“Doing Family” Among Asian American Sons and Daughters
by Angie Y. Chung
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Many scholars have long studied the ways in which gender structures the migration experiences of immigrants and their children, but have yet to consider the way it may shape the assimilation trajectories of future generations. The common perception is that for American-born daughters, assimilation into American society connotes freedom from the oppressive roles and traditions of their parents’ ancestral culture. On the one hand, it may be a true to a certain degree that strict adherence to traditional norms may be perceived as disadvantageous to second-generation Asian American women who are expected to assume more subservient, domestic roles within the family that may clash with the more gender-equal normative structures of American society. This conflict formatively shapes their struggles with ethnic identity and family as they transition into adulthood.

On the other hand, this approach is also problematic in the way it views the relationship between gender and ethnicity in a very dichotomous and additive way. In other words, family connotes traditional culture which in turn connotes gender inequality, whereas assimilation represents liberation from tradition and sexism. Hence, Asian American women are expected to “assimilate” in order to escape the oppressive aspects of gender inequality in Asian immigrant families. My study on the other hand argues that such a perspective essentializes the complexities of gender and racial inequality in American society. This is namely because Asian American women are not necessarily in an either-or situation as such paradigms may suggest. Americanization does not necessarily entail ethnic detachment or full socio-cultural assimilation into White American society but can encompass re-interpreting and practicing traditional norms through an American lens. In this respect, Asian American women will not necessarily shed all positive aspects of their parents’ homeland culture, including the value of family which is an important medium for the intergenerational transmission of ethnicity and culture, but may negotiate their identities, cultural values and traditions with their desire for greater independence as American women.

Based on preliminary findings, my research study considers some of the complex ways 2nd generation (American-born/raised) sons and daughters of Asian immigrant families carry on ethnicity and family culture in their adult lives in ways that are neglected in orthodox measures of assimilation. In particular, I describe three gendered ways sons and daughters maintain ethnicity by carrying on select aspects of family traditions: I argue that the gendered ways children of immigrants are integrated into the household structure and the different levels of emotional engagement and struggles with family that accompany these unequal roles and responsibilities lead to gendered ways of viewing and practicing ethnicity in their adult lives.

In particular, among those who choose to carry on their family culture, sons are more likely to adopt more orthodox and low-maintenance aspects of their ethnicity that require less personal involvement and little change in the status quo (e.g. symbolic practices and marrying within their ethnic group). In contrast, daughters are more likely to cultivate innovative and high-maintenance interpretations of family culture that will enable them to negotiate more equitable gender relations within their intimate family relationships.

The following presentation will focus in on the first of two objectives and touch briefly on the second. Today’s presentation is broadly based on 50 in-depth interviews I conducted over the past two years, with specific references to nine sons and daughters of Korean, Chinese, and Taiwanese immigrant families in the NY/NJ area.

Literature review
The following presentation explores the gendered views and practices of “cultural carriers”—or the children of immigrants, who are designated to carry on the cultural values and traditions of the family to the next generation of American-born children. Cultural carriers are important because their views and practices may shape the ways in which ethnic identity and ancestral traditions are cultivated and maintained across generations—a role that will shape the assimilation trajectories of select ethnic populations.

Traditional studies on assimilation use more visible, orthodox indicators such as language retention, self-identification, co-ethnic networks, maintenance of traditional practices, and intermarriage rates to measure the persistence of ethnicity among the next generation. Granted, such indicators do suggest closer ties to the parents’ immigrant homeland culture, whereas weak evidence of such ethnic-based practices may imply that they have become more acculturated into mainstream society. At the same time, Omi and Winant (1994) suggest that ethnicity, like contemporary racism, can not be identified simply through explicit languages, labels and practices but may draw on a variety of subtle behaviors and coded cultural repertoires learned from past familial or ethnic-based experiences to deal with different life situations.

With this in mind, the study expands on conventional methods of expressing ethnic identity to include the more subtle and complex ways values and practices learned in the immigrant family can reappear in the lives of second-generation sons and daughters. Within this context, a number of studies have found that the ways in which ethnicity and family culture is transmitted across generations can vary by gender.

In particular, there are two approaches that have looked at the way ethnicity may be conveyed to sons and daughters of immigrants in gendered ways.

