

**Situating Chinese Americans  
in the Debate Over Affirmative Action in college admissions**

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**Introduction**

On October 30, 2022, more than 200 protesters of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds gathered in Washington DC for the “Affirm Diversity” rally on the eve of the Supreme Court’s hearings of oral arguments over race-conscious admissions policies at Harvard and UNC-Chapel Hill. They held signs proclaiming, “Asian Americans for Affirmative Action,” “My Race Is My Story,” and “Diversity Opportunity Justice”. In blue T-shirts that read “#DefendDiversity,” they called on the Supreme Court to uphold affirmative action in higher education. Across the town, hundreds of Asian American parents, students, and advocates (mostly Chinese Americans) joined the “Equal Education Rights for All” rally in support of the plaintiff Students for Fair Admissions (SFFA). Rallying in front of the Supreme Court, they held signs that read “HARVARD STOP ASIAN QUOTA,” “MY RACE SHOULD NOT HURT ME” and “MERIT EXCELLENCE FAIRNESS” (Hamid & Orakwue, 2022).

The dueling rallies suggest the widening divide in Chinese Americans’ perceptions of affirmative action and the growing opposition to such policy among recent Chinese immigrants, as evidenced by national survey results and their sustained presence and growing influence on the public debates over affirmative action. According to the 2016 Asian American Voter Survey, Chinese Americans’ opposition to affirmative action increased dramatically from 24% in 2014 to 45% in 2016, while the majority of Asian Americans (64%) remained supportive of affirmative action (Lee et al., 2022). In 2014, when Senate Constitutional Amendment (SCA5), an initiative to repeal California Proposition 209’s ban on affirmative action, was passed by the California State Senate, Chinese Americans demonstrated and protested in cities across California, gathered signatures for an online

petition<sup>1</sup>, and lobbied legislators and elected officials to stop SCA 5, which resulted in its withdrawal (Vuong, 2014). Chinese Americans such as Michael Wang and Yukong Zhao, the co-founder of the Asian American Coalition for Education (AACE), filed complaints against Ivy League schools and supported SFFA's lawsuits against Harvard and UNC-Chapel Hill, alleging that Asian Americans have been discriminated against by prestigious universities in their race-conscious admissions processes (Wang, 2018). It is not far-fetched to conclude that Chinese Americans, especially recent Chinese immigrants, have taken center stage in the current debate over affirmative action in college admissions.

To understand the phenomenon of "*Chinese exceptionalism*," which refers to the dramatic decline in support for affirmative action among Chinese Americans (Lee, 2021, p. 190), I conducted semi-structured interviews with 36 Chinese Americans from diverse backgrounds to explore the complexity and nuances with the Chinese American community regarding their attitudes toward affirmative action. Building on Oiyan Poon and her colleagues' recent work on Asian Americans' multidimensional views of affirmative action (Garces & Poon, 2018; Poon et al., 2019), this paper places Chinese Americans at the center of the discussion and presents their commonalities and differences in terms of their perceptions of college admissions and affirmative action, coupled with an analysis of factors influencing their attitudes toward affirmative action<sup>2</sup>.

### **Methods**

Interview participants (n=36) were recruited through a purposive sampling technique (i.e., snowball, judgement sampling) over the course of six months (February 2022 – September 2022). I sent requests for participation via email to an extensive list of Chinese American civil rights organizations, community organizations, professional organizations, supplementary educational institutions, Asian American studies departments, and Chinese American student associations at selective universities (see Appendix A). I also reached out via email and social media (i.e., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, Quora, WeChat, Red, and Wenxuecheng.com) to invite individuals that had publicly talked about their or their

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<sup>1</sup> In 2014, Chunhua Liao, a founding member of Silicon Valley Chinese Association, started the change.org petition called "Vote NO to SCA 5!" under the name of "Extremely Concerned Californians". The online petition drew 115,850 signatures, many of which were from Chinese immigrants.

<sup>2</sup> This paper is part of my ongoing PhD project titled "Institutional Trust and Policy Acceptance". It examines whether and how institutional trust plays a role in Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action.

children's college application experiences and/or their opinions on college admissions policies and practices to participate in my research. Moreover, I visited Southern and Northern California twice to recruit interview subjects over the course of three months (March 2022 – May 2022, and August 2022 – September 2022), during which I recruited interview participants through a network of Chinese American referrals. Although I did not aim to obtain a representative sample, I endeavored to recruit interview participants from diverse backgrounds (e.g., gender, generational status, age, and social class) to pursue a wide variety of viewpoints and experiences within the Chinese American community.

