Asian Americans, Affirmative Action & the Rise in Anti-Asian Hate

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No court case in recent history has propelled Asian Americans into the political sphere like Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard, *and no issue has galvanized them like affirmative action. Asian Americans have taken center stage in the latest battle over affirmative action, yet their voices have been muted in favor of narratives that paint them as victims of affirmative action who ardently oppose the policy. Bridging theory and research on immigration, stereotypes, and boundaries, I provide a holistic portrait of* SFFA v. Harvard *and focus on Asian Americans' role in it. Immigration has remade Asian Americans from "unassimilable to exceptional," and wedged them between underrepresented minorities who stand to gain most from the policy and the advantaged majority who stands to lose most because of it. Presumed competent and morally deserving, Asian Americans subscribe to the stereotype, and wield it to their advantage. Competence, moral worth, and respectability politics, however, are no safeguards against racism and xenophobia. As fears of the coronavirus arrested the United States, so too has the rise in anti-Asian hate.*

No recent court case has propelled Asian Americans into the political sphere like *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard,* and no issue has galvanized them like affirmative action.[1] The plaintiffs allege that Harvard discriminates against Asian applicants by holding them to higher academic standards and rating them poorly on personal characteristics such as "likeability," "fit," and "courage" in order to suppress their rate of admission. Invoking Harvard's past practice of using subjective measures like character to limit the number of Jewish students in the 1920s, the Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) allege that the university is now repeating its ugly history with Asians. Charging Harvard of imposing a racial penalty and a de facto quota on Asians, SFFA's proposed solution is to retreat from race: to eliminate the consideration of race and ethnicity in all admissions decisions, which, in turn, would effectively eliminate affirmative action.

On September 30, 2019, after nearly a year of deliberation, District Court Judge Allison D. Burroughs ruled that Harvard does not discriminate against Asian American applicants – a decision upheld by a federal appeals court on November

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12, 2020 – thereby allowing the university to continue its practice of affirmative action to pursue the benefits of diversity. Supporters of the policy hailed the ruling a victory, while opponents decried it a moral failing, and one they aim to have overturned by the U.S. Supreme Court. With the confirmation of Justice Amy Coney Barrett to the bench, SCOTUS is now stacked in SFFA's favor, and the future of affirmative action is in peril. While Asians have taken center stage in the latest battle over affirmative action, their attitudes have been drowned out by the inflammatory rhetoric of SFFA, on the one hand, and the staunch advocates of affirmative action, on the other.

Moving beyond the rhetoric, I bridge theory and research on immigration, stereotypes, and boundaries to provide a holistic portrait of *SFFA v. Harvard* and focus on Asian Americans' role in it. I begin by showing how the changing selectivity of contemporary U.S. Asian immigration has recast Asian Americans from "*unassimilable to exceptional*," resulting in their rapid racial mobility.[2] This mobility combined with their minoritized status places them in a unique group position in the U.S. racial hierarchy, conveniently wedged between underrepresented minorities who stand to gain most from the policy and the advantaged majority who stands to lose most because of it. It also marks Asians as compelling victims of affirmative action who are penalized because of their race.

It is a mistake to assume, however, that Asians have been passive agents in this project. Presumed competent and morally deserving, Asian Americans subscribe to the stereotype, and wield it to their advantage. Asian, however, is a catch-all category that masks more than it reveals. While the majority of Asian Americans support affirmative action, one group stands apart in their opposition: Chinese Americans. And because Chinese is synecdoche for Asians,[3] their attitudes have been blithely taken (or more precisely, mistaken) to represent the views of all Asians, resulting in biased narratives of Asian Americans.

Competence, moral worth, and respectability politics are no safeguards against the virulent anti-Asian racism that has surfaced since the outbreak of the coronavirus, flagrantly dubbed by the Trump administration as the "China virus" and "kung flu." Faulting China for the spread of COVID-19, Trump turned a blind eye to the subsequent surge in attacks against Asian Americans who have been stabbed, beaten, spit on, harassed, vilified, and scapegoated. Trump's racist and xenophobic "China virus" rhetoric reanimated a century-old trope that Asians are vectors of filth and disease, exposing not only the precariousness of their status but also the country's nativist fault line.[4]

Less than a century ago, Asians were described as marginal members of the human race, full of filth and disease, and unassimilable.[5] Confined to ethnic enclaves, barred from White schools, and denied U.S. citizenship, Asians were not extended the right to become naturalized citizens until the passage of

the McCarren-Walter Immigration and Naturalization Act in 1952. Yet despite decades of legal exclusion, institutional discrimination, and racial prejudice, Asians now boast the highest educational outcomes and highest median household incomes of all U.S. groups. How did the status of a group once considered the "yellow peril" change from unassimilable to exceptional in the course of a century?

