

Modern Asian American Economic and Political Power in the United States

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Introduction

Between 1880 and 2021, Asian Americans gained considerable amounts of economic, political, and cultural power by asserting themselves as important members of the economy, as well as asserting themselves legally and in the popular consciousness. The current economic and political power the Pan-Asian-American community has was built upon a century and a half of power shifts in American law, economy, and culture. As such, this paper seeks to primarily detail the political power dynamic between Asian-Americans and other ethnic, economic, and cultural groups throughout the late 20th and 21st centuries, as well as the related economic power of Asians and Asian-Americans in brief.

For the sake of brevity, I would like to propose a broadening of Critical Race Theory such that it fits a broader set of issues politically, henceforth called “Power Theory”, where there exists an elite group that seeks to maintain power by subverting other by controlling the flow of information. For example, the court cases of the early 20th century were instances of the state, and the elite group in power, controlling the flow of naturalization and the granting of citizenship, creating new “information” where Asians are implied to be inassimilable. As such, Asian Americans must assert themselves, even today, in modern cultural and historical information to combat entrenched notions that harm and endanger Asian-American communities.

Political Power of Asian-Americans

Historically, Asian-Americans had to prove themselves as white to be naturalized as American citizens. The concept that to better one’s standing, one must become a member of the group in power is also important to these readings. In California during the late 1800s, the leaders of several nativist groups were immigrants or children of immigrants themselves, usually from formerly disenfranchised groups, such as the Irish and Italians. For example, a political

cartoon from 1882 in *Puck* magazine depicts racist caricatures of European immigrants and African Americans helping build a wall to exclude the Chinese, representing these groups' willingness to compete against the Chinese to better their own standing within a primarily Anglo America and to become part of that dominant caste of America.¹ Robert Lee specifically states that

“Irish immigrants who were in the process of consolidating their own claim to Americanness and a white racial identity led the popular anti-Chinese movement.”²

Other examples of clashes between Asian and European groups include one event where Croatians assaulted Filipino workers in Washington State. A Filipino witness stated that despite the assimilation of Filipinos into American culture and society, they were still outcasts. She bitterly mentions that “[The Croatians] couldn’t even speak English, a lot of them... The Filipinos could all speak English.”³ Similarly, the legal cases where Asians argued their case for naturalization – *Ah Yup v. U.S.*, *Ozawa v. U.S.*, and *Thind v. U.S.* – were legal cases where Asians argued their own whiteness, and for their place in the dominant Anglo-American class, in which they were denied access to. As such, we can see the U.S. Supreme Court’s willingness to alter the information of what constitutes the property of “whiteness”, as stated in the 1790 Nationality Act. These landmark cases also marginalized Asian immigrants and first-generation Asian-Americans by generating cultural notions of perpetual foreignness and exoticism.

¹ Erika Lee, *At America's Gates Chinese Immigration during the Exclusion Era, 1882-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 40.

² Robert G. Lee, *Orientalism: Asian Americans in popular culture* (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Temple University Press, 1999), 9.

³ Mae M. Ngai, *Impossible Subjects: Illegal Aliens and the Making of Modern America* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2004), 115.

The inability for Asian-Americans to shed their association with the “unfree labor” label due to their ineligibility to become naturalized citizens of the United States and the language barrier from the first-generation of immigrants continued to suppress Asian voices in the information stream of the 19th and early 20th centuries. As such, the political power of the majority was the only power that was spreading information during this time and the only power in control of information.

By the 1980s, after the Black and Yellow Power movements, another landmark case involves the murder of Vincent Chin, a 27 year-old student who was beaten to death. The perpetrators were tried for second-degree murder, but the sentence was eventually reduced to a manslaughter charge with 3 months parole and a \$3,000 fine for both perpetrators. Following the verdict of the Vincent Chin case, Asian-Americans and sympathetic people protested the lenient sentence given to the perpetrators of the attack. The extent of the protests laid the foundation for modern U.S. hate crime law and set the stage for modern grassroots Asian-American political power.

