LIKE IT OR NOT, assimilation is happening today, as it happened in the past to previous waves of new Americans. And just as in the past, some groups are more successful than others at integrating into mainstream America. They rise more quickly educationally, make faster progress in ascending into the middle class, even feel more at home more quickly in their adopted country. What accounts for these differences?

The Asian-American experience suggests that one of the most important factors may be the strength of the ethnic communities that newly arrived immigrants form here in the United States. Paradoxical as it seems, for Asians, and perhaps for other groups as well, a promising route into the mainstream runs through a period of seeming ethnic separateness. Contrary to the conventional wisdom, assimilation today is not hindered but actually helped by making common cause with one’s fellow ethnics and belonging to a strong, tightly knit ethnic community.
THREE VIGNETTES

Today's Asian-Americans are a widely varied group, and they follow many different paths into American society. Some find themselves included, others excluded, and still others straddle two worlds with growing ease. Successful assimilation is a result, not just of the way they are treated, but also of their own values and choices. Consider the following examples:

Sam Leung arrived in New York from Hong Kong in the early 1960s. He was virtually penniless and spoke no English. For more than thirty years, he worked as a cook in Chinatown restaurants. Now retired, he is reaping the benefits of his life of hard work. Each of his five children has received a degree from an Ivy League college. They all have professional jobs. They've purchased homes, married happily and raised children. All contribute cash, on a monthly basis, for Leung's retirement. Leung and his wife live in one of the children's homes in a New Jersey suburb, but he travels daily by train to Chinatown to play mahjong at the Leung Family Association. Though he still cannot speak English well, he knows his way around the New York area. He feels comfortable and settled. America is his home, he says, and his children are his "social security."

Leung is, to all appearances, a "successful" immigrant. But is he assimilated? Arguably not. After several decades in the United States, he still cannot speak English. Though he has retired to a white middle-class suburb, his social life is confined to Chinatown. He has raised his five children to be "quintessential Americans," and for the most part they are just that. Yet they too cling to inherited ways, including the age-old Chinese tradition of supporting their elderly parents.

Drs. Jiangong Li and Meiyiing Xia arrived in the United States in the mid-1980s to attend graduate school. Now Li is a senior scientist at a federal government research institute, and Xia runs a consulting firm in Washington, D.C. Li and Xia and their two school-aged children live in a beautiful suburban home. They both speak flawless English, albeit with slight accents. In their leisure time, they do what they call the "American thing"—going to the theater, movies and ballgames, bicycling and river-rafting in the summer, skiing in the winter. They vote in local and national elections and volunteer at the school PTA and for neighborhood events. Yet the couple has also helped establish a Chinese-language school in their suburb, which not only offers children instruction in Chinese language and culture but also provides opportunities for other suburban Chinese immigrant parents to socialize. As it draws more and more immigrant Chinese families from surrounding middle-class suburbs, this Chinese language school has become the center of an emerging ethnic community. As Xia described it, "Saturday [when the Chinese school is in session] is the day I very much look forward to. That's when I can speak Chinese, crack some Chinese jokes, and share some nostalgic feelings about the good old days, or bad old days rather. It's sort of like going to church."

Are Li and Xia assimilated? Arguably, yes. But although they have made it by all observable measures—English proficiency, college education, professional occupation, suburban residence, Western lifestyle and civic participation—they find themselves taking the initiative to start a Chinese school and build a new ethnic community far away from inner-city Chinatown.

Congressman David Wu, forty-five, immigrated from Taiwan with his family when he was five. As the first person of Chinese descent ever elected to Congress, he is the embodiment of the American Dream. In May 2001, he was invited by the Asian-American employees of the U.S. Department of Energy to give a speech in celebration of Asian-American Heritage Month. Yet he and his Asian-American staff were not allowed into the department building, even after presenting their congressional IDs. They were repeatedly asked about their citizenship and country of origin. They were
told that this was standard procedure for the Department of Energy and that a congressional ID was not a reliable document. But the next day a congressman of Italian descent was allowed to enter the same building by showing his congressional ID, no questions asked.

Is Congressman David Wu assimilated? Yes, by all means. He has made it, like other Americans, by relying on the strength of his family. A quintessential patriot, he has given up a lucrative legal career for public service because he wants to "make a real difference in the real lives of real people." His fellow Americans in Oregon trust him and have elected him twice to be their representative in Congress. Yet despite compelling evidence that Wu is truly American, he still cannot escape the stereotype of his ethnic group as "perpetual foreigners."