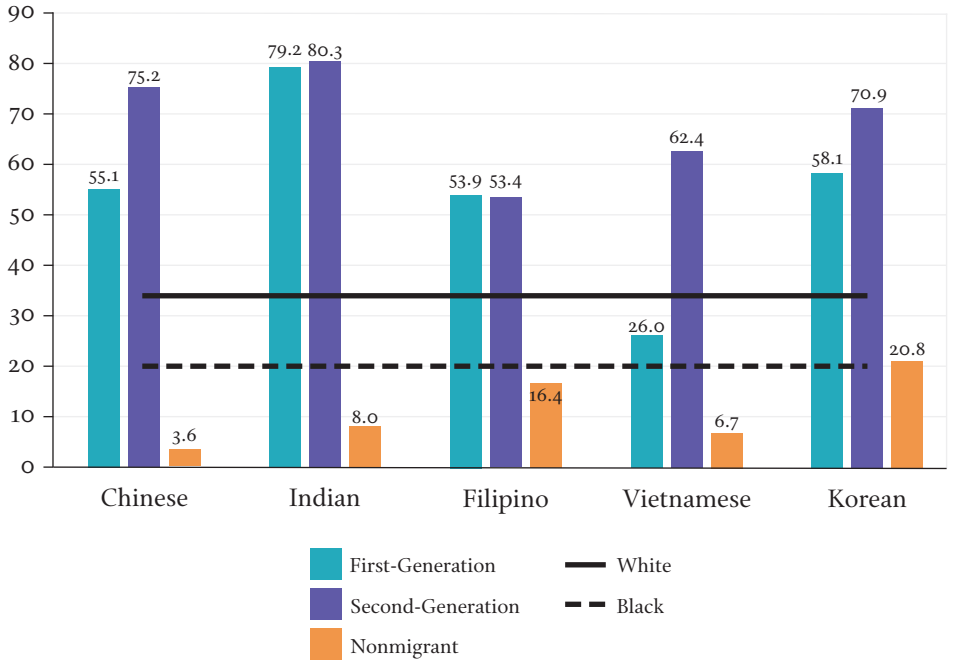
Asian Americans' rapid racial mobility stems from the change in U.S. immigration law. Abolishing national origin quotas, the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act created new preferences for foreign-born applicants based on family reunification, skills, and refugee status. The change in legislation legally engineered a new stream of highly educated Asian immigrants who fulfilled high-skilled labor shortages in the United States. As a result, contemporary Asian immigrants in the United States are, on average, more likely to have graduated from college than their nonmigrant counterparts in their countries of origin, and also more likely to hold a college degree than the U.S. mean. Their dual positive immigrant selectivity – what Min Zhou and I have referred to as *hyper-selectivity* – is the most distinctive feature of contemporary Asian immigration.[6]

A look at the five largest U.S. Asian immigrant groups – Chinese, Indians, Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Koreans – shows that all five are highly selected from their country of origin, and all but Vietnamese are hyper-selected.[7] As Figure 1 shows, 55.1 percent of Chinese immigrants in the United States have graduated from college compared with only 3.6 percent of adults in China, meaning that U.S. Chinese immigrants are more than eighteen times as likely to have graduated from college than Chinese adults who did not emigrate. U.S. Indian immigrants are ten times more likely to have a B.A. compared with their nonmigrant counterparts in India, and U.S. Vietnamese, Korean, and Filipino immigrants are three to four times more likely than their respective nonmigrant counterparts. Moreover, apart from Vietnamese, the other Asian groups are also more highly educated than the general U.S. population, reflecting their dual positive immigrant selectivity. Their hyper-selectivity gives them and their U.S.-born children an edge over other U.S. groups – including native-born Whites – in the domain of education.

While the hyper-selectivity of Asian immigrants has led to the rapid racial mobility of Asian Americans, their mobility has come with social costs.[8] Deemed highly competent, Asian Americans are also perceived as cold, calculating, and too narrowly focused on success at all costs.[9] The vulnerable combination of high competence and low warmth not only relegates Asians as an out-group, but also serves as the bases of anti-Asian bias.[10] It has also made Asian Americans ideal candidates for SFFA to recruit in their mission to dismantle affirmative action.

"Were you rejected from the University of Texas, Harvard or the University of North Carolina? It may be because you were the wrong race." The question appears on SFFA's website followed by an invitation:

Figure 1
Percent of First- and Second-Generation Asians and Nonmigrant Counterparts to Graduate from College



Source: Van Tran, Jennifer Lee, and Tiffany Huang, "Revisiting the Asian Second-Generation Advantage," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 42 (13) (2019): 2248–2269.

"Students for Fair Admissions would like to hear from you. Tell us something about yourself." They do not specify who they would like to hear from, but a photo of more than fifty Asian Americans in front of a banner that reads, "Harvard: STOP Discriminating Against Asian American Students" beckons its intended audience.

In the photo are individuals holding signs lambasting Harvard's use of racial quotas and discriminatory practices in the name of diversity. One sign summons Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s famous "I have a dream" speech but flips the script to read: "I Am Asian American. I Have A Dream Too." Here Dr. King's call for equality of opportunity for African Americans has been reinscribed by Asian American opponents of affirmative action who equate the alleged discrimination experienced by Asians in the twenty-first century to the brutal, de jure discrimination experienced by African Americans in the early twentieth. In so doing, SFFA evokes a false equivalency of race, minoritized status, and moral deservingness.[11]

Michael Wang's narrative is emblematic of the racial discrimination experienced by Asian Americans, according to the Students for Fair Admissions.[12] The only son of Chinese immigrants, Michael had his sights set on Harvard since he was eight years old. With the help of his parents and especially his father (a former teacher in China), Michael began working diligently toward this goal a decade before he applied to Harvard. When Michael was in elementary school, his father tutored him in math and petitioned the local middle school to allow Michael to take classes there. By seventh grade, he was taking math classes at the local high school. So academically advanced was Michael that he skipped the eighth grade altogether.

