**The new meritocracy or over-schooled robots? Public attitudes on Asian-Australian education cultures**

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**Abstract**

The academic success of Asian-Australian students has become increasingly visible over the last decade. They are over-represented in high-performing schools, gifted and talented programs, and prestigious university courses. Asian-Australian educational achievements have generated a mix of admiration and anxiety. Congratulatory voices depict Asian-Australians as a model minority, whose work ethic promises to enhance the calibre of Australian schooling and propel the nation’s meritocracy forward. Anxious voices worry about the escalation of a competitive culture, symbolised by excessive coaching and the ‘tiger parenting’ of Asian migrants. This paper examines the divided public attitudes on Asian-Australian education cultures through a discourse analysis of several hundred online comments posted in response to newspaper stories on ‘Asian success’ over the last five years. It identifies two competing discourses underlying these opinions: firstly, a *pro-meritocratic, neo-liberal discourse*, in which Asian-Australians are a model minority embodying the competitive spirit and aspiration required in a globalised economy, and secondly, a discourse of *Asian-Australians as inauthentic learners* whose excessive focus on schooling threatens to undermine the traditionally relaxed approach of Australians in relation to childhood and education. While these two discourses differ in their evaluation of Asian-Australian students, both share a culturally essentialist framework that explains educational outcomes in terms of ‘culture’, often summarised as ‘Confucianism’. The paper analyses the racial politics of this cultural essentialism.

Keywords: Asian-Australians, education, model minority, racial hostility

*‘Learn from Asian culture of success’ (Sydney Morning Herald 2012)*

*‘Youth of migrant families dominate selective schools’ (The Age 2013)*

*‘Asians outclass Anglos’ (Herald Sun 2010)*

*‘Valuing education is key to migrants' success’ (Sydney Morning Herald 2005)*

These are some of the headlines found in the Australian press over the last decade highlighting the academic success of Asian-Australian students. As in other western countries, children of Asian migrants in Australia are over-represented in high-performing schools and prestigious university courses. They are increasingly visible on annual honour rolls and as educational prize-winners. Their success marks a shift in the traditional association of ethnic minorities with educational disadvantage and under-achievement. Unlike other migrant groups who are viewed through a deficit framework, Asians are increasingly seen as over-achievers who are lifting national educational standards.

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This paper examines the divided public attitudes on Asian-Australian education cultures through a discourse analysis of several hundred online comments posted in response to newspaper stories on ‘Asian success’ over the last five years. It identifies two competing discourses underlying these opinions:

1. a pro-meritocratic, neo-liberal discourse, in which Asian-Australians are a model minority embodying the competitive spirit and aspiration required in a globalised economy, and
2. a discourse of Asian-Australians as inauthentic learners whose excessive focus on schooling threatens to undermine the traditionally relaxed approach of Australians in relation to childhood and education.

While these two discourses differ in their evaluation of Asian-Australian students, both share a culturally essentialist framework that explains educational outcomes in terms of ‘culture’, often summarised as ‘Confucianism’. The paper analyses the racial politics of this cultural essentialism, and concludes by offering some alternative explanations for Asian-Australian academic success.

**Asian academic success**

Soon after 3pm on weekday afternoons, the bright kids who attend the state's most venerable selective high schools, Sydney Boys High and Sydney Girls High, pour out of the gates. One can only be struck by their homogeneity. Where these schools traditionally had a student body that looked like a school in England, today they look like schools in Singapore. A new meritocracy is being created in Australia that looks Asian (Sheehan 2014).

The academic achievements of Asian-Australian students have been the subject of increasing media interest since the early 2000s. News stories on the prominence of Asian names on high school honour rolls and Asians’ dominance of prestigious selective schools have become particularly common, together with commentary on the social implications of these trends. For example, in 2010 *The* *Sydney Morning Herald* featured a page 1 story headlined: ‘Top school’s secret weapon: 95% of students of migrant heritage’ (Patty and Stevenson 2010). This story was about James Ruse Agricultural High School, a selective school which has topped the state’s Higher School Certificate exams every year for the last two decades. The story was linked to a piece published the same day titled: ‘Are migrant parents pushing their kids too hard at school?’ (Patty 2010). These stories generated more than 200 reader comments, and even a follow up story the next day, headlined: ‘Ethnicity at selective schools provokes heated debate’.

Throughout Sydney and also in Melbourne, selective schools are dominated by students from migrant backgrounds. According to the MySchool website, in most selective schools, 80% or more of students come from language backgrounds other than English (MySchool 2016; see Ho 2011 for a fuller account). These state schools, designed for gifted and talented students, routinely outperform other schools, both public and private, in standardised tests, and entry is extremely competitive. In NSW, there were 48 fully or partially selective schools in 2016, and less than a third (32%) of applicants were granted a place (NSW Department of Education 2016).