As Table 1 shows, 75 percent of participants (n=27) are California residents, and a small number of participants live in other states, such as Texas (n=3) and Massachusetts (n=2). The distribution of gender groups is balanced (i.e., 47% female and 50% male). Among 35 participants who identified their generational status, 54 percent (n=19) are first-generation, and 9 percent (n=3) are 1.5<sup>th</sup>-generation Chinese Americans, which approximate the U.S. Census result that over half of the Chinese American population are foreign-born. Nearly all foreign-born Chinese participants (at least 18 of 21) immigrated to the U.S. after the Immigration Act of 1990 was enacted, “which increased preferences for immigrants with higher levels of educational attainment and financial capital” (Poon et al., 2019, p. 209). Despite efforts to recruit interview subjects from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, the sample pool is overrepresented by Chinese participants who identified as either middle-class or upper-middle-class, except Sophia whose parents are working-class Chinese immigrants and Daisy who identified as lower middle class. Given that this research focuses on the issues of college admissions at selective universities (i.e., 30 percent or lower acceptance rates) and that Chinese Americans with a higher socioeconomic status are more likely to apply to selective universities (Teranishi et al., 2004), it is not surprising that middle-class and upper-middle-class Chinese Americans volunteered to participate in my research. At the time of our interviews in 2022, 80 percent of Chinese participants (n=29) had direct college application experiences, which means they and/or their children applied to selective colleges and universities in the United States.

All interviews were tape recorded with the consent of participants. The average length of the interviews is 45 min, and respondents went through the interview process in their

Table 1. Demographic Profile of Interview Respondents (n=36)

#	Pseudonym	Residency	Gender	Generational Status	Year of Immigration
1	Nicole	CA	F	4 <sup>th</sup> -gen	N.A.
2	Selena	CA	F	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
3	Sandra	CA	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	2011
4	Dough	CA	M	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
5	Hannah	CA	F	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
6	Lauren	CA	F	1.5 <sup>th</sup> -gen	Unclear
7	Grace	CA	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1993
8	Richard	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1999
9	Hai	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1991
10	Feng	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1998
11	Jing	CA	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	2000
12	Jacob	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	2010
13	Joseph	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	Early 2010s
14	William	CA	M	1.5 <sup>th</sup> -gen	1986
15	Elijah	CA	M	3 <sup>rd</sup> -gen	N.A.
16	Fiona	CA	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1984
17	Xuan	CA	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	Late 1990s
18	David	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1979
19	Sebastian	CA	M	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
20	Daisy	CA	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1990
21	Sophia	CA	F	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
22	Fabian	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	2005
23	Katherine	CA	F	Unclear	Unclear
24	Lucas	CA	M	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
25	Christian	CA	M	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
26	Gabriella	CA	F	3 <sup>rd</sup> -gen (mixed ethnicity)	N.A.
27	Ming*	CA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	2015
28	Nick	MA	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	Late 2000s
29	Christine	OR	F	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
30	Eva	TX	F	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
31	Harrison	NC	M	2 <sup>nd</sup> -gen	N.A.
32	Anthony	NY	Non-binary	1.5 <sup>th</sup> -gen	2002
33	James	TX	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1995
34	Elisabeth	TX	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	Early 2000s
35	Patrice	MA	F	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	2011
36	Yang	MO	M	1 <sup>st</sup> -gen	1990

Note: Ming is a Chinese reporter with working experience in Chinese-language and English-language local newspapers in California. He immigrated to the U.S. in 2015 and his citizenship status is unclear.

preferred language (i.e., English, Mandarin Chinese, or Cantonese). For interviews in Chinese and Cantonese, I transcribed the data verbatim and then translated excerpts into English for presentation of research findings. Interview transcripts were sent to all participants for review within a specific timeframe. English pseudonyms were assigned to interview participants with an English name, and Chinese pseudonyms to those with a Chinese name.

In terms of data analysis, I used the software NVivo to analyze the interview data. The computer-aided (Nvivo) textual analysis allowed me to identify and organize emerging themes by closely reading the transcripts and by coding all quotes and phrases with theme nodes. I developed a list of codes and subcodes based on their responses to my semi-structured interview questions (see Appendix B). I also used NVivo's case classification function to examine whether demographic characteristics such as generational status and gender might have some bearing on Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action. Additionally, I identified exemplar cases that reflected the shared opinions and experiences of interview participants, while finding contrasting narratives to demonstrate the diversity and nuances within the Chinese American community. I used a subject-centered approach (Zhou et al., 2008) to data analysis, which means I placed my research subjects' belief, values, perceptions, and lived experiences at the center of my investigative focus and analysis. I constantly asked myself in the process of data analysis, "what might lead to this perspective?" in order to understand the logics through which my interview participants made sense of college admissions and affirmative action.

## **Results**

There are four commonalities I found among Chinese respondents, regardless of their attitudes toward affirmative action. Firstly, nearly all Chinese respondents (n=33) were aware of the Asian admissions rumors (i.e., Asian Americans are disadvantaged in the selective admissions process), which indicates that these rumors, whether true or not, have gained a foothold in the Chinese American community. Secondly, the majority of Chinese respondents (n=32) opposed strictly merit-based admissions (i.e., admissions decisions are solely based on grades and test scores), which contradicts the assumption that Chinese immigrants who oppose affirmative action prefer an exam-based admissions system like China's. Thirdly, I

found that all Chinese respondents expressed a genuine interest in the notion of fairness, but there was divided opinion on whether and how to achieve it through affirmative action. Lastly, I found that most Chinese respondents (n=32), whether supportive of affirmative action or not, had an inaccurate understanding of how affirmative action was practiced in the selective admissions process. The following pages delineate these findings before moving on to discuss Chinese respondents' attitudes toward affirmative action.

