* family-oriented. But I’m more Chinese in the sense of saving face or basing my decision sometimes on money [rather than] desire, you know.”

Because of this strong emphasis he placed on family, he decided on his own to forfeit the opportunity to go to a good college so that he could pay for his sister’s college tuition and allow her to enjoy the privileges of a private university. He says he is merely following the footsteps of his parents who had also sacrificed everything by immigrating to America for their children. For this reason, Mark describes Chinese culture in very familial terms.

“You know and the whole living at home thing too I think is very Chinese um. Umm…I’d say 80 percent of my friends still live at home. And most of them, it’s not a problem at all. You know like my non-Chinese friends, they seem to have qualms about still living at home past a certain age. Whereas with my Chinese friends, it’s in a weird way it’s kind of expected that you’re still at home past college. Not that there’s an age limit per say, but it’s accepted and it’s not a big deal. No one’s gonna give you crap for it. You know people realize, okay, what are you doing, you’re helping with the family bills or you know, helping with the family business, or is it just because you like living at home still, you know. And I think that’s a very Chinese trait too.”

Interestingly, several of my Chinese interviewees reported living with or near their parents even after college and in some cases, financially supporting them. This was a less common pattern among Korean American interviewees, although I am still in the processes of understanding the roots of this cultural or perhaps underlying class difference.

Mark also makes the interesting observation that he feels more emotionally attached to his parent’s culture than his younger sister, because he had directly witnessed the hardships of his parents during the early years of their immigration, whereas his sister grew up during a more comfortable stage in his family’s life.

“And she’s pretty much…she’s very…when she was first born, it was always like a running joke when…you know people meet her for the first time, and they’re like, Oh, she’s the American in the family. Cause she was born here and you know. And you could see it like she did it-, like obviously my experience, my whole parents’ transitioning as immigrants, right? My sister never did. You know. She was too young to remember any of it, and by the time she was old enough to remember anything, we already had a decent place to live, my parents had decent jobs, so she got used to this comfortable lifestyle. You know like, she
needed an allowance and...you know it was very textbook in her mind, you know.
And I think TV plays a big role in that probably.”

The fact that he could empathize with his parents’ hardships made him feel much closer to their culture and traditions and enabled him to understand the context behind generational differences.

**Conclusion**

My general finding is that family plays a lesser role in ethnic identity formation among independent family caretakers, a secondary role among familial dependents, and a central role among cultural brokers. This is because each role is associated with varying degrees of familial integration and dependency, which then shapes the child’s sense of empathy for immigrant parental sacrifices and corresponding levels of interest in family traditions and values. Thus, intergenerational communication is central to understanding how gender, ethnicity, and class come together in shaping the views and behaviors of 2nd generation Asian Americans within the context of different household structures.

My broader interest is in seeing how the unique constraints that these families face because of their marginal social status affect their children’s ability to adapt to the host society on a socio-psychological level. By studying the inter-generational transmission of ethnicity, culture and family, the research will bring us closer to understanding the socio-psychological adjustment of children of immigrants to the family migration experience, the marital patterns of Asian American groups (e.g. gender differences in intermarriage rates), gender equality in the families/relationships of native-born Asian Americans, the role of children in facilitating the adaptation of immigrant families into the U.S. and the diverse ways in which ethnic identities and culture may be passed down to future generations of Asian Americans—all of which are crucial elements in the processes of adaptation and assimilation. Further research on the continuing significance of family—one of the important sites for the intergenerational transmission of ethnicity—may push us to reconsider what is going on in the assimilation processes of future generations of Asian Americans.