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**The Myths of Success:
The Perpetual Cycle of Ethnic Expectations**

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Submitted to

Faculty
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by

David Lee*

**ICAS* Intern; Bachelor of Arts for Political Science from American University, Washington,
D.C.

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David Lee was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where he attended high school at Germantown Friends School. He attended the University of Pittsburgh for his first few years of college, before transferring to American University in Washington D.C., where he graduated with Latin Honors with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science. David is currently working as a CRM intern at the American Enterprise Institute.

David Lee

Work Experience

American Enterprise Institute

Washington, D.C.

CRM Intern

Sep 2018 – Present

- Worked with the Communications and Marketing Systems Department in the use of Marketing Technologies across the organization

The Heritage Foundation

Washington, D.C.

Technology Solutions Intern

Jan 2018 – Apr 2018

- Worked extensively with the Technology and Marketing Departments, collaborating on the use of Marketing Technologies across various Research and News Departments
- Led integration of Zendesk Support System for Organization-Consumer Interaction

Think Tanks and Civil Societies Program

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

Research Assistant, Database Manager

May 2017 – Jul 2017

- Collected Data and Updated Database of Information of Thousands of Think Tanks within the United States and Canada
- Compiled, Edited, and Analyzed Global Database consisting of all think tanks worldwide
- Researched Global Policy Issues and Influence of Think Tank Advocacy on Policy
- Prepared an extensive report on think tanks, governance, and public policy in Asia, with detailed profiles of major think tanks in the region and policy concerns within Asia

Institute for Corean-American Studies

Blue Bell, Pennsylvania/Washington, D.C.

Intern, Member of ICAS Youth Excellence Program

Aug 2013 – Present

- Wrote a Research Paper, “The Myths of Success: The Perpetual Cycle of Ethnic Expectations,” which is currently under review for publication

Polling and Research Team Member

Dec 2016 – Present

- Developed Polls and Surveys aimed towards Korean and Korean-American respondents
- Collected and Interpreted Data to compile a Report of Findings

Office of Senator Pat Toomey

Washington, D.C.

Intern

Sep 2016 – Dec 2016

- Attended various Senate Hearings
- Researched various policy issues, particularly the constitutionality of the legislative filibuster
 - Presented a briefing on research results and conclusions to staff

Campaign Office of Congressman Pat Meehan

Media, Pennsylvania

Intern

May 2016 – Jul 2016

- Filed and Updated personal information for donors/voters/ mailing list
- Went door to door to deliver Absentee Ballots and raise awareness during Election Period
- Occasionally answered phone calls and recorded messages
- Volunteered at Polling Place during Election Period

Education

American University

Washington, D.C.

Political Science

- Attended the School of Public Affairs from January 2016 to December 2017
- Received Bachelor of Arts Degree in Political Science in December 2017
- 3.75 GPA Latin Honors

University of Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Economics

- Attended the Dietrich College of Arts and Sciences from August 2013 to December 2015

Additional Skills

- Proficient in Audio/Video Editing in Audacity, Adobe Premiere Pro CS6, Adobe Audition CS6
- Proficient in Transcription of Audio to Text
- Proficient in Streaming Software with Open Broadcaster Software Studio

Questions

What are the identifiable traits shared by financially successful people, what are the myths and potential problems with obsessing over these traits, and how might they be dispelled? Moreover, how might these traits, myths, and questions be applied to Korean-Americans as they attempt to attain financial success as a recent immigrant class in the United States?

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Abstract

Within the confines of modern society, there has developed an obsession with the idea of “success” and its attainment. Success, particularly financial success, has come to mean not only the acquisition of basic means of survival such as food, water, and shelter, but also one’s financial status: one’s salary and general level of comfort and happiness. Because of this obsession with achieving financial success, there has been an emphasis on meticulously analyzing those factors which make people successful. Much of modern society believes that those belonging to the most successful class share certain easily identifiable attributes that distinguishes them from other classes, and that in order to replicate their success, others ought to mimic their practices.

It should be noted that in the United States, at least 51 percent of the population identifies as “middle class” and 48 percent identify as “lower class”. By the definition of financial success previously noted, the top 1 percent that identify as “upper class” are comparatively the most successful. Having understood that society continually tries to mimic the attributes of the financially successful, it stands to reason that those outside the top 1 percent will attempt to mimic those within the top 1 percent in order to achieve financial success themselves.

In order to analyze these various attributes, I have grouped them up into four keys of financial success. Each of these four keys can be represented by singular words: Framework, Aptitude, Moment, and Excellence (abbreviated by the acronym F.A.M.E.), each of which contains a foundational basis for the cultivation of financial success. However, these four keys are not in themselves sufficient to guarantee success, and each suffers from myths and misconceptions that can hinder the attainment of financial achievement. Below is my analysis of each of these categories and some of their possible shortcomings:

- **Framework** represents one’s upbringing and social status that follows from the accidents of birth. In other words, this is the uncontrollable “starting point” that one has from being born rich or poor, into a certain family, and within a certain community or society. The myth that stems from this idea is that individuals born with frameworks closer to the finish line will necessarily be more successful than those who have starting lines further from that finish line. Although framework does play a role in the opportunities one is given, particularly in one’s youth, a closer starting line does not guarantee success in many cases; neither should a further starting line be an indication of future failure. Framework does not simply determine one’s outcome.
- **Aptitude** represents one’s basic level of intelligence: the idea that those who are successful are fundamentally more intelligent than their unsuccessful counterparts. This concept leads to the desire to go to high-end universities with significant name values, as

these are considered hubs where those with extremely high intellect gather to celebrate their collective successes (as such universities would no doubt consist primarily of a student body that on average enjoy higher levels of academic merit than their counterparts) and cultivate future success. Yet there is little definitive evidence that high intelligence results in guaranteed success.

- **Moment** represents the particular opportunities, or moments, that one is exposed to in the course of their lifetime. This is the idea that one is provided with specific opportunities for success and takes advantage of them. However, this line of thinking is flawed when it fails to consider the necessary tools and means to follow through when these opportunities are presented. It is not enough to have these opportunities present themselves; one must have the means to seize them.
- **Excellence** represents the work ethic that one is willing to have during their journey for success. A relatively straightforward idea, this line of thinking puts forth the idea that success is given to those who work hard for it. In a room of people, those who work hardest and have the best work ethic to achieve excellence will subsequently achieve success. But again, this line of thinking cannot be considered a substantive guarantee of success. Anecdotal evidence indicates that for a large percentage of society, the one who works hardest may not always be rewarded the fruit of his labor.

What should be apparent from the examination of these four keys to success is that each individual category cannot definitively guarantee the outcome of financial success. These keys should instead be thought of as four parts to a whole, in which the acquisition of each key contributes another element to one's chance of achieving financial success, and acquiring all four keys maximizes one's chances.

