

**Humanizing the “Nameless, Faceless Yellow Horde”**  
Chinese American Attitudes toward Affirmative Action

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## Introduction

The debate over affirmative action in college admissions is not as black and white as Americans may have previously thought. In 2014, the organization Students for Fair Admissions, founded by conservative legal strategist Edward Blum and backed by anonymous Asian American plaintiffs, made allegations against Harvard University for discriminating against Asian American applicants. The lawsuit went to trial in October 2018, launching Asian Americans, a group that traditionally flies under the radar, into the national political arena. Amidst the fray, reporters and pundits singled out Chinese Americans as the Asian ethnic group least supportive of race-conscious affirmative action (Fuchs, 2018; Ramakrishnan and Wong, 2018; Wermund, 2018; Wong, 2018; Wong, Lee and Tran, 2018). Indeed, Chinese American activists have been among its most vocal opponents (Eligon, 2018; Hartocollis and Siefer, 2018).

However, the media's outsized focus on this relatively small group of individuals has fueled a misperception that opposition to affirmative action is more widespread among Chinese Americans than national survey statistics showed at the time. Although support for affirmative action among Chinese Americans declined between 2012 and 2016, the 2018 Asian American Voter Survey indicates that Chinese support has risen from 41% to 64% in the past two years (AAPI Data, 2018). Several Chinese American students and scholars have also expressed their strong support of affirmative action in op-eds and amicus briefs (Chen, 2018; Fang, 2018; Li, 2018; Liu, 2018; SFFA v. Harvard, 2018). Despite clear evidence that Chinese Americans are not monolithic in their attitudes, the media continue to focus disproportionately on Chinese American opposition.

My capstone aims to counter this skewed representation of Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action through storytelling. Taking as fact that Chinese Americans do not think uniformly about the issue, I interviewed a diverse group of Chinese Americans with widely varying attitudes toward affirmative action. I then created narrative portraits that not only capture the depth and nuance of their feelings toward affirmative action, but also situate each person's commentary against the backdrop of their own life experiences in an attempt to understand the roots of their beliefs. With this capstone, I hope to combat stereotypes that Chinese Americans are homogeneous and to illustrate how life experiences, big and small, can shape a person's notions about deservingness, fairness, race, and justice.

The rest of the paper is organized into five sections. First, I place this topic in context by tracing the historical development of race-based affirmative action policies in higher education from their genesis in the 1960s to the present day. Next, I review the empirical and theoretical perspectives on the factors that shape individuals' attitudes toward affirmative action. In the following two sections, I describe an interview-based research design to study Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action and present my findings in the form of narrative profiles. Finally, I end with a discussion of emergent themes and suggest avenues for possible future research.

## Historical Context

The Harvard affirmative action case is part and parcel of a decades-long series of attempts to eliminate race-conscious policies from higher education admissions. Since the 1970s, opponents have gradually weakened the original conception of affirmative action through battles in the courts, efforts in state legislatures, and ballot initiatives. While the lawsuit against Harvard is not the first challenge to affirmative action, it is groundbreaking in its recruitment of Asian American plaintiffs instead of traditionally white plaintiffs. Below, I summarize the history of race-based affirmative action policies in higher education with a focus on landmark legal decisions, the emergence of Asian Americans as political players, and contemporary events.

### The Origins of Affirmative Action and Early Opposition

The term “affirmative action” first appeared in President John F. Kennedy’s 1961 executive order requiring that federally funded programs ensure no racial bias in hiring and employment practices. As the Civil Rights Movement strengthened in the 1960s and culminated with the passage of federal laws banning discrimination in major sectors of American society, the spirit of affirmative action began to shift from a non-discrimination policy to a more active policy of reparations (Katznelson, 2005). This shift in substance represented a recognition that the country had an affirmative duty to rectify centuries of past racial discrimination. As President Lyndon B. Johnson explained in his 1965 commencement speech at Howard University, “You do not take a person who, for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the starting line of a race and then say, ‘You are free to compete with all the others,’ and still justly believe that you have been completely fair” (Johnson, 1965). That same year, he issued an executive order requiring government contractors to take affirmative action to hire more minority employees (Katznelson, 2005).

By the early 1970s, federal courts were enforcing comprehensive desegregation plans across the country. Many plans included orders that colleges and universities actively recruit and admit more minority students (Minow, 2010). Some higher education institutions that did not face a legal mandate also adopted race-based affirmative action policies, either voluntarily under progressive leadership, or in response to direct action campaigns by black college students and their allies. These new practices expanded access to higher education for all racial and ethnic minorities (Stulberg and Chen, 2014).

However, opponents of affirmative action argued that the policy was unconstitutional and brought colleges and universities to court. An early challenge to the University of California-Davis Medical School admissions policy reached the Supreme Court in 1978. In the *Regents of University of California v. Bakke* (1978), the Court ruled that the University of California could not justify reserving an explicit number of seats for disadvantaged minority students policies on the basis of redressing past discrimination. The Court determined that the only constitutional rationale for affirmative action would be the educational benefits that flow from a having a diverse student body. *Bakke* had drastic implications for higher education admissions practices and the framing of affirmative action. Thereafter, colleges and universities could not make admissions decisions that turned exclusively on students’ race or ethnicity. They could only consider students’ racial and ethnic identity as one factor out of many in a holistic review process, which severely limited the original intent of affirmative action.

## Continued Controversy and the Role of Asian Americans

Asian Americans entered the politics of college admissions in the 1980s when several Asian American students accused selective institutions like Brown, Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, the University of California-Berkeley (UC Berkeley), and the University of California-Los Angeles (UCLA) of taking “negative action,” i.e., discriminating against them in favor of white applicants. The federal Departments of Justice and Education investigated these claims and found that UCLA and UC Berkeley in particular restricted the admission of Asian Americans to admit more white students (Takagi, 1992). This use of “ceilings” or “quotas” for specific racial and ethnic minorities raised serious concerns about the persistent marginalization of Asian Americans.

However, these negative action admissions practices were distinctly different from affirmative action policies intended to increase college access for underrepresented minorities (Poon, 2009). White conservative groups capitalized on this evidence of anti-Asian discrimination to devise an attack on affirmative action by incorrectly framing negative action against affirmative action as the “logical and inevitable outcome of preferences for ‘other’ minorities” (Takagi, 1992). Politicians and political commentators like Congressman Dana Rohrabacher and George Will mischaracterized Asian Americans as bearing the cost of “unfair racial preferences” for blacks and Latinos (Nakanishi, 1989; Takagi, 1992). The mainstream media perpetuated this conflation of affirmative action with anti-Asian discrimination. Positioning Asian Americans as the central victim of affirmative action also enabled anti-affirmative action activists to deflect charges of racism and conceal white interests in eliminating race-conscious policies (Kidder, 2000, 2006). This episode in history laid the foundation for future efforts to dismantle race-based college admissions policies, which I discuss later.

In the 1990s, conservative activists like Ward Connerly and affiliated groups took the battle against affirmative action beyond the courthouse. They organized and funded several statewide initiatives to ban affirmative action. The first two successful initiatives passed in California (Proposition 209) in 1996, and Washington (Initiative 200) in 1998. Six more states soon followed suit, enacting bans either through ballot initiatives, executive decisions, or legislative votes. These laws prohibit discriminatory or “preferential” treatment by the state on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity, or national origin in public employment, education, and contracting (Coleman et al., 2012). They have led to substantial drops in the racial diversity of higher education institutions (Backes, 2012; Garces, 2013; Garces and Mickey-Pabello, 2015; Hinrichs, 2012; Kidder and Gándara, 2017; Wightman, 1997). It is worth noting that in California and Michigan where affirmative action bans were implemented through voter-approved initiatives, 61% and 75% of Asian American voters rejected their respective bans (“State Propositions,” 1996; *The Nation*, 2007).

Meanwhile, two affirmative action lawsuits were moving through the court system and eventually made their way to the Supreme Court by 2003. The cases, *Grutter v. Bollinger* and *Gratz v. Bollinger*, involved white plaintiffs who had been denied admission at the University of Michigan law school and college, respectively. Applying the *Bakke* precedent, the Court ruled in *Grutter* that the law school’s admissions process was constitutional because it facilitated student body diversity and tailored the consideration of race to individual applicants (*Grutter v. Bollinger*, 2003). On the other hand, the Court ruled in *Gratz* that the college was not allowed to

award extra points for underrepresented minorities on the basis of their race (*Gratz v. Bollinger*, 2003). This decision prohibited the future use of explicit racial preferences in higher education admissions and further constrained the ability of affirmative action policies to redress racial inequality head on.

## Recent Challenges and New Strategies

Although the Court maintained that race-conscious holistic review was constitutional in *Grutter*, the balance of Supreme Court justices tipped in favor of conservatives when Justice Samuel Alito replaced Justice Sandra Day O'Connor in 2006. Edward Blum, a legal strategist and then-director of the Project on Fair Representation, saw this as an opportunity to challenge affirmative action yet again. It is worth noting that Blum has a long history of fighting against race-based policies. In the 1990s, he successfully sued Texas for gerrymandering districts in favor of African American and Latino voters. Blum also engineered *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013), the Supreme Court case that struck down provisions in the 1965 Voting Rights Act that protected voters of color (Halper, 2018).

Continuing his crusade against civil rights policies, Blum initiated a lawsuit against the University of Texas at Austin in 2008 for its race-conscious admissions policy (Menicmer, 2016). He recruited Abigail Fisher as the plaintiff, a white woman denied admission at UT Austin. *Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin* reached the Supreme Court in 2013 and again in 2016 after a remand to the Fifth Circuit court for further review. In 2016, the Supreme Court ultimately upheld the the university's admissions policy as constitutional, as it considered race as one factor out of many in admissions decisions for the purpose of promoting a diverse student body. (*Fisher v. University of Texas at Austin*, 2016).

When the Fifth Circuit ruled in favor of UT Austin in 2014, which the Supreme Court would eventually affirm in 2016, Edward Blum took a different tack. He created an organization called Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA) and began intentionally recruiting Asian American plaintiffs for future lawsuits using websites such as [harvardnotfair.org](http://harvardnotfair.org), whose home page displays an image of a disappointed-looking Asian woman with the caption: "Were You Denied Admission to Harvard? It may be because you're the wrong race" (Not Fair Harvard, n.d.). By the end of 2014, Blum's Students for Fair Admissions had filed two lawsuits against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for their alleged discrimination against Asian Americans and alleged use of racial quotas. In *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College*, at least one Asian American is listed as an anonymous plaintiff (Ellis, 2016).

Blum's pursuit of Asian plaintiffs echoes conservative efforts in the 1980s to falsely equate anti-Asian American discrimination to affirmative action as a way to undermine public trust in higher education institutions and end the consideration of race or ethnicity from admissions. Even if his primary concern is to eliminate affirmative action rather than defend Asian American interests, many Asian Americans support his lawsuits. Proponents of affirmative action and liberal mainstream media often point to Blum's remarks at a Chinese American community event in Houston that he "needed Asian plaintiffs" as proof of his ulterior motives (Houston Chinese Alliance, 2015). They rarely acknowledge the fact that the Houston Chinese Alliance invited him to speak in the first place. The Houston Chinese Alliance's interest in Blum's work and the fact

that Asian American students did step forward to serve as plaintiffs, albeit anonymously, suggest that his allegations of anti-Asian discrimination at selective universities resonate with many Asian Americans.

