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The Myth of the Asian-American Advantage

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Asian-American students outperform their classmates by almost every measure, earning better grades, scoring higher on standardized tests, and graduating college at higher rates. But do these accomplishments lead to professional success?

To find out, Columbia sociologists Van C. Tran and Jennifer Lee ’90CC, ’98GSAS, along with graduate student Tiffany J. Huang, analyzed employment data on thousands of second-generation Chinese, Indian, Korean, Filipino, and Vietnamese immigrants in the US. What they discovered is that Asian-Americans, despite their educational advantages, are no more likely than white Americans to land

professional jobs — and those who do are less frequently promoted to leadership positions.

“We were surprised by the results,” says Tran, the lead author of the paper, which appears in the journal *Ethnic and Racial Studies*. “Asian-Americans are present in professional and management positions in much smaller numbers than you’d expect.”

While previous studies have suggested that Asian-Americans’ competitive edge may disappear in the workplace, the Columbia study is the most comprehensive yet and the first to distinguish between different groups of Asian-Americans. The study’s scope led to some major insights. “For example, we found that Indian-Americans are no more likely to attain a professional job than white Americans, despite being eight times as likely to graduate from college,” says Lee. “The same goes for Korean-Americans and Vietnamese-Americans, who are three times as likely to complete college.”

The only group of Asian-Americans to turn their scholastic triumphs into career gold, the researchers found, are Chinese-Americans: they are one and a half times more likely than whites to be in professional or leadership positions, after controlling for age, gender, and level of education.

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