F.A.M.E. is exceptionally significant to the Korean-American community because of how it has proceeded to integrate itself into the American ecosystem. Weighing in at about 1.7 million people, Korean-Americans make up 9 percent of the Asian-American population, and about 0.5 percent of the entire US population. This data suggests that Korean-Americans are statistical minorities in US affairs, necessitating a need to punch beyond its weight class to achieve meaningful representation and levels of success.

Korean Americans primarily subscribe to the key of Excellence in the face of lacking some of the other keys, notably Framework and Moments. However, there also seems to be a fundamental divide within the Korean-American mindset between the First and Second Generation. The First Generation is usually intent on raising the Second Generation in a distinctly Korean cultural context, while effectively ignoring the American cultural context. The Second Generation subsequently rejects this Korean cultural identity in favor of developing its own identity, but has to do so from scratch. What results is a situation where many Second

Generation Korean-Americans have no substantive cultural identity to fall back on, leaving them in a position similar to that of a new immigrant class.

Mastering this problem is the last piece of the puzzle. Before the Korean-American community at large can achieve widespread success, it must first understand its own unique place in the greater American cultural context.

Preface

The Question of Success

While immigration has always been an essential part of the American ethic, only recently has there been significant immigration from Korea. Today, approximately two million people of Korean descent reside in the United States, making the Korean-American population, with the exception of China, the largest concentration of ethnic Koreans outside of Korea itself. Although individual motivations for emigration differ from family to family, a basic generalization can be made that Korean immigrants to the United States share a common hope of realizing the American dream: living in a country where the opportunity for financial and social mobility abounds for those willing to work hard enough. Of course, realizing this dream requires that Korean Americans understand what it means to be successful, and learn how to achieve and maintain success for themselves and their children.

As the topic is examined, certain terms relevant to the discussion must be defined and clarified. The term success and the idea of being successful for now shall for the most part ignore emotional and psychological aspects. More specifically, the ideas regarding the pursuit of happiness and the possibility of happiness without financial stability shall be ignored. As is such, success and the idea of a successful person shall be defined as one who is financially stable and capable of fully supporting himself and his family.

This paper will make references to the upper class as those Americans in the top 1 percent according to income. These citizens have the highest level of disposable income and therefore the highest level of financial stability; they can therefore be called the most financially successful. With this in mind, the notion of the pinnacle of success for the vast majority of the American population, including the Korean-American community, will also be defined as the propensity for upward mobility into the top 1 percent.

The Korean-American population will refer to people of Korean descent that reside within the United States. First Generation will be in reference to Korean citizens who emigrated

from South Korea to the United States. While there exist First Generation Korean immigrants who came to the United States as children, the First Generation discussed in this paper will primarily be in reference to those who chose to immigrate as adults, namely those between the ages of 25-60, and who likely have children born in the United States. Second Generation Korean-Americans and Korean-American students shall subsequently refer to the children of the aforementioned First Generation Korean-American population.

The terms upbringing and social status will be defined in this paper as the quality of cultural formation that one might have. The quality of upbringing in this case depends on the financial stability parents provide for their families along with the type of community in which one was raised.

The term intelligence will ignore the broader forms of intelligence such as social intelligence, otherwise known in slang terms as “street smarts,” instead focusing primarily on innate mental prowess. IQ tests will be a subject of debate in the course of this paper, and will be in reference to the IQ scale of the Wechsler Adult Intelligence Scale and the Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, the most commonly used IQ tests in the English-speaking world.

Two economic ideas must also be defined for the sake of this paper. The first is the relationship between correlation and causation. In economics, it must always be assumed that correlation does not necessarily imply causation. In other words, just because two data points appear to be related and appear to back a certain conclusion, this does not immediately make one the cause of the other; coincidence or another factor at work must always be considered unless proven otherwise. The second economic idea is the idea of opportunity cost. Whenever an action is taken, it carries within it an intrinsic cost. That cost includes the potential benefits that one may have achieved by pursuing a different action (usually the next best alternative).

References to Amy Chua and her novel *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* will be made in this paper as well. It will be inferred through both personal experience and the experiences of others that despite Chua’s Chinese descent and emphasis on Chinese-American culture, the cultural overlap between ethnic Chinese and Koreans, especially when regarding the raising of children, are similar enough to each other to be directly compared. For the purposes of the paper, the psychological impact of Chua’s style of parenting documented in her novel on her children shall be ignored. Only the tangible results of Chua’s parenting as they pertain to financial stability and success will be observed.

A disclaimer: the purpose of this paper is not to present specific solutions to the questions at hand. Instead, the purpose of this paper is to examine the makings of financial success, specifically society's impressions and assumptions on the makings of financial success, along with an examination of the pros and cons of these impressions. It will then relate these findings to the Korean-American cultural experience. The views and opinions presented in this paper, other than the presenting and the examination of the works of others to help delve into the topic, are those of the author. This paper is based on the research and examination of prior works by contemporary figures, along with the culmination of experiences and observations by the author, a Second Generation Korean-American youth.

The first part of this paper will introduce the societal obsession with financial success. It will deal with the rationalizations and ideas that have followed these obsessions, as categorized into four keys: the effect of upbringing and social status, values such as IQ and the quantifiable nature of intelligence, the nature of opportunistic success or the idea that success is achieved only when the opportunity to seize it arises and is taken, and finally the idea of earned success, otherwise known as becoming successful through hard work or discipline. This section of the paper will talk at length on the emergence of these categories, along with an analysis of the pros and cons of each category.

The second half of this paper will then transition into discussing at length the Korean-American community in the context of these four keys, explaining why certain keys simply do not work for the community as a whole and the reasons why Korean-Americans heavily subscribe to certain keys in particular. This section of the paper will then discuss the pros and cons of such thinking as it pertains to the unique problems facing the Korean-American community. The paper will then conclude with an analysis of possible alternative ways of thinking to maximize intergenerational rates of success.

Success is a global issue that has affected individuals on a global scale. However, given that the Korean-American population continues to grow in both size and influence, the understanding of such ideas will be paramount to understanding the future of success for many other ethnic groups, both in the United States and around the world.