As Blum prepared for more litigation, Asian American activists around the country, particularly Chinese Americans, mobilized their own fight against race-based college admissions. A Chinese American businessman in Florida named Yukong Zhao created the Asian American Coalition for Education (AACE) to lodge a separate complaint against Harvard in 2015 for discriminating against Asian American applicants. The AACE's effort differs from those of Asian American students in the 1980s, however. Whereas students in the 1980s aimed to eliminate negative action against Asian American applicants in favor of white applicants, the AACE and its affiliated organizations want to eliminate the consideration of race and ethnicity in college admissions altogether (AACE, 2015). It seems as if their leaders have internalized the belief that anti-Asian discrimination flows directly from race-based affirmative action for underrepresented minorities, which is the same argument that Edward Blum uses and conservative politicians advanced in the 1980s. The Department of Education dismissed the AACE's complaint in 2015, but the Department of Justice under the Trump administration re-opened the complaint in late 2017. It launched an investigation of Harvard's admissions practices in addition to the ongoing SFFA lawsuit, which at that point had begun the discovery process (Jarrett, 2018).

The SFFA lawsuit against Harvard went to trial for three weeks in October and November 2018 at the Boston Federal District Court. The trial unveiled several of Harvard's admissions practices, of which one of the most controversial was the "personal score," or an assessment of character traits and personal qualities (Hartocollis, 2018b). Plaintiffs presented evidence that Harvard not only holds different racial and ethnic groups to different academic standards, but also assigns comparatively lower ratings to Asian American applicants on traits like "positive personality," likability, courage, kindness, and being "widely respected" (Hartocollis, 2018a). In its defense, the university presented evidence that there was no statistically significant difference between Asian American students' chances of admission and those of other groups. However, using the same dataset but excluding athletes and legacies from the sample, Students for Fair Admissions found that being Asian American did impact an applicant's likelihood of admission (Jung, 2018). Furthermore, court documents showed that Harvard conducted an internal investigation in 2013 and found that its admissions process was biased against Asian Americans (Hartocollis, 2018a). According to SFFA, none of the anonymous, Asian American plaintiffs who claimed they were denied admission would testify in court (Carapezza, 2018).

The Harvard trial stirred Asian American activists on both sides. Supporters and opponents of Harvard's admissions process held simultaneous demonstrations outside the courthouse. Supporters invoked the slogan "Defend Diversity!" while opponents, many of whom were Chinese American, called for "race neutral admissions" and "fair admissions for all" (Anderson, 2018). Court watchers anticipate that presiding Judge Allison Burroughs will release her opinion in early 2019. Both parties say they plan to appeal if they lose, and commentators suggest that the case may eventually reach the Supreme Court (Jung, 2018).

## Literature Review

Surprisingly little research has examined Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action, let alone Asian American attitudes. Garces and Poon (2018) are the only affirmative action researchers who have analyzed Chinese Americans as a separate ethnic group from Asian Americans in general. After interviewing 36 Asian Americans with varying attitudes toward affirmative action, they found that all 15 people who opposed affirmative action identified as Chinese American. Eleven of them were immigrants, and seven of these 11 immigrants arrived after the 1990 U.S. Immigration Act, which dramatically increased the number of visas for highly skilled, professional-class immigrants. On the other hand, those who supported affirmative action were ethnically diverse, including people of East, Southeast, and South Asian descent. Garces and Poon suggest that many of the Chinese American immigrants in their study opposed affirmative action because of limited social interactions with other racial and ethnic minorities and a culture of exam-focused education in China. They also attributed their opposition to widely circulated misinformation about affirmative action and sensational stories about minority groups on WeChat, an extremely popular messaging and social media app among Chinese citizens and first-generation Chinese immigrants in the U.S.

There is no other empirical research on Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action specifically. This capstone builds on Garces and Poon's (2018) study but focuses exclusively on Chinese Americans. Furthermore, while Garces and Poon devote much of their discussion to Chinese American opposition, I intentionally seek participants who oppose and support affirmative action to varying degrees. The purpose of diversifying my sample is to show how Chinese Americans are not monolithic in their views on affirmative action, and also to explore how people arrive at either side of the fence.

Due to the dearth of research on Chinese Americans, it is necessary to turn to theory to hypothesize what factors lead to differences in their attitudes toward affirmative action. Researchers have proposed several theoretical frameworks. Although most of these theories were developed from studies of non-Chinese people, it is credible that they apply to Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action, too. I rely on Fishbein and Ajzen's (1980) theory of attitude formation to explain the different ways in which Chinese Americans think about affirmative action. According to this theory, any difference in attitude toward affirmative action stems from differences in beliefs about the policy or related events and ideas. People acquire these beliefs over the course of their lives, whether through direct observation or inference. The relationship and relative strength of their beliefs determine the degree to which they support affirmative action.

The literature suggests that there are at least four categories of beliefs that may inform how Chinese Americans feel about affirmative action: beliefs about (1) how the policy works; (2) who the policy benefits; (3) whether the policy is fair; and (4) racial prejudice and ideology. I review these categories below, with an understanding that they overlap to a large extent and that I cannot neatly trace people's feelings to specific beliefs or values. Nevertheless, they provide a useful framework to analyze the possible roots of Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action.

## Beliefs about Implementation

Beliefs about how affirmative action is implemented may influence Chinese Americans' favorability toward it. Individuals in general are less likely to support affirmative action if they associate it with quotas or explicit preferences (Bell et al. 1997; Golden et al. 2001; Le et al. 2006). Garces and Poon (2018) found evidence that some Asian Americans believe affirmative action works like this. They interviewed 36 members of Asian American organizations involved in affirmative action advocacy and discovered that the vast majority did not know the true meaning of the policy: All but six wrongly identified affirmative action as the practice of quotas, bonus points, or preferences for underrepresented minority applicants. These iterations of affirmative action have all been ruled unconstitutional. The only form of affirmative action that the U.S. Supreme Court currently endorses is race-conscious holistic review, or admissions policies that consider a student's race as one of many factors to craft a diverse student body.

## Perceptions of Self-Interest

Assuming that people value what is in their self-interest, an individual's perception of whether affirmative action will benefit them or a group to which they belong largely shapes his or her attitude toward the policy (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Jacobson, 1985; Kravitz, 1995). Several studies find supporting evidence for this: Racial minorities are more supportive of affirmative action policies than white people, and women are more supportive than men (Allen et al. 2000; Konrad and Linnehan, 1995; Sax and Arredondo, 1999). Conversely, lack of self-interest seems to explain why individuals with higher levels of education and income are less supportive of affirmative action (Bobo and Kluegel, 1993; Costantini and King, 1985; Jacobson, 1983).

Extending this line of thought, Chinese Americans would be more likely to support affirmative action if they perceive themselves as an underrepresented minority group that experiences discrimination. Chinese Americans have in fact experienced a long history of racism and social and economic marginalization in the United States. Whether Chinese Americans connect this history to their understanding of affirmative action is less clear. Previous research has not examined Chinese Americans specifically but has found that compared to white people, Asian Americans are more likely to support affirmative action, report experiences of discrimination, and perceive under-representation in the workplace, especially in leadership positions (Bell et al. 1997; Hyun, 2005; Weathers and Truxillo, 2008; Westmoreland, 2018). These findings about Asian Americans are consistent with the self-interest hypothesis, although it is unknown how they apply to individual ethnic groups. Asian Americans likely vary in the degree to which they perceive affirmative action as compensation for past discrimination given the distinct immigration patterns and histories of each ethnic group.

Affirmative action may serve other self-interests, too. For instance, Chinese Americans who value diversity and pluralism may be more likely to support the policy. Many students and higher education officials have defended affirmative action in college admissions on the basis that it leads to more diverse college campuses that enrich all students' learning experiences (Faust, 2018; Korn, 2018; SFFA v. Harvard, 2018). Researchers have also found that students who are strongly committed to promoting racial understanding are more likely to support affirmative action (Sax and Arredondo, 1999). Chinese Americans who believe in the social and educational

benefits of diversity will likely have more positive attitudes toward affirmative action, especially if they reap the rewards of a diverse student body themselves.

Chinese Americans may be less likely to support affirmative action if they perceived it benefitting certain racial and ethnic minorities but not themselves (Gu et al., 2014). Some Chinese Americans may internalize the model minority identity, or the idea that Asians are “too successful to be considered a disadvantaged minority group” (Cheng, 1997). In this case, they may be more likely to oppose affirmative action because they do not think they need or will benefit from it (Bell et al. 1997). Some Chinese Americans may also come to believe that affirmative action does not benefit them through personal experience or observation. Inkelas (2003) found that some Asian Pacific American college students felt like they did not have the same advantages accorded to black and Latino applicants in the college admissions process. Wong (2018) found that some Chinese Americans have shared feelings of neglect by universities over WeChat, suggesting that they do not think affirmative action is meant to help them.

Relatedly, Chinese Americans may be less likely to support affirmative action if they perceive it creating more competition for limited educational or employment opportunities (Kravitz, 1995; Sax and Arredondo, 1999). Sax and Arredondo (1999) found that White and Asian American students who attended their first-choice college were significantly more likely to support affirmative action than those who did not attend their top choice school. The former group of students did not see affirmative action as a threat to their own chances of getting into college.

### Considerations of Fairness

People who believe affirmative action works like a quota or preference system may oppose affirmative action if they adhere to the meritocratic ideal that the most “qualified” person gets the job or promotion (Bell et al. 1997; Gu et al. 2014). Fairness seems to be a particular concern of Chinese Americans who immigrated to the United States after 1990, the majority of whom are highly skilled and wealthy (Garces and Poon, 2018). Many recent Chinese immigrants grew up in mainland China where the National Higher Education Entrance Examination, or *gaokao*, is the sole determinant of admission to selective universities. Garces and Poon infer that they were socialized to believe that standardized tests are a valid and objective measure of merit. A greater proportion of recent Chinese immigrants might oppose affirmative action because they perceive it as undermining merit-based admissions. Indeed, some perceive it as a “shortcut” for certain groups of people and a disincentive to work hard in school (Wong, 2018).

On the other hand, Chinese Americans who believe in equality may be more likely to support affirmative action. Gu et al. (2014) found that people with egalitarian values are more likely to perceive affirmative action in hiring decisions as fair. Their study did not examine perceptions of fairness of college admissions decisions, but it is credible that people’s values about equality in the realm of employment extend to the realm of higher education.

Additionally, Chinese Americans may perceive the fairness of affirmative action differently if they prescribe to different ideas about the opportunity structure in America. Kluegel and Smith (1986) found that individuals who believe that racial disparities result in unequal opportunities for upward mobility are more likely to support affirmative action. On the other hand, they found that individuals who believe in the work ethic narrative of the American dream are more likely to

oppose affirmative action. Black Americans tended to fall in the former group; white Americans tended to fall in the latter. It seems safe to assume that Chinese Americans vary in their beliefs about opportunity structure in America, but it is unclear what would lead them to think in either way.

## Racial Prejudice and Ideology

Chinese Americans may be more likely to oppose affirmative action if they are prejudiced against the minority groups they see as benefiting from it. Studies have shown that white people's opposition to affirmative action is largely due to negative feelings toward African Americans and Latinos (Alvarez and Bedolla, 2004; Bobo, 1999; Jacobson, 1985). There is ample reason to believe that some Chinese Americans are racially prejudiced and that these prejudices inform their negative attitudes toward affirmative action. Many middle and upper-middle class Chinese American immigrants settle either in Chinese ethnoburbs or predominantly white neighborhoods where they have little to no contact with other racial minorities. As a result of this social segregation, they likely harbor racial prejudice that could manifest itself as opposition to affirmative action (Garces and Poon, 2018). WeChat has also played a role in fostering opposition to affirmative action among some Chinese American immigrants by spreading misinformation and stereotypes to stoke anxieties about other racial minorities (Chen, 2018; Zhang, 2018).