Arguably the main reason for the increased competition for entry into selective schools is the expansion of private tutoring, another educational practice associated with Asian-Australians. Sriprakash et al (2015, 2) estimate that the number of commercial coaching centres in Sydney increased from just 60 in 1989 to 910 in 2014. This period coincides with an influx of migration from Asia, especially from China. Internationally, private tutoring is particularly common in East Asia (Bray 2006).

The much-noted dominance of Asian-Australian students in private tutoring and selective schools are signs of what Watkins and Noble (2013) call the ‘ethnicization’ of academic achievement, focused upon Asian-Australians. Academic achievement has become part of the ‘racial formation’ (Omi & Winant 1994) of Asian migrants in Australia, the US, UK and other western countries. In these societies, Asian ethnic identity is now virtually synonymous with hard work and educational success. These stereotypes tap into older discourses of Asians as a ‘model minority’, diligent and quietly aspirational. Of course, the image of the Asian high flyer masks enormous variation within this cohort, and researchers have noted the damaging consequences of the stereotype for those who do not live up to it (Chang & Au 2007, Lee 1994, Lew 2006, Li & Wang 2008). Nevertheless, the image of Asians as the model minority remains powerful.

The idea of the model minority is strongly evident within the first discourse I analyse below. While this discourse lauds Asian migrants for their hard work and commitment to excellence, the second discourse views these very traits as threats to an idealised traditional Australian relaxed approach to education and childhood.

Although these are superficially opposed discourses, I argue that they are united in their culturally essentialist assumptions about achievement, education and parenting, and both contribute to a racial politics that depicts Asian-Australians as fundamentally ‘other’ in contemporary Australian society. Both the positive and negative discourses on Asian-Australian achievement are part of the same racial formation.[[1]](#footnote-1) Whether Asian-Australians are lauded as exemplary students or demonised as over-worked automatons, their achievements are cast in terms of a deep-seated cultural predisposition to ‘hard work’. Whether this attribute is seen as desirable or threatening, it contributes to the overall perception of Asian-Australians as culturally alien to Australian society.

**Methods and sources**

This paper is based on a discourse analysis of 868 online reader comments. These comments were in response to three prominent news articles published in Sydney and Melbourne:

1. Patty, A. 2010. ‘Are migrant parents pushing their kids too hard at school?’ in *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September (214 comments)
2. Milburn, C. 2011. ‘Fears over “white flight” from selective schools’ in *The Age*, 17 October (226 comments)
3. Broinowski, A. 2015. ‘Testing times: selective schools and tiger parents’ in *Good Weekend Magazine*, 24 January (428 comments)

These stories were among the only mainstream news articles on Asian-Australians and schooling that allowed for readers to comment online. Although there have been many more stories on the topic, the news outlets generally choose not to enable reader comments online. The *Good Weekend* article’s comments were on a Facebook site, while the others were attached to the online versions of the article, on the newspapers’ websites.

Although readers are able to comment on any news story via Letters to the Editor, there are never more than a few letters published on any story. I decided to examine these stories because the quantity of reader comments allows for a much more expansive understanding of the range of public attitudes. The majority of comments on Facebook in particular, judging by user names provided, were made by readers from non-English speaking backgrounds, and many identified themselves as Asian-Australians who had recently attended selective schools. Their perspectives were much less evident in the comments published on the newspaper websites.

**Discourse 1: Supporting meritocracy and aspiration**

In NSW, the success of Asian-Australian families in the selective schools system is the most impressive thing I have ever seen – a quiet revolution founded on the value of hard-striving in life (Latham 2014).

Online reader comments were almost perfectly divided between those who praised Asian-Australian students for their hard work and achievement, and those who worried that this achievement was coming at too high a cost, to the students themselves, and to others now being left behind in an excessively competitive environment.

Comments within the first approach celebrated Asian-Australian students’ achievements, arguing for the necessity and benefits of competition and hard work. Often these comments implicitly or explicitly referred to globalisation or international competition as necessitating higher levels of aspiration in Australia, as symbolised in the following:

Better get use[d] to ‘hard’ work because we need it in a globalised world. (*Grace2*, Sydney, September 13, 2010)

…To survive in the 21st century, you need to excel from an early age. As parents, [Asian migrants] are simply enabling the kids to become the best. To live. To survive. To be the best. WRONG???? (Rufus, Sydney, September 14, 2010)

In response to the Patty story (2010) questioning whether Asian migrant families were raising the academic performance bar ‘beyond the reach of students in mainstream schools’, many readers were unapologetic in their defence of high academic standards:

The question we should is asking is not "Have migrant parents pushed the HSC achievement bar too high" but is our standard too low. Working hard to achieve a low standard is not going to push us in front. (A Levels, Sydney, September 13, 2010).

Other readers saw the achievements of Asian-Australians as the natural product of a healthy meritocracy at work:

if you study and work hard, you'll get in. period. black, white, asian etc… that goes for everything in life not just school (*bloke*, October 17, 2011).