Social privilege: The first approach emphasizes the “gendered privileges” that sons may accrue by preserving traditional family values and maintaining the status quo. In most Asian cultures, sons are the ones who carry on the family lineage through their names and their cultural traditions through endogamy. More importantly, sons are expected to derive more gender advantages and privileges by maintaining traditional values about the domestic and marital responsibilities of women, instead of conforming to more equitable gender norms embedded in American culture. As a result, sons are more likely to marry within their racial or ethnic group, reproduce family structures similar to those of their immigrant family, and carry on the gender roles into which they are socialized ((Zhou & Bankston 1998 #440)). This approach however is too dichotomous in the way it portrays the gender inequities of Asian culture versus the supposed gender equality of American culture. Second, it is not broad enough to consider the diverse and unorthodox ways 2nd generation sons and daughters may cultivate and maintain ethnicity in their lives.

Social control: The second approach which comes from the gender and migration literature explores the restrictive social controls that Asian immigrant parents exert on their daughters in order to preserve sanctified gender roles and maintain the sexual purity, family honor, and cultural authenticity in the face of outside racial marginalization (Dasgupta 1989; Espiritu 1997; Toro-Morn and Alicea 2003). Because daughters are expected to pass on these traditions through their roles as “mothers,” they are also perceived as the “cultural carriers” for family values and traditions. 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). Numerous studies have looked at how parents particularly try to control the sexuality of their daughters, e.g. by regulating their social and dating behaviors, much more so than they do their sons. Although
gender inequality is a clear factor in shaping the behavior of second-generation Asian Americans, it is unclear to what extent these pressures will shape the processes of ethnic identity formation among sons and daughters. In other words, how do daughters negotiate these gendered experiences when they are asked about the relative value of family?

The following talk incorporates both approaches to underscore the way social integration into family structures may determine the gendered ways American sons and daughters view and practice ethnicity in their own adult lives. Daughters are integrated into the family in more profound ways vis-à-vis various gender roles (e.g. as cultural brokers, family caretakers, and symbolic embodiments of family honor). At the same time, their socialization into family structures may be done on less equitable terms because of the restrictive nature of these gender roles. Based on this, I argue that the more emotional and complicated way daughters are involved in family matters may lay the foundations for more innovative, engaged, and profound ways of fulfilling their parents’ aspirations on family and culture.

In contrast, sons are less likely to learn about family practices through personal and emotional engagement with parents and are more likely expected to carry on ethnic roots of family “in name only.” Because sons are also more likely to derive gender privileges from maintaining the status quo, they have a tendency to value and carry on more orthodox aspects of their ancestral culture (e.g. endogamy and symbolic practices). These practices require less emotional and personal engagement with family members and more emphasis on financial support and low-maintenance obligations.

**Gender and familial integration**

The tendency of daughters to carry on traditional ethnic values partly depends on their level of integration into the immigrant family, which is partly shaped by varying household roles and responsibilities. The brokering role of Asian American daughters leads to greater empathy and understanding of immigrant experiences.

To explain, children of immigrant families can be 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. In some dual-earning family structures, parents must juggle multiple work and household responsibilities, which often means that children of those families have less time to spend with their parents and must assume greater domestic responsibilities in their absence. As a result, studies have shown that among other things, these children oftentimes 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. In another paper I discuss how those who are more involved with the family are not only more likely to have positive relationships with their parents as adults but also, more likely to develop a deeper sense of empathy and understanding of their parents’ immigrant experiences and the value of their ancestral traditions.

With this in mind, the first observation I’ve made is that among those who expressed a stronger sense of ethnic identification, daughters are more likely to act as cultural brokers than sons, although this does partly depend on birth order. Although the middle child of the family, Suzanne felt that her whole family looked to her to take care of things like translating for her parents, caring for her siblings, and covering household chores in her parents absence. She states that her older sisters were not seen as responsible enough to do this sort of caretaking, whereas her brother was exempt simply because he was favored as a boy. When asked why she thought he was favored, she responds that it was because he was protected from such domestic responsibilities: “Cause you know like I would say to my parents, “Why doesn’t he do anything?” and my father would say, “he’s a boy, he’s not supposed to.”
Suzanne, who speaks intermediate Korean and whose peer network is 90% Asian, goes onto say that it was this experience of being the broker of the family and also being exposed to the hardships of her immigrant parents that made her bond more closely with other Korean peers, whom she felt better understand her experience than her White American counterparts:

So you said you had more common interests with Asian Americans even though you went to school with mostly White Americans…Um-hunh…Can you explain that a little bit more? I think it has to do with being able to talk to your friends about everyday things that perhaps a White American student won’t understand and inviting people over to your home I think is more comfortable if your lifestyle is similar. I think in high school I would’ve felt very uncomfortable to bring a White person to my house. Like what kind of things could you talk about with your Korean or Asian American friends for instance? We could talk about everything and I know that among my friends, there was a lot of these internal issues in their home where there was domestic violence or those kind of things. And I think among my Korean friends it was just understood that these things happen, and that they’re a part of life and growing up but…we knew that we could never talk to someone outside of that circle because they would see it as something being very strange. Even though we understood that these things aren’t common, we knew that among ourselves, this was just something that happens. A lot of my Korean friends, all of our parents were storeowners or worked in certain sectors like nail salons or…green groceries or dry cleaning. And you know just sharing those experiences of having to go and work there and also, having the burden of like taking care of the house and also being a student but at the same time, being the caretaker for your siblings and for your household, because your parents aren’t available to do that.

The oldest daughters in particular were responsible for taking care of household responsibilities in their parents’ absence and even assumed a type of motherly role as described by the following 25-year-old Chinese American who was raised by her oldest sister while her parents worked:

So would you say that you were very close with your sisters then? Yeah. I’m closer now with my second sister and I think it’s mainly because her mindset is more similar to mine. Whereas my older sister, she’s definitely more of a mother figure, because I have like this different level of respect for her. You know that she’s the oldest and she’s the one who watched out for us and who always tried to take care of me, you know who always tried to give me money if I needed it, who always wanted to buy me clothing, always wanted to take me shopping. You know, she didn’t want to put on my parents to have to handle those kind of things.

Peter, another younger brother, agreed that it was his older sister who took care of household chores and raising him during the period his parents worked long hours.

These patterns have much to do with the gendered ways in which children are raised in immigrant families. Sons in broker-structured households reported taking on domestic responsibilities that tie them to their parents only when the family was having economic difficulties and there either was no daughter in the family or the daughter was too young to assume such duties. Because of this, lines of parent-child communication generally tended to be strongest among daughters in broker-structured households. Cultural brokers (and hence many daughters) are more likely to develop a strong sense of family and hence carry on certain
cultural values and traditions learned within the familial context. Among other things, daughters in the study tended to visit and communicate more closely with parents, particularly their mother, as they got older and even more so when they have children. They were thus more likely to mediate conflicts between parents and siblings or remind their siblings to call or help out their parents whenever necessary.

**Communicating parental sacrifice**

In another paper, I discuss how the notion of parental sacrifice is one ideological bond that cultivates attachment to family culture, but one pattern I find is that sons and daughters vary in terms of their sense of obligation to family traditions through the gendered ways they learn about parental sacrifice. In particular, daughters are taught the value of family through the emotional bonds they create especially with mothers, whereas sons pick up these values through more indirect and superficial channels of communication.

When asked what positive value their parents taught them that they would like to pass onto their own children (should they choose to have children), most of my interviewees emphasized the ways their parents demonstrated the value of family by sacrificing everything they had back in the homeland and slaving away at their jobs to give their children a better life in America. Mark, a Chinese American creative manager who had decided to go to a state university and move in with his parents so he could pay for his sister’s private college education, states:

> So when people ask me, damn I can’t believe you paid for your sister’s tuition, you know why do you do that, I’m like it’s no big deal. And then you kinda take a look back and I’m like, it’s no big deal?? That’s practically your salary! But when I think about what my parents did, that’s a bigger sacrifice: when you’re not just giving up money, just paper at a certain point, and they gave up their life basically to start a new one.