As an example of more recent Asian American grassroots political power, Asian Americans and likeminded people were able to petition Councilman Barry of Washington D.C. to apologize for racist remarks against Asian and Asian-American workers.⁴ By introducing themselves into the constant stream of information that is the internet, Asian-American activists were able to push for an official apology from the Councilman. However, there existed issues with the campaign. First, the campaign was staffed by volunteers, who couldn’t focus on the

⁴ Olivia Chow, Rohan Grover, Camden Lee, and Vincent Paolo Villano, *Building Asian American Political Power through Online Organizing: How Digital Activism Mobilized a Community and Changed the Policy Conversation in Washington, DC* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Asian American Policy Review, 2013), 3.

movement. Second, the campaign was only executed in English, and “further excluded some of the most marginalized populations in [the Asian-American] community.”⁵ Third, the technological tools used for the campaign were easily available, free technology, which lacks the more useful tools more complex and expensive digital technology has, reducing the outreach of the program.

More recent Asian-American activism, as can be seen with the *Stop AAPI Hate* organization, have involved multi-media efforts across several websites, in news networks, and public television, and with the much higher amount of access to these mediums in the United States, greater outreach is achieved. Issues that hampered older activism, such as language barriers, are reduced via online translation software, some built-in to websites, and greater emphasis by modern media to output information in a variety of languages to increase viewership. With modern data science techniques, mainly databasing and mapping, *Stop AAPI Hate*, in particular, takes information pertaining to hate crimes witnessed by people and storing this information for future purposes, such as aiding law enforcement and community groups.⁶

Economic Power of Asian-Americans

In fact, Japanese-, East-Indian-, and Chinese-Americans by the year 1990 had, at minimum, the incomes a little above the national mean income, and at most 14% unemployment. However, these are the only three nonwhite ethnic groups with a “statistical profile that placed them at or above the mean for all Americans.” Among them, Japanese-Americans earned in 1980 and 1990 about 140% of the national mean income, the highest of the three, and at least 40% of the male population of these groups and 30% of the female population of these groups had

⁵ Olivia Chow, *Building Asian American Political Power*, 6.

⁶ “Frequently Asked Questions,” Stop AAPI Hate (San Francisco State University, April 23, 2021), <https://stopaapihate.org/frequently-asked-questions/>.

professional or managerial positions/occupations, with Asian-Indians having the highest percentage of men in those positions with 50% in 1990.⁷ This is in stark contrast to the pre-1965-Immigration-Act Japanese-American economic group, who were primarily physical laborers in Hawaiian and West Coast plantations and owned corner stores. The increase of middle-class, educated Asian immigrants to the United States has had some positive impact on the average income of the economic group they reside in. However, the Chinese-American economic group, of the aforementioned groups, had the highest poverty rate of 12-14% in the years 1980-1990.⁸

However, other Asian-American groups, such as Korean- and Vietnamese-Americans, the average income of these groups falls below the national mean income. We can assume that this is in-part due to the positive effect of being proficient in English has on income⁹, and inversely the negative effect of being nonproficient in English has on income. A possibility, then, is that some of the Asian-Americans who were economically disadvantaged from the 1970-1990 period are or are descendants of refugees from conflicts in Asia, such as the Vietnam War, and were not only racially discriminated against by employers but also turned away due to their lack of proficiency in English. However, there has been in fact positive gains for some of these economic groups. Darity et al. explains that

“Males with the largest gains in earnings due to(positive) differential returns to their characteristics by 1990 included Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Italian, Lebanese, Lithuanian, Russian (Jewish) and Yugoslavian men.”¹⁰

⁷ William Darity Jr, David K Guilkey, and William Winfrey, *Explaining Differences in Economic Performance among Racial and Ethnic Groups in the USA: The Data Examined* (The American Journal of Economics and Sociology, 1996), 414.

⁸ Ibid, 414.

⁹ Ibid, 417.

¹⁰ Ibid, 420.

By 2015, Asian-American children of ages 31-34 had higher median individual and household incomes than any other ethnic group in the United States, earning nearly \$10,000 in median household income more than White Americans, despite having lower median parent household income compared to White parent household income by about \$17,000. However, it is important to note that in the study conducted by Chetty et al., 67% of the polled explicitly stated that they were White-Americans and only 3% of the polled explicitly stated that they were Asian-American.¹¹ It is also important to note that these statistics are not divided based on industry of those polled or level of education of both parents and children, and that these statistics, despite the warnings of the authors, can be used to perpetuate the model minority myth.