Part 1

The Keys to Success

Introduction: Chasing the 1 Percent

Within modern society, there is a continuous fascination in analyzing the practices that make one successful. In the United States specifically, where Truslow Adams' 1931 idea of the American Dream continues to be a driving factor in the population's aspirations, it should come as no surprise that the achievement of success has become an obsession permeating every aspect of US society. Success has come to mean not only the acquiring of basic means of survival such as food, water, and shelter, but also the level of ease one may have in attaining monetary stability, comfort, luxury goods, etc. According to the most recent census, 51 percent of the US population identifies as "middle class" while 48 percent identifies as "lower class", with roughly 16 percent of the population living underneath the poverty line. (United States Census Bureau, 2015) In terms of the evolving definition of success, the logical conclusion is that the 1 percent identifying as "upper class" are, in relative terms, the most successful, being the most financial stable and likely to be living the most comfortable and lavish lifestyles.

Having established that the top 1 percent are comparatively the most successful, a sensible step for those invested in discovering the keys to success is to focus on observing the 1 percent and determining how they have gotten to where they are. The culmination of these attempts to mimic the success of the 1 percent has resulted in several clear attributes that society suggests are responsible for attaining financial success. For the purposes of this paper, these attributes can be placed into four categories, each of which can be broadly denoted by singular specific tags: Framework, Aptitude, Moments, and Excellence. However, it is important to recognize that these categories are not guarantees of success and that each has corresponding myths and misconceptions associated with them that may actually hinder one's success.

1.1: Framework

Perhaps the most natural progression of thought from observing the top 1 percent, framework represents the underlying basis and foundations that frame a person's status in society. Framework represents one's upbringing and the relative social status that follows from being born rich or poor or within a certain community or society.

Imagine that the journey to success is a literal foot race. For the race to be fair and for each participant in the race to have an equal chance of winning, they must start at the same

starting line. However, framework asserts that not everyone starts at the same line in the race to success. Those who were born into a family with substantial wealth or social status have an advantage that puts them well in front of an average starting line, while those who do not start behind the average starting line. Therefore, it is presumed that those who have starting lines closer to the finish line will reach success far more easily than those without the advantages of wealth and status.

Following the logic of framework as the key to success, the resulting phenomenon is that those within or close to the 1 percent will continue to succeed and maintain their status in that upper echelon of society, while those born below that threshold will struggle to achieve upward mobility, if not undergo downward mobility from continually being unsuccessful. However, this line of thinking is flawed in assuming that success is predetermined by one's upbringing. There are countless examples of irresponsible heirs who squander their family's wealth, as there are countless examples of people who made a fortune starting from nothing.

Consider for instance the story of a young African-American woman born in rural 1950s Mississippi. When her grandmother died, six-year-old Oprah Winfrey left to live with her mother in a Milwaukee boarding house, where she grew up in extreme poverty and was subject to sexual and physical abuse. Yet despite these circumstances, Winfrey's net worth is currently estimated at \$3.2 billion and she is the only black woman ever to appear on *Forbes* magazine's 400 richest people in America. (Elkins, 2015) Under the myth of framework, the odds of Winfrey achieving financial stability, let alone a multi-billion-dollar fortune, are extremely low, if not impossible. And yet today Oprah Winfrey is among the most powerful women in the modern world.

Examining the *Forbes* 400 list further, the trends one sees in the list directly contradicts the notion of framework. According to a 2011 study done by Steve Kaplan, a professor at the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, and Joshua Rauh, a professor at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, thirty-two percent of the wealthiest Americans on that list came from wealthy families, as opposed to in 1982, when sixty percent of people on the list were from wealthy families. Moreover, the study indicated that in 2011 roughly sixty-nine percent of the people on the list started their own businesses, as opposed to forty percent in 1982 (Snyder, 2013). While some on the list did acquire their wealth and subsequent success through some kind of inheritance, these trends indicate that framework is more of a product of a myth than a clear-cut attribute of success.

Horatio Alger famously pioneered the idea of the “rags-to-riches” narrative in his many novels writing about impoverished young people picking themselves up from their unfortunate beginnings to become part of the wealthy elite. Alger’s characters became relatable embodiments of social mobility and testaments to the validity of the American Dream. The rags-to-riches idea cultivated the creation of a deep-rooted interpretation of the American Dream, one that anyone in the United States could feasibly achieve, which could certainly help to explain the disconnect between finding Oprah Winfrey on the *Forbes* 400 list, and the framework theory’s reliance on inherited circumstances. However, Alger’s works have also given rise to a mythology famously characterized as the Horatio Alger Myth. Scholarly literature has explored the validity of the American Dream according to Alger and has indicated inconsistencies with the supposed open nature of success. For example, scholars note that “natives moved up further and more quickly than immigrants,” and that among immigrant groups, some groups like the English and other Western Europeans advanced at faster rates than others (Anbinder, 2012, p. 744). This suggests that although Framework by itself may not be enough to explain financial success and upward mobility, there is clearly something about one’s inherited status that contributes to financial success that makes it difficult for just anyone to achieve.

1.2: Aptitude

Aptitude represents one’s level of intelligence: the idea that those who are successful are fundamentally more intelligent than their counterparts. More importantly, especially throughout the past few decades in the United States, aptitude has been the most popular key to success among the four categories. To find evidence of this claim, one only need to look at the various tools that society has adopted to determine intelligence. Children are encouraged to take IQ tests at young ages, especially with the availability of countless online testing services. In terms of education, there are numerous so called “Gifted Education” and “Special Education” programs in which those with especially high IQs and especially low IQs are prioritized. Standardized testing itself, most famously college entrance exams like the SAT and the ACT, are basically exercises in test-taking ability without any truly difficult subject matter, yet they are excruciatingly examined as integral parts of the US higher education admissions process. Innate intelligence

continues to be highly valued in society, sometimes with good reason, but other times with no reason.¹

The reasoning behind this emphasis on intelligence is perhaps best illustrated in Charles Murray's and Richard Herrnstein's book *The Bell Curve*. In their book, Murray and Herrnstein argue that the reason some individuals are more successful than others is simply because their IQ was higher than others. Based on their analysis of data compiled in the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, a study conducted by the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics, the two provided a list of statistical economic and social correlations between IQ levels. Using this data, the two attempted to paint a convincing landscape in which certain life events – one's poverty level, whether one has ever been incarcerated, or if one is frequently unemployed – could be predetermined by their IQ level. What they found was that those with lower IQ levels would on average belong to a lower socioeconomic class, have served more jail time, and have spent more time unemployed than their higher IQ counterparts. A lower IQ would intrinsically result in a lower innate intelligence. For people with higher IQ, sound financial and moral decision making came more easily because of their increased intellectual capacity. The end result was suggesting that individuals with increased aptitudes were more likely to be financial stable and less likely to make decisions that compromised their financial stability (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994).