It’s simple. Migrants put higher value on education than anglo parents. If anglo students are slowly vanishing from selective schools and the hardest university courses, they only have themselves to blame. (*Am*, Melbourne, October 17, 2011).

Some of the most fervent comments came from readers contesting the notion that private tutoring or coaching provided an unfair disadvantage:

There is no other way to describe this uproar about "coaching" other than pure envy. There is nothing wrong with training yourself for a test. Those who work hard will do well. I'm sorry if you feel hard done by because other people simply performed better than you through sheer hard work. (Brendan, September 15, 2010).

Many argued that Australians were hypocritical to criticise students for attending coaching – which the Broinowski story (2015, 11) suggested amounted to ‘cheating’ – when the national obsession with sport made it socially acceptable for athletes to engage in extensive training:

If coaching is cheating, then that would mean the Australian Cricket team, Rugby team, Netball team, and indeed, all of Australia’s Olympians are cheats, because they, presumably, train (*Darwin Akbar*, January 24, 2015).

People will always chase self-improvement. Olympians can only reach their admirable level of fitness through rigorous training and a determined work ethic over many years. And if someone decides to invest their efforts into pure academics? Let them be "automatons". It is through "automatons" that we discover cures for illnesses, land robots on a comet, and develop renewable hydrogen fuel cells. (*Andy Wang*, January 24, 2015).

Where is the outrage about dragging kids out of bed at 4 am to do 3 hours swimming training? Migrants aren’t the only ones pushing their kids. (Sam, September 13, 2010).

Some readers – from migrant and non-migrant backgrounds – put the blame on Australia’s anti-intellectual and laid-back culture, seeing criticism of selective schools as part of a ‘tall poppy syndrome’:

If ‘Australians’ didn’t stigmatise learning and intelligence so much, we wouldn’t feel this ‘threat’ from migrants. (Gabby, September 13, 2010)

Good on any one who raises the bar it needs it, you would be shocked at how far behind the bog standard education is in this country its disgraceful. (Katie, Sydney, September 13, 2010)

Let the anglo parents worry about teen binge drinking, not Asian parenting that allows their kids to become doctors, lawyers, economists, engineers. (*Tobias*, Melbourne, October 17, 2011).

Overall, these comments show that there is great support within Australian public opinion for successful Asian-Australian students (as well as pride among Asian-Australians themselves), driven by a commitment to the notion of meritocracy, and a firm belief that hard work deserves success. In this view, Asian-Australians are a model minority who ought to be emulated. The next section analyses the ideology underlying such attitudes, examining how the idea of the model minority is undergirded by a neo-liberal worldview.

**Behind discourse 1: Neo-liberalism and the model minority**

The concept of the model minority dates back to the 1960s in the US, when news reports appeared about the success of Chinese- and Japanese-Americans. A 1971 article in *Newsweek* discussed how some minority groups were ‘outwitting the whites’ (Li & Wang 2008, 3). Since this time, Asian students have been depicted as ‘devoted, obedient to authority, respectful of teachers, smart, good at math and science, diligent, hard workers, cooperative, well behaved, docile, college-bound, quiet and opportunistic’ (Chang and Au 2007, 15).

Chou (2008, 220) argues that while in the 1960s and 1970s, the term model minority referred to ‘a successful case of assimilation’, now the model minority is about success within a neo-liberal environment. Asian migrants’ putative values of hard-work, achievement and success mirror those of neo-liberalism. Within neo-liberalism, success is a product of individual talent and effort, regardless of cultural or social background. As Du Gay (1996) argues, within neo-liberalism, individuals are ‘entrepreneurs of the self’. Students’ success in school is determined by individual motivation and the family environments that have shaped their disposition towards schooling. These factors, rather than education policy or school systems, dictate how well students fare (Bradbury 2013, 554).

The model minority therefore demonstrates meritocracy at work, a system in which anyone can succeed. Within the discourse of meritocracy, the disadvantaged are blamed for being irresponsible, rather than seen as simply unfortunate (Archer & Francis 2007, 19). In the UK, as Bradbury (2013, 551) notes, Indian and Chinese British students’ superior performance in high school exams (compared to White British students) is ‘frequently cited as evidence that the education system is not institutionally racist’. She explains the flaw in this logic: ‘This argument is predicated on the idea that *a system must be racist to all minority groups, or none at all*’ [original emphasis]. The model minority therefore functions as ‘a discursive tool to deny accusations of racism and divert attention from continuing racial inequities’ (Bradbury 2013, 550). Writing about the US, Min (2004, 334) argues that the existence of the model minority ‘legitimates the supposed openness of American society’.

