

Asian immigrants conquer US

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Everyone knows about the Asian miracle in Asia. China and India's stratospheric growth are by now the world's worst kept secrets. Less famous is the Asian miracle that has taken place in the US.

Asian immigrants to the US, many of whom arrived practically penniless and took low-paying jobs with little prospect for advancement, have become among the wealthiest, best-educated people in the country.

The story of Asian success is well-established. Asian immigrants, whether Chinese, Korean, Indian or Thai, are seen as ferociously hard-working high achievers who succeed in education and then move on to take professional jobs, often in technical fields. Described at one point as the "model minority", they were seen as exemplars of integration, as against the social and economic problems facing Latin Americans or blacks.

According to the 2005 US census, the median household income of Asians is almost double that of black ones, and significantly higher than white households. Asians are also more likely to get a college-level education and have a better chance of obtaining a managerial or professional job.

"There's a great emphasis for Asians that the areas they study are career driven," says Henry Tang, a former investment banker and founder of Committee of 100, a prominent Chinese-American organisation. "There is a focus on doing something meaningful in later life rather than study for study's sake." This can often mean pressure to get marketable qualifications - whether that is in technology, law, medicine or finance. There is also a tendency, partly because of language barriers, for Asians to be entrepreneurs, and set up shops and small businesses on their own.

Such is their success that "Asians have been labelled the new Jews", says Howard Winant, who runs the New Racial Studies Project at the University of California Santa Barbara.

One example of the level of achievement of some Asian immigrants is Shashi Anand, whose life story is the stuff films are made of. Ms Anand emigrated to the US from India in 1975 as a young widow of 25 with two daughters and \$80 in her pocket and only a high school education. In a true rags to riches tale, she now runs a children's clothing company called Simonia Fashions with an annual turnover of \$18-\$20m.

She thinks that the success of Asians is clearly cultural, although it is also to do with the responsibilities of being an immigrant. "When you come from an Asian family, you think when you make \$200 you have to send \$50 home," she says. "When you eat at a restaurant you can eat more reasonably and send the money back. You have to work hard and save money to have a good life. White people were always broke at the end of the week."

Amit Sinha, a vice president at JP Morgan at the tender age of 29, moved to the US from Mumbai to study for his college degree on a scholarship when he was 18.

"I think [Asian success in the US] is not because it is engrained on the psyche, but is more of a function of the environment [that immigrants find themselves in]," he says.

The rise of Asians in the workplace is evident to people with plenty of experience in the corporate world as well.

Seong Ohm came to the US from Seoul in 1975 aged 11. Her father was an engineer who had worked for the South Korean army. She went to college in New York to study neuroscience, but fell in love with business and took an MBA. Since then she has worked for a number of US giants including GE and AT&T.

Now a vice president at Sam's Club, the membership store arm of Wal-Mart, Ms Ohm says that the prevalence of Asians is much greater than when she started out 21 years ago.

"Asians are now very well represented in middle management," she says.

The rising success of the Asian economies promises to add to that. Ms Seong says she has found that her Korean background has helped her in relationships with Asian suppliers. Mr Singh, likewise, sees growing opportunities based on the language skills and greater local understanding that Asians have for the markets in the continent.

However, as yet, Asians "have a long way to go" in the US boardroom, says Ms Seong.

Recent data from the Committee of 100 shows that 1.5 per cent of seats on boards of Fortune 500 companies were

taken by Asians in 2006, compared with their 4.3 per cent share of the population. That is up 50 per cent since 2004.

However, calling Asians a group, or even trying to analyse statistics that lump them together, is fairly inexact and rather misleading.

Whereas an astonishing 68.2 per cent of Indian Americans are educated to college level or beyond, only 9.6 per cent of Hmong Americans (who hail from south east Asia) achieve similar qualifications. Such poorer Asian groups often came to the US under very different circumstances, and ridicule the idea of Asians as a uniform "model minority". While many from the Indian subcontinent or from Korea came to the US after attempts to attract skilled professionals and scientists from 1965 onwards, the influx from south east Asia was chiefly in reaction to the Vietnam war, and the immigrants were less educated.

There is also a huge difference between the first wave of Asian immigrants in the mid-19th century and more recent arrivals. "If you go to Chinatown or look at any group of . . . Asians, there's a whole underclass . . . who are not really documented," says Viranjini Munasinghe, director of Asian American Studies at Cornell University.

"You only hear the success stories . . ."

Whether the phenomenon of Asian success in the US will grow as the "Asianisation" of the global economy increases, or fade as later generations of immigrants become more Americanised, is not clear.

But Bonnie Wong, president of Asian Women in Business, points out the flipside to the success of new arrivals in the US, as families that previously had to fight become more at ease: "The children of their children become lazy bums."

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