### **Common Awareness of the Asian Admissions Rumors**

One of the commonalities I found among Chinese respondents was that they were aware of the Asian admissions rumors. Specifically, 33 of 36 Chinese respondents or 92% reported that they had heard of the rumors that Asian Americans were disadvantaged in the selective admissions process (e.g., Asian quotas, implicit bias against Asian Americans, and higher standards for Asian Americans). This finding suggests that the Asian admissions rumors have been spread and perpetuated in the Chinese American community. Over half of Chinese respondents (n=19) saw it as a perceived reality that Asian Americans had a tougher time getting into selective universities compared to other racial groups. Or in the words of a respondent named Hannah, "it is just a common knowledge". Except Hai and Harrison who shared their personal experiences of allegedly being unfairly treated in the selective admissions processes, most concerned Chinese respondents relied on hearsay evidence that they gathered from their social circles (i.e., family, friends, and friends' friends), schools (i.e., teachers, co-ethnic and pan-ethnic peers), and from local and mainstream news articles and the Internet (e.g., online forums and WeChat). The anecdotes of high-achieving Asian Americans being rejected by top-tier universities (e.g., Ivy League schools, Stanford, UC Berkeley, and UCLA) were evidence they frequently provided to support their claims. Nicole's narrative of her "fear and concern" about being treated unfairly in the admissions process resonated with many other Chinese respondents. Nicole was preparing for college applications in the spring of 2022 when the interview was conducted. She was a high-achieving high school student in the Bay Area and a 4<sup>th</sup>-generation Chinese American from an upper middle-class household. Judging by the media converge of the Harvard lawsuit and the hearsays of high-achieving co-ethnics and pan-ethnics being rejected from top-ranked universities at her high school, she believed that her race could work against her.

I've heard that a lot of Asian Americans, even though they seem to have the perfect application with a ton of activities, like perfect GPA, perfect standardized testing scores, and they still don't have a good shot at getting into any of the top schools. And...um...I think...um...basically, just like it doesn't matter how well they're doing in high school, they're still kind of at an equal footing as like everyone else who may not have the same perfect application look.

Believing that her application “does look like another Asian American's,” Nicole confessed that she was constantly worried about her chances of getting in. She continued to explain what she perceived as a typical Asian American application.

Oh, just like...just like, based on the classes I take, all my friends take the same classes because there are a lot of AP honor ones where my GPA is very similar [to theirs], and we all have similar activities. So I just worry that...it just looks so similar to everyone else's where if admission readers don't really look at my essays that closely and just look at my transcript, they would just like, “Oh, okay, it's another top student. Maybe we'll accept them, maybe not. Or we would just toss it in a bag and draw whoever gets it or not.”

Nicole worried that admissions officers would not put in the effort to read her application carefully, which would then put her at risk of being undistinguishable from other similarly qualified Asian Americans. It was this constant fear of not being treated with dignity and respect in the admissions process that caused Nicole's struggle with college application stress. Pressure and stress were two high-frequency words she used throughout the interview. Nicole explained that it was the result of a combination of self-pressure, peer pressure, and the perceived tougher admissions process for Asian American applicants.

I think it all kind of piles up. It's kind of like a weird cause-and-effect. You hear about Asian Americans getting rejected despite their good application. So then that adds to pressure among students, like my peers, the peer pressure to be as amazing and perfect as you can, even though that's impossible.

For Nicole, the Asian disadvantage in the admissions process was a perceived reality that had an impact on her high school life and mental health. She described herself and her high school pan-ethnic friends with good academic performances and resume as “stressed out” and “over the edge,” and she wished that she could have similarly happy high school years like her friends “who have easier classes, a less busy schedule”.

While Nicole and other 18 Chinese respondents were worried about the Asian admissions issues, close to 40% of Chinese respondents (n=14) disregarded the rumors. They emphasized the favorable admissions outcomes within their proximal contacts and the visible presence of Asian Americans on elite campuses as evidence to debunk the rumors. Richard's narrative resonated with Chinese respondents who did not believe in the rumors. Reflecting on his and his immediate family's positive college application experiences, Richard, a

middle-class farm manager immigrating to the U.S. in 1999, said that his family did not experience any discrimination when applying to universities and that he had never heard from his Chinese friends complaining that Asian American students were rejected even though they worked hard and had better qualifications. Richard's positive college application experience made him believe that holistic admissions allowed admissions officers to make meticulous decisions, thereby ruling out the possibility of discrimination.

I think, judging from the application experiences of my wife, of me, and of my two daughters, in my opinion, it basically reflects our actual educational levels. When I applied for admission to a MBA program, I took an English test, and my English Listening score almost pulled my overall score down. However, in the interview, I explained to him [the admissions officer] why my [English] listening is not good. "Because we learn British English in China, the pronunciation is different from American English, so the listening part is my weakness, but I can definitely read and write well." And they did see that I could read and write well, so they let me pass. I think judging from their holistic approach to reviewing applicants, they do not reject a person solely based on one criterium.