Of the figures displayed below, the mean child-household income rank of Asian-Americans, based on the lines-of-best-fit, are generally higher than those of other ethnic groups, as can be seen in Figure 1. However, when considering whether the mother was born in the United States, implying that the child is not a second-generation immigrant, we see that once the parent household income rank surpasses the 60th percentile, White-American children of ages 31-37 have higher mean household incomes in comparison to Asian-American children, and of all children whose mother is not American-born, we see again that Asian-American children are again on top in Figures 2 and 3 respectively.

As such, we can conclude that Asian-Americans are not an economic monolith, and instead that second-generation Asian-Americans have better economic advantage overall than Asian-Americans whose families are longstanding residents of the country. This is likely due to

¹¹ Raj Chetty, Nathaniel Hendren, Maggie R. Jones, and Sonya R. Porter, *Race and economic opportunity in the United States: An intergenerational perspective* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Quarterly Journal of Economics 135, no. 2, 2020), 730.

the level of education of first-generation Asian immigrants, and their status as upper-middle class in the economies they emigrated from.

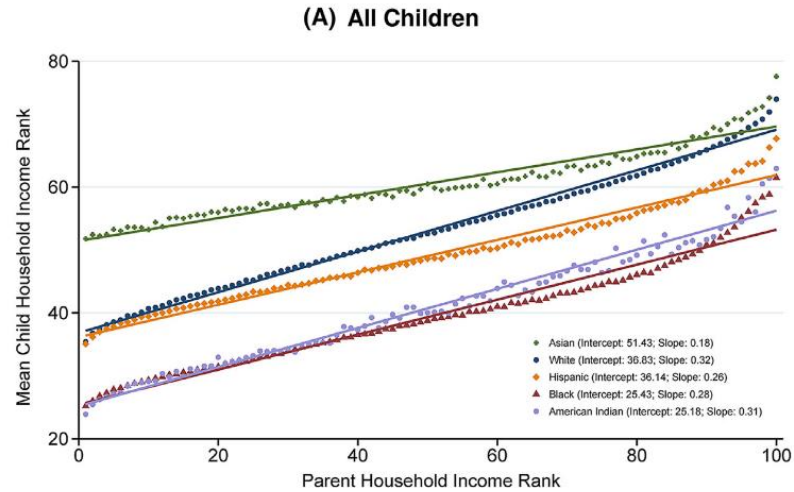


Figure 1: Parent Household Income Rank v. Mean Child Household Income Rank for all children between ages 31-37.¹²

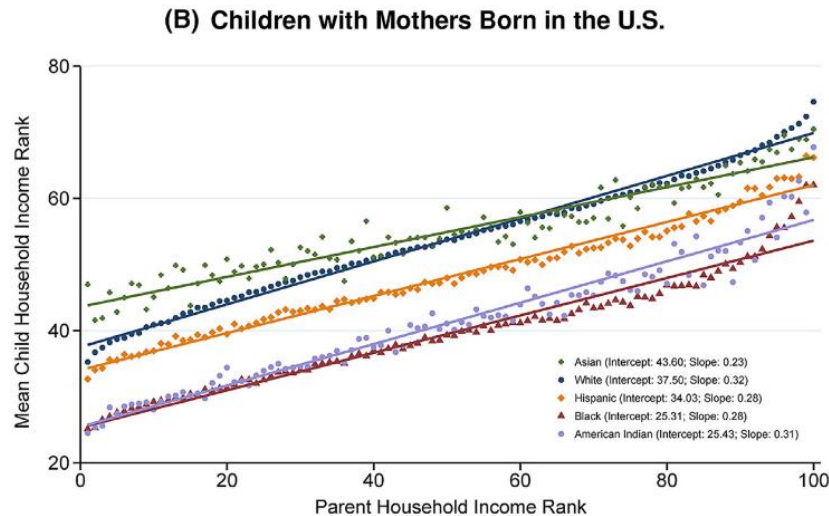


Figure 2: Parent Household Income Rank v. Mean Child Household Income Rank for children whose mothers are American-born between ages 31-37.¹³

¹² Raj Chetty et al., *Race and economic opportunity in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Quarterly Journal of Economics 135, no. 2, 2020), 735, Figure IIIA.