Most interviewees suggest that it is not just because they have simply assimilated into the Americanized framework of individual achievement and meritocracy that they have chosen to better themselves through high-paying professions; rather, it is the sacrifices their parents had made as immigrants to achieve the American Dream that drove them to do well financially. Other interviewees make similar connections between their career aspirations and desire to fulfill their parents’ immigrant dreams. Jinah, a 30-year-old Korean American in finance, explains why she decided to make a lot of money and become financially independent, “I realized I wanted them to kind of understand why they came to this country and realize that we came to have children like Jinah, you know. I wanted them to feel like as if their life had purpose.”

What is interesting are the gendered ways Asian American sons and daughters learned about their parents’ immigration experience and hence interpreted parental sacrifice. Upon reaching “adulthood,” female respondents would learn about their parents’ hardships through their mothers, who found their daughters were the only secure emotional outlet for their social isolation within the extended family and the larger community. Jinah, a middle-child who felt more like the oldest in her family, related to me:

> My mother even said to me, she feels as if I’m not her daughter, that I’m her friend now. Cause [pause] I think in some way she comes to me. And I don’t always want to hear everything but she says, I’m the only one she can talk to in the family. She has close friends; she talks to them. But there are certain embarrassing things or family things you don’t want to tell anyone, so she comes to me and I was like okay.
In this particular passage, “saving face” becomes an important force that strengthens familial solidarity, including the bond between mother and daughter.

Another interviewee, Winnie, states that she knew very little of her family’s contentious history with their in-laws because her older caretaker sister would be the one to communicate with her parents and it wasn’t until she was older that her mom decided to start confiding in her.

So when did you started to learn about your family history? Was it just because of little things like you noticed or did anyone ever say things to you? My mom would talk to my sister about it of course and I think when I was younger, they would choose times not to speak about it in front of us. Like me and my brother, like they couldn’t tell us basically. So I think they would you know kind of [talk] when we’re sleeping or you know if we’re taking a shower or something, they would just kind of discuss it on their own time. But as I got older, I guess she started to kind of say, “Okay you know she’s older she can deal with it now.” And then she would just kind of talk about it. It didn’t matter if I was there or not. And I was always like [with] my mouth agape, “What do you mean? What is all this?” Like I’ve never heard of any of these things, you know, and yeah, after awhile it’s just like all right, you know, my family history’s kinda…crappy.

On the other hand, Very few men in the study related to me similar lines of communication about family opening up with either parent, unless it was focused on practical matters like advice on finance or business. Male respondents stated that their parents did not verbally communicate their hardships to their children but claimed this was something they had pieced together on their own through simple “facts” their parents would occasionally reveal to them about their former lives. The father-son relationship was equally influential in shaping the ethnic identities and transmission of cultural traditions among males in the family, although in a more indirect, symbolic, and hands-off manner.

Young, who was raised as the youngest brother in a family with three older sisters, states that his mother had played a more active role in raising him while his father was away on business, but interestingly, it is his absentee father who had taught him the one valuable lesson that he said he wanted to pass onto his own children in the future. In particular, Young says that through his own life struggles as an immigrant, his father had taught him the value of work and having children earn their keep in life.

So my father’s very much a “pull-yourself-up-by-the-bootstraps” kind of guy. So I think I sort of inherited those characteristics. So there’s this intrinsic need for me to kind of earn my keep. [tells me his father’s life story and how he supported his family when his father died at an early age] Okay. And how did you find out all about this, about your dad, did he tell you himself? Noo, I kind of just learned it empirically from him. You know he never really sat down and lectured me on any particular topic. So it was always through this quiet observation that I think I came to realize later on in my life.

The symbolic presence of absentee fathers seemed to play a key role in shaping the contours of ethnicity among sons of immigrant families. As opposed to daughters who were inextricably engaged in family affairs through their mothers, sons tended to pick up the more “visible” and “symbolic” features of family culture, which they would implicitly associate with their fathers in their absence.