Although it is difficult to measure or prove whether selective universities systematically put Asian Americans at a disadvantage in the admissions process, I found it unsettling that rumors about selective admissions had a real hold among Chinese Americans and that 53% of Chinese respondents (n=19) believed that Asian Americans had truly suffered from the selective admissions process, despite lacking strong evidence to support their claims. These rumors had rhetorical power in a way that they shaped the judgments and decisions Chinese respondents made in terms of college applications. In responses to perceived bias and discrimination in the admissions process, Chinese respondents adopted various coping strategies to boost their or their children's chances of getting in, ranging from trying harder, to appearing "less Asian" by breaking the Model Minority stereotypes, to applying to a boarder range of schools, and to seeking external help such as college consulting services. Moreover, some Chinese respondents became active in the public debate over affirmative action, as evidenced by Hai's and Harrison's decisions to join SFFA to fight against affirmative action.

### **Opposition to Strictly Merit-based Admissions**

The second commonality among Chinese respondents was that nearly all of them (n=32) opposed strictly merit-based admissions, which means admissions criteria should be limited to high school grades and standardized test scores. Only 4 of 36 Chinese respondents

expressed support for strictly merit-based admissions. Lauren, for example, a 1.5th-generation Chinese mother whose daughter enrolled at a selective university recently, argued that merit should be the sole determinant of admission to selective universities.

The [admissions] criteria should be, you know, based on academic work and based on test scores, to show the readiness of a student being able to handle university-level courses, not based on the color of their skin, not based on their family background, whether the first time in their family to go to university, you know? It should not be based on anything, but the academic record, you know? Put aside family, put aside color of your skin, put aside all that, and look at their academic record, period, because that will tell you their character, whether they are hard workers, whether they value education, and then also that would lead to their ability or capability in society and in the workplace.

Contrary to Lauren, the majority of Chinese respondents (n=32) believed that other admissions criteria such as extracurricular activities, counselor and teacher recommendations, essays and short response answers, and special talents should be considered. In addition to a wide range of admissions criteria, quite a few Chinese respondents (n=24) added that universities should consider students' different contexts of educational opportunities (e.g., socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity) when evaluating their achievements and potential to succeed in college. Nicole, for example, shared why she supported holistic admissions.

I think there has to be like a holistic view of a student. I would say you should account for their activities over their transcripts, because I think as a university, you would want more students who are involved in stuff than just being studious, because you want students to engage with the university, not just study for themselves. So I feel like you have to include that. And definitely like contextual view. So obviously students where I live have a lot more resources and abilities to do different projects and activities than students in underfunded, underserved communities. So it should definitely be [taken] in[to] consideration. And, yeah, I would also say start moving away towards numbers, like GPA, standardized testing score, because a lot of the most talented people that I've met don't have perfect GPA or standardized testing score, and it'd be a shame if they couldn't get into a top school because of that.

The same pattern of support for holistic admissions was also found in Garces and Poon's (2018) research on Asian American organizational elites' attitudes toward affirmative action. They found that 33 of 36 Asian American interview participants, regardless of their policy position, supported "the general principles of holistic review, such as reviewing applicant credentials within the context of their educational opportunities or considering criteria outside of tests and grades in evaluating admissions" (p. 19). Our findings both debunk the misconception that Chinese Americans who oppose affirmative action collectively advocate for strictly merit-based admissions.

### **Common Interest in Fairness**

The third commonality among Chinese respondents was that they expressed a genuine interest in the notion of fairness, but there was no consensus on how to achieve it in practice. Without hesitance, Chinese respondents were able to point out what they saw as fair and/or unfair admissions practices (e.g., admission preferences for minority students, athletes, legacies, donors, the [de]emphasis on standardized test scores, implicit bias, and corruption), and argued that measures should be taken by selective universities to make the admissions process fairer and more trustworthy. They agreed that nobody should be discriminated against because of their race and ethnicity in college admissions, and that increasing transparency (e.g., admissions criteria, the actual admissions process, and/or admissions data) was a step forward. However, their opinions on whether affirmative action could be a means to an end were disparate. Notably, I found that there was a principle-implementation gap among some Chinese respondents, which means on the one hand, they seemed committed to fairness and on the other hand they opposed affirmative action, a policy attempting to level the playing field in higher education. This finding is consistent with Inkelas (2003)'s research exploring Asian Americans' conflicted views of affirmative action. Inkelas found that Asian American students "are among the most likely (exceeded only by African Americans) to support affirmative action in principle but are also among the most likely (exceeded only by White/Caucasians) to oppose affirmative action in practice" (p. 614).

