

BY WILLIAM HARMS

REDEFINING HOW PEOPLE THINK ABOUT **ASIAN IMMIGRANTS**

Yoonsun Choi's work debunks myths about Asian youth and studies parenting styles in the U.S. and abroad

THE EXPERIENCES OF FILIPINO AMERICANS and Korean Americans show how Asian American groups can be quite different, dispelling a popular monolithic stereotype about immigrants from Asia, recent work by Associate Professor Yoonsun Choi demonstrates.

Choi, who is leading a major study of Asian American families, has devoted her research career to redefining how people think about Asian immigrants. Although they have done well in America and are the parents of achievement-oriented children, each group of Asians has its own experiences, based on culture and acceptance of the values they find in the U.S., she says.

Her research shows, for instance, that while Filipino Americans are the most integrated of all Asian groups in America, they also hold fiercely to their traditional values. Koreans have formed cohesive ethnic communities but seem more willing to have their children adapt Western ways.

As a result of her current research, social workers and teachers will be better able to understand how the different backgrounds of Asian American groups shape their lives and how to accommodate that understanding when working with them.

Choi is exploring the differences among Asian Americans as principal investigator of the ground-breaking Midwest Longitudinal Study of Asian American Families (ML-SAAF). It is funded by the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute

of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), a federal agency that funds research on child health and development.

"To date, no study has directly compared associations between parenting and adolescent developmental outcomes between Filipino American and Korean American youth," she says. ML-SAAF is intended to address that gap in the literature. The study, begun in 2013, will trace the development of Filipino American and Korean American family processes and adolescent developmental outcomes over five years.

ML-SAAF tests Western parenting measures for generalizability to Korean and Filipino families and develops new ways to measure Korean and Filipino family processes specifically and accordingly provide a new way of looking at Asian Americans.

"There are at least 17 Asian American subgroups with distinct histories, languages, religious affiliations, and other markers of culture," says Choi.



Despite this number of different groups, people often think of Asian Americans as sharing the same values and having similar experiences, she says. An important part of that stereotype is an admiration among other Americans for Asian American children, who are seen as doing well in school, obeying their parents, and behaving well in society.

As a whole, Asian American high school students report better grades and lower rates of crime, substance use, and risky sexual behavior than the youth of other racial and ethnic groups, research by other scholars shows. But that finding does not take into account differences among groups of Asians and also does not look at ways in which the youth struggle.

As a result of a stereotype of success, Asian Americans are often viewed as a "model minority," and accordingly not in need of any special services reserved for people who are disadvantaged.

The Asian American youth, who internalize their problems, often do have problems requiring counseling, Choi says. "Depression and suicide rates are significantly higher among Asian American youth than among youth of other backgrounds."

Among the researchers on the project is Tae Yeun Kim, AM, '08, PhD, '15, Assistant Professor in the Department of Applied Social Sciences at the City University of Hong Kong. She says she notices similarity in parenting styles between Asians in Hong Kong and Asian Americans.

"In Hong Kong, parents always place high expectations for their children. Many parents have beliefs that their children should 'stand above others in life,' comparing their children with others and preparing them to stay competitive. Children feel

much pressure from their parents' expectation on many things such as academic performance, behavior, and so on. When they cannot fulfill parents' expectation, both children and parents may feel disappointed and depressed."

Choi's research looks at whether this pattern also exist in other Asian countries.

Kim says she enjoys continuing to work with Choi, who was her advisor. "Professor Choi gave me challenging questions and tasks and at the same time, encouraged me to find a way to solve and complete them. I am

always inspired by her strong commitment to research, which emphasizes ethnic minority and immigrant children and families. Her leadership makes our project team vibrant and productive."

Another member of the research team, Jeanette Park Lee, AM '16, is a social worker in private practice as well as a medical social worker and researcher at Rush University Medical Center, Chicago. The project will help social workers dealing with problems faced by struggling Asian American families, she says.

"I think a value of this research is to establish norms, to know how an Asian family works and to be able to identify dysfunction so social workers can make specific recommendations. This gives social workers an integral part in helping families," she says.