It is worth noting that those who oppose affirmative action may never express explicit racial prejudice. Instead, different belief systems about racism in America may explain divergent positions of Chinese American in the affirmative action debate (Hartlep et al., 2013; Poon and Segoshi, 2018). Notions of "racial egalitarianism" may guide supporters of affirmative action. Racial egalitarianism speaks to the idea that "past and present racism and inequality in the United States compels the state to allow race consciousness in public policies related to educational and employment opportunities" (Moses, 2016). Notions of "racial libertarianism" may guide opponents of affirmative action instead. Racial libertarianism refers to the idea that everyone should be treated "equally" regardless of circumstance (Poon and Segoshi, 2018). Just as this ideological divide exists among Asian Americans, it could also exist among Chinese Americans specifically.

## Pilot Study of Chinese American Attitudes toward Affirmative Action

Despite the centrality of Chinese Americans in the contemporary debate over affirmative action, scholarship on Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action is largely absent. I will begin filling this gap in the literature with my own pilot study of a diverse group of Chinese Americans with varying attitudes toward affirmative action. I seek to answer two questions:

1. In what ways do Chinese Americans vary in their attitudes toward affirmative action?
2. What factors might explain the variation in Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action?

Researchers who use survey and interview methods often conceal individuals' raw data and present only overarching themes. To depart from that style, my pilot study will present

participants' responses in the form of first-person narrative profiles that describe each individual's background and attitude toward affirmative action. The motivation for using narrative profiles is threefold:

First, I believe that presenting a range of opinions in story format is an engaging way to persuade readers that Chinese Americans are not monolithic in their position on affirmative action. The impetus of this study was to combat the media's generalization of Chinese Americans as opponents of affirmative action. In-depth narratives will underscore each person's individuality and difference from others, which the stereotype of "faceless" Asian Americans is intended to strip away.

Second, narrative profiles allow for fuller, more accurate representations of how participants view affirmative action. Much of the research on individuals' attitudes toward affirmative action is survey-based (Bell et al., 1997; Weathers & Truxillo, 2008; Gu et al., 2014). However, surveys may reflect the researchers' bias or fail to capture the complexity of how respondents think about affirmative action. While this study does include a survey instrument, participants' narratives are largely based on their interviews, in which they have an opportunity to speak for themselves and complicate, amend, and deepen their responses. The profiles bring into relief the nuances of and differences between participants' attitudes toward affirmative action.

Finally, narratives will enable me to explore the factors that influence individuals' attitudes toward affirmative action. Jerome Bruner suggests that people think about their lives in stories, and that narrative research reveals "the storied ways in which we make sense of meaning and experiences, within the wider context of our social world and those social others within it" (Bruner, 1987). Situating participants' attitudes toward affirmative action in the broader context of their lives may shed light on the bases of their beliefs and feelings about the policy. Uncovering tentative connections between current attitudes toward affirmative action and past experiences and observations would be a novel contribution to the literature.

## Methods

### Data Collection and Participants

Using a purposeful sampling technique, I identified potential participants by contacting Asian American organizations that: (a) signed onto *amicus* briefs submitted to the Boston Federal District Court for the *Students for Fair Admissions, Inc. v. President and Fellows of Harvard College* case, or (b) had publicly supported or opposed the Asian American Coalition for Education's 2015 complaint with the Department of Education and Department of Justice requesting an investigation of Harvard University's admissions practices. In total, I asked 60 organizations to distribute my recruitment message to their members or stakeholders. Thirteen organizations (21.7%) agreed.

Fifteen Chinese Americans contacted me asking to participate in an initial survey round. The purpose of the survey was to collect enough information about each recruit so that I could intentionally diversify my final sample and capture a sufficient variety of attitudes toward

affirmative action. The survey included two free-response questions about their position on affirmative action and awareness of the Harvard lawsuit. It also included demographic questions about family, education, occupation, geography, and political orientation. I administered the survey via Qualtrics. Before gaining access to the survey, respondents consented to their participation in the survey and a possible interview. The consent form outlined the goals of the project, the risks and benefits involved, and statements regarding confidentiality and the voluntary nature of the project.

From this pool of 15 respondents, I selected 8 participants to interview. I intentionally selected participants with a range of positions on affirmative action and the Harvard lawsuit. I also chose a sample that reflected diversity along lines of sex, age, marital status, citizenship status, immigrant generation, education level, and occupation. I conducted one interview with each participant. I developed customized, semi-structured interview protocols for each participant based on their survey responses. In general, each interview followed a basic order: childhood experiences, educational background, work experience, perspectives on affirmative action, and perspectives on the Harvard case. Interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 75 minutes. Each interview was audio recorded and professionally transcribed.

## Data Analysis

I read each interview transcript several times. I first open-coded the transcripts, guided by the two research questions, and discovered that the emerging themes fit remarkably within the analytical framework from the literature review. Then, I created axial codes based on the four categories of beliefs that researchers have found to influence people's attitudes toward affirmative action. Using these codes, I systematically analyze how participants' attitudes related to specific beliefs, and how specific beliefs connected to concrete experiences, observations, and events in their lives. Throughout the process, I put myself in participants' shoes and articulated their position on affirmative action in writing, reflecting simultaneously on my own beliefs and background so as to not project onto them.

After sketching brief summaries of each participant's attitudes toward affirmative action and underlying beliefs, I grouped them into four pairs to bring certain differences and commonalities into relief. This process deepened my understanding of not only each individual's perspective, but also overarching themes and trends in the entire sample. Next, I distilled and reconstructed the interview transcripts into profiles of each participant that presents their stance on affirmative action within a broader narrative arc that includes details from their childhood, young adulthood, and present-day life. The purpose of weaving aspects of their personal background into their argument for or against affirmative action was to explore the possible origins of their attitudes and beliefs, and to emphasize the fact that regardless of their position in the debate, they are not faceless individuals. Rather, they are people with real lives, values, and unique personal histories who are trying honestly to make sense of "their experiences in messy spaces" (Bhattacharya, 2009). To honor their individuality, each narrative profile is written in the first-person. Direct quotes from interviews were preserved wherever possible.

## Narrative Profiles

This section presents these first-person narrative profiles. To reiterate, the value of presenting these data as narrative profiles is threefold: First, they underscore each person's individuality and remind us that people cannot be reduced to their opinions. Second, they offer room for more nuanced opinions than surveys do, which may reveal even greater variation in attitudes toward affirmative action than previously found. Third, they contextualize participants' attitudes in a way that allows us to identify specific factors that may have led them to feel differently about affirmative action.

The eight profiles are presented in four pairs to highlight divergent attitudes and emerging themes that I discuss at length in the next section. The first three pairs consist of individuals who differ in their attitudes toward affirmative action for various reasons predicted by the literature: 1) different beliefs about affirmative action, 2) different notions of fairness, 3) different perceptions of self-interest and competition, and 4) different racial ideologies and degrees of racial prejudice. The last pair consists of two individuals who share similar attitudes toward affirmative action. The purpose of including a case of convergent attitudes rather than divergent ones is to explore the commonalities that bring people together not only in opposition to, but also in support of, affirmative action. A brief introduction precedes each pair of narrative profiles to give readers a useful framework with which to compare the individuals' attitudes.

### Profile Pair #1

Sunny Zhao and Michael Wu lead vastly different lives. Mr. Zhao is a first-generation Chinese immigrant, mid-career financial engineer who's raising two children. He actively participates on WeChat and keeps in touch with various friends and relatives, all of whom are also Chinese. Mr. Wu is a second-generation Chinese American, first-year student at Harvard, where he is immersed in the study of history and social issues and surrounded by an ethnically diverse group of peers who come from all corners of the world. Mr. Zhao and Mr. Wu's profiles illustrate how these differences in background and social environment may have led to opposing ideas about the costs, benefits, and fairness of affirmative action.

#### Sunny Zhao

I grew up in a small village of about 2,000 people in China's Hebei province. My mom ran a pear farm there, and my dad owned a small transportation and food storage business. I went to elementary school in the village but had to travel farther outside for middle school and high school. Eventually I went to college at Tsinghua University in Beijing to study physics. I was pretty lucky to go there. It's one of the best universities in China. My coursework was very difficult. I spent most of the time in my books. After graduation, I studied for several years at the Tokyo Institute of Technology before coming to the U.S. to do further research. I started off in a physics lab at Stanford, but within a few years I decided that I wanted to change directions. So I switched my career to financial engineering, earned a one-year master's

degree, and then came to New York to work at various financial firms like Citi Bank and the Royal Bank of Scotland. Studying physics actually helped me a lot with financial engineering because both fields rely heavily on mathematical models. My work mainly involves doing research, fitting models to data on asset prices, and making forecasts and projections based on the models. Right now, I live in New Jersey in a suburb called Livingston and commute to work at Bloomberg, LLC, in New York City.

I don't support affirmative action because it's the same as discrimination. If you give some people priority but not others, then you are discriminating against a whole group of people. It is obvious that black and Hispanic people get an advantage in the

college admissions process, while white and Asian people don't. White and Asian people have to work much harder to get admitted by the same college as black and Hispanic people, especially Ivy League schools. Asian people, especially Chinese people, have the hardest time getting into those schools. Everybody knows that, right? There are statistics showing that Asian students have to score hundreds of points higher on the SAT than black, Hispanic, and white students to get into an Ivy League school. Those numbers are true.

I've heard so many stories where teachers put black, white, and Asian students in the same group to get the black students a passing grade because the white and Asian students do all the work, and the black students don't have to do anything. They just get the credit and pass the class. I'm not making this up. These stories are all over the news, like on WeChat and Facebook. Affirmative action works the same way. Every year, colleges like Harvard have roughly the same percentage of Asians, whites, blacks, and Hispanics. There is less and less incentive for black and Hispanic people to work hard because there's a special quota that colleges have to meet, so their performance gets worse and worse.

On the other hand, Chinese American students have to work harder and harder if they want the same opportunities as black and Hispanic people. They are made to compete with each other. If colleges eliminate the racial factor and compare the academic performance of Chinese students with other racial groups, then 50 or 60 percent of Harvard and Yale students would probably be Asian. But instead, they are using racial quotas to admit certain numbers of each group. The numbers don't lie.

Affirmative action is becoming a trend in other places, too. When I worked in the lab at Stanford, it was so much easier for black and Hispanic researchers to get a faculty position than it was for white and Asian ones. Asian students had to work much harder to get tenure, which is one of the reasons I switched careers and didn't go on to

## Michael Wu

Both of my parents came from poor families in China. They met in college and left after graduation to pursue higher education. They lived and worked in England and Canada before settling in California. My dad works as an optical engineer, and my mom is a software engineer. They both made immense personal and professional sacrifices to raise our family. I am really grateful that they spent a lot of

become a professor. I've also heard that at companies like Google and Apple, black and Hispanic people get priority in hiring. They're treating people differently based on their race and color. That's wrong. It's terrible.

I don't know why affirmative action started, but I would guess people thought black people are discriminated against because they were slaves and should be treated better. Maybe that was the reason. I don't really care why they started it, though. All I care about is now. I want my kids to be treated fairly. I don't want colleges and employers to discriminate against them because they are Asian. If my kids work harder than other kids, then they should get better opportunities. My kids shouldn't be punished for working hard. Look, I don't think they are smarter than kids of other races. But they do work harder. It's a cultural thing. We spend a lot of money on education and extracurriculars. What else can we do? If my kids don't work harder, how will they be able to compete in a society that holds them to higher standards?

I want a society where everyone is judged by their capabilities and performance, which is why I want race to be removed from consideration in college admissions and recruitment. It's unconstitutional. It's illegal. And so, we are fighting. If we don't fight, our children will end up somewhere bad. It will be more difficult for them to go to college and find a job. I attended a big rally in Boston the day before the Harvard trial began, and we told people that we are fighting against political correctness and affirmative action—these things are all connected. I also always donate to Students for Fair Admissions.