### **An Inaccurate Understanding of Affirmative Action**

Similar to Garces and Poon (2018), I also found that only 6 of 36 Chinese respondents had an accurate understanding of how affirmative action was practiced in college admissions (i.e., race and ethnicity must be used in a narrowly tailored way to serve the compelling interest of student body diversity). The majority of Chinese respondents, regardless of their attitudes toward affirmative action, believed that affirmative action was the practice of racial quotas, racial balancing, and/or racial preferences. Over half of Chinese respondents (n=23) alleged that affirmative action could hurt Asian Americans in the admissions process, either by the practice of racial quotas, or by giving admissions preferences to Blacks and/or Latinx over Asian Americans, despite the fact that these are unconstitutional practices determined by the Supreme Court in affirmative action cases. Regardless of the scope and depth of their

knowledge of affirmative action, Chinese respondents express clear policy positions when they were asked how they felt about affirmative action in college admissions. The following pages delineate my findings of Chinese respondents' attitudes toward affirmative action.

### **Chinese Americans' Attitudes Toward Affirmative Action**

In analyzing their interview responses, I found that 21 of 36 Chinese respondents or 58% opposed affirmative action, while 14 respondents expressed support for affirmative action, and one respondent was unclear about his policy position. There is a good range of diversity in terms of generational status among policy proponents, ranging from the first generation (n=5), to 1.5th generation (n=1), to second-generation (n=5), and to third-generation or higher (n=3). By contrast, policy opponents are relatively homogenous in this regard. They are predominantly post-1965 Chinese immigrants (16 of 21), and only five policy opponents identified second-generation. Interestingly, the majority of policy opponents (76%) are parents, 12 of whom have children who were either in the process (n=1) or done with college applications (n=11) by the time of interviews. On the contrary, over half of policy proponents (8 of 14) are individuals who were either in the process of college applications (n=1) or done with college applications in the last 15 years (n=7) when they participated in my research. There is no significant difference between different gender groups in terms of their support for or opposition to affirmative action. Specifically, 9 of 21 policy opponents, or 43% were female and 8 of 14 policy proponents, or 57% were female. These results suggest that Chinese immigrants, especially those who are parents, are more likely to oppose affirmative action compared to their U.S.-born counterparts. This finding is consistent with Garces and Poon's (2018) research, which suggests that "contemporary Asian American anti-affirmative action efforts are more accurately described as predominantly led by Chinese American immigrants" (p. 19).

What are the factors shaping Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action? Consistent with previous research suggesting that Asian Americans hold particularly "multifaceted" views of affirmative action in higher education (Inkelas, 2003; Oh et al., 2010), I found two main factors influencing Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action: collective self-interest and belief in individualism and meritocracy.

### **Collective Self-Interest**

Collective self-interest, rather than personal self-interest, is a strong indicator of Chinese respondents' attitudes toward affirmative action. Sears and Funk (1991) defined "an individual's self-interest in a particular attitudinal position in terms of (1) its short to medium-term impact on the (2) material well-being of the (3) individual's own personal life (or that of his or her immediate family)" (pp. 15-16). According to the personal self-interest argument, people who expect affirmative action to impose costs on them will oppose affirmative action to maximize their or their immediate family's gains (Kravitz, 1995, p. 2197; Bobo & Kluegel, 1993, p. 445). In my research, I found that Chinese respondents rarely used the personal-interest argument when elaborating on their perceptions of affirmative action. In other words, personal self-interest had minimal effects on Chinese respondents' attitudes toward affirmative action in general, which mirrors the findings of Sears and Funk's (1991) research examining whites' attitudes toward affirmative action. Instead, I found that collective self-interest, which is "the belief that affirmative action will help or hurt members of the respondent's demographic group" (Kravitz, 1995, p. 2197), was an important factor influencing Chinese respondents' attitudes toward affirmative action, which is consistent with previous research on the link between collective self-interest and Asian Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action (Sax & Arredondo, 1999).

When explaining the impact of affirmative action, policy opponents in my research believed that affirmative action would hurt Asian Americans or sometimes more specifically Chinese Americans in college admissions. In analyzing their interview responses, I found that Chinese respondents mentioned both concrete and abstract costs imposed on Asian Americans/Chinese Americans by affirmative action. Concrete costs refer to the negative impact of affirmative action on personal outcomes, such as anticipated increased competition and lower chances of getting into a certain school that otherwise might be possible. For example, David, an ardent policy opponent immigrating to the U.S. in 1979, was anxious about Asian American students having a tougher time getting into selective universities. He opposed affirmative action for self-interested reasons, a combination of personal and collective self-interests.

Um...I don't support it [the goal of student body diversity], because I'm...um...a selfish person. Everybody has to be selfish. I don't support it, because to support it means that my daughter will have less of a chance to get into a good school. But I understand why society may wanna impose something like that. I understand the logic behind it, but I am very unhappy about the result of it, which is making life so much more difficult for Asian American students.