¹³ Ibid, 735, Figure IIIB.

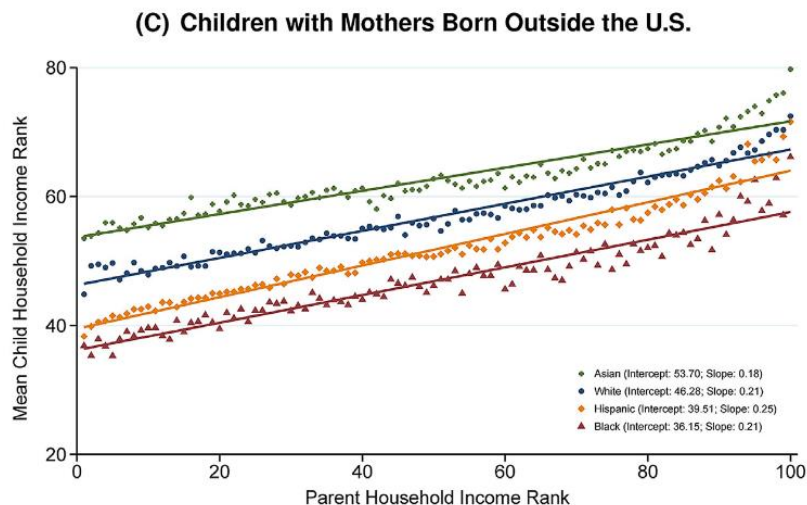


Figure 3: Parent Household Income Rank v. Mean Child Household Income Rank for children whose mothers are not American-born between ages 31-37.¹⁴

Chetty et al. explained that

“...81.8% of Asian parents in our sample are first-generation immigrants, who might have high levels of latent skill but low levels of observed income in the United States,... the exceptional outcomes of Asian children are unique to the children of first-generation immigrants rather than a persistent feature of Asians who are U.S. natives.”¹⁵

Therefore, the economic power of Asian-Americans is on one hand much stronger than their political power, and on the other much more varied than the popular perception of Asian-American economic power would suggest. The model minority myth is similarly perpetuated by those who strictly look at economic activity and prosperity and forgo the information that divides second- and multi-generation Asian families in the United States.

¹⁴ Raj Chetty et al., *Race and economic opportunity in the United States* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The Quarterly Journal of Economics 135, no. 2, 2020), 735, Figure IIIC.

¹⁵ Ibid, 737.

Conclusion and Future Concerns

By the 21st century, Asian Americans gained power in the form of higher wages and, with the introduction of the internet, have been able to mobilize quickly to exert themselves politically. Despite being built upon decades of political and economic shifts, the current perception of Asian-American political and economic power can be summarized as extreme generalizations of the truth, where Asians are politically weak and economically strong. These perpetual stereotypes actively harm those who are politically active, as well as those who are below the poverty line. The constant regurgitation of this information maintains the power dynamic between Asian-Americans and the rest of the country.

However, again citing the grassroots nature of the internet and the modern digital generations, Asian-American activism actively contradicts stereotype, and the political power of Asian-Americans seems to only increase with time and seeks to combat the power of the elite group by increasing the amount of information in the American information stream. Conversely, modern Asian-American economic power, divided as it is between second- and multi-generation children, will likely even out between the two economic groups given enough time. However, not enough emphasis is placed on the current differences education and industry create within the economic grouping. As such, while it is correct to say that Asian-American economic power has increased, the information on which parts of the group have the economic power remains to be describes, analyzed, and distributed.

Therefore, to understand the economic power of Asian-Americans, we must first understand the wealth distribution within the group itself based on education and industry-of-work and scale appropriately. More research, then, must be done to properly distribute the data along the economic grouping and along the greater national economy.

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