Australians are just as drawn to the appeal of meritocracy, and fostering open competition. The success of Asian-Australians is often used to demonstrate the benefits of this neo-liberal vision. One reader in my study made an explicit connection between educational competition and free trade:

Competition in any shape or form makes us stronger. There’s no need to fear competition and there is certainly no need for protection or intervention of any kind. Whenever there is government intervention and/or protection it makes us weak and dependent on continuing protection. Our auto industry is a clear example of how protection is not doing us any favour[s]. (*Georgie M*, October 17, 2011).

The contrast between the competitive, hard-edged Asian migrant and the complacent, lazy Anglo-Australian (as described above) mirrors the neo-liberal language that exhorts us to leave behind the era of the welfare state and government protectionism, to streamline old bureaucratic systems and embrace the global reality of market competition. This discourse is evident in the following cautionary comment:

What I am thinking is it will be more competitive in the future in Australia. If you don’t work hard and prepare yourself well for your future, you will be loser, no matter what skin colour you have. For the English speakers, they won’t be so lucky and easy to live well as their parents do if they won’t work hard. Australia will change not in a long time. (A.A, Roseville, September 14, 2010)

Naturally, competition produces winners and losers, and the status of Asian migrants as a ‘model’ can cause resentment from other minorities, and from the White majority, who fear being overtaken in schools and workplaces (Bradbury 2013, 550; Li and Wang 2008, 2). Within a neo-liberal environment, economic success becomes the ‘yardstick for measuring various degrees of assimilation among racial minorities’ (Chou 2008, 223). And the power of the notion of meritocracy means that less successful groups only have themselves to blame for their failure. As Palumbo-Liu (1999, 190) writes, ‘the underlying mechanisms that continue to work against blacks, Latinos *and* Asians, too, are made invisible by the inflationary symbolic of the “model minority”’. As mentioned above, in Bradbury’s terms, a system that allows some minority groups to succeed cannot possibly be ‘racist’. At the same time though, the very notion of the ‘model’ minority is predicated on the idea that other minorities are lesser in status. As Lee writes, there can be no ‘model minority’ without ‘the concomitant stereotype of the lazy and unintelligent Black or Brown other’ (2008, ix; see also Archer & Francis 2007, 1).

At the same time, being singled out as a ‘model minority’ forever places Asian migrants outside the mainstream. Even remarkable educational success is insufficient for inclusion in mainstream society, because this very success is viewed as a symbol of Asian migrants’ otherness. In spite of the emphasis on neo-liberal, individualistic frameworks, ultimately this discourse reproduces collective and racialized understandings of the ‘hard-working’ Asian, pitted against ‘lazy’ members of other minority groups or of the white majority.

The next section examines some dimensions of the resentment that Asian migrant success has created. In Australia this has come primarily from members of the Anglo majority, who denigrate Asian students’ academic success and criticise the culture of ‘hot-housing’ associated with Asian migrants.

**Discourse 2: Against hot-housing**

‘Coaching teaches kids how to be obedient zombies’ (Constantine Argiratos, January 24, 2015).

The growth of private coaching is a symbol of the intensification of competition in schooling, in the eyes of many Australians. My discourse analysis identified considerable anxiety around coaching, which is now seen as necessary to secure a place in a selective school, but which is so negatively viewed by many parents that they choose to forfeit the opportunity to enrol their children in a selective school, and indeed, would decline an enrolment offer in any case, because in their eyes, these schools are now full of over-coached ‘Asian automatons’.

In this discourse, coaching stands in for an approach to parenting that critics say deprives children of a happy or normal childhood. According to this discourse, the excessive focus on school work reduces the horizons of a child’s life, and threatens to undermine Australia’s traditionally relaxed and balanced lifestyle. The following comment is typical:

…my boys excel at school (no tutoring except me) and I’m sure they could get a place at the local selective school (Manly). The simple fact is I don’t want them to go, its racially divided and I don’t think its a happy place.  
My Aussie dream includes the boys going for a surf after school, enjoying the beautiful environment and having a good rounded life, not just non-stop study. I don’t think that getting 99% in your school exams makes you successful in life or happy… I believe that with all the Asian kids being tutored within an inch of their lives its now impossible for any kid whose parents don't believe in the ‘cult’ of private tutoring to get a place in Medical school… there is a lot more to life in Australia than just hitting the books. A very sad upbringing indeed. (White bread sandwiches, Freshwater NSW, September 13, 2010)

Others are more concerned about the well-being of over-pressured students:

Parents, please remember, suicide is a real risk. My 2 children attended different schools on sydney's north shore with high migrant levels (one selective, one not). At BOTH schools, a child from non-english speaking background committed suicide (one Chinese, one Indian). How terrible. What a price for academic success? (Eleanor, Sydney, September 13, 2010)

Some children are coached all of their lives, from as early as kindergarten. Something has to give, either socially or psychologically. Why can’t kids just be kids? (*Tracey Lewis*, January 24, 2015).