However, such line of thinking could prove to be extremely dangerous, and perhaps even self-serving. Perhaps the most controversial aspect of *The Bell Curve* is their belief that IQ is only part of the equation. Murray and Herrnstein believed that there were many aspects that went into determining what everyone's IQ would turn out to be, specifically the aspect of race. They argued that the overall IQ, and thus the overall intelligence and capacity for success was predetermined based on racial background. To them, there was a clear and finite line that represented the pinnacle of intelligence for certain races, and depending on what race an individual was, one would fall into a hierarchy of intelligence. To make matters more controversial, the two also argued that it was impossible to try and escape this system of inherent intelligence; it was simply the destiny of children of certain descent to have an inferior intellect (Herrnstein and Murray, 1994). Today, there have been massive outcries against these views. Yet

¹ In one of Malcolm Gladwell's books, *The Tipping Point*, he explains the societal phenomenon known as the "power of context," which explains that society tends to latch on to the popular opinion. This phenomenon could help explain how IQ became so important within a perpetual echo chamber.

Herrnstein and Murray cannot be ignored altogether as this opinion continues to exist within certain communities, and has been resoundingly popular among the upper echelons of society.²

It was not until late into the 20th century that the massive outcry towards such racialized views of intelligence outweighed its opposition. First published in 1981, Stephen J. Gould's *The Mismeasure of Man* marked a significant turning point in the way in which society viewed intelligence. Gould's book was meant to be a critical analysis of the 18th century invention of scientific racism³, taking shape in forms such as craniometry.⁴

Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, many works and studies spawned from the concept of scientific racism, through the works of people like Samuel George Morton, Louis Agassiz, and Paul Broca. Much of their work was dedicated to showcasing data that seemed to indicate that the basis of scientific racism held true. However, Gould points out that there existed an intrinsic bias within the researchers of the time, inevitably resulting in unreliable data. Gould argues that because of the strength of their bias, these researchers continually jumped to conclusions and only saw data that confirmed their prejudices.⁵ Regardless of the actual information provided, the researchers assumed their hypothesis to be true even before testing it. And in cases where legitimate data might seem to prove their hypothesis, they assumed that this correlation between their data and race implied causation, when more often than not there was no evidence to presume such.

It is because of this examination of bias and analysis of the correlation-causation fallacy that Gould argues that the correlation between IQ and genetics is false, refuting Murray's and Herrnstein's *The Bell Curve*. Gould illustrates the dangers of this fallacy by providing an example where he compares the measure of change over time (his age), the population of Mexico, the price of Swiss cheese, his pet turtle's weight, and the average distance between galaxies, finding that they all have a high correlation with each other. However, even though this correlation may exist, it is not proof that Gould's increasing age is a cause of the increase of the population of Mexico.

² i.e. Racial profiling. (See Ferguson, et cetera.)

³ The field of study devoted to explaining, in scientific terms, the innate inferiority of those of color when compared to the white man. Most likely the basis and inspiration of the works of Murray and Herrnstein.

⁴ The study of skull structure as it relates to intelligence. Inspired by the structural differences in the human skull depending on race.

⁵ Although it would be difficult to prove, there is also the possibility that data was forged when the initial data did not show them what they wanted.

For further inquiry into whether IQ and intelligence really is a defining key to success, one only needs to examine the experiences of Lewis Terman, a psychology professor at Stanford University and the father of the modern IQ test, referenced in Malcolm Gladwell's book *Outliers: The Story of Success*. Through a series of studies and series of preliminary IQ tests, from a test group of 250,000 students, Terman came across "1,470 children whose IQs averaged over 140 and ranged as high as 200." Terman went on to follow the careers of these 1,470, noting all of their academic and social achievements and constantly keeping in touch with them to provide advice and counsel. "'There is nothing about an individual as important as his IQ, except possibly his morals,' Terman once said. And it was to those with a very high IQ, he believed, that 'we must look for production of leaders who advance science, art, government, education and social welfare generally.'" The issue with buying into this line of thinking is that when we return to Terman's niche of geniuses, "few of them were nationally known figures," as Terman envisioned. "They tended to earn good incomes – but not that good. The majority had careers that could only be considered ordinary, and a surprising number ended up with careers that even Terman considered failures" (Gladwell, 2008, p.117-140). Ultimately, society's heavy subscription to intelligence as a key to success not only appears to result in dangerous and divisive thinking, but it is becoming increasingly clear that Aptitude alone cannot explain why some become more successful than others and what separates the most successful top 1 percent from the rest of the population.

1.3: Moments

Moments represents the opportunities, or moments, that one is exposed to during their lifetime. In other words, success comes to people because they are given the opportunity to chase that success and take advantage of these opportunities, opening a ladder of opportunities ripe for the climbing.

To better understand what is meant by moments and opportunities, an examination of Malcolm Gladwell's *Outliers* is necessary. An analysis of the correlation and causation dilemma, Gladwell rejects society's sole subscription to aptitude and intelligence, instead suggesting that what explains the outliers of society, or, with respects to this paper, the top 1 percent that are comparatively the most successful, is a combination of skills such as intelligence and the strategic (or sometimes even coincidental) seizure of opportunity.

One of Gladwell's fundamental steps in presenting this argument is in his example of a list of names of junior hockey league players, which includes their position on the hockey field, their height, their weight, and their date of birth. Like many contact sports, hockey is one that requires an immense amount of physicality, in which the weight of a player and his or her ability to control that weight theoretically determines the force of impact, while the height of the player would have an effect on the momentum and speed that a player could potentially have. Therefore, it makes perfect sense that the list includes these two pieces of information. However, Gladwell's focus is on the piece of information on that list that at first glance seems quite trivial: their date of birth. After examining the list of players, one soon discovers that a significant number of these players were born in the early months of the year. January had the most birthdays, followed by February, followed by March, and so on until December. These results are then compared with that of the National Hockey League, after which Gladwell notices that "in any elite group of hockey players – the very best of the best – 40 percent of the players will have been born between January and March, 30 percent between April and June, 20 percent between July and September, and 10 percent between October and December" (Gladwell, p.33). However interesting that may be, one might disregard this as another correlation-causation fallacy. However, Gladwell produced another almost identical list, this time a list of soccer players, giving credence to an unknown factor correlating date of birth and success in athletics. Gladwell was able to use these examples to discern what was really going on by researching how the groupings for these sports were created.