"I was attracted to her innovative research and to a project that tracks changes over time. Professor Choi has a depth of knowledge about all the various aspects that impact family functioning," she explains.

CHOI'S STUDY IS INTENDED to lay important groundwork for improving the services that Asian American families receive, and research from the project is beginning to be published.

Among the first papers is a report of her research team's survey of parents in the paper "Cultural and Family Process: Measures of Familism for Filipino and Korean American Parents," published in the journal *Family Process*. Her co-authors were Tae Yen Kim; Samuel Noh, a Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Toronto; Jeanette Park Lee; and David Takeuchi, Associate Dean for Research at the School of Social Work, Boston College.

The paper provides new insights not only in how the two groups are similar and different, but also how research on Asian American subgroups can be successfully conducted by testing a scale that Choi has developed to measure family interactions.

Before they began surveying research subjects, the team reviewed existing literature of scales used to measure Filipino and Korean familism, which is characterized by an emphasis on collective needs, interdependence, and conformity, along with a deeply held sense of obligation and orientation to the family. Familism is one of the most distinctive characteristics of Asian culture.

Familism has been measured in other cultures, particularly among Latinos, but those measures may not be useful for Asian Americans, who have different values among groups and different experiences in adapting to new culture.

To determine how Filipino and Korean families may view familism, the team also used focus groups from the two communities to develop a questionnaire that was culturally valid for the two groups and submitted their proposals to an expert panel for further review before developing a set of eight scales with 34 items.



LEFT: Choi meets with her research team in her office. Right: Grace Lee, MA, LCPC and SSA doctoral students Michael Park and Mina Lee.



THE PAPER ON FAMILISM reports the results of findings from surveying 151 Filipino American parents and 186 Korean American parents, all from the Chicago area. The team also surveyed children in the families, and results from those questionnaires will be reported in subsequent studies.

The average age of the parents, mostly mothers, in both groups was 47. One hundred percent of the Koreans and 90 percent of the Filipino parents were foreign born, with an average length of residence in the U.S. being 19 years for Filipinos and 16 years for Koreans. Nearly 60 percent of Korean mothers and 80 percent of Filipino mothers had achieved some college education or advanced degree. Children were either American-born or arrived in the U.S. as very young children. The demographic information was consistent with U.S. Census data and also showed that a majority of families in both groups earned more than \$50,000 a year.

Other research has identified some key cultural differences between the two groups. Korean parenting is largely influenced by Confucianism, Taoism, and Mahayana Buddhism. Confucian tradition emphasizes parental control and guidance and respect for age. Koreans also put a particularly strong emphasis on education.

Filipino culture reflects a long history of colonization by Spain and the U.S., which has the potential of increasing egalitarian values. However, the Filipino families also emphasize parental control and family obligations, especially for girls. Like Koreans, they are less likely to express affection openly than white parents.

Integration in American society is different for both groups. Korean immigrant adults continue to live segregated, monolingual lives, attend Korean churches or temples, and primarily associate with other Koreans. Filipinos, in contrast, are the most integrated of all Asian American groups, speak fluent English, and score highly on acculturation. However, their experiences with colonialism may have prompted them

to value family as a way to hold on to traditions as a form of resistance, Choi says.

TO MEASURE THE VALUES the two groups attached to different measures of familism, Choi used a five-point scale commonly used for academic research with measures ranging from (1) "not at all" to (5) "very much" to gauge responses. They looked at measures of traditional manners and etiquette; respect for adults; caring for aging parents; centrality of the family in terms of values; the centrality of the family in terms of behaviors; harmony and sacrifice; family obligation expectations of children; and family obligation expectations for daughters specifically.

Filipino parents reported high agreement on the importance of traditional manners and etiquette (4.5), for instance, and a higher sense of responsibility for caring for aging parents than did Koreans (4.3 vs. 3.5). For Koreans, children are expected to bow to adults and elders and say "*an-nyung-ha-se-yo*" while Filipino children are expected to place the back of their hands gently on an elder's forehead and say "manopo." Both greetings translate as "how are you?"