I heard about the lawsuit and rally through WeChat. WeChat groups are my major source of information about these types of things. I belong to dozens of groups. Some of them are for fun, like hiking or skiing. Other groups are more political where we discuss events happening around the world. I get all the information I need from WeChat.

time with us as kids and invested so much energy into making us feel proud of who we are. They made sure that my sister and I became good people, not just good students.

I grew up in the suburbs of Irvine, a mid-sized city in Southern California. A lot of my friends and peers were Chinese, Indian, Japanese, Korean—all kind of

Asian ethnicities. I think being surrounded by other Asians helped build my self-confidence at a young age. For instance, I was elected student body president in the sixth grade, which was important to my identity back then, and I don't know if I would have been elected if I went to a predominantly white school.

I continued with student government in high school, and it was one of my most meaningful extracurricular activities along with science fair and basketball. They were all integral to my upbringing in the sense that they helped me develop leadership qualities and communication skills. I would describe my leadership style as leading by example. Some day, I want to prove that Asian Americans can make a big impact on the United States and be represented among the CEOs of Fortune 500 companies, famous entrepreneurs, and politicians.

I applied to Harvard because it felt different from all the other colleges I visited. It seemed like there were incredible people who felt invested in who you were. I also liked doing chemistry research in high school and thought Harvard had good opportunities for STEM education. Furthermore, Harvard inspires leadership, so I knew I'd be with like-minded students. I was eventually admitted and decided to come. I'm currently a first-year and having a great time. I'm taking a variety of classes, from philosophy and African American studies to computer science and math. I spend most of my time socializing—in my dorm, the gym, the dining hall—and building relationships with friends.

The personal growth I've experienced through interacting with fellow students who are African American, Latino, and African has easily been one of the best parts about college so far. I definitely valued growing up in a city that is 45% Asian, but in some ways I was sheltered. I really appreciate the diversity at Harvard because it has deepened my capacity for empathy, for putting myself in other people's shoes. It is incredible to have a conversation with someone from across the world and understand global issues through their eyes.

For example, I took a class last semester on the history of the British empire, and at one point we learned about former Rhodesia, which is now modern-day Zimbabwe. To be able to go from that lecture immediately to lunch with my roommate Jordan, who is from Zimbabwe, and hear about the legacies of colonialism from his perspective is wild. I could have never had these kinds of conversations back in Irvine.

I strongly value diversity in all forms and believe it is essential to the college experience, which is why I support affirmative action in college admissions. I also think affirmative action is particularly important when you look at how African American, Hispanic, and even Asian people have been historically oppressed. It helps ensure equal opportunity at the college level. We can't just ignore the fact that racism has always been part of the United States and say everyone is equal now. A lot of racial minorities still face tremendous hardship as a result of this racist history, especially those in inner-city communities.

We also need to look beyond affirmative action and promote equity at all levels of education, not just in college admissions. Our educational system isn't perfect, but removing affirmative action is not going to solve the issue. Affirmative action is a necessary part of the effort; it's just insufficient. We need to supplement it with policies that help disadvantaged children when they are younger and at more formative stages in their development.

When it comes to using race in college admissions, I think the claim that Asian Americans need higher SAT scores is suspect. I don't know if we can assume that the reason Asian Americans have higher average test scores is because colleges are holding them to a higher standard. Maybe Asian Americans have internalized the expectation that they have to do perform better academically and thus work harder to get higher test scores. Or maybe the statistic reflects a cultural bias. Asian families, rich or poor, prioritize education so much that they will do anything to send their kids to SAT boot camps or enrichment classes so they can get into a good college.

I've grappled with the personality rating issue as well. I don't want to say it's necessarily true that Asian Americans have worse personalities. That would be hard for me to say as an Asian American. I will say, though, that I've read a lot of essays through my college application advising startup, and I've noticed that students who spend all of their time studying and doing extracurriculars don't have as much time to develop genuine interests, read the news, watch television, or do activities that convey one's personality. This pattern is not exclusive to Asian Americans, but a lot of Asian Americans are very academically driven and may not spend as much time exploring themselves. I will also say that Asians tend to be more STEM-oriented and less focused on writing. They are definitely not inherently less interesting or compelling people; perhaps many of

them just don't know how to express themselves as well.

In short, the story might be more complicated than intentional discrimination on Harvard's end. It may seem like I'm just supporting the university because I got in. In all honesty, I think I would have thought the same even if I hadn't gotten in. Harvard isn't my be-all and end-all. Now, if there was prejudice or

discrimination against Asians in Harvard's admissions process, I would be one of the first people to speak out against it. Racism is unacceptable. But I don't think there has been any. The high percentage of Asian students at Harvard compared to the percentage of Asians in the United States is a fair-enough indicator that the admissions committee is not discriminating against Asian Americans.

## Profile Pair #2

Steve Chen and Mai Xu grew up in China at the same time. They even overlapped for a few years at Fudan University in Shanghai, where they both studied biology before pursuing their PhDs in the United States. While their careers took them to different places, both ended up with their families in Howard County, Maryland. Despite similar life trajectories, Mr. Chen and Ms. Xu differ in their attitudes toward affirmative action: he opposes it, she supports it. Their profiles illustrate how two people with comparable educational backgrounds and professional stature can diverge in their opinions about affirmative action due to different conceptions of fairness and inequality. Their profiles also shed light on the experiences, observations, and events that have shaped these conceptions.

### Xi "Steve" Chen

I grew up in the center of Beijing right next to Tiananmen Square, the site of massive and fatal student-led demonstrations in 1989. I was attending Fudan University while these protests happened. Fudan exposed me to many different ideas and ways of thinking. I participated in clubs and societies where I interacted with students came from all over the country, from major cities to small towns and rural villages. I enjoyed my time there a lot.

When I graduated from Fudan in 1992, my parents wanted me to get a higher degree in the United States, where there were more competitive universities and greater chances for a better life. I completed my PhD in biological sciences at the University of Maryland and worked for a pharmaceutical company as a research scientist. Eventually I realized I no longer had the same passion for scientific research and made a career switch. I earned a law degree at Fordham University and now work as a patent lawyer for DSM in Columbia, Maryland, where I live with my wife and three young kids.

I first heard about affirmative action during the Fisher v. University of Texas case. It was covered in the Wall Street Journal, which I read daily, and all over WeChat, which I use to keep in touch with my Chinese friends and colleagues. That's when I started

to realize that African Americans and Latino Americans are taking advantage of the college admissions process.

Diversity is a valid goal for colleges, but there is a difference between means and ends. I think colleges are achieving diversity by reducing the number of admitted Asian American students to make more room for African Americans and Latino Americans. I saw a study that showed Asian American students at Harvard had a higher average SAT score than all other racial groups. Harvard also rates Asian applicants lower on personality. The university clearly holds racial groups to different standards to reach its diversity goals. I think Asian Americans are most taken advantage of, specifically Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, and Korean Americans. This is discrimination and violates the original intention of affirmative action to treat people equally regardless of race.

A fairer alternative would resemble China's college admissions system, which evaluates applicants almost solely based on their score on the National College Entrance Examination known as the gaokao. That's what I had to take in order to get admitted to Fudan University, one of the top universities in the country. Not only is it a more accurate judge of students' merit; it is also harder to game the system

through insider contacts or fancy extracurriculars only rich families can afford. The more criteria colleges use, the more subjective the evaluations become. Trade-offs exist, of course. Tests and GPA don't measure a person's empathy or social skills. But I think they are more fair than race, which says nothing about your merit.

I think affirmative action was intended to raise the socioeconomic status of African Americans and Latino Americans. I don't have statistics to back me up, but it seems like one reason African Americans have lower average incomes is the crime rate. I can also tell from my regular interactions with them. I own rental properties in Baltimore and occasionally go into the city to manage and repair them. I've driven through some pretty rundown neighborhoods where a lot of African Americans live. I don't think some of them work. Among those who do, many of them work for the state or federal government. I think Latino Americans have lower incomes because they're immigrants and stuck in low-paying jobs like landscapers and maids. I also see some of them waiting in line at the Social Security office. My

## Mai Xu

I had a peaceful childhood. I was born in 1968 in Hangzhou, the capital city of the Zhejiang province in Southeastern China. Hangzhou is famous for its West Lake, a cultural heritage site filled with gardens, pagodas, and temples. Alibaba, the Chinese e-commerce giant, also has its headquarters in Hangzhou. Although my village was poor when I was growing up, I never felt stressed as a child, and I considered myself neither disadvantaged nor privileged.

My parents always encouraged me to value education. All Chinese parents believe a good education will guarantee a good life, an easier life. Fortunately, I was able to attend Fudan University in Shanghai, where I studied biophysics. With my parents' advice and the general expectation that Chinese students go to America for higher education, I packed my bags and went to Pennsylvania State University for my PhD in biology. I chose Penn State for two main reasons. First, I didn't have many other options. Second, I'm not an adventurous person and thought I could adjust to Penn State more easily. It seemed smaller, safer, and quieter than other places.

Graduate school is where I first started seeing and working with people with very different backgrounds and beliefs. I realized that even though we looked differently, we were all pretty similar and could work

well together. Looking back, though, I didn't see the full extent of inequality in American society at Penn State because I was in a college town. It wasn't until I moved to Baltimore to work as a scientist for the National Institute of Aging when I came face to face with that side of the country. I was shocked. Those abused kids, those criminals, those teenagers. One night, I got lost while driving through the city on my way home from work and saw some kids just wandering the streets. I worry for them. They could be totally different people if they were born into a good family, a better family. I feel like we need to find some solution for this as a society.

That's why I think affirmative action is a good tool to provide societal support to disadvantaged groups. There are some kids who are raised in an environment that helps them do well in school. They receive support from their parents and encouragement from their teachers that allow them to get good grades. My husband and I have tried to create the best home environment we can for our two kids. But not everyone grows up in the same kind of environment, which might explain why they have lower grades in school or worse behavior. If your teachers don't tell you to try hard or don't have high expectations for you, or if you were born in a family where there's not even a father for you, then you probably won't grow up to be successful. Also, not

In fact, I think it's doing more harm than good at this point. I think affirmative action is part of a larger effort to push political correctness and restrict free speech. In recent years, people have gotten more and more sensitive about issues like race, gender, and sexuality. It's preventing people from speaking up. Everyone should be able to speak their minds, though. Even if they're racist, I think that's fine. You cannot prohibit that person from speaking his mind. It's not good that we can't have open conversations anymore. Yes, I agree that the Civil Rights Movement was necessary in the 1950s and 1960s for African Americans to be treated equally. But now they're overdoing it. The movement for racial equality has swung too far in the opposite direction and become a way for African Americans and Latino Americans to tilt the scales in their favor.

all families can afford to send their children to the best high schools that have lots of AP classes and extracurriculars. I don't think it's fair to judge these kids at the same level as those who grew up with a big support system. Children who don't grow up in ideal circumstances deserve to get a little advantage in the college admissions process. It's not like affirmative action means that minority kids can go to any school they want to because they are minority. These kids are trying the best they can given what they have. I think it's fair to give them a chance.

That being said, families should also be responsible for children's success. I don't know anyone personally who doesn't care about education, but I do think there are cultural differences between Asian parents and African American and Hispanic parents. In my kids' elementary school, for example, the student body was about 30 to 40% African American. I'm not sure how many Hispanics there were. Sometimes I went to school to help the teachers or pick up my kids. I'd constantly see the teacher talking to one or two kids asking them, "Why didn't you finish your homework?" And the kids would basically say, "Oh, this thing happened with my family and I don't have the atmosphere to finish my homework." The teacher would ask, "So do your parents help you?" And the kids will say "They're busy. They're not there." Or something like that. I would just watch nearby, look at the kids, and feel helpless for the teacher.