Some Asian-Australian students themselves weighed into the debate (mostly on Facebook), expressing regret at their parents’ enforced excessive focus on schooling, at the cost of other childhood activities, and also at the cost of a more holistic or ‘real-world’ education:

I always wanted to play cricket or rugby on Saturday just like any other Year 4, 5 or 6 child would have liked to, but most of my weekends were used up by tutoring/coaching. I regret not being able to play sport on the weekends just for that small part of my childhood and I wished that I had the courage to make my parents change their mind. (*Geoffrey Pak*, January 24, 2015)

I dunno man.. we asians are gods in rote learning. most of us rote learn our way to 99+ in HSC and HDs and honours in our degree. But I’ve learnt more in one year of travelling around than 18 years of equations, "literary analysis" and book bashing. (*Ching Du Ma*, January 24, 2015).

For most Anglo-Australians however, a larger concern is that the system of selective schools is being ‘gamed’ by Asian migrants, and ‘truly gifted’ children are denied entry:

the children who get in are pressure-cooked in coaching to pass the entry tests by rote learning, totally defeating the concept of these schools and an anathema to the idea of giftedness which is about natural talent and creativity, not battery-farming children of potentially average ability or slightly above average to pass IQ type tests. (*vale*, October 17, 2011).

Everyone has lost sight of the purpose of the…Selective system. It was provided so the weird gifted kids (of which I am one) are given an opportunity to clump together and be weird and socialise together. Unfortunately now the [government] provides a system that can be cheated by performance enhancing drugs (ie coaching) to enable non-gifted kids without superior IQs to enter the selective system. Thus truely gifted kids are left out and not able to enter the system set up for them… (Lynda, Ermington, September 13, 2010)

In this worldview, giftedness or talent are inherent, natural human traits that some are lucky enough to be born with. The achievements of gifted and talented students should not be conflated with the achievements of those who simply work hard, or more to the point, those who are coached or ‘hot-housed’.

Many of these commenters were explicit in blaming Asian migrants for introducing a culture of ‘hot-housing’ to Australia:

To be brutally honest, I would not bother putting children up for a selective high school… And yes, it is due to the cultural domination that the Asian communities express in this environment… I want an education that involves group activities, socializing and sport as part of its approach. School[s] dominated by students of Asian backgrounds do not provide this depth of experience… So yes, it is race driven. That is my truth, and the truth for many many other parents I speak to’ (*Undisclosed*, Melbourne, October 17, 2011).

As a former secondary teacher I am concerned at the level of tutoring to achieve high results and entry to selective schools and high status university courses. This is not a WASP practice but an asian practice based on Confucius. It is unhealthy and damaging to children and asian parents need to change their ideas when they choose Australia as their home. (*Susanna***,** October 17, 2011).

Some pointed to the situation in East Asian societies as a cautionary tale for Australia:

Hyper-competition and intense pressure to dominate academically has taken a huge toll in Asian societies, with suicides of young people who don’t do well in exams. Japan is a case in point. Australians once had a balanced, healthy view, valuing childhood as a time of development and exploration as well as education (*balance*, October 17, 2011).

For these commenters, the academic success of Asian-Australian students is ‘inauthentic’ (Bradbury 2013) because it is gained through aggressive parents pressuring their children into private coaching based on rote learning and repetition. These children are not naturally gifted or talented, but have ‘crammed’ their way to success, to the detriment of their creative development and according to some, their entire childhood. And of course, to the detriment of ‘truly gifted’ students who are denied places in the best schools and university courses. The next section analyses the conceptual framework underpinning the accusation of Asians as ‘inauthentic learners’.

**Behind discourse 2: Authentic learners & Asian ‘automatons’**

Although Asian students are constituted as ‘model’, they are not seen as ideal authentic learners (Bradbury 2013, 556), because they are viewed as passive rather than active, and motivated by external forces (‘oppressive’ parents, coaching colleges) rather than an intrinsic desire to learn. As a result, although they may do well in tests, they are seen as unskilled at ‘authentic’ tasks which require creative or critical thinking, autonomy, collaboration, or verbal participation. The upshot is that they are somehow undeserving of their academic success because they are not genuinely skilled or talented.

This discourse has been documented for various minority ethnic communities that are perceived as ‘culture rich’ (especially South Asian and Chinese families), whose cultural heritage is simultaneously seen as a source of strength and cohesion but also a source of oppression and restriction of young people (Archer and Francis 2007, 50; see also Ran 2001; Rattansi 1992; Alexander 2000). In their UK study, Archer and Francis (2007) found that Chinese-British students were seen as hard working and successful, but pathologised as too focused on school, and their parents viewed as too ‘pushy’. Teachers criticised their alleged subservience and passivity, leading to a ‘negative positive’, where teachers had high expectations based on racist assumptions. Chinese-British students had achieved their success in the ‘wrong way’, with their aggressive parents producing the ‘wrong sort’ of learning, being too ‘enclosed’ and denying children ‘individuality’ (2007, 42). Similiarly, Youdell found that Indian-British students were viewed as diligent and successful ‘but not intrinsically gifted’ (2006, 143).

