

# America's New Tiger Immigrants

Asians have arrived in record numbers in recent years and are transforming the terms of the debate

By [WALTER RUSSELL MEAD](#)

No Country on earth is in the same league as the U.S. when it comes to the quantity of immigrants who have come here and the quality of their contributions. But lately, in our generally sour mood, Americans have been questioning the benefits of immigration. Many worry that today's immigrants differ from those of the past: less ambitious, less skilled, less willing and able to assimilate.

The conventional picture is of an unstoppable wave of unskilled, mostly Spanish-speaking workers—many illegal—coming across the Mexican border. People who see immigration this way fear that, instead of America assimilating the immigrants, the immigrants will assimilate us. But this picture is both out of date and factually wrong.

A report released this month by the Pew Research Center shows just how much the face of immigration has changed in the past few years. Since 2008, more newcomers to the U.S. have been Asian than Hispanic (in 2010, it was 36% of the total, versus 31%). Today's typical immigrant is not only more likely to speak English and have a college education, but also to have come to the U.S. legally, with a job already in place.

What's responsible for the change? The reasons include a rapidly falling birthrate in Mexico, dramatic economic growth there and the collapse of the U.S. residential construction industry—a traditional market for low-skilled, non-English speaking immigrants whose documentation was often subject to question.

A great deal of mythology has grown up around American immigration. Images of Irish and Italians forced by starvation to emigrate, Jews fleeing Russian persecution—this was all real, but just part of the story. Waves of educated and professional middle-class people also arrived—men like Albert Gallatin fleeing the radicalism of the French Revolution, disappointed liberals abandoning Europe after the failure of the revolutions of 1848, and of course the generations of educated exiles from the terrible totalitarianisms of the 20th century.

America needs and benefits from both kinds of immigration. Like all waves, the Asian influx mixes the skilled and the unskilled. But overall it resembles earlier waves of educated and already urbanized immigrants more than the desperate and often unskilled rural groups from Europe and Latin America.

The Pew study found that the new Asian immigrants identify themselves, surprisingly, as 22% Protestant and 19% Catholic, but whatever their religion, most of them have in spades what Max Weber called the Protestant work ethic. Arguably, in America's long history of immigration, the

group that the new immigrants resemble most is the original cohort of Puritans who settled New England.

Like them, the Asians tend to be better-educated than most of the people in their countries of origin. Steeped in the culture of enterprise and capitalism, they're more likely than native-born Americans to have a bachelor of arts degree. While family sponsorship is still the most important entry route for Asians (as for all immigrants), this group is three times more likely than other recent immigrants to come to the U.S. on visas arranged through employers.

In many cases, they're not coming to the U.S. because of the economic conditions back home. After all, places like China, Korea and India have experienced jumps in prosperity and an explosion in opportunity for the skilled and the hardworking. But most of the new immigrants like it here and want to stay (only 12% wish they had stayed home).

More Asian-Americans (69%) than other Americans (58%) believe that you will get ahead with hard work. Also, 93% say that their ethnic group is "hardworking."

There also seems to be some truth in the "Tiger Mom" syndrome described by author Amy Chua. While 39% of Asian-Americans say their group puts "too much" pressure on kids to succeed in school, 60% of Asian-Americans think that other Americans don't push their kids hard enough.

Other family values are strong as well, according to Pew. Only 16% of Asian-American babies are born out of wedlock, in contrast to 41% for the general population. In the U.S., 63% of all children grow up in a household with two parents; the figure for Asian-Americans is 80%. Some 66% of Asian-Americans believe parents should have some input into what careers their children select and 61% think that parents have something useful to say about their children's choice of a spouse. The hard work and strong family values appear to pay off: Asian-Americans' median household income is \$66,000 (national median: \$49,800) and their median household wealth is \$83,500 (national median: \$68,529).

Nor does the community seem to be inward-looking or unwilling to assimilate. While just over half of first-generation Asian immigrants say that they speak English "very well," 95% of those born in the U.S. say they do. Only 17% of second-generation Asian-Americans say that their friends are mostly members of their own ethnic group.

Perhaps reflecting this social integration, Asian-Americans are the most likely of all American racial groups to marry outside their own race: 29% married non-Asians between 2008 and 2010; the comparable figure for Hispanics was 26%, for blacks 17% and for whites 9%.

Immigration from Asia wasn't always this smooth, and for many years the federal government, often prodded by politicians from the West Coast, tried to keep Asians out. By 1870, Chinese workers accounted for 20% of California's labor force; the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 cut Chinese immigration from 39,500 that year to just 10 people in 1887.

With the Chinese excluded, thousands of Japanese, Koreans and Indians replaced them as cheap labor, but public opinion soon turned against these immigrants as well. In 1906 the San

Francisco school board ordered the segregation of Japanese students in its public schools. The news sparked riots in Japan, and President Theodore Roosevelt scrambled to make what was called the "Gentleman's Agreement" by which the Japanese government agreed to stop immigration to the U.S. In 1917 India was added to the "Pacific-Barred Zone" from which no immigrants to the U.S. were allowed, and from 1924 until 1965 Asian immigration into the United States was essentially banned.

The ensuing 37 years of legal immigration are making an impact. In 1965, Asian-Americans accounted for less than 1% of the population; today they are almost at 6% and growing, with the biggest numbers from China, the Philippines and India, followed by Vietnam, Korea and Japan. (Almost one out of four Asian-Americans has roots in either mainland China or Taiwan.)

The honor roll of American immigration is long. Names like Alexander Hamilton, Albert Einstein, Andrew Carnegie, Madeleine Albright and Sergey Brin speak for themselves. Those who worry today whether we have what it takes to meet the challenges of this new and difficult century need to look at the people who continue to join their fates to ours.

The world's best, the world's hardest-working and the world's most ambitious are still coming our way.

—Mr. Mead is James Clarke Chace professor of foreign affairs and humanities at Bard College.

<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052702303561504577494831767983326.html>