There was another event that happened a long time ago. I used to live in Boston in a three-story apartment when I was doing my post-doc at the Dana-Farber Cancer Institute. A Hispanic family with a single mother and two kids, one 5-years-old and the other 16-years old, lived on the bottom floor. The mother would have parties almost every night, and so many cars came in and out every day. I didn't

### Profile Pair #3

Ning Zhou and Xu Lin are first-generation Chinese immigrants whose educational and career opportunities in the United States have been limited by racial discrimination. Despite this shared experience, they hold different views on race-based affirmative action: Mr. Lin supports the current practice of race-conscious college admissions, while Mr. Zhou considers the use of race unfair and advocates instead for socioeconomic-based advantages. Their profiles illustrate how different experiences with discrimination and class backgrounds may have led both men to feel at odds over who is at a disadvantage in college admissions and whether affirmative action for racial and ethnic minorities is just.

understand how her kids could study at home because it was always noisy in their unit.

I think affirmative action could help them change their culture a little bit. Once the kids go to these top schools, they will have access to the best resources and opportunities. After graduation, they can go back and help their communities. In the long run, I think this is good for society as a whole. Otherwise, there will be so many families with single parents or no parents. If we don't do anything for those kids, what's going to happen eventually? I don't know.

I don't care much about the Harvard lawsuit. I first heard about it when my friends emailed me asking me to sign a petition supporting the plaintiffs. I didn't sign it because I don't think we should have much say in their admissions policy. I trust that colleges know what they're doing. Choosing criteria is their prerogative. I think I'm in the minority among my Chinese friends, though. If you go onto WeChat, everybody is talking about how Harvard is unfair. I don't participate in those conversations.

There's also more to life than Harvard. My daughter fared well in the college application process and now goes to Carnegie Mellon, which we are very happy about. A top school did reject my daughter, but I wasn't surprised because those schools often look for specific traits like leadership, and she's shy. I'm actually glad colleges look at more than just grades because I wouldn't want the whole class to be filled with nerds. I am a little worried for my son, who is a junior in high school and wants to go to a top school. In my experience, Chinese boys seem to have a harder time of standing out. I assure him, though, that there are plenty of other great schools and everything will work out in the end. You never know what's going to happen in life.

## Ning Zhou

I was born in Changchun, the capital city of northeast China's Jilin province. I really enjoyed school growing up. Everything came naturally to me. Plus, there wasn't as much pressure on kids to do well, and my parents never really had to ask me to go study. At the end of high school, my school offered me a scholarship to go to college in the United States because of my academic ranking and English proficiency. It was for a private co-op school called the General Motors Institute (GMI) in Michigan, which specialized in automotive engineering. The college was later renamed Kettering University. Both of my parents were automotive engineers, and my sister was, too. It was the only thing I knew at the time, so I accepted the scholarship. I felt very fortunate to receive it.

I went to GMI and studied electrical engineering while working for Chrysler Motors. After graduation, the company gave me a scholarship to get a master's degree at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and continue working for them. I worked for about ten years at Chrysler Motors in their manufacturing and assembly plants and vehicle test facilities. In 1998, I got another scholarship to attend a fellowship program at MIT called Leaders for Manufacturing and also get an MBA degree. Their idea was to build future leaders of America's corporations who had both an engineering and management background. I went on to manage Amazon.com's East Coast operations for a while. Then I came back to MIT to help global firms grow in China and help local firms in China globalize their operations. I later joined Intel to manage a \$2.5 billion venture in Dalian, China, where we established a chip manufacturing facility. I've never really had to pursue a lot of these opportunities. They just fell into my lap.

It would be the mark of a good and fair society to help the economically disadvantaged. I came to this country with two suitcases and a couple hundred dollars in my pocket. That's it. I didn't have access to many resources throughout college and the first part of graduate school. Life could get hard sometimes. I also have a number of Chinese friends who are also first-generation immigrants and work several jobs to make ends meet. They place a lot of emphasis on education so their children can have a better life. But children in poor families have a more difficult upbringing than wealthier kids and may need to work harder to achieve the same level of success. That is why I think economic-based affirmative action would be just. Colleges would essentially just add a few

points based on economic hardship, probably like they do for race right now.

A race-based approach to affirmative action is inherently unfair. Yes, affirmative action was meant to right past wrongs and help the descendants of slaves. But I read that most of the African American students at Harvard are actually the sons and daughters of wealthy immigrants from Africa or the Caribbean who recently came to the U.S. So affirmative action may not actually be helping the people it is intended to. I don't actually know if this is true. What I do know is that if you are born into a certain race, it should not increase or limit your chances of getting into an elite school. Everyone can tell, though, that it's harder for Chinese Americans to get into a top college. I have worked with several Chinese students who I thought were outstanding but didn't get into the top schools. While race-based affirmative action is wrong, I support economic-based affirmative action. I believe colleges would still get African American and Hispanic people under this kind of program because they tend to have lower incomes anyways.

In the end, Harvard will probably end up doing some combination of both, like putting a bit less weight on race and a bit more weight on economic hardship. Regardless of what they do, I hope they at least stop rating Asian Americans consistently lower on their character, leadership qualities, courage, likability. That's what bothers me most. And you see this implicit bias everywhere. When I worked at Intel, we had to hire a lot of managers, and people kept saying that the local Chinese people are technically sound but don't have the leadership capacity. That is just crap.

I've experienced this personally, too. When I graduated from MIT, I interviewed with a tech company and made it to the last round. The hiring manager took me out to lunch and told me that I had an impressive background and everything fits for this role. But then he said that I'd be leading a team where those guys aren't used to having an Asian manager, that they had just never seen one before. Those were his words. I am not making this up. So afterwards, the guy didn't call me. But hey, whatever, I don't care. There will always be those situations. I laugh it off and move on to other opportunities. I'm just glad that Trump is exposing this kind of discrimination to the public. It is so insulting.

## Xu Lin

I was born and raised in Fuzhou, the capital city of China's Fujian province, close to Taiwan. My dad came to the United States when I was eight-years-old because he wasn't able to make enough money in China to support our family. He worked in many different restaurants here and sent money back home to my mom, who was raising me and my two siblings by herself. We lived in a housing unit with about 20 other families who were very supportive, though. They took good care of us when my mom needed help. There was a strong sense of community and trust. For the most part, life was peaceful.

My life changed when I was 16-years-old. My dad finished getting all of his documents in order and brought my family over to America. I had established my identity in China, though, and felt completely uprooted. I didn't speak any English, nor did I know any of the cultural norms or references here. I also never worked before living in the U.S., but I began working in restaurants two months after I arrived.

School was especially shocking. I went to a public high school in Philadelphia where other Chinese students, immigrant students, and I faced a lot of racially motivated violence. Students would call us all kinds of names and start fights every week. Conflicts would escalate quickly and many of my friends were sent to the hospital. It got to the point where people thought of bringing weapons to school to defend themselves. Kids were almost dying, but the school administration didn't care and dismissed the fights as boys being boys. Several dropped out because they couldn't take the bullying and violence anymore, including my older sister.

My four years of high school were very hard and very painful. By the time I graduated, I didn't want to go to college. I had had enough. I did take a few college classes but eventually quit because I got frustrated that professors did not understand real life experiences, even if they were great scholars. Instead, I got involved in community organizing and advocacy work. I first became interested in social activism in high school when I participated in a campaign against school violence. Then I started asking questions about how there could be so many people who are homeless, who are hungry, and who can't afford healthcare in the richest, most powerful

country in the world. Coming from China, I thought everyone in America would be living well. But when I got here, I realized that isn't true for a lot of people.

I wanted to be part of the solution, so I joined Asian Americans United (AAU) and have worked on and off with them over the past several years. One of AAU's biggest achievements was the settlement of a lawsuit against the School District of Philadelphia for failing to protect Asian students against repeated harassment and violence. It was after an incident in 2009 where 26 Asian immigrant students were attacked at South Philadelphia High School, and school staff and administration did not respond adequately. I am now a board member of AAU and have spent the past four years running my own restaurant in Philadelphia's Chinatown.

During my time with AAU, I went to local and national conferences where I was exposed to different social issues, including public education. My parents gave up a lot for us to get here. They wanted us to get a better education. But they couldn't afford private school, and our public school system is a mess, nor is it completely safe. My siblings and I didn't have access to the same educational opportunities as other children. If it were a race, we were behind at the starting line. I support affirmative action because it gives minority students access to a quality education. And I mean all minority students. Before the Civil Rights Movement, no racial minorities could go to white schools, including Chinese people. The intention of affirmative action was to give access to all minority groups. It's good for Asians like us.

When I first heard about the Harvard lawsuit, I was like, what the heck? Harvard has about 20 percent Asian students, whereas Asian Americans make up five or six percent of the nation's population. That is higher than our fair share. Why are people complaining? It is very clear that this particular group of Asian Americans come from a different class background. They are privileged enough to feel entitled to get into Harvard. I know a lot of people who would be happy if they got into any college, not just Harvard. These are people who work in restaurants, garment shops, and construction sites. It's just ridiculous.

## Profile Pair #4

Renée Wang and Judy Lei are second-generation Chinese American women who grew up in radically different circumstances. Ms. Wang's parents have PhDs in physics and electrical engineering and were able to send their daughter to one of the top private boarding schools in the nation, Phillips Exeter Academy. Ms. Lei's parents immigrated to the U.S. around the same time but in much poorer circumstances: They have worked in the restaurant and garment industries since they arrived and could not afford to send their daughter to anywhere other than New York's segregated public high schools. In contrast to Mr. Zhou and Mr. Lin, however, Ms. Wang and Ms. Lei's profiles illustrate how class differences do not always result in disagreement over affirmative action. Both women have certain educational experiences in common that fostered similar beliefs about racial inequality and educational opportunity that seem to undergird their shared support for affirmative action's core principles.

### Renée Wang

My parents emigrated from China in the early 1980s to pursue higher education at Columbia University. My dad was on a government-funded scholarship for a PhD in Physics, and my mom got her PhD in Electrical Engineering. They had me in Boston but then for work reasons, moved to Saratoga, a wealthier, predominantly Asian American suburb outside the Bay Area. That's where I grew up until I went to boarding school in the 10th grade. We were a pretty normal family. We'd always eat dinner together, and I'd spend a lot of my time doing sports and competitions and other extracurriculars.

I didn't feel challenged enough once I got to high school, so I applied to private schools and ended up going to Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire on a partial scholarship. Exeter was probably the most formative experience of my life. The curriculum was incredibly demanding, and I took on many responsibilities through extracurriculars. It showed me that if I worked really hard and got to know the right people, I could go wherever I wanted to go.

During one semester at Exeter, I got to live and work on an organic farm at The Mountain School of Milton Academy in rural Vermont. One of the required classes was environmental science, and that's when I developed a passion for learning about the natural world. After exploring a few other majors at the University of Southern California (USC), I decided to study geology and am now pursuing a PhD in Geochemistry at the California Institute of Technology (CalTech). I ultimately want to work as a research scientist. It's really exciting to be at the edge of what we know as humanity.

I've realized that it's a privilege to be a scientist. Not everyone has the ability to get what at this point is a million-dollar education. I was extremely fortunate to grow up in an environment where I could do all these extracurriculars, and my parents could afford me to send me to Exeter, and Exeter was wealthy enough to give lots of scholarship money and fund all these experiences. People are born into different circumstances, though. I support affirmative action because I think it makes progress toward the goal of giving everyone the opportunity to get an education like mine, regardless of race, gender, or socioeconomic status. Affirmative action lets colleges account for these differences in background and upbringing during the admissions process.