In every youth league for sports, groups are organized together based on age, with a standard cut-off date. For the sports in question, that cut-off date was between December and January of any given year (meaning that a child born on December 31st would be grouped with older children and a child born on January 1st would be grouped with younger children). What this entails is that within their respective age groups, children born in the early months of the year such as January, February, March, and April, are typically more physically developed than their younger counterparts. Therefore, in the eyes of scouts that attend little league matches, the players born in the earlier months of that year appear stronger and faster than their younger counterparts. This discrepancy was thus interpreted as having more skill and talent. Because of these potentially skewed scouting reports, these players born in the earlier months are then more likely to be recruited into higher level skill groups and receive better training and more practice

time. Because of this extra training, these players will then be more likely to be recruited into professional sports. These players happen to have the extraordinary luck of being born right after the cut-off for age groups and are more likely to have the opportunity to rise to the highest levels. In other words, these players are given more opportunities to practice not only for longer amounts of time, but also more efficiently.⁶

Additionally, Gladwell discusses the consideration of all the possible negatives of missing opportunities. Economists name these potential negatives opportunity cost. For every decision that one makes, the cost of that opportunity is equal to the next best option. Or rather, in gaining from one opportunity, one loses what one might have gained from taking a different opportunity. Therefore, when considering pursuing one opportunity, it is of absolute importance to consider the cost of other opportunities before doing so.

One could theoretically ascertain that the idea of opportunity seizing paints a picture where all one needs to succeed is the opportunity to do so. However, to suggest this is to also fall into flawed and myth-based thinking, which is pointed out by Gladwell in his book. Returning to the example of hockey league players, there are several additional factors at work that should not be ignored. As stated previously, it is true that the players observed in the study have birthdays earlier in the year, which contribute to yearly-based cutoffs for age brackets and potential physical growth patterns. Yet just because they have these birth dates does not mean that they are automatically allowed to participate in these camps and gain optimal training and results just because they had the opportunities given to them. For example, physical growth may not necessarily translate to practical hockey skills or understanding of the game. Other factors include whether the players have the financial means to attend training camps, quality of equipment afforded, ease of access and travel, whether whatever university a player might attend has a hockey team, and so on. It could be true that one requires the opportunity for success to achieve it, but what good is that opportunity if one lacks the financial or social tools to pursue it? Subscribing to Moments and opportunities as a sole indicator of success inherently assumes that an individual who is given an opportunity will achieve the same level of success as others given that same opportunity, when in reality, they may not have the same means nor the will to seize it in the first place.

⁶ In their books, *Talent is Overrated* and *The Talent Code*, Colvin and Coyle respectively go further into detail about the phenomenon of natural genius versus experience and skill gained through vigorous practice.

1.4: Excellence

Excellence represents the work ethic that one is willing to have during one's journey for success. A relatively straightforward idea, excellence puts forth the idea that success is given to those who work hard for it, where those who work the hardest and have the best work ethic to achieve excellence will subsequently be the most successful. These are thus the most likely to become the top 1 percent.

In Amy Chua's book, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, she chronicles what it was like raising her two daughters in the United States through what she called the "Traditional Chinese Method." While strict parenting exists from culture to culture, Chua takes the idea to new heights: the schedules of her children are written down and followed to excruciating detail down to the last minute, moments spent idly by are considered wastes and discouraged, friends with no real value towards her children achieving success are cast aside, and things like "play dates" are commodities that typical American parents do not understand are detrimental for their children (Chua, 2011a). As Chua puts it "even when Western parents think they're being strict, they usually don't come close to being Chinese mothers. For example, my Western friends who consider themselves strict make their children practice their instruments 30 minutes every day. An hour at most. For a Chinese mother, the first hour is the easy part" (Chua, 2011b).

While it might be somewhat strange – and therefore in some eyes cruel – to those who are unfamiliar with the Traditional Chinese Method, the purpose of Chua's method of parenting is to implant the seed of excellence into the mind of her children. Through the strict schedules and plans that Chua lays out for her children, Chua hopes that her children take the lessons and habits that they learn abiding to these parental restrictions into their academic and social lives. These habits of excellence planted into them at a young age, and this strict parenting pushes them to get through school at the top of their class. Moreover, these habits help them achieve upward mobility by perfecting the kind of work ethic that will impress future bosses and colleagues. Based on the results, Chua's draconic efforts appear vindicated, as her two children have ended up as quite successful into their late formative years. The two have gone on to become virtuosos in their respective instruments: the piano for the elder, the violin for the younger. Moreover, the older child is currently a small business owner in New Haven, CT, while the younger child graduated from Harvard in 2018.

Regardless of the outcome of her two children, there are false conclusions that Amy Chua

comes to in her book. The first is that Chua assumes that the success of her children is dependent predominantly, if not solely, on her actions and sheer will as a parent to instill the key of excellence into her children. This view appears to spawn from the notion that Chinese children are indebted from birth.

Chinese parents believe that their kids owe them everything. The reason for this is a little unclear, but it's probably a combination of Confucian filial piety and the fact that the parents have sacrificed and done so much for their children. (And it's true that Chinese mothers get in the trenches, putting in long grueling hours personally tutoring, training, interrogating and spying on their kids.) Anyway, the understanding is that Chinese children must spend their lives repaying their parents by obeying them and making them proud (Chua, 2011b).

The more the parent sacrifices for the child, the more the child should feel indebted to the parent. The more the child feels indebted, the more the child will strive to pay that debt by excelling in their studies, gaining financial security, and being successful in life. The harder Chua works to keep her daughters in line so that their lives may be more luxurious down the road, the harder her daughters will work as they understand and appreciate the sacrifices Chua has made. The fundamental flaw here is that one cannot assume what exactly it is that the child is thinking through this process, or what other outside influences may be affecting their train of thought. Amy Chua cannot possibly know that her daughters will recognize her sacrifices and so she cannot assume that her actions are definitively leading her daughters to success.

Chua cannot be fully aware of all of the outside influences that might have an effect on not only her children's way of thinking, but also in their daily habits and routines. Chua states that she firmly believes that Chinese mothers "believe that they know what is best for their children and therefore override all of their children's own desires and preferences. That's why Chinese daughters can't have boyfriends in high school and why Chinese kids can't go to sleepaway camp. It's also why no Chinese kid would ever dare say to their mother, "I got a part in the school play! I'm Villager Number Six. I'll have to stay after school for rehearsal every day from 3:00 to 7:00, and I'll also need a ride on weekends." God help any Chinese kid who tried that one" (Chua, 2011b). In rejecting her children's input, which has been shaped by their (in this case) non-Chinese interactions, Chua essentially refutes the rest of the environment in which her

children grew up, and therefore does not necessarily command a full view of her children and their wishes.