In her study of ethnicity and education in the UK, Bradbury (2013, 556) reports one teacher stating,

There are too many children coming out that are able to repeat things, like a parrot, or follow a writing frame… they’ll do that but ask them to really truly do something authentic and they can’t do it and I think that’s a major problem.

Bradbury questions whether it is possible to so clearly distinguish between repetition and something ‘authentic’. She argues, ‘This discourse, which places the responsibility for assessing authenticity with the teacher, can work as a refusal to recognise educational success in various forms, for any student’ (2013, 556).

The implicit counterpoint is that White students’ successes reflect something innate and internal (Bradbury 2013, 556). As Archer and Francis argue, the ‘ideal learner’ is an ‘inherently embodied discourse which always excludes minority ethnic pupils and denies them from inhabiting positions or identities of “success” with any sense of permanency or authenticity’ (2007, 170).

Analysing the Australian media’s portrayal of Chinese-Australian students, Watkins and Noble (2013, 25-26) argue that these students are depicted as lacking creativity, as ‘automatons’. Their success is presented as ‘a form of deviant, cultural pathology which seems to directly threaten core [Australian] social values’.

In their study of Sydney schools, Watkins and Noble (2013, 96) found that teachers viewed Chinese-Australian students as passive and uncreative, particularly blaming the coaching colleges many attended for students’ ‘rigid and formulaic’ approach to learning. Even students displaying outstanding mathematical skills were pathologized as deviant because they ‘over-emphasised’ school work. In one vignette, Watkins and Noble (2013, 97) recount the story of a Chinese-Australian boy who had solved a Mensa problem in three and a half minutes, compared to the next best student who took over an hour. The boy was also able to explain how he did it, challenging the stereotype of Asian learners as unthinking automatons. However, this boy’s teacher’s response was to express concern that he spent too much time on his studies.

Watkins and Biggs (2001) highlight the contradictions in these perceptions, that they term the ‘Chinese Learner Paradox’. While ‘Chinese learners’ are seen as passive, they are also considered self-disciplined and effective workers. Watkins and Noble (2013, 100) explain that ‘passivity’ may ‘actually constitute active engagement in another form, namely quiet attention and concentration’.

The stereotype of the ‘Asian automaton’ was fiercely resisted by Asian-Australian students themselves in the online debates in this study. For example:

The stereotype of selective schools being a place… w[h]ere kids are being trained to become superhuman robots is far from the truth. In most selective schools students are taught to thick critically and become a global citizen. We are encouraged to have our own opinions and approach to learning. (*Emily Zhang*, January 24, 2015).

Dozens of students or recent graduates from selective schools commented that non-academic activities were a big part of school life. Many of these students expressed frustration and bewilderment at the stereotype that they did nothing but study:

Can I just clear up some things, James Ruse students are involved in plenty of activities other than studying and school. In regards to sport, James Ruse won the Hills Zone Swimming and Cross Country Carnivals this year and placed third in the zone in athletics (Ruse wins Cross Country every year) All the boys and girls basketball teams constantly win the zone championship every season. The touch football, netball, waterpolo and volleyball teams are also extremely successful… No, students don't study at lunch and recess, HEAPS of them play soccer, basketball or touch football at lunch and recess, even yr 12 students. Asian James Ruse students LOVE sport. (Proud Rusian, James Ruse, September 14, 2010)

Why are many people assuming that MacRob and Melbourne High[[2]](#footnote-2) have poor co-curricular programs? I went to MacRob… My best memories from high school involve participating in co-curriculars. MacRob has a very diverse and competitive house competition, puts on joint musicals and plays with MHS, offers many, many lunchtime club[s], has broad music programs and many competitive sport teams… Going to MacRob exposed me to a variety of cultures and values, but I never experienced the ‘feverish academic competitiveness’ that many people are claiming (*Kate*, Melbourne, October 17, 2011).

Other commenters challenged the stereotype that Asian high achievers were socially awkward, poor team players or lacking in communication skills. In fact, their very presence in online discussion forums, sometimes making impassioned and articulate arguments, was in itself evidence disputing the ‘Asian automaton’ stereotype. These findings mirror those of Archer and Francis (2007, 97-98), many of whose Chinese-British student informants represented themselves very differently to how they were stereotyped. In contrast to their alleged ‘passivity’ and ‘repression’, some students claimed, for example, that they were ‘loud mouths’ in class, ‘lazy’, and did not take learning seriously.

**Beyond cultural essentialism**

‘Too easily in popular debates categories of ethnicity become the explanation of social phenomena, not a means by which those categories can be unpacked’ (Watkins and Noble 2013, 32).

