

Some Asians decline to identify race on college applications, citing admissions challenges

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Lanya Olmstead was born in Florida to a mother who immigrated from Taiwan and an American father of Norwegian ancestry. Ethnically, she considers herself half Taiwanese and half Norwegian. But when applying to Harvard, Olmstead checked only one box for her race: white.

"I didn't want to put 'Asian' down," Olmstead says, "because my mom told me there's discrimination against Asians in the application process."

For years, many Asian-Americans have been convinced that it's harder for them to gain admission to the nation's top colleges.

Studies show that Asian-Americans meet these colleges' admissions standards far out of proportion to their 6 percent representation in the U.S. population, and that they often need test scores hundreds of points higher than applicants from other ethnic groups to have an equal chance of admission. Critics say these numbers, along with the fact that some top colleges with race-blind admissions have double the Asian percentage of Ivy League schools, prove the existence of discrimination.

The way it works, the critics believe, is that Asian-Americans are evaluated not as individuals, but against the thousands of other ultra-achieving Asians who are stereotyped as boring academic robots.

Now, an unknown number of students are responding to this concern by declining to identify themselves as Asian on their applications.

For those with only one Asian parent, whose names don't give away their heritage, that decision can be relatively easy. Harder are the questions that it raises: What's behind the admissions difficulties? What, exactly, is an Asian-American — and is being one a choice?

Olmstead is a freshman at Harvard and a member of HAPA, the Half-Asian People's Association. In high school she had a perfect 4.0 grade-point average and scored 2150 out of a possible 2400 on the SAT, which she calls "pretty low."

College applications ask for parent information, so Olmstead knows that admissions officers could figure out a student's background that way. She did write in the word "multiracial" on her own application.

Still, she would advise students with one Asian parent to "check whatever race is not Asian."

"Not to really generalize, but a lot of Asians, they have perfect SATs, perfect GPAs, ... so it's hard to let them all in," Olmstead says.

Amalia Halikias is a Yale freshman whose mother was born in America to Chinese immigrants; her father is a Greek immigrant. She also checked only the "white" box on her application.

"As someone who was applying with relatively strong scores, I didn't want to be grouped into that stereotype," Halikias says. "I didn't want to be written off as one of the 1.4 billion Asians that were applying."

Her mother was "extremely encouraging" of that decision, Halikias says, even though she places a high value on preserving their Chinese heritage.

"Asian-American is more a scale or a gradient than a discrete combination . I think it's a choice," Halikias says.

But leaving the Asian box blank felt wrong to Jodi Balfe, a Harvard freshman who was born in Korea and came here at age 3 with her Korean mother and white American father. She checked the box against the advice of her high school guidance counselor, teachers and friends.

"I felt very uncomfortable with the idea of trying to hide half of my ethnic background," Balfe says. "It's been a major influence on how I developed as a person. It felt like selling out, like selling too much of my soul."

"I thought admission wouldn't be worth it. It would be like only half of me was accepted."

Other students, however, feel no conflict between a strong Asian identity and their response to what they believe is injustice.

"If you know you're going to be discriminated against, it's absolutely justifiable to not check the Asian box," says Halikias.

Immigration from Asian countries was heavily restricted until laws were changed in 1965. When the gates finally opened, many Asian arrivals were well-educated, endured hardships to secure more opportunities for their families, and were determined to seize the American dream through effort and education.

These immigrants, and their descendants, often demanded that children work as hard as humanly possible to achieve. Parental respect is paramount in Asian culture, so many children have obeyed — and excelled.

"Chinese parents can order their kids to get straight As. Western parents can only ask their kids to try their best," wrote Amy Chua, only half tongue-in-cheek, in her recent best-selling book "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother."

"Chinese parents can say, 'You're lazy. All your classmates are getting ahead of you,'" Chua wrote. "By contrast, Western parents have to struggle with their own conflicted feelings about achievement, and try to persuade themselves that they're not disappointed about how their kids turned out."

Of course, not all Asian-Americans fit this stereotype. They are not always obedient hard workers who get top marks. Some embrace American rather than Asian culture. Their economic status, ancestral countries and customs vary, and their forebears may have been rich or poor.

But compared with American society in general, Asian-Americans have developed a much stronger emphasis on intense academic preparation as a path to a handful of the very best schools.

"The whole Tiger Mom stereotype is grounded in truth," says Tao Tao Holmes, a Yale sophomore with a Chinese-born mother and white American father. She did not check "Asian" on her application.

"My math scores aren't high enough for the Asian box," she says. "I say it jokingly, but there is the underlying sentiment of, if I had emphasized myself as Asian, I would have (been expected to) excel more in stereotypically Asian-dominated subjects."

"I was definitely held to a different standard (by my mom), and to different standards than my friends," Holmes says. She sees the same rigorous academic focus among many other students with immigrant parents, even non-Asian ones.

Does Holmes think children of American parents are generally spoiled and lazy by comparison? "That's essentially what I'm trying to say."