Chua's third misconception is assuming that the "Traditional Chinese Method" can be adopted by anyone and that her children stand as clear examples to that fact. Unlike the typical Chinese immigrant in the United States, Amy Chua is not a first generation immigrant. And even if she were, her plight as an immigrant would be discounted due to the success she inherited from her family prior to emigrating. Chua's grandparents were planted firmly in the upper echelon of Chinese society well before they had any presence in the United States. Her parents graduated from Ivy League schools and were well equipped to raise Chua in a good environment. Lastly, Chua herself graduated from Harvard College and received a law degree from Harvard Law School. Chua is overly concerned with the potential success of the Chinese Method as compared to the typical white family, making no mention of other potential factors at work. Does the child have a stable home environment? How many other siblings must the family take care of? What is the annual income of the parents? How demanding and time-consuming are their jobs? Does the child have access to quality education? Chua does not entertain the idea of a serious discussion of these additional factors, effectively taking them for granted. Chua is so fixated on instilling the values of excellence into her children that she doesn't stop to think about how her children already appear to have the attributes of framework, aptitude – in the sense that they are already naturalized, born, and raised in the USA – and moments all gifted to them on a silver platter.

Conclusion: Pursuing F.A.M.E.?

With framework, the idea that favorable upbringing and financial/social status objectively increases the chances of success did not seem to explain the rise of Oprah Winfrey and the growing trends of new money and entrepreneurialism in the *Forbes* 400 List. With aptitude, one sees that not only does the societal focus on Aptitude result in dangerous and divisive thinking in a racial context, but also that IQ, which has been hailed as the definitive indicator of intelligence, also seems to fail by itself in explaining the success or lack of success of individuals. With moments, one sees that while it is true that success is achieved if the opportunity for success presents itself, that opportunity means little if the means to pursue that opportunity, be it intelligence or wealth or otherwise, are not present. Finally, with excellence, one again sees that attributing success to one's hard work may not factor in the privileges that one might also have

enjoyed while growing up; perhaps hard work by itself cannot guarantee success if these privileges and higher social/financial status are not present.

The trend that continues to present itself in the analysis of these four keys to success is the lack of individuality and self-sustainability that each category maintains. In slightly different terms, society's obsession with discovering a definitive route to success has caused subscribers of each key to solely rely on their respective methods. Subscribers to aptitude believe that aptitude is paramount, while subscribers to excellence believe that excellence is the primary key, and so on.

While there are numerous examples in history of people defying the expectations that specific keys to success claim are both sufficient and necessary to succeed (thus perpetuating the notion that anyone can achieve the American Dream) scholarly works on the Horatio Alger myth and the validity of the American Dream continue to indicate that there is clearly something at work that causes the playing field not to be equal among all parties.

The likely reality is that the definitive key to success is not one of these four keys individually, but rather all four categories in conjunction with one another. The reason each category surfaced separate from one another is likely because those lacking in one or more of the categories compensated by finding and subscribing to another category with zealous intensity. While it is sensible to mask one's weaknesses by acquiring other strengths, the line of mythical thinking paired with these keys to success results in an individual stopping at one key when they lack another, instead of attempting to acquire every key that they can to maximize their chances of success.

Consider that Oprah, who obviously lacked in framework, deciding to pursue instead excellence, by graduating from high school as an honor roll student and then going on to receive a full scholarship from Tennessee State University. But she did not stop there. Having gained useful tools from her commitment to excellence, she then moved on to moments, where she seized an opportunity to work at a local black radio station, and then used that to become a news anchor in Nashville. By seizing these opportunities, she eventually became the host of her very own Oprah Winfrey Show (Elkins, 2015). And the rest is history.

It is much of the same for Amy Chua's children as well. Yes, Chua instilled a strong foundation for excellence in her children through her strict parenting. But Chua's children also had a strong foundation in framework, with Chua and her parents hailing from affluent

backgrounds and providing financially and socially stable environments for her children (Chua, 2011a). And it was this framework and commitment to excellence, along with her children's high aptitudes that would lead to the moments and opportunities that allowed her children to attain success.

Instead of individually subscribing to certain keys to success, it is instead most prudent to consider all four categories, F.A.M.E., to maximize one's probability of success. And then when one's success is achieved, the natural step should be to consider the categories that one may still be missing and bring them into one's repertoire. One would now make connections with other successful individuals, buy homes in affluent and safe areas, and create trust funds for their children so that they might have a better framework than their parents. One would look into strategies for nourishing the intelligence of their children in their formative years to maximize their children's inherent aptitude. One would actively look for more opportunities and attempt to gain the necessary tools to seize these additional moments. And one would instill in their children (perhaps not as intrusively as Chua) a habit of excellence that gives them the drive to succeed.

Part 2

The Cycle of the Korean-American Dream

Introduction: The New Wave

Starting in the 1960s, fueled by increasing relations between the United States and East Asia, the U.S. saw a massive spike in Korean immigration. Despite the popular narrative that most immigrants coming into the United States hail from Hispanic countries, recent studies show that the annual percentage of immigration from Asia supersedes that of Latina America (Mead, 2012). While the current Asian-American population accounts for only about 5.6 percent of the total American population, this trend suggests that Asian-Americans will become increasingly significant in both a political and social context in the United States.

Given this likelihood of increased political relevance, it is prudent for Asian-Americans to prepare to enter an expanded role in American politics and social life. A failure to do so might lead to a perpetual disconnect or lack of social cohesion between Asian-American culture and the American cultural ethos at large. Thus far, Asian-Americans have approached the issue of increased political relevance by buying into the promise of the American Dream, aggressively chasing after financial success for themselves and for their children.

2.1: Excellence as a Means of Equality

Asian-American immigrants are not alone in their pursuit of achieving the American Dream. Many people of diverse ethnic backgrounds have come to the United States and attempted to take any advantage to become successful. However, Asian-Americans seem almost obsessively determined to prove themselves using the one key to success they perceive to be able to control: excellence. This is likely due to the fact that Asian-Americans have historically been culturally limited as a class and cannot rely on the other keys to success as readily as their willingness to display a robust work ethic.

Korean-Americans effectively lack anything associated with framework upon immigrating to the United States. Since Korean immigration is a relatively new endeavor, these immigrants have no predetermined social framework to rely on in this country. This is only magnified by pre-existing cultural barriers between Asian and American communities. An argument could be made that some form of framework exists in the immigrant culture established by previous generations of Korean-American immigrants; however, very few of these ethnic Koreans have thus managed to break into the upper echelon of American society. There just are not enough, if any, Korean-Americans in the top 1 percent to provide a framework of success to recent Korean immigrants. So long as the pinnacle of success is measured by the financial and social stability garnered by the top 1 percent, the framework available to the Korean-American immigrant community does not provide a significant means for the goal of upward mobility.

As for aptitude, one must further understand two terms used to measure intelligence; Practical Intelligence and General Intelligence. General Intelligence implies the general mental capacity of an individual. Practical Intelligence is defined as the intellect and knowledge used for specific tasks. As a whole, Korean-Americans usually prove quite capable in terms of General Intelligence (hence the stereotypes regarding things like academic success on standardized tests). However, Korean-Americans may not fare as well when it comes to Practical Intelligence as it pertains to a uniquely American context. Practical Intelligence that proved useful in one's home country may not prove useful in the United States. For instance, many Korean-American immigrants must learn English to survive in this country, yet a significant portion of Korean immigrants never develop a basic proficiency, let alone full mastery of the English language.