Whether Asian-Australian students are lauded as the new meritocracy, or pathologised as automatons, there is one discourse that runs through the public attitudes evident in this study: their success is explained by culture. Deep-seated cultural traits, traced back to Confucianism, are what propel Asian migrants to work hard and aspire for excellence. Confucianism’s prizing of education explains why Asian migrants take schooling so seriously, and Confucian filial piety explains why Asian migrant parents can foster such obedience in their children. Or so goes the conventional wisdom. As one commenter claimed, Chinese are from ‘an ancient, very smart culture’ (*Sal*, October 17, 2011). Another summarised, after explaining how ‘the poor kids attend coaching college daily’ – ‘sadly it’s their culture’ (*Milly Chip*, January 24, 2015).

Culturalist explanations for Asian migrant success are all the more powerful because they are often promoted by Asian migrants themselves, the most prominent example being Amy Chua, author of the 2011 best-seller, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*. In this book Chua constructs a sharp dichotomy between Western and Eastern parenting styles, and states bluntly that ‘Chinese’ parenting is superior, with the evidence being the remarkable achievements of their children (Chua 2011).

This cultural essentialism is highly simplistic. In particular, explaining the educational practices of 21st century Asian migrants living in the west by citing an ancient philosophy assumes that ‘culture’ never changes. As with any cultural or religious tradition, Confucianism is interpreted and reinterpreted according to the prevailing social circumstances of the time. As Ryan and Louie note, ‘many influential scholars are now reinterpreting Confucian education as a path to wealth and democracy. Such a view would have been considered outrageous heresy by any traditional Confucian’ (2007, 410). Ryan and Louie argue that it is a false dichotomy to set up binaries of ‘Western’ versus ‘Confucian’ education, or critical thinking versus rote learning. For example, they remind us, not long ago in the West, being able to recite great works, such as those of Shakespeare, was considered a sign of great intelligence and education (Ryan and Louie 2007, 414).

In the contemporary setting, Watkins and Noble (2013, 26) also argue that there is a false dichotomy constructed between ‘Chinese’ and ‘Western’ approaches to education. For instance, they note that practices that are pathologised as ‘Chinese’, such as private tuition and parental expectations of academic success, have been long-established practices in non-Chinese families as well. Archer and Francis (2007, 131) argue that the practice of planning, resourcing and strategizing for the future is an important aspect of both Chinese migrant and White middle-class families’ educational practices. Moreover, they note that the stereotype of the ‘pushy middle-class [white] mother’ is commonplace (2007, 71). For example, middle-class parents are the most likely group of parents to come into schools and challenge teachers (Ranson et al 2004). Reay (1998) also found that some primary school teachers felt highly intimidated by certain demanding White middle-class parents. And as the comments above argue, ‘tiger parenting’ has a long history in Australian society in relation to children’s involvement in sport.

Culturalist explanations of Asian-Australian educational success, which explain Asian migrant behaviour in terms of an alien and unchanging ‘culture’, fuel the racial hostility and resentment increasingly evident in public debates over selective schools. Here are some typical comments:

I hope all the politically correct multiculturalists are happy with what they have created here. I wonder how many will change their tune when their own children or grandchildren can't get a place in a selective school because it is full of Asians and Indians (*Jennifer*, October 17, 2011).

Yet another confirmation that multiculturism [sic] does not work and wil [sic] ultimately bring about the demise of the euro Australians. (*Len Davis*, Brisbane, October 17, 2011).

These comments reflect the perception that Asian and Anglo-Australians are so culturally different that, in the final analysis, they will be in competition with each other. As Rhee (2013, 568) points out, tiger mother Amy Chua’s depiction of the Chinese parenting shares the same ‘East vs West’ framework as Samuel Huntington’s ‘clash of civilisations’ (Huntington 1996). In both works, East and West are seen as irretrievably different, divided and competing.

Even the celebratory discourse of the model minority can feed a racial hostility, precisely because Asian migrants are perpetually seen as outsiders. The term ‘model minority’ suggests that no matter how successful Asian migrants are, or how well they assimilate, they ‘at best are the model minorities instead of becoming part of the majority’ (Chou 2008, 222). As Chou (2008, 224) argues, ‘The logic of model minority corresponds with Huntington’s intention to remove any notion of “Asianness” from the “core” of the US nation’.

In both the clash of civilisations framework, and the neo-liberal framework of globalisation and competition, the success of the model minority can easily feed into alarmist discourses of the decline of the West. After all, Huntington argues that it is Confucianism, not economic or military development, that makes China the biggest ‘civilisational’ threat to the West: ‘Whatever economic connections may exist between them, the fundamental cultural gap between Asian and American societies precludes their joining together in a common home’ (Huntington 1996, 307).

Seeing migrants as simply embodiments of essential, unchanging and hermetically sealed ‘cultures’ is ultimately damaging for race relations within multicultural societies. Migrant ‘cultures’, defined in distinction to ‘mainstream culture’, always contain the potential to become threats to the mainstream society, because of their incompatible or downright hostile features. Even notions of the model minority come at the cost of other (non-model) minorities, and members of the group who do not live up to the stereotype. But if we don’t explain migrant practices through reference to their ‘culture’, what alternatives exist?