I didn't always recognize these differences, in part because I grew up with mostly other second-generation Asian Americans who lived in similar circumstances as me. But I remember this one conversation I had when I first got to Exeter that changed my awareness. I was talking to a girl in my class about how I didn't understand why people often talk about black and white people in the context of social issues but not Asians. And she was like, Renée, African American people have a very different history of racism and adversity in this country than other races. And I was like, oh my god, you're totally right. Ever since then and all throughout college, I learned more and more things about race that made my younger self seem naive.

For example, during my freshman fall at USC, I participated in this program called CIRCLE, which stands for Critical Issues in Race, Class, and Leadership Education. We talked about the major

reasons we have policies like affirmative action in the first place, and how they actually benefit Asian Americans, a category that encompasses East Asians, Southeast Asians, and Pacific Islanders. It really hit home that we all come from different starting points and are given different sets of tools in life. It makes sense for colleges to take this into consideration.

CIRCLE was also where I began thinking seriously about the persistent discrimination that Asian Americans face. We talked about issues facing Asian American communities that either I hadn't known before or reinforced discomforts that I felt my entire life. There are just so many misconceptions, stereotypes, and assumptions made about us that are really insidious. For instance, white moms from Saratoga would openly say how they wouldn't send their kids to the public schools because there were too many Asians. Or, one guy at USC told me that I didn't look like other Chinese girls because other Chinese girls don't have meat on their bones. He told me they look like men. And then, did you realize that the enemy countries in Western video games are often Asian? I had no clue about that before college.

Unfortunately there is a big bias against Asian Americans in schools, too. People assume that Asian people are just innately intelligent and discount their hard work. At CalTech, I've seen a lot of Chinese international students not get the credit for their achievements that they deserve. People think it takes them five minutes to do a problem set that takes someone else ten hours, but they don't see them staying up until 1AM to finish. Also, there was this girl in my CIRCLE group, and at her high school, the GPA cutoff for honors was 0.1 points higher for Asian students. That was a school policy! I was shocked.

## Judy Lei

My dad is from Toisan, and my mom is from Hong Kong. Both grew up poor and came to the United States in the 1980s to find work. My dad began working in restaurants and eventually opened up his own bakery in New York City's Chinatown along with some of his siblings. My mom had to quit school when she was 11 years old to work in a garment factory back in Hong Kong to support her family. When she got to America, all she knew was garment factories. She worked there until the industry exited the city in the early 2000s and now works at my dad's family's bakery. They actually own two bakeries. They sell buns and dim sum.

One day, I hope that people acknowledge discrimination against Asian Americans as readily as they acknowledge discrimination against other ethnic groups. That's why, on the one hand, I am glad that the lawsuit against Harvard is highlighting a form of discrimination against Asian Americans, which is sometimes willfully overlooked. Harvard is basically saying that, test scores being held equal, the admissions rate for Asian American applicants is lower because they have consistently weaker leadership and other personal qualities. That is racist and indefensible. My mom told me that she felt like Asian Americans were treated like American Jews back in the 1920s and 1930s—maligned for our success in society and assigned negative personality stereotypes to keep us out of certain institutions.

On the other hand, I think certain groups and the Trump administration are hijacking the lawsuit and using Asian Americans as pawns for their own agenda to eliminate affirmative action. I don't think they necessarily care about discrimination against Asian Americans. They're basically pitting races against each other and painting a false dichotomy between white and Asian people and black and Hispanic people that's based on totally inaccurate assumptions about the natural intelligence of different races.

Part of why I support affirmative action is because it rejects this racial categorization of people. It's based on the belief that we should not discriminate on the basis of race. So, I don't think that speaking out against anti-Asian discrimination contradicts my support for affirmative action. In fact, I think it reflects the original spirit of affirmative action.

I've lived in Brooklyn my entire life but spent a lot of time growing up and going to school in Chinatown to be closer to my parents. I pretty much grew up around only Chinese American kids. They were the children of immigrants, too, and their parents would also own small businesses that would sell traditional Chinese things like freshly-killed chicken and fermented cabbage. I loved the community we had. That's not to say life wasn't hard, though. My parents were working all the time, even on weekends, and maybe they'd leave bread or rice or leftovers for me to eat. But sometimes there wasn't any, like, real food. They always stressed education because they wanted me to have a better life than them.

It wasn't until I got to high school that I was exposed to non-Asian people. I went to a place called Murry Bergtraum High School in Lower Manhattan that used to be a top school in the city in the 1970s and 1980s but got progressively worse since then. Most of the students were African American and Latino. I knew barely any white people. When I was a student at Murry Bergtraum, the principal kept threatening to close down the school because of disciplinary issues and students not showing up to class. A lot of my peers dropped out and had really low graduation rates.

I worked really hard to graduate in the top ten of my class and was able to get into Smith College. Smith was in a league of its own, though, both academically and socially. I was afraid to speak in class, and I wasn't as well prepared as my peers who attended private boarding schools or wealthy suburban public schools. It was also difficult to connect with people outside of class. They watched different shows and listened to different music. It was a real culture shock. I was used to being around Chinese Americans and just couldn't relate.

Eventually I joined an activist group called the Five-College Pan Asian Network, which was a collaboration of students, faculty, and staff from colleges in the area that met every week and organized a conference every year to raise awareness of issues facing Asian American communities. That's how I became politicized. Making positive change and increasing Asian representation have guided my work ever since I graduated from Smith. I've been a voting rights organizer with the Asian American Legal Defense and Education Fund, a director of the Asian American Film Festival, a Congressional aide, and now I'm pursuing a career in acting. It's been challenging and disillusioning at times, but I hope that the work I do and stories I tell somehow influence the next generation.

During my time at Smith, I knew I was different, so I started learning about not only Asian American history but also education patterns in the U.S. I also thought I wanted to be a teacher, so I took an urban education class and learned about how this long history of oppression and disenfranchisement and segregation is why there are such huge disparities in educational outcomes. Just look at New York City for example. It's completely segregated. These are folks who have been blocked out from the rest of society. It really limits people's opportunities. If you're from the hood, where there are only fast food restaurants, and it's a total food desert, and everyone else is in a gang where you join or die, there's a high chance you

won't make it out. All you know is the boundaries of where you come from. So, if you grow up in that environment, how will you ever succeed in life? You either need the will and the resources, or parents who push you, to get out.

If everyone started out on the same foundation, it would be fair for colleges to judge applicants the same way. But America is messed up and constructed in a way that disenfranchises certain groups of people, like people from the hood. Underprivileged kids from working-class backgrounds still deserve a chance to go to elite colleges, though. If we're all about equal opportunity, then lower-income students should be given extra points in college admissions so they can compete with their wealthier peers who grew up in the suburbs or neighborhoods like Park Slope where parents work from 9 to 5, hire private tutors, are able to put food on the table, and give their children everything they need to be successful.

I'm not saying that people who come from money don't deserve it either. They also work hard. But if colleges don't factor in race and class, then people from disadvantaged backgrounds will never be able to move up in society. They'll be stuck in menial jobs forever. If affirmative action didn't exist, I don't think I would have gotten into Smith. Even though I got good grades in high school, I still wouldn't have stacked up against applicants from the upper and middle classes, who prepare for college their entire lives. I think affirmative action allowed Smith to view students like me holistically, not just look at my merit and where I went to school.

Affirmative action doesn't consider class enough, though. Colleges absolutely need to consider a student's class background in addition to their race and ethnicity. I met this Vietnamese girl at the University of Massachusetts who was in the top quarter of her high school class. She was a ballerina and did all these other crazy extracurricular activities. She initially applied to Smith College but didn't get in. On the other hand, I have a good friend who's also Vietnamese that is from Palo Alto, California. She was an average student in high school, but her dad was an engineer, so she was in a higher income bracket than the other girl. My friend from Palo Alto got into Smith. How did that happen? I'm purely guessing here, but if affirmative action were more class-based, then that ballerina probably would have gotten into Smith and had a different life.

I also think we need to talk about class more because I feel like there's been a shift in student demographics on college campuses, at least at Smith.

By the time I graduated, I noticed fewer students like me. There were more people of color, but they tended to be affluent. So when the college reports out their demographics, it still looks like the student body is racially diverse. But there aren't as many students from disadvantaged backgrounds. There are probably a lot of factors behind that, like protecting the

endowment and ensuring future donations, especially if you're a private college. Maybe colleges and universities aren't doing so well, so they have to admit a certain number of students who can pay out of pocket, and that changes the student population. I'm not sure.

## Findings and Discussion

This capstone set out to answer two questions: (1) In what ways do Chinese Americans vary in their attitudes toward affirmative action?; and (2) What factors might explain the variation in Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action? I present my findings in two sections, one devoted to each guiding question. For reference, the table below summarizes interview participants' backgrounds and positions on affirmative action. The discussion ends with a consideration of the study's limitations, implications, and inspiration for future research.

Table 1: Interview Participants

Name	Year of birth	Generation	If first gen, year of immigration (path)	Supportive of race-conscious affirmative action?	Accurate understanding of affirmative action?
Mr. Zhao	1973	1st gen	1990s (grad school)	No	No
Mr. Wu	2000	2nd gen	N/A	Yes	Yes
Mr. Chen	1970	1st gen	1995 (grad school)	No	No
Ms. Xu	1968	1st gen	1990s (grad school)	Yes	No
Mr. Zhou	1970	1st gen	1988 (college)	No	No
Mr. Lin	1984	1st gen	2000 (work)	Yes	Unclear
Ms. Wang	1994	2nd gen	N/A	Yes	Yes
Ms. Lei	1989	2nd gen	N/A	Yes	Yes

## Variation in Attitudes toward Affirmative Action

As these profiles show, Chinese Americans are not monolithic in their attitudes toward affirmative action: They range from unconditional supporters to staunch opponents. There is even diversity of opinion among first-generation Chinese immigrants, who have been portrayed in the media as overwhelmingly against affirmative action. While participants like Mr. Zhao, Mr. Chen, and Mr. Zhou oppose it because they believe that the college admissions process should be colorblind and strictly meritocratic, Ms. Xu and Mr. Lin's emphatic defense of the policy is a

reminder that first-generation Chinese immigrants do not think uniformly about affirmative action, despite the prevailing narrative that they are fueling its demise. This should not come as a surprise, given that the most recent public opinion polls indicate that 61% of Chinese Americans support the policy, many of whom are bound to be in the immigrant generation.

Participants' narratives not only balance out the skewed media and scholarly representation of Chinese Americans in modern-day coverage of the affirmative action debate. They also reveal more nuance in Chinese Americans' attitudes than is typically acknowledged.

### Differentiating between Race- and Class-based Affirmative Action

For instance, both supporters and opponents of affirmative action make a distinction between admissions policies aimed at increasing access to college for racial and ethnic minorities, and those aimed at increasing access for low-income students. Mr. Zhou specifically advocates for class-based instead of race-based affirmative action. Mr. Zhao and Mr. Chen also do not have as negative of attitudes toward the use of students' socioeconomic status in college admissions decisions, perhaps because the relevance of class to academic performance was more evident to them than the relevance of race. Opponents' differentiation between race- and class-based affirmative action implies that they see the two variants as separate policy options, and that the relationship between race and class in America is unclear to them.

While supporters like Ms. Lei and Ms. Xu agree that race is still necessary to consider as a factor in college admissions given that societal inequality is heavily racialized, they also agree that economic disadvantage is a legitimate barrier to educational opportunity that should be mitigated. Although they do want race-conscious affirmative action to end, they support taking socioeconomic status into greater account. The salience of class considerations among participants suggests that income- and wealth-based policies are more likely to have broader appeal among Chinese Americans than race-based ones.