* * *

Assimilation is not a popular concept today, not in the mainstream and not among the activists and scholars who claim to speak for immigrants. Many ethnic spokesmen denounce it as yielding to white oppression and "selling out." At times it seems that the word itself may be disappearing from the language. In fact, however, as these three stories show, assimilation is alive and well. One way or another, sooner or later, new immigrants and their offspring are becoming like average Americans.

Still, these stories also show how hard assimilation is to define, and how many forms it can take. Obviously, it entails some level of objective success in the new country, as well as a subjective sense that one is at home in America. Yet as these vignettes make clear, inner and outer experience can be very different, and they don't necessarily go together. Immigrants who have prospered in America do not necessarily feel the most American, and even those who succeed on both counts aren't always accepted as American by the mainstream. The Asian-American experience suggests that assimilation today is more complex than we ordinarily think, and that the most successful strategies for immigrants are different than they used to be.

THE CHALLENGE

Concern about assimilation runs high these days among scholars and the public alike—and no wonder. The descendants of the last great wave of immigration, in the early twentieth century, have by now dropped their ethnic hyphens; Irish, Italian and Polish immigrants have melted into the white mainstream. But since 1970, a vast wave of new immigrants has been pouring into the country and adding a new set of ethnic identities to the old familiar list. Most of the recent newcomers have non-European national origins: they are Mexican, Salvadoran, Dominican, Chinese, Filipino, Indian, Korean, Vietnamese, Cambodian. Altogether, between 1971 and 2000, the United States admitted approximately 21 million immigrants, far exceeding the number who came during the first three decades of the twentieth century; but this time more than 80 percent of them were Latino or Asian in origin. As a result, America’s ethnic makeup is changing drastically. The 2000 census reported that the U.S. population is 69 percent white, 12.6 percent black, 12.5 percent Latino and 4.4 percent Asian.

When asked what they expect of life in America, these new immigrants say they want to be like average Americans. They want to find high-paying jobs, own their own homes, raise children who are more educated and prosperous than themselves and enjoy a secure retirement. Even if they don’t use the word “assimilation,” their definition of success is the same as every American’s: to achieve middle-class status and freely pursue their personal dreams.

But immigrants face a whole different set of obstacles to their pursuit of the American Dream. For native-born Americans, the key to success is usually education. For immigrants, many other factors have to be in place before they can hope to get a good education. Family socioeconomic status is perhaps the most important because it determines where immigrants live and how much access they have to good jobs and schools, as well as to valuable information and social support networks. The state of the broader economy is another
factor. Economic restructuring since the late 1970s has destroyed several crucial rungs in the ladder from the bottom of society to the top. Climbing into the middle class is now more difficult than in the past, and it requires more education and more developed skills; it is also easier to fall to the very bottom and be trapped there because of the scarcity of jobs that pay a living wage. Racism is yet another factor. The historical legacy of slavery and racial discrimination lives on in a system of racial stratification, which in turn interacts with class to affect the life chances of many Americans, especially those belonging to racial minorities.

Today's newcomers also face time-honored challenges: they lack English proficiency, transferable education and skills, familiarity with American institutions and social networks that would link them with mainstream society. The poor and unskilled among them have few choices but to take up low-wage jobs and settle in inner-city ghettos, starting their American lives in poverty or on welfare. For such immigrants, catching up to the status of average Americans is like joining a marathon an hour late, and they have little hope of finishing in their lifetimes.

The children of immigrants seem to have it easier. After all, surpassing their parents is no big deal, since their parents are usually stuck at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder. But the second generation faces a different kind of challenge—equally difficult, if not more so. After all, the foreign-born generation is by definition transitional. First-generation immigrants are likely to regard their disadvantaged status as temporary, and to be optimistic about the future. But the second generation, born in America and raised to be American, expects to be judged by the same standards as other Americans. They hope not only to do better than their parents but to do at least as well as their native-born peers.

This is no easy task, since the children of immigrants often grow up under highly unfavorable circumstances. Many are from families where both parents work hard just to put food on the table. They live in crowded housing in unsafe neighborhoods and attend poorly-performing local schools. Many must deal with urban gangs and the peer pressure to be "cool," which often does not include doing well in school. Nor can they look to their parents as role models. They have little tolerance for the discriminatory treatment their parents regularly put up with, and they know more than their parents about the English-speaking world. No wonder that, at home, they often refuse to defer to their elders: as often as not, they feel that it is they, not their parents, who are leading the household.