By the time Michael applied to college, he boasted a perfect ACT score, a near-perfect SAT score of 2230 out of 2300 (which placed him in the ninety-ninth percentile), thirteen Advanced Placement courses, and a 4.67 grade point average. Salutatorian of his high school class, Michael's academic profile was buttressed by his impressive extracurricular record: he played piano, founded his high school's math club, was on his school's debate team, and sang at President Barack Obama's first inauguration as part of the San Francisco Boys Chorus. Armed with a stellar record, Michael applied to seven Ivy League universities and Stanford, but was rejected by all except the University of Pennsylvania. He was wait-listed at Harvard and Columbia, yet was eventually rejected by both. He was admitted, however, to the University of California, Berkeley, and Williams College, and chose to attend Williams.

The rejections prompted him to file a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education against Princeton, Yale, and Stanford, charging that these elite institutions rejected him because of his race. Michael was not alone. In March 2016, a coalition of 132 Asian American organizations filed complaints with the U.S. Department of Education against Yale, Dartmouth, and Brown, alleging that these Ivy League universities make decisions based on informal racial quotas that effectively cap the number of Asian American students. The year prior, in 2015, the coalition targeted Harvard.

In the Students for Fair Admissions, Michael Wang found an institutional ally, and in Michael Wang, SFFA found a model candidate to hail as a victim of discrimination and affirmative action. With the election of Donald Trump as U.S. president in November 2016, both SFFA and Michael Wang found and seized an opportune political moment. Despite its namesake, however, the Students for Fair Admissions is not an organization established by aggrieved students like Michael Wang who were rejected by Harvard. Rather, it is an organization founded by Edward Blum, a White, male former stockbroker turned legal entrepreneur and ardent anti-affirmative action crusader who fought to dismantle race-conscious policies for decades, including a key portion of the Voting Rights Act. In *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), Blum fought and succeeded in freeing nine states, largely in the South, to change election laws without prior federal approval. With support from conservative donors and high-powered, Republican lawyers, Blum orches-

trated more than two dozen lawsuits challenging voting rights laws and affirmative action practices across the country.[13]

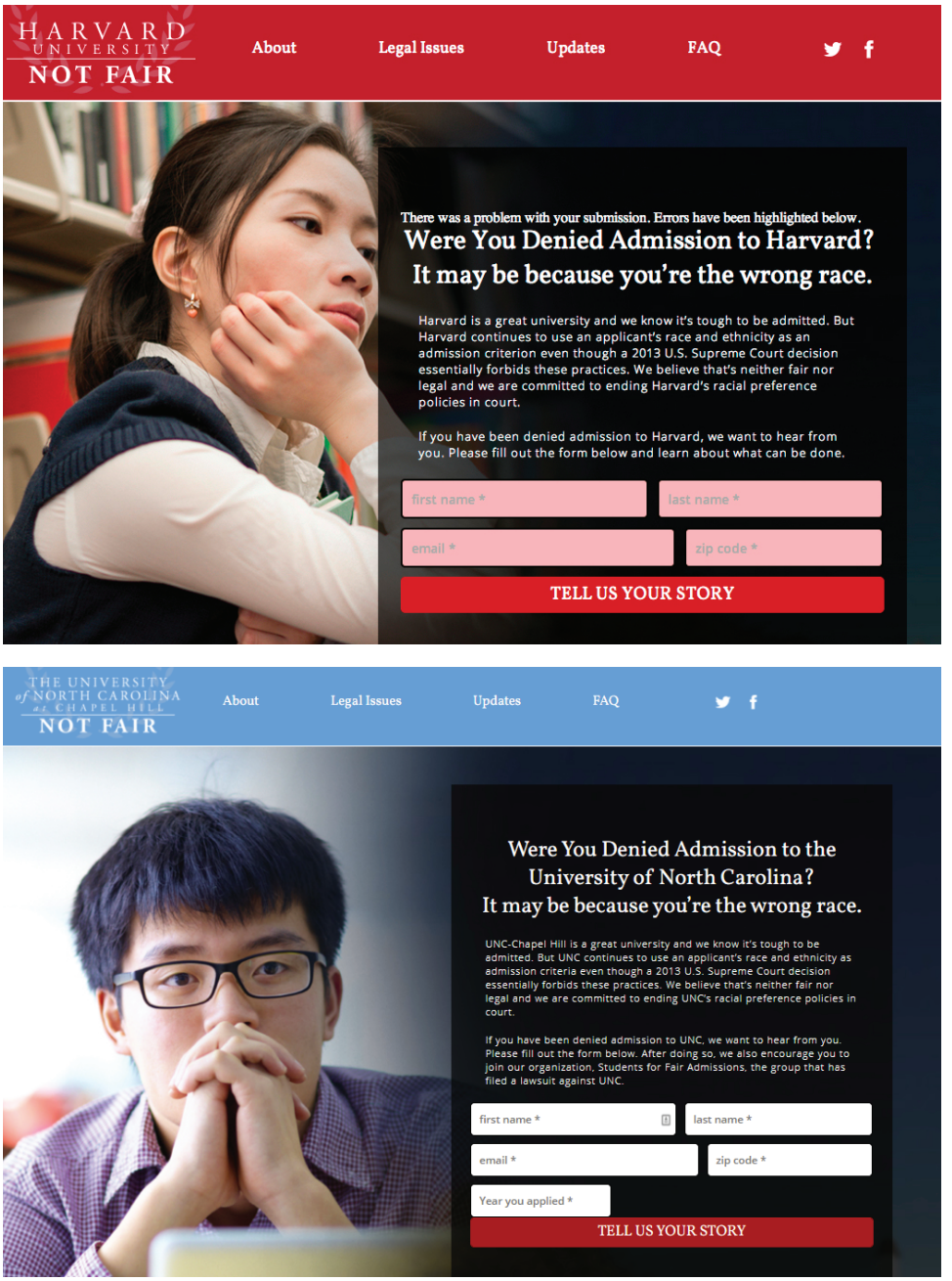
Blum arranged the lawsuit against Harvard under the rubric of the Students for Fair Admissions, as well as the more recent suit against the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the closing arguments for which took place on November 19, 2020. In addition, he organized the lawsuit against the University of Texas in *Fisher v. University of Texas*, and its appeal, in which Abigail Fisher – a White woman – charged the University of Texas with denying her admission because of her race. But Abigail Fisher was far from the model candidate to challenge UT Austin's policy of race-conscious affirmative action. A White woman with a 3.59 grade point average and an SAT score of 1180 out of 1600, Fisher's academic record was by no means exceptional nor did it make her an obvious selection for admission to the University of Texas's flagship campus at Austin.