Although the majority of policy opponents in my research did not use the term “selfish” as blatantly as David, they adopted a similar collective-interest argument that Asian Americans were disadvantaged in the race-conscious admissions process when explaining their opposition to affirmative action. They cited anecdotes of Ivy League rejects in their social circles and schools as well as rumors about potential racial quotas practiced by selective universities to support their arguments. In addition to concrete costs, Chinese policy opponents also underlined the abstract costs of affirmative action, which refer to costs derived from anticipated increased competition and decreased opportunities resulting from affirmative action. Abstract costs include anticipated threats to the material and non-material well-being of Asian Americans/Chinese Americans, including increased college application stress and anxiety, lower motivation to work hard in high school, loss of bragging rights, emotional breakdown and lower self-esteem resulting from college rejection, and anticipated lower chances of getting a better job without an elite university degree. For example, Lauren, a 1.5<sup>th</sup>-generation Chinese mother, pointed out the concrete and abstract costs of being rejected from Harvard, which should be held accountable if it was proved by the Supreme Court that it discriminated against Asian Americans in its race-conscious admissions process.

All these Asians lose out on opportunities for Harvard education, [which is] you know, worldwide they're known for. And if they lose, they should suffer the consequences, because the students who they turned away have suffered consequences because of their discrimination. And they should be probably...Harvard should probably...how do you say...pay them for damages, for emotional damages. And finance too...if they were able to get a Harvard degree, they would probably get a higher-paying job, you know. There should be consequences, not just a slap on the hand, because that doesn't do anything. When you punish your wallet, then that really hurts.

Speaking of emotional damage, Hai, a middle-class Chinese father immigrating to the U.S. in the 1990s, shared his “heartbreaking” personal experience when explaining the way in which affirmative action hurt him and his daughter emotionally. Believing in the merit of her daughter's candidacy, Hai thought his high-achieving, well-rounded daughter would make it to Harvard, the school of her dream. However, the rejection letter from Harvard took a toll on them. His daughter broke down and cried three days in a row after knowing her dream did not

come true. Hai was also deeply hurt by this “heartbreaking” experience. After comparing his daughter’s and her classmates’ college application results, he believed that his daughter and other high-achieving Chinese American students were the victims of affirmative action, which “punished” the excellence of Asian Americans.

Because as Asians, as a Model Minority, it seems like it’s natural for us to study well, so our grades are never used as one of the criteria for admission anymore, so they’ll just...disregard our grades, disregard our commitment, disregard our perseverance to overcome difficulties and strive for continuous improvement and growth, and base admissions decisions solely on our skin color. In other words, they picked skin color in the name of equal right, and my daughter, because of her skin color...was treated unfairly. It’s a very contradictory...medium and situation.

Concerned about the shared fate of Chinese Americans in the face of affirmative action, Hai joined SFFA in its fight against Harvard’s and UNC-Chapel Hill’s race-conscious admissions policies. In short, perceived threats to the collective well-being of Asian Americans affected Chinese respondents’ opposition to affirmative action.

In analyzing their self-interest arguments, I found that policy opponents in my research internalized the Model Minority Myth (i.e., the belief that Asian American students are perseverant, hard-working, and academically achieving) and argued that affirmative action “steals” seats from competitive Asian American students. Jing, a middle-class Chinese immigrant mother, argued that seats at selective universities were a zero-sum game and that affirmative action hurt Asian Americans, whom she described as “more hard-working and excellent”.

Before there was affirmative action, you just admitted students based on their performance and grades. Affirmative action is practiced not only in college admissions but also in employment. I think we Asians are relatively more hardworking and excellent. Relatively, we are outstanding in all aspects. The average level of Asians who can immigrate to the U.S. is relatively higher. This is my own feeling. They are very excellent. In this case, when there is no affirmative action, as long as your grades are [good] enough, your performance is [good] enough, your letters of recommendation are [strong] enough, you can get in. Then I thought, “Oh, if there were no affirmative action at Harvard, as long as you had achieved all these, you would have gotten in, and then maybe the share of Asian students would have been able to reach 30%, for example. With affirmative action, in order to give these seats to Blacks and Mexicans, because your admissions pool remains the same, 1000 students a year, and you’re not going to add 200 more seats dedicated to affirmative action...there’s no such things like that. There are still 1000 seats in total. When there was no limit on the number of Asian students, 300 Asians could get in. But now there is a limit because we have to give seats to them, only 200 Asians might get in. Isn’t that a covert act of injustice to us? When it is fair to them, it becomes unfair to us. It hurts the interests of the strong to protect the weak. We joked and laughed at the time, “Isn’t it a little bit of robbing the rich to give to the poor?”

Jing was not the only one that emphasized the deservingness of “model” Asian American students, who were often described by Chinese respondents as hard-working students with higher grades and test scores. They did not assume that Asian Americans were born to be more intelligent than others. Instead, they believed that it was a combination of work ethics, deferred gratification, and collective willingness to invest in education that made them academically successful in general. Policy opponents internalized the Model Minority Myth and claimed that without affirmative action, an increased number of Asian Americans could get accepted, accounting for far more than 25% of the student body population on elite campuses. In this way, they depicted Asian Americans as the “sympathetic victims of racial preferences” (Takagi, 1993, p. 238).