Gendered expressions of ethnicity
This then brings us to the question of how children of immigrant families maintain ethnicity in gendered ways. As stated, the tendency for daughter’s proclivity to get more “emotionally” involved helps to explain why sons tend to learn more “low-maintenance” aspects of maintaining cultural traditions—i.e. things that require less emotional commitment—while daughters reaffirm their ethnic identity and practice cultural traditions in less publicly visible but intimate ways. Sons are also less likely to grapple with the gendered aspects of this tradition at least in practice and are thus expected to value and carry on traditional aspects of their ancestral culture. For this reason, the men I interviewed in the study, regardless of their level of acculturation, tended to learn and want to pass on the more orthodox aspects of their family’s cultural traditions, such as marrying women within their own ethnicity or maintaining traditional household roles. As opposed to cultivating intimate relations with their birth family, men in the study were also more likely to provide financial support for their parents by buying them cars and a retirement home, and even preparing a “nest egg” for them when they got older.

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.

While parental control over the sexuality and behavior may promote both conformity and rebellion by daughters against such cultural traditions, more profound reflection and engagement with these issues can also heighten the daughter’s understanding of these traditions and hence cultivate a more nuanced sense of ethnicity. In other words, they may find indirect ways of fulfilling their parents’ aspirations on family, culture, and career as opposed to simply transplanting the values and traditions their parents taught them. In terms of how this plays out in their own lives, daughters in the study reflected more deeply on their choice of marital partners based on both their gender-based struggles with traditional cultural values and their desire to pass on positive aspects of their family culture and negotiated their lives accordingly.

On one hand, it is true that depending on their background, women varied in terms of their willingness to marry a Korean man or to marry at all, because of negative experiences they had with sexism in either their families or their own relationships. Some hoped to marry non-co-ethnic Asian American men, who were less likely to conform to traditional gender roles but could still relate to their immigrant family experiences. One female interviewee who doubted she would marry another Korean, told me how she broke up with one White American boyfriend she dated for 4.5 years, because he didn’t understand the family part of being Korean:

My mother really liked him and my siblings really liked him. But then are a few things he just couldn’t understand about being Korean. So he didn’t understand how I probably kind of help out and help my parents out financially. And he’s just like, Jinah, you know they just want your unconditional love, just give them your unconditional love. And I was like, yeah, yeah, yeah, you give all that but you also gotta do other things so.

As suggested, daughters may not carry on the orthodox symbols, traditions, and structure of their immigrant family household, but may instead re-create the collective values, intimate relationships, and ethnic networks that underline these structures.
A few female interviewees admitted to me that they decided to shift careers to more profit-making aspirations because of their parents. One fashion boutique worker was contemplating going from acting to something more lucrative partly in consideration of her parents’ wishes. Another 25-year-old Korean American daughter of storeowners now works at an international NGO but explains how she wants to transition into law for her parents.

*Um do you feel obligated to your parents in any other sense, other than cooking for them?* [short laugh] I think with my future just cause I know this is temporary but I think I need something more solid. So I feel because ideally if I was to follow my own heart, I think I would pursue a PhD in languages but I feel like to appease my parents, I’ll go for the international law degree (ha). And um, I also feel like my mom, my parents have also given me pressure about being married. So I feel like I have to desperately search for someone so I can appease them….I also feel like even though you know that money is not the end, I think seeing how my parents lived, I think if you wanna have children and live comfortably, you have to have a good income. So part of that wanting to pursue law is, I know that comes with a good paycheck. So I think that if I were to have future children and all of that and want to provide a better life then you have to have a good job.

Suzanne interprets economic success not necessarily as the fulfillment of the American Dream but as an ingrained part of her parents’ culture and also a lesson she learned from their immigrant hardships. This may explain why the second-generation may appear to show signs of “assimilating,” but that this may be more a reflection of the immigrant legacy, not an American one.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research study has set out to understand how diverse household structures among Asian immigrant families may play a role in shaping the intergenerational transmission of ethnicity and culture in gendered ways. Traditional assimilationist measures do not take into account the diverse ways sons and daughters may maintain a sense of ethnic identity and familial traditions. Among those who expressed a stronger sense of ethnic identification, sons are more likely to embrace more orthodox aspects of their parent’s culture based on abstract relationships with their father, whereas daughters are more likely to create more innovative interpretations of this culture based on strong relationships with their mothers.

My initial findings do suggest that 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. Furthermore, there is a need to explore the gendered way ethnic identities and cultural traditions are passed onto the next generation in ways unimagined by traditional scholars in this field. 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.