**Non-culturalist explanations of Asian-Australian academic success**

Of course ‘culture’ plays a role in explaining the academic success of Asian-Australian students, but it is not the whole story. This final section offers some social explanations, focusing not on migrants’ ‘culture’, but on their status as migrants. This is important in a number of ways.

Firstly, the majority of migrants who are admitted by Australia’s highly selective migration program are educated, middle-class professionals. For example, nearly 40% of Australia’s China-born population holds a university degree, approximately double the national average (DIAC 2014). This class status, and the fact that occupational skills allowed them entry into the country, means that Asian migrants may be more likely than others to value education. In the US, Lee and Zhou (*this issue*) describe Asian-Americans as ‘hyper-selected’ by the post-1965 US immigration program, such that Asian immigrants are more highly educated than the general population, and bring with them a ‘success frame’ that values educational success and high status employment.

The second way in which migrant status affects parents’ behaviour relates to migrants’ downward mobility and lack of social capital. Although they are highly skilled, it is well documented that migrants from non-English speaking countries often confront discrimination and non-recognition of qualifications and experience, and therefore struggle to get jobs equivalent to their skills, or to secure promotions (e.g. Ho and Alcorso 2004; Teo 2007), the so-called ‘bamboo ceiling’ (Harrison 2014). In addition, migrants lack the social networks that longer-term residents can mobilise to secure good jobs. As a result, Asian migrant parents emphasise to their children the necessity of acquiring educational qualifications. As Park (2012) writes, ‘For the Asian immigrant who has left everything behind and has nothing to fall back on except his or her own efforts, “succeeding” is an all-consuming compulsion’. Asian migrant parents fear that otherwise, discrimination and a lack of social capital will hold their children back, what Louie (2001, 452) terms ‘immigrant pessimism’. This behaviour is a response to being a migrant and ethnic minority, not simply an expression of some deep-rooted Confucian culture. As Min (2004, 334) argues, Asian migrants’ emphasis on their children’s education ‘reflects their recognition of social barriers rather than their cultural norms’ (see also Archer and Francis 2007, 141).

Thirdly, Asian migrants come from societies that until recently were developing countries, where opportunities for education and social mobility have been limited, along with social welfare, and competition for good schools and jobs has been extremely high (Windle 2015, 91). These societies remain comparatively hierarchical, where high levels of education are synonymous with social status and a good income. In comparison, societies like Australia have historically been more egalitarian, with greater opportunities for social mobility. While a university degree is associated with higher incomes, inequality is not as great as it is in many Asian societies (World Bank 2015). These differences are not innate ‘cultural’ differences, but reflect a more complex combination of economic, social and geo-political forces over many generations.

**Conclusion**

Asian-Australian students have become increasingly visible over the last two decades. Unlike other migrant groups who have been traditionally associated with under-achievement and disadvantage, Asian-Australians are now seen as the model minority, hard-working and successful. However, public opinion on their achievements is divided. While supporters applaud Asian-Australians’ success, and view it as a testimony to Australia’s healthy meritocracy, critics resent their success, seeing it as a product of an excessive focus on schooling and oppressive parenting. This paper has analysed the underlying ideologies informing these positions, linking the former to a neo-liberal endorsement of competition, and the latter to an idealisation of the ‘authentic’ learner.

Ultimately, neither discourse does much to advance our understanding of why Asian-Australians comparatively do so well in school, and both have the potential to feed into a politics of racial hostility. Critics argue that Asian-Australian approaches to education pose a direct threat to traditional ‘Australian’ parenting and schooling practices, and even supporters of Asian-Australians are motivated by a commitment to competition, which supports educational ‘winners’ while implicitly (or sometimes explicitly) denigrating ‘losers’. All too often, these losers are members of other ethnic groups, whose ‘cultures’ are pathologised as lazy and under-achieving.

In order to gain a better understanding of educational achievement, we need to go beyond culturally essentialist explanations of students’ behaviour. We need to place students and their families within a broader social context, rather than reduce their behaviour to simplistic accounts of ‘Confucianism’, for example. This paper has shown how other aspects of the migration story, including Australia’s migration policy and discriminatory labour market, also play crucial roles in shaping the education cultures of Asian-Australians. And although focused on educational outcomes, the debates described in this paper implicate much broader social questions, around migration, parenting, childhood, social mobility, class reproduction, and the goal of education itself. Recognising these larger stakes, and taking this more holistic understanding can help to provide more nuance to debates currently trapped within sharply polarised discourses, so that we may begin to see Asian-Australians as other than just the ‘model minority’ or ‘over-schooled robots’.

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1. I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting this useful framing of the argument. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Mac.Robertson Girls High School and Melbourne High School are Melbourne’s original selective high schools. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)