Second-generation immigrants who grow up in inner-city ghettos face a still more insidious obstacle: a deeply troubling learned ambivalence about mainstream culture and success. Anthropologist John Ogbu has described it as an "oppositional" outlook, arguing that the most important influence on any immigrant group is the nature of its initial reception by Americans and its way of dealing with that reception. According to Ogbu, many immigrants who are looked down upon manage to turn their distinctive heritage into a kind of ethnic armor. They establish a sense of collective dignity that enables them to cope psychologically, even in the face of exclusion and discrimination, by keeping the host society at arm's length. Others, however, accept and internalize socially imposed inferiority as part of their collective self-definition, and this in turn fosters an oppositional outlook toward mainstream institutions.

For immigrants with an oppositional outlook, symbolic expressions of ethnicity may hinder, rather than facilitate, social mobility. They view assimilation as "acting white," and react to discrimination and other disadvantages by resisting assimilation. For example, research in the past twenty years shows that many inner-city black and Latino youths who desire to do well in school are pulled back by strong ethnic peer pressure, which regards academic success as somehow a betrayal of ethnicity. Such students fear that if they succeed, they will be shunned by their ethnic peers as "sell-outs" or "turnovers." Sociologists call this the "forced choice dilemma," and see it as perpetuating downward assimilation: instead of assimilating to the mainstream, these children of immigrants risk assimilating to the bottom segment of American society, the urban underclass.
THE ASIAN PUZZLE

Asian immigrants face many of these same challenges. A considerable number of them are poor and unskilled, and they often settle in neighborhoods where their children are subject to the undertow of an insidious peer culture. Yet Asian-Americans as a group are doing remarkably well in the United States today. Consider their extraordinary educational achievement. Research on the new second generation repeatedly shows that high school students of Asian origin outperform non-Hispanic white students (who, in turn, outperform black and Hispanic students). Even the Hmong, who come from a preliterate peasant background, outperform native-born American students attending the same school, and so do more recently arrived Cambodians. Compared to whites and other racial minority groups, Asian-Americans show stronger belief in the value of schooling and are more inclined to attribute school success or failure to individual effort; they attend college at a significantly higher rate, and more of their peers do well in school. Asian-Americans are also noticeably overrepresented on the nation’s most prestigious campuses—whether the public UC Berkeley and UCLA or private institutions like Harvard, MIT, Stanford and Cal Tech.

But if many of the children of Asian immigrants are making it—arguably better and faster than any immigrant children have ever done before—it is far from clear why. To be sure, some Asians have it a little easier than other immigrants. Many are affluent and highly skilled professionals who achieve occupational status and incomes higher than those of average Americans within just a few years of their arrival. Yet even these more successful Asian-Americans lack accumulated wealth, and few have access to the old-boy associations and other networks that buoy many native-born Americans. As a result, merely sustaining their middle-class status often requires unending hard work. And while class background may explain why the children of foreign-born physicians, engineers and computer specialists show up in elite universities, it is more difficult to understand how Asian-Americans from more modest circumstances reach the same campuses, and at the same speed.

Often we hear a cultural explanation. Political scientist Francis Fukuyama argues that the values newcomers bring with them from the old country help speed their incorporation into the American mainstream. Asian culture puts a high value on strong families, dutiful children, delayed gratification, education, hard work, discipline, respect for others and moral obligation to the community—virtually all qualities that Americans prize and are now arguably losing. Similarly, economist Thomas Sowell believes that cultural assets—values and attitudes, skills and contacts—play a significant part in the high IQ scores and scholastic achievement of today’s most successful immigrant groups.

What is missing from such theories is an explanation of just how cultural values and beliefs adapt to changes in environment, and how they are transmitted from one generation to the next. After all, not everyone from even the most successful culture does well in America. My research on Asian-American communities suggests that Asian-Americans and their children are making it not because of “Asian” values per se but thanks largely to the ethnic community developed since their arrival in the United States. It is this community that sets goals for achievement and standards of behavior and establishes economic and cultural institutions to enforce them.

THE ANSWER: THE ETHNIC COMMUNITY

The role of the ethnic community in immigrant settlement has long been recognized in studies of earlier European-origin groups. But much of the emphasis has been on how the community serves as an interim refuge and a springboard for assimilation. According to this traditional view, new immigrants cluster in ethnic enclaves upon arrival, relying on ethnic networks and institutions to find housing and jobs and help them learn their way around. In the long run, however, the ethnic community and its social structures are thought to
obstruct assimilation, trapping immigrants in permanent isolation by discouraging them from learning English and adopting American ways. So, the theory goes, immigrants must eventually move out of the enclave in order to achieve social and economic progress.