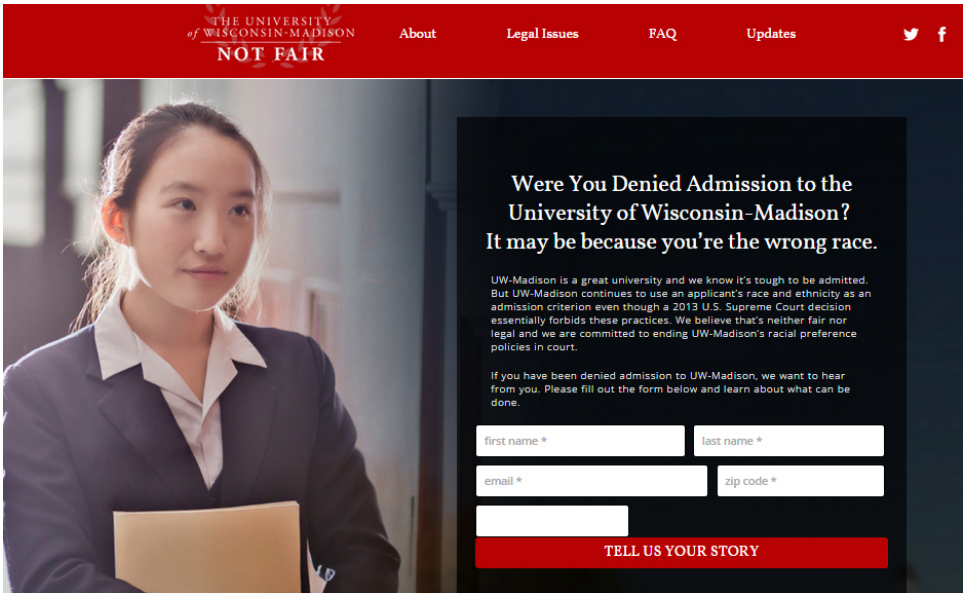
Recognizing that Fisher's record failed to match her sense of entitlement, Blum admitted, "I needed Asian plaintiffs." And he got them. Using advertisements showcasing pensive-looking East Asians (see Figure 2), Blum recruited Asian American plaintiffs by raising the provocative question, "Were You Denied Admission to Harvard? It may be because you're the wrong race." He used the same question and rhetoric to recruit Asian Americans in his fights against the University of North Carolina and the University of Wisconsin.

As details of *SFFA v. Harvard* unfolded, both camps of the affirmative action debate held their ground, but one particular allegation drew widespread ire. SFFA claimed that admissions officers categorically rated Asian applicants poorly on character traits such as "likeability," "courage," and "fit," and used these subjective measures as the bases for denying admission to academically and morally deserving applicants. That Asian Americans scored highest on measures like grades and test scores but lowest on personal characteristics corresponds with the stereotype that Asians are competent but cold: technically strong but socially weak; model students and workers but poor visionaries and leaders. This argument hit home for many Asian Americans – including myself – who battle these stereotypes every day.