It is also noteworthy that the factor of collective self-interest also influenced Chinese Americans’ support for affirmative action. Some respondents supported affirmative action either because the threats of affirmative action to Asians Americans were perceived as minimal (i.e., by citing the facts that Asian Americans still got into selective universities), or because Asian Americans benefited from affirmative action (i.e., by stressing the benefits of holistic admissions and diversity or the benefits of affirmative action in hiring and contracting). Anthony, an elite university graduate supportive of affirmative action, for example, argued that policy opponents exaggerated the negative impact of affirmative action on Asian Americans.

I think it’s overstated. I don’t think it should matter that much. I have never met a middle class, or upper-middle class, or higher Asian family who has not done well in the college process. Everyone seems to have gone to a school that’s pretty good, if they wanted to do that. So I just don’t think it matters too much. People are just a little stressed out, ‘cause it’s college and they also want to do well.

Feng, a Chinese immigrant father, supported affirmative action because it benefited Chinese Americans in hiring and more importantly, he supported it only when it did not cause discrimination against Asian Americans and whites.

It is advantageous for racial minorities and at least to some extent for Chinese people, because affirmative action not only applies to college admissions but also to employment in the workplace. Without affirmative action, it is highly likely that Chinese people would face greater discrimination in the workplace, so this is... I think it is still good. Just don’t take it too far and turn it into [a practice of] reverse discrimination. For example, if a white student is more qualified, but you reject him to prioritize a racial minority student. If things are taken too far, problems will arise

Patrice, similar to Feng, supported affirmative action conditionally. She opposed the policy if it gave an advantage to other racial minorities with a higher socioeconomic status while hurting low-income Chinese Americans. She was critical of policy proponents' claim that affirmative action did not hurt Asian Americans, which she saw as a lie.

Even supporters of affirmative action are constantly lying. The reason why I say they are constantly lying is that the pie is only so big. If you admit more Asian Americans, then there will be fewer spots for other groups, and vice versa. It is impossible for Asian Americans to not be affected. I think what we should be discussing is how much self-interest Asian Americans should give up, rather than discussing "I will give extra points to Black people, but it won't affect Asian Americans." That is nonsense. The discussion should be about how much self-interest we should give up, whom it is appropriate to give it to, how to give it, and who should be the one to give it up. Should African American immigrants also give up something? Should Hispanic immigrants also give up something? I think affirmative action should be for people who have been discriminated against, persecuted, and oppressed in history, not for the descendants of Spanish white oppressors and colonizers who moved from Spain to Mexico and are whiter than me, and then they end up taking advantage of affirmative action. It is not fair at all for the child of a Chinese restaurant dishwasher to lose out. So what we need to discuss is who should give up something, to whom, and how much. This discussion is missing. Supporters have always told me, "Asian Americans are not losing out." I say, "I know how to do math. 1 plus 1 equals 2. If there are 5 peaches in a box and you take one, then I will have one less. It's that simple. If you take one more, then I will have one less." That's why I have always felt that they are lying.

Patrice's opinions resonated with many other Chinese respondents who questioned whether affirmative action was practiced in a way that really benefited its policy recipients. Some opposed affirmative action because they worried that affirmative action did not help those who truly needed it (i.e., Black and Latinx students who suffer from poverty and/or discrimination), but rather their co-ethnics with a higher socioeconomic status. Grace, a Chinese immigrant mother, opposed affirmative action because she believed selective universities gave special treatment to African American and Hispanic students without considering their socioeconomic status.

If you use race, then you can...let's say, you know a lot of African Americans, right? American people think African Americans are an underprivileged group...or they will be considered an underprivileged group in college admissions. Or Hispanic, right? In that case, they got some special treatment. But what if...someone who is like a prince of an African tribe, or...African country, right? It's possible and Hispanic, well... If we have affirmative action, then Hispanics will benefit from this kind of treatment, right? But the fact is I don't think wealthy Hispanics, you know, are disadvantaged in college application process. So, I'm against affirmative action, but I'm not against, and I'm even pro special treatment for underprivileged group. But the underprivileged group, by definition for me, is those who are from low-income families.

The finding that Chinese respondents opposed affirmative action because they did not trust selective universities to implement affirmative action in a way that was narrowly tailored to serve its institutional goals (e.g., to increase access to higher education for racial minorities, and to promote student body diversity) is consistent with Hetherington and Globetti (2002)'s work on trust and racial policy preferences. The authors analyzed National Election Study data from 1990 to 1994 and found that without trusting the government to implement and administer programs designed to promote racial equality, whites felt their sacrifices are "pointless, even punitive" and thus opposed affirmative action (p. 269). Chinese respondents in my research, similarly, opposed affirmative action because they perceived that affirmative action not only threatened their collective self-interest but also failed to benefit its policy recipients, which rendered their sacrifices pointless. Simply put, they believed that affirmative action did more harm than good.