For today's immigrants, however, remaining in close contact with the ethnic enclave may actually facilitate rather than hinder assimilation. True, some immigrant neighborhoods have declined or even disappeared as more successful residents become assimilated and move out. But others are thriving—despite the departure of more successful residents—by luring new immigrants from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and attracting money from overseas. These new ethnic enclaves defy old stereotypes: far from being urban ghettos, they remain a symbolic home base even for successful former residents who have moved to the suburbs.

In such neighborhoods, the enclave economy is no longer the classic immigrant economy of mom-and-pop stores and other small retail businesses. Instead, there is a wide range of economic activities—professional services, manufacturing, retail and wholesale trades—that provides ethnic group members from diverse class backgrounds with employment and entrepreneurial opportunities as well as culture-specific goods and services. This economy is closely linked with various ethnic institutions in the enclave—churches, temples, schools, business and professional associations, nonprofit service agencies—that provide newcomers with networks for self-help and mutual support. The solidarity and trust that come naturally among residents of the same ethnic background is a form of "social capital" that spurs ethnic entrepreneurship and helps reinforce communal norms.

New York City's Chinatown shows how such an ethnic enclave can help immigrants succeed in America without losing their ethnic identities. The enclave economy offers convenient and easy alternatives to mainstream employment. The neighborhood functions as a cultural center, attracting not only tourists but also suburban Chinese for routine activities such as shopping, entertainment, and sending children to ethnic schools. These opportunities tie immigrant Chinese from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds to Chinatown even after they have moved out of the enclave. These ties, in turn, directly or indirectly create a feeling of cohesion that cuts across class lines and strengthens the sense of identity and community.

Nevertheless—and this is very important—nothing about the enclave discourages eventual absorption into mainstream American life. On the contrary, all the values and habits of the ethnic community point toward the communal goal of settlement and integration. In the simple words of one Chinatown worker, "We want to buy a home and move out of here and we want our children to get a job in those office buildings down the street [on Wall Street]."

The experience of Chinatown's working women is revealing. Immigrant Chinese women with little English and few job skills often find working in Chinatown a better option, despite low wages, than taking a similar job outside the enclave. This is because the enclave enables them to more effectively combine their roles as wage earners, wives and mothers. In Chinatown, jobs are easier to find, working hours are more flexible, employers are more tolerant of the presence of children, and the private child-care within walking distance of work is more accessible and affordable. Convenient grocery shopping and the availability of takeout food also make dinner preparation easier.

At work, women are able to socialize with other Chinese immigrant women, some who may not come from similar socioeconomic backgrounds but who nonetheless share the same goals and concerns about family, child rearing and social mobility. Sitting at the sewing machine, the women gossip, brag about their children, complain about insensitive husbands or nagging relatives. They also exchange information and coping strategies and comfort each other in times of hardship. Perhaps most important, they share strategies for succeeding in the mainstream. It is not uncommon to hear non-English-speaking garment workers in Chinatown talking in detail about SAT exam scores and admissions to highly selective magnet schools such as nearby Stuyvesant High School, or even Harvard and MIT.

These Chinatown workers also get valuable information from neighborhood encounters with employers and middle-class Chinese
immigrants who have moved out of the enclave but come back to visit. Residents and nonresidents share what they know about assimilation in conversations at Chinese-language schools, cultural centers, churches, temples, restaurants and shops. Extensive Chinese-language media—radio, television and newspapers—also reflect the experience of those who have already made it, and provide valuable information to help newcomers do the same.

Even more important is the role of the ethnic community in aiding the adaptation of immigrant children. Consider how the enclave works to reinforce obedience and respect for elders—one of the core cultural precepts in Chinese families. Relatives and adult family friends often greet children with "Have you been obeying your parents?" or "Have you behaved well?" Parents frequently ask their children "How was that test you took today?" Or they will respond to a straight-A report card with "How come you got an A-minus?" And relatives and friends reinforce the same message. If a youngster is disobedient or disrespectful, he or she is considered without gui-ju (discipline) or jia-jiao (family principles) or li-mao (proper manners), and his or her parents may even blame for bad parenting. In an ethnic enclave where behavioral standards are enforced through this sort of everyday interaction, children tend to conform, either willingly or as a way to avoid public disapproval and embarrassment. Obedience, hard work and academic achievement are matter-of-fact expectations for immigrant children and could not possibly be instilled without the support and reinforcement of the ethnic community.