So what are we to make of this allegation? First, the "personal" rating is not a measure of "personality," as it has been popularly described. Rather, it includes factors such as the applicants' intended major and career, the neighborhood in which they grew up, whether they were raised by a single parent who did not attend college, or raised by two parents who graduated from Harvard. It also allows admissions officers to consider whether the applicants are refugees, whether they had to work to support their families during high school, whether they hail from a rural background, and so on. So rather than relying solely on standardized test scores like the SAT, which account for only 2.7 percent of the variation in freshman

Figure 2
Students for Fair Admissions Advertisements Seeking Plaintiffs against Harvard, the University of North Carolina, and the University of Wisconsin





Source: Jenn Fang, "#IAmNotYourWedge: Lawsuits against Harvard and UNC Assert Anti-Asian Discrimination in Admissions," Reappropriate, November 19, 2014. Original ads taken from http://harvardnotfair.org/; http://uncnotfair.org/; and http://uwnotfair.org/.

grades after students' backgrounds are taken into account, admissions officers can consider applicants as a "whole person" and evaluate candidates holistically.[14]

Second, the difference in personal ratings between Asian and White applicants is, on average, 0.05 points on a 6-point scale. Asians received an average rating of 2.82, while White applicants, an average of 2.77, in which 1 denotes "outstanding" and 6 "worrisome." Hence, contrary to SFFA's claim, Asian American applicants were not rated significantly poorer than White applicants.[15] Third, analyses show variation in the personal ratings of Asian American applicants. Asian females, on average, received higher personal ratings than Asian males, and Asians from California received the highest ratings compared with those from other regions of the country. The intragroup variation in the personal ratings of Asian American applicants indicates that there is not uniform, categorical bias against them on the part of admissions officers.

Finally, analyses of the admissions data from the opposing camps differed in a crucial way. SFFA excluded legacies, recruited athletes, and the children of faculty and donors from their analyses. The omission is consequential since applicants from these special interest groups are admitted at significantly higher rates than those who do not belong to these categories. That Asian applicants are underrepresented in each of these categories served to amplify SFFA's claim that Asians experience bias in admissions.

Here it is worth underscoring that eliminating bias has never been the core of SFFA's mission. If it were, SFFA would have championed eliminating the bias *for* legacies: applicants whose parents attended Harvard. The legacy effect is potent. Harvard's own analysis shows that legacies received a 40 percent boost in their chances of admission. Between 2010 and 2015, the admission rate for legacies was 34 percent, compared with less than 6 percent for nonlegacies, indicating that legacies are nearly six times as likely to be admitted than nonlegacies. Double legacies – applicants with both parents who attended Harvard – receive a more generous boost.

Not surprisingly, Harvard's legacies are largely White, and the number of White legacy admits exceeds the number of Asian, Black, and Hispanic legacy admits combined. Close to 22 percent of White admits at Harvard are legacies. Harvard's preference for legacies places all non-White applicants at a disadvantage, which feels especially acute since the admissions rate dropped to a historic low of 4.5 percent in 2019. Harvard's bias for legacies and SFFA's decision not to focus on them also reveals a glaring *affirmative action paradox*. While race-conscious policies have been on trial time and again, categorical preferences for legacies continue to go unchallenged and unchecked. Looking ahead, it remains to be seen whether Harvard's preference for legacies will remain intact as Asian American applicants become an increasingly larger share of the university's legacy pool.

At the moment, however, the question that remains unanswered is whether Harvard's inclusion of a "personal" rating is a measure of "included variable bias," in which the variable itself is the product of and, therefore, masks evidence of discrimination. As one group of statistical analysts articulate in a *Boston Review* feature, "If personal ratings were awarded in racially discriminatory ways, it would be inappropriate to appeal to them to explain disparities in admissions."[16] They add, "Even if a variable helps to explain away a disparity between groups, that variable may itself be the product of discrimination or have little rational relation to a legitimate policy goal." Harvard's history of deploying "character" ratings to disadvantage Jewish applicants to cap their numbers in the 1920s lends credibility to this possibility.

But it is a mistake to reduce the alleged bias against Asian applicants to the overt bias against Jewish applicants in the 1920s, which is based on yet another false equivalency: that of equating affirmative action to negative action. Beginning in the 1920s, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton began requiring recommendation letters, personal interviews, essays, and descriptions of extracurricular activities, which, in turn, dissuaded and disadvantaged "the wrong kind" of college applicant.[17] Consequently, these Ivy League schools could shroud their admission process through layers of subjectivity, and cap the number of Jewish students they could admit without overtly discriminating against them.

Quotas used to cap the number of Jewish students at Harvard, Yale, and Princeton in the 1920s were a negative action against Jewish applicants, and were ruled

unconstitutional in *University of California v. Bakke* (1978). A quota implemented to limit or designate the number of slots allotted to a particular ethnic or racial group wholly differs from race-conscious affirmative action: the former predetermines results based on ethnicity and race; the latter allows ethnicity and race to be considered among many factors in admissions decisions. Apart from the crucial substantive difference, there is a fundamental arithmetic difference that opponents of affirmative action have failed to reconcile: the growth of the Asian American student population at Harvard and other elite universities has occurred in tandem with the growth of affirmative action.[18]

There is yet another flaw in the false equivalency of touting Asian Americans as the "new Jews": in the 1920s, the Jewish community unanimously denounced Harvard's cap on Jewish students; today, Asian Americans are more divided about affirmative action. Michael Wang and Thang Diep represent opposing sides of the divide; the former opposes affirmative action, while the latter supports it. Thang Diep is a Vietnamese refugee who migrated to the United States at the age of eight with parents who did not attend college. A student at Harvard at the time of the trial, Thang testified on the university's behalf. While Michael and Thang did not apply to Harvard at the same time, it is worthwhile to compare their records nevertheless. A quick glance at grades and test scores puts Michael ahead. Michael's GPA was 4.67, while Thang's was 4.325; Michael's SAT score was 2230 while Thang's was 2060. Michael's SAT score placed him in the ninety-ninth percentile for college bound seniors, while Thang's score placed him in the ninety-fifth percentile and also placed him in the bottom quartile of his matriculating class of 2019 at Harvard. Despite Michael's superior academic record, he was wait-listed and eventually rejected by Harvard, while Thang was accepted.