### Separating the Means and Ends of Affirmative Action

Some participants also distinguish between the means and ends of affirmative action and have distinct attitudes toward each. Mr. Chen agrees that diversity is a worthy goal for colleges to pursue. He also does not oppose improving the socioeconomic status of African American and Latino students through higher education. Mr. Chen is primarily concerned with how colleges achieve these goals. He believes that colleges admit more African American and Latino students by systematically holding Asian American students to higher academic standards and giving them lower personality ratings. In his eyes, this constitutes discrimination and does not justify the albeit noble goal of creating a diverse student body. It is more precise to say that Mr. Chen opposes certain practices that he understands as affirmative action, rather than the policy's objectives.

As for Ms. Xu, she wholeheartedly supports the goal of affirmative action, which she views as providing greater educational opportunities for children who face societal disadvantages. At the same time, she frames affirmative action as a tool that can be used properly or improperly. For example, she disapproves of racial quotas, much like Mr. Chen disapproves of racial balancing. Furthermore, she thinks colleges can adjust their affirmative action practices by weighing

socioeconomic status more heavily as a sign of disadvantage. Ms. Xu's distinction between the goals and methods of affirmative action implies that her support depends on more than the policy's good intentions; implementation matters, too.

Similarly, Mr. Zhou agrees that helping the disadvantaged is a noble goal even though he opposes race-based affirmative action. He believes, though, that affirmative action for low-income students is a more just and inclusive way of achieving the same ends as affirmative action for racial and ethnic minorities. Taken together, these participants demonstrate that support for affirmative action is not binary. A simple statement of being "for" or "against" affirmative action may obscure more nuanced, layered opinions about the policy's theoretical underpinnings and the forms that affirmative action may take in reality.

### Framing Affirmative Action as a Solution to Different Problems

People who share the same opinion about affirmative action do not always share the same reasons for having that opinion. For example, Ms. Xu reveals how supporters can differ subtly in their intentions for supporting affirmative action. While she believes it is necessary to improve educational opportunities for racial minorities through policies like affirmative action, Ms. Xu does not identify past and present discrimination as the root cause of modern-day inequality. Rather, she suspects that educational inequality results from different cultural norms and practices among parents of different races. This explains why her attitude toward affirmative action is decidedly paternalistic compared to the attitudes of other supporters like Ms. Lei and Mr. Wu, who recognize that educational inequality reflects larger societal inequalities rather than cultural differences. This variation among participants who support affirmative action serves as a reminder that support for the policy does not always come with the recognition that racial inequality is structural, nor does it mean that they don't have racial prejudice.

### Factors that Help Explain Variation in Attitudes

The previous section brings new evidence to bear on how Chinese Americans vary widely in their attitudes toward affirmative action. The following section offers several possible explanations for why some participants have net positive attitudes toward affirmative action and others have net negative attitudes. In my analysis, I found that the literature review provided a robust analytical framework to understand the underlying causes of this variation. Thus, I have structured the discussion according to the four categories of beliefs that researchers have determined influence how people feel about affirmative action: beliefs about (1) how the policy works; (2) who the policy benefits; (3) whether the policy is fair; and (4) racial prejudice and ideology.

Furthermore, I highlight the empirical sources that gave rise to these beliefs, such as personal experiences and observations, formal education, and media consumption. In doing so, I underscore the fact that an individual's attitude toward affirmative action, whether positive or negative, is the end result of an honest attempt to make sense of the surrounding world. People's feelings and beliefs about affirmative action do not form out of thin air; rather, they are heavily shaped by the environments they inhabit and the information they receive.

## Beliefs about Implementation

Participants' beliefs about how affirmative action works in practice laid the foundation for their attitude toward the policy. For instance, Mr. Zhao and Mr. Chen do not support affirmative action because they believe conferring an advantage to certain ethnic groups is equivalent to discriminating against others. Mr. Zhao, for one, incorrectly believes that affirmative action establishes racial quotas. The two men's opposition to the policy is consistent with previous research, which found that people who think affirmative action operates in a discriminatory or restrictive fashion are less likely to support the policy (Bell et al., 1997; Golden et al., 2001; Le et al., 2006). Their opposition also corroborates Garces and Poon's finding that many first-generation, professional Chinese immigrants tend to frame affirmative action as such (2018). Participants who do not understand affirmative action as a racial quota policy are less likely to oppose it. Ms. Wang and Ms. Lei, both of whom support affirmative action, correctly understand contemporary affirmative action as a holistic review system in which colleges consider students' race and ethnicity as one of many factors.

Like Garces and Poon (2018) found in their interviews of 36 Asian Americans, both Chinese Americans who support affirmative action and those who oppose it articulate inaccurate or incomplete understandings of contemporary affirmative action (i.e., race-conscious holistic review). For example, Mr. Zhou seems to believe colleges give bonus points to certain racial and ethnic minorities. He opposes the use of race in admissions but advocates for a similar point system based on socioeconomic status rather than race. Ms. Xu supports race-based affirmative action, but she misconceived it as an explicit preference for African American and Latino applicants. Even Ms. Lei, a strong supporter, contradicts herself at one point in her narrative and refers to affirmative action as a point system rather than a process of holistic review.

Contemporary affirmative action does not allow for racial quotas, racial bonus points, or explicit racial preferences, yet the majority of participants frame it in these terms, especially those who are first-generation immigrants. The source of their misunderstanding may have been WeChat, which Garces and Poon (2018) also hypothesized. News coverage and discussions about the Harvard lawsuit in particular seemed to shape Mr. Zhao, Mr. Chen, and Mr. Zhou's belief that affirmative action works to the disadvantage of Asian Americans. All three participants allude to evidence released during the trial to substantiate their claims that affirmative action resulted in discrimination against Asian Americans. Specifically, they make reference to the Espenshade and Radford (2009) SAT study, Harvard's enrollment demographic trends by race and ethnicity, and Harvard's personal ratings by race and ethnicity. On the other hand, most participants who support affirmative action do not closely follow the Harvard trial and are less likely to view affirmative action as a quota or point system. Although Ms. Wang is invested in the Harvard case, she does not believe that affirmative action caused colleges to discriminate against Asian Americans, as Mr. Zhao, Mr. Chen, and Mr. Zhou seem to believe.

Without fact-based reporting, accurate translations, and careful explanations of the difference between affirmative action policies and anti-Asian discrimination, it may be easy for WeChat users to misunderstand affirmative action as a quota, point, or preference policy that pits racial groups against each other in a zero-sum game for college acceptances. The consequences of this are significant, since beliefs about the implementation of affirmative action influence people's perceptions of who benefits from the policy and whether it is fair. As subsequent sections

explain, participants who wrongly defined affirmative action as anything other than holistic review were more likely to view affirmative action as an unfair handout to African American and Latino students that lowers Asian Americans' chances of getting into college.

### Perceptions of Self-Interest

Perceptions of whether affirmative action benefited themselves or Chinese Americans in general shape many participants' attitudes toward the policy. All those who oppose it believe affirmative action puts Chinese Americans at a disadvantage in the college admissions process, and that Chinese Americans must work harder to get admitted to the same colleges as African American and Latino applicants. Mr. Zhao's profile especially illustrates the intense personal stakes of the affirmative action debate for some Chinese Americans: He perceives it as jeopardizing the future security and wellbeing of his own children. As a result, he has devoted himself to eliminating the policy because he does not want it to harm his children's chances of success. This falls in line with previous research, which predicts that individuals are inclined to protect their own interests and will be more likely to oppose affirmative action if they perceive others benefitting from the policy but not themselves (Bell et al. 1997; Gu et al., 2014).

Conversely, some of the participants who support affirmative action believe that it improves educational opportunities for Chinese Americans like themselves. Ms. Lei and Mr. Lin in particular view themselves as part of a disadvantaged minority group that suffers from discrimination. This finding contributes to the small body of research showing a correlation between support for affirmative action among Asian Americans and self-reports of discrimination and underrepresentation in the workplace, except this piece of evidence is in the context of higher education (Bell et al. 1997; Weathers and Truxillo, 2008).

That being said, the profiles as a whole show that viewing one's self or racial group as a target of discrimination does not guarantee support for affirmative action. Rather, Chinese Americans who experience discrimination may support the policy only if they perceive it as compensation for this discrimination. For example, Mr. Lin may think affirmative action is beneficial because he experienced a type of discrimination that precluded him and fellow Asian immigrant students from the opportunity to receive a safe, quality education. In contrast, Mr. Zhou believes the use of race in college admissions perpetuates the kind of racial stereotyping of Asian Americans that is rampant in the business world, leading him to oppose race-based affirmative action. This finding is a call for future researchers to distinguish between different types of racial discrimination and acknowledge that people may think that affirmative action does not adequately address, or exacerbates, the effects of racial discrimination.

Two distinct self-interest concerns seem to underlie Mr. Wu's support of affirmative action. First, Mr. Wu may have a positive attitude toward the policy because he has benefited directly from Harvard's diverse student body, which he attributes to affirmative action. He provides evidence that affirmative action can advance personal interests in more than one way. Second, Mr. Wu's stance on affirmative action supports the hypothesis found in the literature that individuals are more likely to support affirmative action if they do not think it poses a threat to their own chances of success (Kravitz, 1995; Sax and Arredondo, 1999). A sense of competition is entirely absent from Mr. Wu's profile, either because he does not perceive college admissions as a zero-sum game, or because he got accepted to an elite college and no longer feels personally

affected by the policy. Other participants like Mr. Zhao, Mr. Chen, and Mr. Zhou do not share the same sense of removal as Mr. Wu. They perceive race-based affirmative action as favoring other racial minority groups over Chinese Americans and lowering their prospects of college admission, which contributes to their negative attitude.

### Considerations of Fairness

One of the most salient differences between supporters and opponents was their sense of whether the policy is fair. As the literature predicted, their differing evaluations of fairness largely result from different ideas about merit (Bell et al. 1997; Gu et al. 2014). Mr. Zhao and Mr. Chen believe that a fair admissions process is based purely on merit, and that GPA and standardized test scores sufficiently reflect students' merit and level of hard work. Consideration of applicants' race is superfluous to Mr. Zhao and Mr. Chen as they do not see its relationship to academic performance. To them, affirmative action is unfair because it disincentivizes African American and Hispanic students to try hard and discounts Chinese Americans' work ethic. They advocate instead for a colorblind meritocracy. This corroborates Garces and Poon's (2018) finding that many Chinese immigrants who pass through China's educational system are socialized to believe quantitative measures of academic achievement are king and anything else is too subjective.

Ms. Xu and Ms. Wang's conception of merit is more expansive. They believe that environmental factors such as parental involvement and home life significantly affect students' performance in school, and that colleges should evaluate their academic achievement in the context of each individual's upbringing. In Ms. Xu's eyes, it is only fair that colleges give students who lack adequate support and resources growing up an advantage in the admissions process, given that they try hard to make the most of what they have. Ms. Wang feels the same way; she just understands affirmative action as holistic review, not racial preferences.

Ms. Lei and Mr. Wu have expanded their notion of a fair college admissions process even further to include considerations of the "opportunity structure" in America (Kluegel and Smith, 1986). Both are aware of how historical, structural racism has created unequal opportunities for minority children to attend college today. In light of the persistent effects of past racial discrimination, affirmative action strikes them as necessary and fair to achieve equal educational opportunity. Similarly, Mr. Lin feels like racial and ethnic minorities are "behind at the starting line," including Asian Americans. Thus, he feels like it is appropriate to level the playing field of college admissions through policies like affirmative action.