While each group expressed strong support for the centrality of the family in terms of behavior, Filipinos were more likely than Koreans to share their homes with relatives, while Koreans expressed the value by giving money when a neighbor or relative dies.

When asked to define their families, Filipinos included their extended families of grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and godparents in the definition, while Koreans defined family as including parents and siblings.

Both groups moderately felt that children should help out the family, while Filipinos were more likely than Koreans to feel that children, especially girls, should stay near home and care for old parents.



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ANOTHER IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION Choi is making to understanding Asian American families comes from a book she co-edited with Hyeouk Chris Hahn, Associate Professor at the School of Social Work, Boston University: *“Asian American Parenting, Family Process and Intervention.”* The book is a collection of chapters from leading researchers in the field who look at Asian American families through a wide variety of research approaches. The book further dispels notions of an ethnic monolith.

In the introduction, Choi says that other research has overlooked “the troubling psychosocial costs of acculturation and enculturation as Asian American families negotiate their collectivist heritage within an individualistic, and sometimes hostile, culture. The costs manifest, among other ways, in the disproportionately high percentage of psychologically distressed Asian American adolescents and young adults who struggle with suicide and self-harming behaviors and in a dramatic

increase of substance use and abuse.”

The stresses Asian American children can face gets serious attention in a chapter on parenting styles. Su Yeong Kim, Associate Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Services at the University of Texas at Austin, and colleagues look at family relations among Chinese Americans and found four distinct types, ranging from easy going to very strict, which can include a style called “tiger parenting” in which parents establish and enforce high expectations for their children.

They find that although tiger parenting may promote academic success, there is a related cost of psychological well-being across the course of adolescence.

Kim says that Choi’s study will provide an important new understanding of the dynamics of Asian American families, which have been studied mostly on the East and West coasts and not in the Midwest.

“This type of research has resulted in an incomplete understanding of the unique experiences of Asian Americans. Dr. Choi’s work helps us to understand cultural processes as experienced by the cultural groups, rather than trying to fit

a model that was developed for European Americans into Asian Americans. Her major contribution is explicating indigenous cultural processes in understanding Asian American children and families,” Kim says.

OTHER CONTRIBUTORS to *Asian American Parenting: Family Process and Intervention* are developing approaches social workers can use to help children and families dealing with adjustment and parenting issues. They point to techniques such as expressive writing, online mental health interventions, and tele-mental health services as a valuable response to the needs of immigrant Asian families.

Choi’s interest in the problems facing Asian American families comes from her own experiences as a social worker. After earning a BA in English and Education from Ewha University in Seoul, she came to the U.S. to pursue graduate studies in social work at the University of Texas, Austin. She intended to earn a PhD but paused her studies for four years for a career as a clinical social worker at agencies on the West Coast devoted to serving Asian Americans. “I was especially challenged by the lack of practice guidelines to work with adolescents of immigrant families,” says Choi, who with her husband Jin Kim, is the parent of two sons.

“I would like this study to produce empirical evidence that can guide social workers,” she says. “When I was a social worker, I had nothing to guide me. All of the studies were from a Western perspective, and when I made a suggestion based on that work, I would get a blank stare from the parent I was working with,” she says.

Choi says she ended up using her own “common sense” as an aid for her work. Her experience and research have since helped her make more thoughtful suggestions to Asian families, who struggle with adjusting to a new culture while maintaining their traditional values.

A point of conflict can be language school on weekends, she said. Children frequently resist going, and parents are likely to insist they attend as a way to preserve culture. “Now I am able to say to parents that, although being bilingual is great and beneficial, they have to weigh the benefit of going with the challenge of making children attend. What is really important is their relationship with the child, and if they end up forcing the child to go and damaging their relationship, as a result, it is counterproductive.”

Parents also need to explain why maintaining culture is important, and children need to be encouraged to listen, she points out. “It’s really a matter of interactive communication.”

Public policy also plays a role in encouraging good family relations for Asian American families. “If schools value multiculturalism, children learn to value their heritage; and that, in turn, can strengthen the family,” she says. ■



Although tiger parenting may promote academic success, there is a related cost.