H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lisa Sun-Hee Park. *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant Entrepreneurs.* Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005. xii + 169 pp. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8047-5248-0.

Reviewed by Melissa Klapper (Department of History, Rowan University)
Published on H-Childhood (December, 2006)

Status and Sacrifice

Lisa Sun-Hee Park's sociological study of the children of Chinese American and Korean American immigrant small-business owners takes as its departure point the challenge facing second generation members of the "model minority." While they are expected by both their families and American social imperatives to acculturate into "good Americans," both their families' cultural and economic structures and an unstated yet still deeply felt American racism make such acculturation difficult to secure. Park argues that Chinese and Korean American children resolve this conflict through consumption of American cultural prescriptions for achievement as well as material goods. They attempt to secure social citizenship by following injunctions to work hard, to parlay advanced education into economic security, and to purchase markers of upward mobility that can be publicly displayed, such as luxury cars and homes. Only this kind of outcome can repay their parents' many sacrifices and demonstrate their claim to the American success story.

In order to explore the experiences of Korean and Chinese American children of immigrant entrepreneurs, Park conducted a series of in-depth interviews with more than one hundred adolescents and young adults and their families. She visited her subjects in their homes and workplaces, visiting several different regions of the United States. All the families she investigated were beneficiaries of the post-1965 U.S. immigration reforms that for the first time in decades allowed significant migration from Asia. The majority of the adolescents and young adults grew up in families that owned small businesses. These businesses functioned as the economic, social, and familial focal points of their lives. Park convincingly demonstrates the critical role played by family businesses in the experiences of her subjects. As a result of their parents' entrepreneurship, Chinese and Korean American young people began to work early, spent little time with their families outside their places of business, and served as literal and figurative translators for their parents. They also developed commitments to repaying their parents both by surpassing them in educational and economic achievement and by buying them goods that would make their sacrifices appear worthwhile.

The theme of sacrifice appears repeatedly in this study. Virtually everyone Park interviewed referred to his/her parents' sacrifices in making the difficult decision to migrate, working so hard, and, in some cases, giving up professional accomplishment in Korea or China to secure a better future for their children. In one interesting chapter, Park explores the ways in which the children recast their parents' migration narratives into an American mold by adopting familiar elements of rags-to-riches stories or Western tales of rugged, iconoclastic heroes. Yet there are other sacrifices as well, though possibly not as apparent to the people Park interviewed. It seems that many Chinese and Korean American young people feel such an obligation to repay their parents that they sacrifice their own dreams and desires. Nearly all the interview subjects had either gone into medicine, law, and business or were preparing to do so; these were the professions they assumed would have the greatest possible earning power and were therefore the only options open to them. Following their own interests at the expense of economic potential would disappoint their parents and inhibit their ability to repay them with either cultural or economic capital. As Park notes with a wink, "Apparently, it is not so impressive to tell the neighbors that your child decided to become a sociologist" (p. 110). Parental expectations clearly impose a kind of family discipline that some of the children could identify but few were willing to challenge, having been inculcated from the earliest ages that the ultimate success of their families would depend on their educational and economic achievement. Because many, though not all, of the subjects lived in tightly knit ethnic neighborhoods, family discipline was further reinforced by the cultural expectations of the community. Park also argues that the label

of "model minority" exerts its own influence, as the willingness of American society as a whole to accept Asian immigrants depends heavily on the same kind of educational and economic attainment that Chinese and Korean immigrant families require of their children.

Perhaps inevitably, the children have a mixed reaction to these expectations and particularly to the small businesses that are supposed to provide the launching pad for their success. Many resent having to work so many hours in family businesses, often at the expense of time spent with peers. They regret the fact that they have little family time outside the business and compare their own families unfavorably with the "American" families they encounter in the media. They cringe when they see their parents act in a servile manner to appease customers. Since relatively few of the businesses are very successful, though many are stable, they express astonishment that their parents continue working so hard for so little reward. On the other hand, many of the children, especially young adults who by going away to college achieved a measure of independence, acknowledge their parents' success in building businesses out of nothing. They point out that they did have family time at the businesses, though not the kind of leisurely family time they might have liked. Few seem troubled by the fact that they were not paid for their work in the family businesses, since they received allowances and money for whatever they needed. They openly admit to manipulating their parents by claiming they needed more time and money for school-related activities.

Park's explorations of this ambivalence highlight the most engaging part of the book, the voices of the Korean and Chinese children and young adults themselves. The book is peppered with quotes from the interviews, and by subtly focusing on a few people so that the reader comes to know these individuals, Park makes good use of what were clearly meaningful encounters between sociologist and subjects. This feature of the book is particularly important in enlisting the reader's confidence, since by her own admission Park did not seek a scientific sample of interview subjects. When Sky speaks at length about her adolescent experience of realizing she was the lone Asian amid her group of white friends (p. 50), or when Robert confesses his near panic at his parents' dreams of retirement, which include his marriage to their best friends' daughter and all of them moving into a big house together that Robert's good job will enable him to purchase (pp. 125-126), the book comes alive. There are enough similarities among the various narratives sampled throughout the book to help support Park's conclusions about the family structures and coming of age experiences of the children of immigrant entrepreneurs.

Where the book is somewhat less successful is in the application of a variety of social theories to lived experience. Park wants to make connections between social citizenship and consumption, but it is never entirely clear how these theoretical categories relate to the experiences she describes. For example, although she demonstrates that Korean and Chinese children seek high status, high-paying careers, the extended metaphor she employs about immigrant children "consuming" a particular brand of the American dream falls flat. It may be that the relative brevity of the book prevents her from exploring the theoretical basis of her project; as it is, though, the book suffers from some of the usual problems of lightly revised dissertations in insisting on a theoretical overlay that does not add as much as it could to what is certainly an interesting topic within the sociology of immigration.

Still, there is a great deal of interest for historians of childhood and immigration in this book. Focusing on both Korean and Chinese populations allows Park to discuss the construction of an "Asian" identity, an issue that was also part of the experience of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century immigrants from Japan, China, and Korea. It is fascinating to speculate on the process by which the most feared and loathed populations of turn-of-the-century immigrants became models of achievement for post-1965 immigrants and immigration policy. All the conflicts over language, acculturation, education, and work that faced turn-of-the-century immigrant children resurface, though slightly altered, in the experiences of the children of Chinese and Korean immigrant entrepreneurs. The development of adolescence in the earlier part of the twentieth century was shaped in part by the experiences of immigrant children; by the late twentieth century, what Chinese and Korean young people resent most of all is the impingement of their family structure on their own experiences of adolescence. Then and now, constant cultural negotiation is a central feature of immigrant children's lives.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Melissa Klapper. Review of Park, Lisa Sun-Hee, *Consuming Citizenship: Children of Asian Immigrant*

Entrepreneurs. H-Childhood, H-Net Reviews. December, 2006.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=12679

Copyright © 2006 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.