Asian students have higher average SAT scores than any other group, including whites. A study by Princeton sociologist Thomas Espenshade examined applicants to top colleges from 1997, when the maximum SAT score was 1600 (today it's 2400). Espenshade found that Asian-Americans needed a 1550 SAT to have an equal chance of getting into an elite college as white students with a 1410 or black students with an 1100.

Top schools that don't ask about race in admissions process have very high percentages of Asian students. The California Institute of Technology, a private school that chooses not to consider race, is about one-third Asian. (Thirteen percent of California residents have Asian heritage.) The University of California-Berkeley, which is forbidden by state law to consider race in admissions, is more than 40 percent Asian — up from about 20 percent before the law was passed.

Steven Hsu, a physics professor at the University of Oregon and a vocal critic of current admissions policies, says there is a clear statistical case that discrimination exists.

"The actual dynamics of how it happens are really quite subtle," he says, mentioning factors like horse-trading among admissions officers for their favorite candidates.

Also, "when Asians are the largest group on campus, I can easily imagine a fund-raiser saying, 'This is jarring to our alumni,'" Hsu says. Noting that most Ivy League schools have roughly the same percentage of Asians, he wonders if "that's the maximum number where diversity is still good, and it's not, 'we're being overwhelmed by the yellow horde.'"

Yale, Harvard, Princeton and the University of Pennsylvania declined to make admissions officers available for interviews for this story.

Kara Miller helped review applications for Yale as an admissions office reader, and participated in meetings where admissions decisions were made. She says it often felt like Asians were held to a higher standard.

"Asian kids know that when you look at the average SAT for the school, they need to add 50 or 100 to it. If you're Asian, that's what you'll need to get in," says Miller, now an English professor at the University of Massachusetts-Dartmouth.

Highly selective colleges do use much more than SAT scores and grades to evaluate applicants. Other important factors include extracurricular activities, community service, leadership, maturity, engagement in learning, and overcoming adversity.

Admissions preferences are sometimes given to the children of alumni, the wealthy and celebrities, which is an overwhelmingly white group. Recruited athletes get breaks. Since the top colleges say diversity is crucial to a world-class education, African-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans, and Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders also may get in despite lower scores than other applicants.

A college like Yale "could fill their entire freshman class twice over with qualified Asian students or white students or valedictorians," says Rosita Fernandez-Rojo, a former college admissions officer who is now director of college counseling at Rye Country Day School outside of New York City.

But applicants are not ranked by results of a qualifications test, she says — "it's a selection process."

"People are always looking for reasons they didn't get in," she continues. "You can't always know what those reasons are. Sometimes during the admissions process they say, 'There's nothing wrong with that kid. We just don't have room.'"

In the end, elite colleges often don't have room for Asian students with outstanding scores and grades.

That's one reason why Harvard freshman Heather Pickerell, born in Hong Kong to a Taiwanese mother and American father, refused to check any race box on her application.

"I figured it might help my chances of getting in," she says. "But I figured if Harvard wouldn't take me for refusing to list my ethnicity, then maybe I shouldn't go there."

She considers drawing lines between different ethnic groups a form of racism — and says her ethnic identity depends on where she is.

"In America, I identify more as Asian, having grown up there, and actually being Asian, and having grown up in an Asian family," she says. "But when I'm back in Hong Kong I feel more American, because everyone there is more Asian than I am."

Holmes, the Yale sophomore with the Chinese-born mother, also has problems fitting herself into the Asian box — "it doesn't make sense to me."

"I feel like an American," she says, "...an Asian person who grew up in America."

Susanna Koetter, a Yale junior with an American father and Korean mother, was adamant about identifying her Asian side on her application. Yet she calls herself "not fully Asian-American. I'm mixed Asian-American. When I go to Korea, I'm like, blatantly white."

And yet, asked whether she would have considered leaving the Asian box blank, she says: "That would be messed up. I'm not white."

"Identity is very malleable," says Jasmine Zhuang, a Yale junior whose parents were both born in Taiwan.

She didn't check the box, even though her last name is a giveaway and her essay was about Asian-American identity.

"Looking back I don't agree with what I did," Zhuang says. "It was more like a symbolic action for me, to rebel against the higher standard placed on Asian-American applicants."

"There's no way someone's race can automatically tell you something about them, or represent who they are to an admissions committee," Zhuang says. "Using race by itself is extremely dangerous."

Hsu, the physics professor, says that if the current admissions policies continue, it will become more common for Asian students to avoid identifying themselves as such, and schools will have to react.

"They'll have to decide: A half-Asian kid, what is that? I don't think they really know."

The lines are already blurred at Yale, where almost 26,000 students applied for the current freshman class, according to the school's web site.

About 1,300 students were admitted. Twenty percent of them marked the Asian-American box on their applications; 15 percent of freshmen marked two or more ethnicities.

Ten percent of Yale's freshmen class did not check a single box.

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