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The Asian American Achievement Paradox

Asian Americans are frequently deployed as racial mascots by conservative pundits who fixate on how they been able to achieve extraordinary levels of academic attainment. They make up about one-fifth of the entering classes in Ivy League universities like Harvard, Yale, and Princeton, yet are only 5.5 percent of the U.S. population.

Unable to explain these vexing educational outcomes, pundits often point to Asian culture, traits, and values. However, this facile explanation fails to consider the pivotal role that U.S. immigration law and global development have had in ushering in a new stream of highly-educated, highly-skilled Asian immigrants.

The *hyper-selectivity* of contemporary Asian immigration means that the children of Asian immigrants begin their quest to get ahead in society from more favorable *starting points*, with greater access to *ethnic capital.*

In addition, hyper-selectivity has social psychological consequences: Asian Americans are affected by positive stereotypes and biases, which can result in *stereotype promise*—the boost in performance that comes with being perceived by teachers, guidance counselors, and peers as smart, high-achieving, and deserving. Stereotype promise, however, is a double-edged sword. It contributes to exceptionally high academic outcomes while making those who do not attain the same achievement levels feel like failures and ethnic outliers.

Moreover, the seemingly positive stereotype that enhances Asian Americans' academic performance can also work against them as they vie for leadership positions and as they often find themselves trying to break through a *bamboo ceiling.*

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4:00–5:30PM | Henry R. Luce Auditorium, 34 Hillhouse Avenue