Both records are exceptional for graduating high school seniors, but neither stands out among Harvard's applicants. Of the forty-thousand applicants who applied to Harvard last year, more than eight thousand had perfect grade point averages, three thousand four hundred had perfect SAT scores in math, and two thousand seven hundred had perfect SAT scores in English. With only two thousand coveted slots, Harvard could fill its entering class many times over with applicants with perfect grades and test scores. Hence, admissions officers rely on other measures in their evaluation such as extracurricular activities and a personal rating, as well as overall excellence. What set Thang Diep apart from the throngs of other applicants was his personal rating. A report by an alumni interviewer noted that his openness to new ideas was "truly unusual" and added that Thang would be an "outstanding" roommate. In short, Thang's personal rating boosted his application.

While Thang Diep and Michael Wang represent competing narratives of Asian Americans, the latter has dominated the discourse in the current battle over affir-

mative action. In part, this is because Michael Wang's exceptional competence fits the prevailing stereotype of Asian Americans, while Thang Diep's warmth defies it. But it is also because the default for Asian is East Asian. For the majority of Americans, their concept of who counts as Asian is East Asian: nearly four in five Americans consider Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans as Asian or Asian Americans (81 percent, 80 percent, and 78 percent, respectively).[19] By contrast, only 70 percent of Americans consider Southeast Asians like Filipinos as Asian or Asian American, and a mere 46 percent and 37 percent claim the same of Indians and Pakistanis, respectively (see Figure 3).

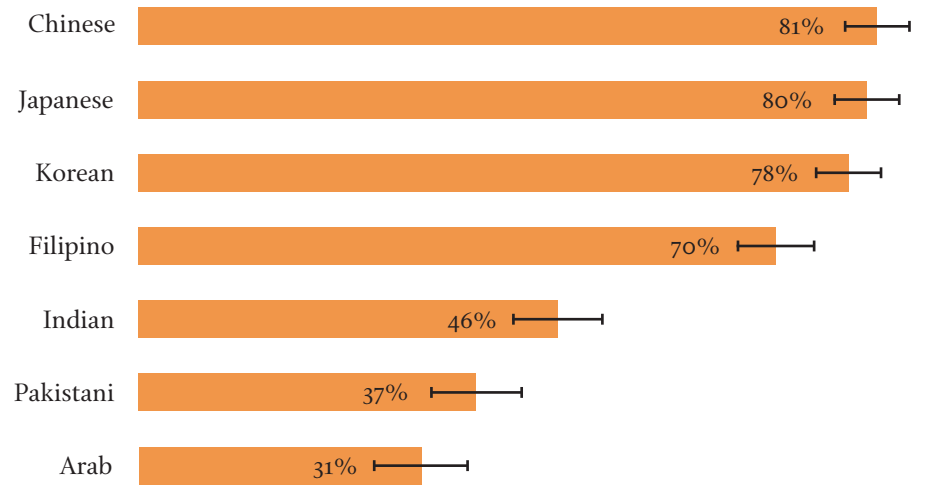
In addition, because Chinese boast the longest history in the United States and are the largest U.S. East Asian group, accounting for one in five Asian Americans, Chinese has become synecdoche for Asian.[20] This form of boundary contraction affects which Asian American narratives are privileged and accepted, and which are challenged and rejected. In this case, when narratives of Chinese are privileged over others, and then serve as the proxy for all Asian Americans, we paint an incomplete and biased portrait of Asian Americans' experiences and attitudes, including their support for affirmative action.[21]

In 2012 and 2016, AAPI Data surveyed Asian American registered voters about their views of affirmative action by posing several different questions of the policy, including the following, which is adapted from a Pew Research Center survey: "Thinking about colleges and universities, do you favor, oppose, or neither favor nor oppose giving blacks, women, and other minorities better access to higher education?" In 2012, three-quarters (75 percent) of Asian Americans supported affirmative action in higher education, but by 2016, the figure dropped to 65 percent. When Chinese Americans are excluded from the analyses, however, Asian Americans' support for the policy remained unchanged, with nearly three-quarters expressing support for affirmative action at 73 percent.[22]

As Figure 4 shows, the precipitous decline in support for affirmative action among Chinese Americans in the four-year period between 2012 and 2016 accounts entirely for the drop in support for the policy among Asian Americans – pointing to a pattern of *Chinese exceptionalism*. When we draw on the views of Chinese Americans to represent the views of all Asian Americans, we misrepresent Asian Americans' support for affirmative action.