Because of these limitations in aptitude regarding Practical Intelligence, Korean-Americans have found themselves unable to raise the ladder of success as smoothly as other immigrant groups.

As immigrants from a non-European, non-English-speaking country, Korean-Americans also face unique challenges in utilizing moments. While not wholly incompatible, Korean immigrant culture and the American cultural ethos have enough differences to result in various disconnects between Korean-American immigrants and larger U.S. society. The end results are various cultural barriers. The language barrier makes it difficult for many Korean-Americans to seize opportunities because of the inability to communicate properly. The social barrier creates disconnects on topics like religion, holidays, and acceptable social roles and behaviors, where opportunities may be missed because of a lack of social awareness or picking up on social cues. And the economic barrier inherent to immigration for many Korean-Americans contributes to missing opportunities based entirely on financial inability.

Having encountered resistance in attaining three of the four keys, the only logical step remaining is for Korean-Americans to focus their efforts on the attaining success through excellence. This is precisely why First Generation Korean-Americans put such an emphasis on the importance of excellence among the Second Generation, particularly in the form of their studies and standardized test preparation. It is their hope that by drilling academic excellence into their children (even if it means Tiger parenting), the Second Generation will see the fruits of their study and work ethic pay off in the long run, even if the other keys to success elude them (Park, 2012).

2.2: All Asians Created Equal?

One should be aware that among the numerous studies recently conducted on the topic of Korean-American and Asian-American immigrants, there is rarely ever a distinction made between the two groups. Despite the cultural differences between Korean, Chinese, and other immigrant groups (specifically from Southeast Asia), they are considered similar enough to be put together into one cohesive demographic group.⁷ Even so, one must ask whether this grouping is justifiable in trying to understand the experience of Korean-Americans.

The total Asian-American population at about 5.6 percent, rounds out to roughly 17.86 million people. The Korean-American population accounts for approximately 1.7 million people,

⁷ Indeed, a number of studies used in this paper seem to heavily group together the Korean-American population to the Asian-American population as a whole. For the most part, in terms of socioeconomic data, the distinction between Korean-Americans and Asian-Americans can be ignored.

which is only about 9.5 percent of the entire Asian population (4.427 billion) and just shy of 0.5 percent of the entire American population (United States Census Bureau, 2015). To put this into another context, the entire population of South Korea is only about 50 million. It would seem that the Korean-American population is statistically insignificant, especially when considering the demography of the Asian world as a whole. It follows why most demographers have proceeded to ignore Korean-Americans as a distinct group apart from other East Asian immigrant communities.

However, studies of the relationship between ethno-national identification and pan-ethnic identification seem to indicate that Korean-Americans (along with most other Asian-American sub-groups) do not prefer to identify themselves as broadly Asian-American, but are rather attached to their unique ethnic identities. First, and perhaps most obviously, Korean-Americans are hyper sensitive to the cultural differences present between East Asian societies and do not find that they have very much in common with their other Asian-American counterparts. Secondly, the thriving economic status of South Korea, in the aftermath of the Korean War, has ushered in the rise of South Korean popular culture in the form of K-Pop, Korean Dramas, etc. These seem to contribute to a sense of ethnic pride for Korean immigrants around the world, especially in the United States, where ethnic diversity is so abundant. (Kim, 2013, p. 92). Having understood that there is this clear ethno-national divide between the cultures of the Asian-American community, Korean-Americans therefore have no reason to believe that any of their Asian-American counterparts have the interests of Korean-Americans in mind when it comes to the political and social realm in the United States, and therefore do not wish to be corralled into a general Asian-American population.

2.3: By the Numbers

Part of the reason why Asian-Americans are considered so vastly different from other non-Asian immigrant groups is the idea of the Model Minority. The Model Minority refers to the idea that Asian-Americans (generally referring to students and young professionals) are a minority group perceived to be extremely socioeconomically successful, despite cultural barriers and their visible immigrant status. The notion of a Model Minority generally stems from the belief that Asians belong to a very hardworking culture that teaches the values necessary for success. The reality, however, is that this perception of a Model Minority is a myth.

For instance, as of 2012, approximately 2.3 million Asian-Americans in this country are uninsured, accounting for just under 13 percent of the entire Asian-American population. About one million Asian-Americans in the country are undocumented. High-School dropout rates for some Southeast Asian communities, namely Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, etc., are the nation's highest. (Chen, 2012). While Asian-Americans have relatively low unemployment rates compared to other ethnic groups in the United States, studies show that half of Asian-Americans who lose their jobs stay jobless a for period of 27 weeks or longer, as opposed to only 40 percent of Latinos and 42 percent of whites (Semuels, 2010).

At a cursory glance, high-school academic success rates for Korean-American students are in stark contrast to other Asian-American student communities. For Korean-Americans particularly, the rate of high school dropouts is quite low in comparison to the rest of the United States. Studies also indicate that among Second Generation Korean-Americans, approximately 40 percent of students will attend Tier 1 universities in the United States. This indicates that among Asian-American communities, Korean-Americans may in fact be a Model Minority (Kim, p. 22-23). However, looking more closely at these statistics paints another picture. Despite these high attendance rates into Tier 1 universities, studies also show that approximately 44 percent of Korean-American students will drop out and not return to a college classroom.⁸ The percentage for white American students is 34 percent less than Korean-Americans, Indians-Americans account for only 21.5 percent, and Chinese-Americans have a 15 percent dropout rate (Park, 2008). Even among their Asian-American counterparts, the rate at which Korean-American students are dropping out of college is alarmingly high.

2.4: A Clash of Cultures

There are reasons for the apparent failures within the Korean-American community. Many of these stem from the way in which they perceive, or rather misperceive, the route to success. As previously stated, the typical Asian-American response to achieving success is through the key of excellence, something that is particularly true of Korean-Americans. And as one might also recall, each individual key to success cannot account for guaranteed success, but rather acts as one of four essential ingredients for maximizing the probability of succeeding into the top 1 percent. In attempting to overcompensate through excellence what they may lack in

⁸ 40% of Second Generation Korean-Americans attend these Tier 1 Universities, and 44% of Korean-American Students drop out. This means that at the very least 17.6% of all Second-Generation Korean-Americans are dropping out of college. This number is likely much higher when considering all non-Tier 1 Universities.

framework, particularly aptitude, and moments, Korean-Americans often disregard these other keys to success and prevent themselves from progressing as subculture into the American elite.⁹

Korean American immigrants, especially members of the First Generation, either do not understand the importance of attaining these other keys in the American context, or willfully reject a degree of acculturation that prevents them from fulfilling this role. The stereotype of overbearing Korean-American parents pushing their children to become doctors, lawyers, or engineers is common, and for good reason. For First Generation Korean-Americans, these three STEM-based professions appear to carry high level of status and earning potential in the United States, which they believe can propel the Second Generation into success via integration into American high-society (Kim, p 73). Although this strategy does increase one's chances of upward mobility, the way in which Korean-Americans have traditionally interacted, and failed to interact, with American society at large has hindered this quest for success.