Belief in an unequal opportunity structure does not necessarily lead to support for race-conscious affirmative action, however. Mr. Zhou thinks the playing field is uneven along class lines, but not lines of race or ethnicity. Thus, he supports affirmative action for socioeconomically disadvantaged students over affirmative action for racial and ethnic minorities. He believes that the consideration of race in college admissions is "inherently unfair" because race should not determine one's lot in life. Mr. Zhou's skepticism that colleges admit more wealthy children of immigrants than the descendants of slaves also suggests he thinks race-conscious admissions may be unfair because it might not help those it was intended to. He promotes color-blind admissions like Mr. Zhao and Mr. Chen do; that is, he believes that everyone should be treated equally, regardless of race, ethnicity, or culture.

The belief that contemporary affirmative action is fair seems to be the common denominator between all participants who support affirmative action. This shared belief seems to be the result of shared contextual knowledge; that is, all supporters demonstrated awareness that minority children face unequal educational opportunities. Most of them gained this awareness through formal education. For example, all three second-generation participants—Mr. Wu, Ms. Wang, and Ms. Lei—have attended selective liberal arts colleges where they learned to think critically about the historical roots of modern-day inequality. Mr. Lin did not graduate from college, but he acquired the same knowledge by attending community organizing conferences. These experiences are distinct from the those of professional-class Chinese immigrants, who came to the U.S. for career training and did not learn to analyze race, inequality, and poverty through the same critical lens. Ms. Xu is one of them, but by volunteering at her children’s school in Baltimore and observing city residents, she seemed to gather that racial inequality is serious enough that policies like affirmative action are fair. Despite her support, she still lacks an understanding that racial inequality is a structural phenomenon rather than an individual one.

### Racial Prejudice and Ideology

Using Poon and Segoshi’s (2018) framing, racial ideologies shaped supporters’ and opponents’ beliefs about the fairness of affirmative action. Opponents’ color-blindness reflected an ideology of “racial libertarianism,” or a disregard of unequal socioeconomic circumstances between racial groups. According to this ideology, identical treatment is fair, and affirmative action is not. Mr. Chen’s narrative embodies racial libertarianism. He believes that the Civil Rights Movement achieved its goal of racial equality, and that affirmative action is no longer needed to compensate for past discrimination. To him, affirmative action has become counterproductive: It both perpetuates racial conflict and exacerbates racial inequality by giving African American and Latino students preferential treatment at the expense of Asian Americans. Mr. Chen echoes Chief Justice John Roberts, who wrote in 2007: “The way to stop discrimination on the basis of race is to stop discriminating on the basis of race.” On the other hand, an ideology of “racial egalitarianism,” which recognizes the structural barriers to individual achievement, guides Ms. Lei and Mr. Wu’s support of affirmative action. According to this ideology, reparations for historical wrongs are fair.

Racial ideology seems like a more salient determinant of participants’ attitudes toward affirmative action than overt racial prejudice. It is worth noting that interview methods in general may not be able to discern much racial prejudice due to social desirability bias. However, Mr. Zhao does evince some racial prejudice that likely increased his likelihood to oppose affirmative action. He implies multiple times that African Americans are lazy and undeserving of their achievements. In addition to stereotyping them, Mr. Zhao resents African Americans and Latino Americans for “overdoing” the Civil Rights Movement by “taking advantage” of the college admissions process and pushing political correctness, which he sees as interrelated.

As Garces and Poon (2018) predicted, the participants who are first-generation Chinese immigrants seemed more likely to prescribe to a colorblind ideology and feel negatively toward African Americans and Latino Americans due to misinformation on WeChat and living socially and culturally segregated lives. Unlike many of the participants who support affirmative action,

they lack a critical awareness of the role of race in the United States as well as a familiarity with the present and historical circumstances of other racial and ethnic minorities.

## Limitations, Implications, and Future Recommendations

Some constraints on the design of this research project limit the scope of its findings. First, I was able to interview only eight Chinese Americans. Although they varied in age, immigrant generation, educational attainment, class, marital status, and household type, the sample size was far too small and unrepresentative to draw generalizable conclusions about the attitudes and beliefs about affirmative action among particular demographics of Chinese Americans. That being said, this capstone never intended to do so. Rather, it was meant to draw attention to the diversity and depth of Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action as a means of challenging future reporters and researchers to frame public opinion about affirmative action in a more nuanced way and to represent Chinese Americans more truthfully. In light of my findings, my capstone accomplished this exceedingly well.

However, extensions of this research should still be mindful of recruiting as widely representative of a sample as possible. Future researchers should also cast a wider net during the recruitment process to account for the self-selecting nature of participating in a study like this. Those who have strong opinions and beliefs about affirmative action are more likely to volunteer than those who feel indifferent. It is important to include the perspectives of Chinese Americans who are ignorant of and even apathetic to affirmative action because they may represent large populations of people for whom policies like affirmative action feel irrelevant, even if they would benefit from them.

There are also inherent limitations of interviews as a methodology. Participants may have withheld certain details from me because of social desirability bias, or because they struggled to articulate nebulous feelings and beliefs. I may have also failed to ask questions that elicited richer answers. Regardless, it was impossible to glean all relevant information in the course of one interview, so there may be missing evidence from participants that either reinforced or refuted my current findings. Furthermore, I did not consistently ask follow-up questions across interviews, either due to oversight or discomfort. For instance, I did not probe as deeply into personal experiences of discrimination, nor did I ask for in-depth descriptions of WeChat as a social environment, even though both factors clearly shaped some participants' attitudes toward affirmative action. In future iterations of this capstone, I would have spent more time building trust and rapport with participants before interviewing them and conducted multiple interviews instead of one. I would have also tried to add an ethnographic component to the study to more fully understand the social contexts in which each participant lives.

Despite these imperfections, this capstone makes important contributions to the scholarly research and national conversation on Chinese Americans and affirmative action. Most significantly, this capstone is the first known study to examine the variation of Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action. Other researchers have examined the attitudes of Asian Americans in general (Bell et al., 1997; Garces and Poon, 2018; Inkelas, 2003; Weathers and Truxillo, 2008) and Chinese American political interests other than affirmative action (Zhang, 2018), but no one has specifically explored how Chinese Americans feel about

affirmative action and why. I found that they cannot be neatly categorized into supporters and opponents. Rather, they exhibit a wide range of attitudes and beliefs about affirmative action that media reports and surveys often overlook. In light of this finding, reporters and researchers need to move beyond public opinion polls and be more nuanced and comprehensive in their coverage of Chinese Americans. By ignoring the variation in and subtleties of their attitudes and beliefs, they flatten the conversation about affirmative action and misrepresent an ethnic minority group that is already subjected to persistent stereotyping and dehumanization.

Furthermore, this capstone's use of narrative profiles offers a more expansive and generous way of portraying Chinese Americans' perspectives on affirmative action. The narrative profiles had two distinct advantages as a form of Chinese American representation. First, they shed light on the factors that influence Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action; namely, beliefs about how the policy works, who it benefits, whether it is fair, and race. Past research had identified these beliefs among other ethnic groups, but before this study, no one had investigated whether they applied to Chinese Americans. Second, the narrative profiles showcased the internal processes by which Chinese Americans from different walks of life make sense of affirmative action through the lens of their own personal experiences and observations. They give credence to the idea that affirmative action is not a static or sterile policy with a singular definition; rather, it is a dynamic, multifaceted phenomenon that people understand differently depending on their station in life.

The narrative profiles ultimately serve as a reminder that Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action, whether positive or negative, are rooted in a belief system that has developed over time and been shaped by their social and cultural contexts. Journalists and academics who report on Chinese Americans' policy preferences should be held responsible for informing the public of their larger belief systems and ways of life. Giving readers a window into the lives of Chinese Americans rather than reporting their opinions divorced from personal context will foster a deeper, more sympathetic understanding of an ethnic minority group that currently receives a lot of attention but not as much respect. In general, it is important to humanize supporters and opponents of affirmative action alike and not reduce them to their opinions.

This capstone lays the groundwork for additional lines of research. First, narrative profiles should be created of individuals belonging to underrepresented groups within the Chinese American population, such as those from lower class and educational backgrounds. Class divisions within ethnic groups are often neglected but may correlate with attitudes toward affirmative action, insofar as class influences people's values, interests, and social milieu. Researchers should also elucidate the connections between people's attitudes toward affirmative action, social segregation, and racial discrimination, which seemed salient in participants' narrative profiles. These new iterations of the project may uncover certain structural conditions that increase or decrease the likelihood of supporting affirmative action among certain demographics of Chinese Americans.

Future research should also explore the extent to which Chinese Americans have mobilized around affirmative action and the channels through which different groups of Chinese Americans seek to influence affirmative action policies. While my capstone was focused on understanding

Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action, a necessary complement to this knowledge is understanding how their attitudes affect their political behavior.

Finally, while the perspectives of Chinese Americans are crucial to understand given their prominence in the debate over contemporary affirmative action, attention on them should not come at the expense of other Asian ethnic groups that also have a stake in the issue. Elevating their views on affirmative action and life histories will contribute not only to the important project of expanding Asian American representation, but also to our understanding of how race-based policies like affirmative action might fare in a multiethnic society.

## Conclusion

A small but vocal contingent of Chinese Americans have garnered widespread attention for their political activism in the wake of recent legal challenges to race-conscious college admissions practices. The media's outsized focus on them has contributed to a perception that Chinese Americans oppose the policy distinctly more than other ethnic groups. Chinese Americans have been increasingly ostracized among progressive circles for seemingly betraying Asian American interests in affirmative action.

This capstone was born out of a belief that Chinese American attitudes toward affirmative action are more diverse and nuanced than they are given credit for being. It is spurious to label Chinese Americans at large as the most anti-affirmative action ethnic group simply because a few Chinese immigrants stand at the forefront of the movement to end race-conscious admissions. National surveys have empirically validated that Chinese Americans hold a range of attitudes toward affirmative action; moreover, the majority of Chinese Americans support it. To ignore that variation is a serious oversight. Blurring over differences between Chinese Americans and treating a fraction of them as representative of all five million strips them of their individuality. Just as it is unproductive and discriminatory to treat Asian Americans as a monolithic racial category—or in the words of historian John Dower, as a “nameless, faceless yellow horde”—there is no virtue in ethnic typecasting, either. By bringing the de facto diversity among Chinese Americans into relief, this capstone counters the skewed representation of them in the current debate over affirmative action in college admissions.

Moreover, this capstone affirms that people, regardless of race or ethnicity, are embedded in a social and cultural context that profoundly shapes their attitudes and beliefs about affirmative action. People do not spontaneously form policy preferences. Rather, they move through life forming and reforming beliefs and values related to academic merit, educational opportunity, fairness, inequality, race, and justice based on what they see, hear, and experience for themselves. The interaction of these beliefs and values gives rise to positions on policies like affirmative action. Recognizing that people's opinions are often rooted in personal life experiences does not absolve people from their moral responsibilities; bigotry and prejudice, no matter where they come from, must not be tolerated. However, it does underscore the point that people are infinitely more complex than their opinions about affirmative action might suggest, and that whether or not we agree with them, we should not presume to know who they are or what else they stand for until we ask.

Affirmative action in college admissions is one of the most polarizing issues of our time. People and institutions that facilitate the debate, particularly journalists and academics, must be careful about how they frame competing interests and portray groups to which they do not belong. The choices they make impact how the intentions and actions of participants in the debate are perceived, for better or for worse. Unfortunately, Chinese Americans on the whole have not been afforded the fair and balanced representation they deserve. Due to the lopsided coverage of their viewpoints on affirmative action, people have begun making sweeping generalizations about all Chinese Americans that are not only counterproductive but patently false. Lest affirmative action cause more strife than it already has, it is incumbent on everyone to reconsider their assumptions about Chinese Americans, treat them as distinctive individuals, and listen to the stories they have to tell.

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