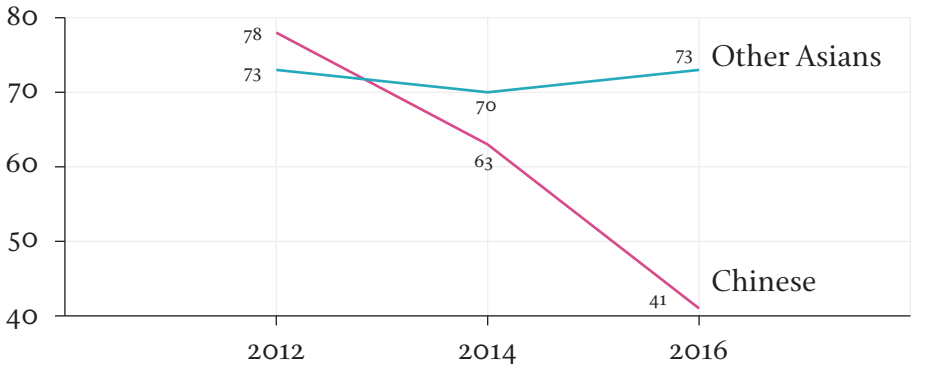
Immigration has remade Asian America time and again. Most recently, the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act ushered in a new stream of immigrants from Asia who are more highly educated and more positively selected than their counterparts of yore. Not only are contemporary Asian immigrants, on average, more likely to have graduated from college than their nonmigrant counterparts from their countries of origin, but they are also more likely to hold a college degree than the U.S. mean. The dual positive immigrant selectivity –

Figure 3
Percent of Americans Who Consider Each Group as "Asian" or "Asian American"



Source: Jennifer Lee and Karthick Ramakrishnan, "Who Counts as Asian," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 43 (10) (2020): 1733–1756.

Figure 4
Percent of Asian Americans Who Support Affirmative Action



Source: Karthick Ramakrishnan and Janelle Wong, "Survey Roundup: Asian American Attitudes on Affirmative Action," Data Bits, a blog for AAPI Data, June 18, 2018, http://aapidata.com/blog/asianam-affirmative-action-surveys/.

their *hyper-selectivity* – has resulted in the rapid racial mobility of Asian Americans. Deemed subhuman and unassimilable in the nineteenth century, Asians have become America's exceptionally competent minority in the twenty-first.

Their rise in mobility has come with social costs, however. Presumed competent, Asian Americans are also perceived to lack warmth, creativity, and vision. Technically strong, but socially weak, Asians are stereotyped as hard-working students and diligent workers, but poor visionaries and implausible leaders.[23] The combination of high competence and low warmth, however, has made them credible candidates to challenge affirmative action. Under the rubric of the Students for Fair Admissions, Edward Blum recruited Asian Americans whose stellar grades, exceptional test scores, and bevy of extracurricular activities failed to gain them admission to Harvard, and then pointed to admissions officers who rejected them based on their poor rating on personal characteristics like character, courage, and fit. The personal rating encompasses far more than personal characteristics, yet SFFA has reduced it to personality, and touted it as the source of the alleged bias against Asian Americans – a provocative allegation that resonated with Asians and non-Asians alike.

While the debate about bias against Asian Americans continues to rage, Harvard's bias for legacies remains unchecked. Legacies are nearly six times as likely to be admitted than nonlegacies, and the majority of Harvard's legacies are White. Rather than fighting to dismantle all categorical bias, Edward Blum and SFFA have targeted the so-called Asian penalty. Hailing Asians as the meritorious, morally deserving minority who are unjustly penalized because of their race, SFFA has held up Asians as both victims of discrimination and victims of affirmative action. In the process, they have falsely equated affirmative action with negative action against Asians by arguing that undeserving minorities like African Americans and Hispanics get a boost because of their race at Asians' expense. But affirmative action is neither a quota nor can it be reduced to negative action. Indeed, the Asian American student population has increased in tandem with affirmative action. The missing component in SFFA's calculation is legacies whose birthright entitles them a lift in admissions, thereby placing all minoritized groups – including Asian Americans – at a disadvantage.

It is worth underscoring that Asians are overrepresented as a proportion of their population at elite universities like Harvard. They make up only 6.6 percent of the U.S. population, but 24.4 percent of Harvard's most recent freshman class. Where Asians are underrepresented is in the executive ranks and leadership positions in the workplace as they bump up against a career ceiling, otherwise known as the *bamboo ceiling*. College-educated Asians fall behind their White counterparts in earnings, and fall behind all groups in advancement beyond the professional ranks, even after adjusting for potential covariates, including native-born status.[24]

Recent reports of top technology firms in Silicon Valley show that Asians are the least likely racial group to be promoted into managerial and executive positions.[25] Asian men and women are half as likely to advance into the executive ranks as their White counterparts, with Asian women the least likely of all groups to be promoted – reflecting their acute intersectional disadvantage. A similar pattern emerges in law where Asians make up 10 percent of graduates of top-thirty law schools, but only 6.5 percent of all federal judicial law clerks. While Asians are the largest minoritized group in major law firms, they have the highest attrition rates and lowest ratio of associates to partners of all groups, at four to one, compared with two to one for Blacks and Hispanics, and parity for Whites.[26]