In order to acquire keys like framework, aptitude, and moments, Korean-Americans ought to embrace certain aspects of American culture to maximize their level of integration and demonstrate the unique value that Korean-Americans can bring to the American Melting pot. Instead, the current trend among Korean-American immigrant communities is one of outright isolationism and detachment from the rest of the United States. Consider for instance the presence of *hagwons*, translated roughly as “cram schools” in English. The purpose of these *hagwons* is to ensure that the Second Generation be well educated and academically prepared for success in high school, elite universities, and beyond. They can essentially be found in every Korean-American hub in the United States, and play a huge role in the lives of both First and Second Generation Korean-Americans. (Kim, p.32). More than just test prep centers, these *hagwons* act as cultural centers for Korean-American students, where the Korean language is prevalent (some *hagwons* may not even speak English) and where education in Korean cultural values is routinely practiced.

Another major cultural hub for Korean-Americans is the Korean-American church. While attending church in the American context is typically considered a purely religious experience, many, if not most Koreans attend these churches specifically because they are owned by Koreans

⁹ Aptitude begets Excellence begets Moments begets Success begets Framework begets Higher Chances of Success for Children, etc.

and serve an almost exclusively ethnic Korean congregation.¹⁰ Somewhat disconnected from religion itself, the act of attending a Korean-American church becomes a means of connecting with the rest of the community, reinforcing the pervasiveness of the First Generation Korean-American immigrant culture and social experience. Moreover, “the church serves as a conduit for disseminating not only education information but also values and views about education to church members. In fact, many parents easily obtain valuable information about the location, costs, and rankings of prestigious high schools and colleges through social networks developed at church” (Kim, p.37). Both the church and the *hagwon* act as echo chambers of Korean values and culture, leaving seemingly no room for American values to enter the equation. Thus, the environment in which Second Generation Korean Americans grow up is a culture that is more Korean than American, despite being 6,671 miles removed geographically from South Korea.

This is not to say that Korean culture must be jettisoned upon entry into the United States nor that modern American culture is without its flaws. Rather, this disconnect between Korean culture and American culture has caused significant problems for Second Generation Korean-Americans in their formative years. The experience of immigrants to the United States regardless of ethnic origin has, in general, been characterized by suspicion, prejudice, and discrimination. What follows is usually a feeling of inferiority and transience among members of the Second Generation, contributing to the idea of “wanting to be white” as to fit in with the prevailing American culture. Once Second Generation Korean-Americans enter adolescence and early adulthood, there are many instances in which they reject the Korean culture subjected to them by the First Generation. In many cases, the Second Generation becomes reluctant to identify as Korean at all, many preferring to be identified simply as “American.” Some go as far as avoiding contact with any Korean-American or Asian-American peers (Kim, p.110-111).

A potential alternative to this apparent rejection of the Korean-American culture and the groundwork of the First Generation is for the Second Generation to utilize their unique position centered between Korean and American culture to organically cultivate the four keys of success. After all, although there exists a disconnect between the two cultures, that is not to say that there are no qualities of Korean culture that will not ultimately coalesce into U.S. society. No one would suggest that a culture of discipline and familial respect is detrimental to the American

¹⁰ Korean churches provide an ethnic and religious bond for Korean-American immigrants who have abandoned their home country in favor of coming to the United States.

cultural ethos. Moreover, given the rising demographic importance of Korean-Americans (and Asian-Americans in general), it may only be a matter of time until Korean culture is effectively forced to take a larger role in American cultural and social politics. However, given the current behavior of Second Generation Korean-Americans, the requisite amount of time needed for Korean culture to properly integrate has not yet passed, “necessitating” the rejection of Korean culture by the Second Generation.

Once the Second Generation rejects the First Generation, the former group proceeds to have no culture at all. By rejecting their Korean identity, they forsake their history, culture, and everyone else that came before them. They become, quite literally, cultural nomads untethered from reality. Moreover, since the Second Generation was raised in a very insular community, they have never really been exposed to American culture and values, and are unprepared to adapt to it in a wise and prudent manner. One need look no further than American popular culture outlets to see that partaking too readily of all American culture has to offer can be very destructive. The moment that Korean-Americans reject Korean culture, they create a cultural vacuum that, in effect, leaves them as vulnerable as if they had just immigrated into the country for the first time, only this time without the support of an ethnic community. While the First Generation may have some framework, moments and aptitude built up from their collective cultural experiences (with excellence being a key that is perpetually pursued through Korean-American values and work ethic), the Second Generation, in rejecting their culture, abandons everything the First Generation provided for them, greatly minimizing their chances of upward mobility and success, effectively starting from zero.

Conclusion: Redefining the Korean-American

The issue with the Korean-American community is not in whether its choice to pursue excellence is the correct key to success. Instead, it can be found in the apparently contradictory approach of the First Generation to demand that the Second Generation achieve an adequate degree of growth in framework, aptitude, and moments *through* excellence, all the while failing to acquire these themselves. There is an unmistakable unwillingness by the First Generation to truly adapt and integrate into the American cultural ethos, likely stemming from fond memories of their home country and culture in which pride in one’s heritage and family lineage permeates throughout nearly to a fault.

The desire for First Generation Korean-Americans to push the Second Generation to utilize excellence to mask their deficiencies in the other three keys to success is perfectly rational. In fact, the evidence found in the cases of Oprah Winfrey, Lewis Terman's IQ students, and Malcolm Gladwell's hockey players, suggests that the truest route to success lies in acquiring all four keys and using them in conjunction with one another to achieve success for oneself, and to provide a strong foundation for one's children to do the same.

The solution, as argued in the case of the Korean-American community, is for the First Generation to show a willingness to acquire all four keys through an intentional process of acculturation while the Second Generation embraces their unique position as a blend of both Korean and American cultural values without rejecting the former for the latter. Although some may argue that this change will occur organically if given enough time, this fundamental change in the outlook of the Korean-American cultural mindset must be achieved in order for Korean-Americans to truly dispel their propensity for social stagnation and become fully integrated both socially and financially into the American cultural framework.

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