Involvement in the community not only gives immigrant children the support necessary for academic success. It also helps to ease intergenerational and bicultural conflicts. Second-generation immigrants often perceive their parents as holding onto traditional ways and imposing these old ways upon them, while parents often fear that their children are becoming Americanized too quickly and will be distracted from their goals. In the ethnic enclave, Chinese children do not have to deal with such conflicts on their own, and their shared experience helps them cope more effectively than in situations where they are the only Chinese.

Perhaps even more than Chinese immigrants, Vietnamese refugees in the United States demonstrate the value of clustering in ethnic enclaves. The Versailles Village in New Orleans, for example, is a community of Vietnamese fishermen and peasants who settled in one of the city's most underprivileged black neighborhoods. And here, as in Chinatown, the ethnic community plays a decisive role in determining whether young people move up into the American mainstream or remain permanently trapped at the margins of society.

Most of the Vietnamese children in Versailles Village attend public schools, where many of their American peers feel alienated from the mainstream and discourage academic achievement. Even with parental involvement, many second-generation immigrants would naturally adopt this oppositional outlook in order to be popular with their American peers. In this situation, the Vietnamese community is critical in preventing the younger generation from taking such a downward path, helping young Vietnamese instead to bypass the negative local environment and succeed in mainstream American society. Rather than let their children loose in the dangerous streets of a marginal American neighborhood, the ethnic community binds the children in close relationships with other Vietnamese families and adults through participation in institutions such as the Catholic Church and after-school programs.

Although the ethnic enclave in Versailles Village, as in Chinatown, might seem to encourage isolation and separation from the mainstream, in fact it does exactly the opposite. A supportive and watchful community actually encourages and facilitates integration into mainstream American society. As a Vietnamese teenager from Versailles Village put it, "My parents know pretty well all the [Vietnamese] kids in the neighborhood, because we all go to the same church. Everybody here knows everybody else. It's hard to get away with much."

Among Korean immigrants, too, the ethnic community is vitally important in pushing the second generation to succeed in America. Many Korean immigrants in Los Angeles come from middle-class backgrounds and have settled in suburban communities. But they
still maintain ties to Koreatown in the inner city, particularly through involvement in the ethnic economy and churches as well as in an extensive system of social institutions and, most important, a supplementary educational system. In Koreatown, there is an impressive range of private Korean-language schools, after-school tutoring centers and youth-oriented recreational facilities offering sports and music lessons. These ethnic institutions not only benefit Korean working-class families living in the inner city but also attract middle-class suburban Korean children—thus reinforcing the value of education among Korean young people from all kinds of backgrounds.

CONCLUSION

America today is very different from the nation that welcomed European immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century. In those days, the newcomers’ children and grandchildren had few options but to assimilate quickly into the white mainstream. And they encountered conditions that were in some ways more propitious to integration. Like the native-born population, they were overwhelmingly of European stock; they entered an expanding manufacturing-based economy with powerful trade unions; and they benefited from a long hiatus in new immigration after the 1920s. Even so, it often took them two or three or more generations to join the mainstream.

In today’s arguably more open, inclusive America, new immigrants from diverse backgrounds have more freedom to choose their own destinies and to determine the pace and extent of their assimilation for themselves. Yet many second-generation Asian-Americans, who are considered assimilated, are still subjected to a pernicious system of racial stratification. One second-generation Chinese-American described the discrimination she has faced: “The truth is, no matter how American you think you are or try to be, if you have almond-shaped eyes, straight black hair, and a yellow complexion, you are a foreigner by default.”

For this reason too—along with the cultural advantages of clustering in a traditional ethnic enclave—Asian-Americans find it beneficial to maintain a strong ethnic identity. The very fact that they are often accepted only conditionally prompts them to organize ethnically; and in the end, this greatly facilitates their absorption. Call it the Asian paradox: in order to fight the negative stereotype that they are “perpetual foreigners,” a seemingly assimilated second generation falls back on ethnicity for empowerment and becomes actively involved in ethnic politics. Although this strategy for assimilation is very different from the one their parents used, in practice it serves them well—and is typically American.

Of course, the Chinese, Vietnamese or Korean way of assimilating may not work for other Asian-origin groups, much less non-Asian groups. The circumstances in which immigrants leave their old countries and are received in America vary widely, and every group must find its own path in the quest for acceptance and socioeconomic advancement. But with any immigrant group, the first requirements for success are dignity and faith in their own abilities, no matter what ignorance or bigotry they encounter. As America becomes increasingly multiethnic, and as ethnic Americans become integral to our society, it becomes more and more evident that there is no contradiction between an ethnic identity and an American identity. The time is approaching when “the ethnic way” will seem like an inevitable part of “the American way.”