Even in academia, where Asian Americans are overrepresented as students in elite universities, they are nearly absent in leadership ranks, representing only 2 percent of college presidents. Asians are not well represented among the ranks of tenured faculty either. Take Harvard, for example. The current freshman class is 24.4 percent Asian American, but among its tenured faculty, only 11 percent are Asian. And there is a stark gender divide: 8 percent are Asian men, and a mere 3 percent are Asian women. Even rarer are Black, Hispanic, and Native American faculty. Combined, they account for less than 8 percent of Harvard's tenured professors. By far, the majority of Harvard's tenured faculty are White (80 percent), with White men constituting the lion's share at 61 percent. Asian Americans who oppose affirmative action in university admissions will find that they have shot themselves in the foot when they confront the career ceiling in the workplace.[27]

While the reigning misperception is that Asians are ardent opponents of affirmative action, the majority of Asian American registered voters support the policy. One group, however, stands apart: Chinese Americans. This sobering finding highlights both the heterogeneity of the U.S. Asian population and the salience of data disaggregation in accurately reporting their narratives.[28] Data disaggregation will become even more critical as the fastest growing U.S. racial group continues to diversify through immigration. Since 2000, the East Asian population dropped from 43 to 37 percent of the Asian American population, and the South Asian population increased from 19 to 27 percent. The share of the Southeast Asian population dropped slightly from 36 to 34 percent.[29]

As the U.S. Asian population grows and diversifies, so too do their political attitudes. While Asian Americans have become increasingly progressive, a new brand of Asian immigrants has entered the political sphere whose attitudes depart from the Asian American college student activists of the 1960s.[30] From opposing Proposition 16 (which would have reversed Proposition 209 and removed the ban on affirmative action in California), to protesting New York City's attempt to reform specialized high school tests, to siding with the Students for Fair Admissions in the fight against affirmative action at Harvard, this faction of politically conser-

vative Asian immigrants has no intention of following their liberal-leaning predecessors, nor do they intend to stay silent.

Politically conservative Asian immigrants who are calling for a retreat from race do not seek to deny opportunities for others: from their perspective, they seek to open opportunities for all. They believe in the American dream and immigrated to the United States because they subscribe to the creed of America's open opportunity structure: those who get ahead do so on the bases of talent, hard work, and grit. They also believe that one's racial status should be neither a penalty nor a reward, and are committed to protecting the opportunities for their U.S.-born children who they have watched work hard, follow the rules, yet in some cases be denied university admission nevertheless. This group of Asian immigrants has aligned with conservatives like Edward Blum, the Students for Fair Admissions, and the Department of Justice under the Trump administration in the fight to dismantle affirmative action.

Whether more Asian Americans will choose to side with conservatives like Blum and Trump and splinter along political lines, or whether they will choose to forge a collective Asian American alliance will depend on whether U.S. Asians recognize and embrace their ethnic and class diversity. Will they forge a sense of linked fate akin to that which has guided the political attitudes and voting behavior of Black Americans?[31] Beyond these poles lies yet another possibility: an Asian America that recognizes the precariousness of their racial status and one that also recognizes the precariousness in status of all U.S. minoritized groups. The coronavirus crisis has presented us with the unique opportunity to embrace such a possibility, and reimagine what Asian America could look like.

In early 2020, as fears about the coronavirus arrested the United States, attacks on Asian Americans mounted steeply. In a one-month period beginning mid-March 2020, the Asian Pacific Policy and Planning Council received more than 1,500 reports of anti-Asian hate incidents, with the majority of the reports made by Asian American women. Ranging from verbal harassment to physical assaults, Asian Americans have been vilified based on the false assumption that they are to blame for the deadly pandemic. In Texas, for example, a man stabbed a Burmese American family – a father and two young children (ages two and six) – because he thought they were Chinese and were infecting people with the coronavirus. In Brooklyn, a man poured acid on an Asian woman while she was taking out the trash in her home, severely burning her head, neck, and back. In midtown Manhattan, a Korean woman was grabbed by the hair and punched in the face.

Accusing China of manufacturing the coronavirus as a deliberate act of bioterrorism, and then faulting China for its spread, Trump flagrantly dubbed it the "China virus," the "Wuhan virus," and "kung flu," and then turned a blind eye to the rise in anti-Asian racism and hate. The horrors of the coronavirus pandemic are already leaving scars: so potent was this rhetoric that just three weeks of "China

virus" in the media offset more than three years of prior declines in anti-Asian bias.[32] The pandemic – and Trump's glib designation of it – has revived the century-old trope that Asians are vectors of filth and disease, and has exposed America's nativist fault lines.

Politically conservative Asian Americans are arriving at the brutal realization that the ally with whom they have sided in their fight against affirmative action has elected not to side with them when they are the target of attack. In this defining political moment, they are learning that their perceived competence and moral worth are no shields from xenophobia and racism, and their elite degrees and respectability politics are no protection from anti-Asian hate. This moment of reckoning presents Asian Americans – regardless of political persuasion – an opportunity to reimagine what racial justice and multiracial coalitions could look like. Indeed, the coronavirus pandemic presents all Americans an opportunity to reimagine what equity, empathy, and moral worth could look like.[33]

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ENDNOTES

[1] I use the terms *Asian* and *Asian American* interchangeably throughout the essay.

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