### **Look Beyond Self-Interest**

Contradictory to the collective-self-interest argument, some Chinese respondents in my research argued that they supported affirmative action even if it might hurt their or their children's chances of getting in. Others denied that self-interest was the main reason for their opposition to affirmative action. Thus, it was necessary to look beyond the self-interest argument and to explore other factors influencing their attitudes toward affirmative action. In analyzing their responses to the question, "how do you feel about affirmative action," I found that belief in the American Dream ideology played an important role in Chinese respondents' opposition to affirmative action. The American Dream is an enduring myth that the United States is the promised land of opportunity that rewards talent, skills, and hard work, "regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (Adams, 1931, p. 404)<sup>3</sup>. Believing in the open opportunity structure in the United States (Louie, 2014), policy opponents in my research expressed their commitment to individualism and merit. Although only 4 Chinese respondents opposed strictly merit-based admissions, the majority of policy

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<sup>3</sup> James Truslow Adams coined the term "American Dream" in his 1931 book *The Epic of America*. He states that "But there has been also the *American dream*, that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement...It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position" (p. 404).

opponents still emphasized that merit should be a primary factor in admissions decisions, and that hard work led to educational success. Although they did not think admissions officers should go to extremes and consider only academic performance (i.e., GPA and SAT/ACT scores), as China's admissions system does, they believed that merit was the prerequisite for admission to selective universities. For them, merit meant not only getting good grades and test scores, which was an indicator of college readiness, but also having a "spike" (i.e., a special talent) or qualities that made them an asset to a selective university. I found that their emphasis on this expanded definition of merit was linked to their strong belief that only the "best" deserved to attend selective universities, which prepared the "best" students to be future professionals. For example, Yang, a Chinese immigrant father helping Chinese students apply to universities in his spare time, argued that academic achievement and personal integrity, rather than race, constituted merit in college admissions.

Those who are rewarded with college admissions should have grit and talents, believe in hard work, and care about others and their surrounding communities. The priority admissions criteria should be about a student's character rather than the amount of pigmented protein expressed in the student's skin. In addition to ensuring academic achievement and personal integrity, due consideration should be given to factors such as family resources. If special treatment is needed, it should be for students of all ethnicities whose families are economically disadvantaged.

Policy opponents worried that affirmative action was practiced in a way that devalued or disregarded merit, which had consequences on students themselves but also on universities, workplaces, and even the United States. Fabian, a Chinese immigrant father actively involved in the attack on affirmative action, worried that affirmative action turned race into such a decisive factor in college admissions that it became detrimental to the competitiveness of students at selective universities and worse still, of the United States.

I think how affirmative action is practiced now will eventually damage...some abilities of admitted students. It is equivalent to promoting an unqualified student to a position. It not only harms those qualified students. The long-term effect is that in the end, everyone's ability is getting worse and worse, and then, it will eventually affect the entire United States...That is to say, the overall competitiveness of our nation.

To make sure that merit remained an objective measure of students' college readiness and potential to succeed in college and beyond, policy opponents suggested that admissions criteria should be as objective as possible, such as putting more emphasis on standardized test

scores, and making subjective admissions criteria (e.g., personality, extracurricular activities) quantifiable. Hai, for example, explained how to quantify admissions criteria.

Take extracurricular activities as an example. The length of time (e.g., hours and years of participation) can be quantified. I'm sure you understand American college admissions, right? Let's assume that extracurricular activities can be quantified: How many [extracurricular activities]? How long [have they taken part in these extracurricular activities]? What is the result? These are all quantifiable.

Similarly, Joseph elaborated on how to quantify the subjective criteria, personality in college admissions.

There is no way to do this experiment in the actual admissions process, because this experiment involves too much specific individual cases and specific real-life consequences. It is understandable that you cannot do this experiment, but I was wondering if you, people in the academia, could really do it as scientists do with the double-blind study (i.e., blinded experiment), right? You really don't know what this person really is, and then you don't even listen to his accent, don't look at his last name, but just go through his transcription to evaluate his social ability or personality. Could you offer quantifiable data on his personality? I was wondering when you design the experiment, if it is possible to know, let's say, the tone of this person's so-called personality. The tone can be evaluated according to the pitch his voice. For example, as a male, is his tone more high-pitched? Or how about the way he demonstrates his emotion, temperament, and other qualities? How about the speed of his speech? Could they be more scientific[ally evaluated] a little bit?

Policy opponents in my research attributed their emphasis on objective and quantifiable admissions criteria not only to their belief in individualism and merit but also to their distrust of admissions officers at selective universities. They believed that as human beings, admissions officers had their personal preferences and implicit biases, which rendered applicants vulnerable to the subjectivity of human perception. Hai, for example, called it as a "human being's defect." Hai elaborated on what came into his mind when he thought about admission officials at selective universities.

It is not just a mental picture of whom they are. I know them too well, because many of my colleagues are doing admissions. They are very hardworking people, and they want...most of the admissions officers are still.... relatively fair. They are still fair. They're also caring, right? And also...uh, very...they're actually very... credible and reputable. Actually, they are very...diligent, and they're a very dedicated group of professionals. My own organization, we are also a member of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, and we also uphold very high work standards and ethical standards. Nevertheless, we're still a group of people, and as long as we're human, we're going to work according to a non-quantitative standard of conduct and behavior, right? So that's it. This brings up a lot of.... Maybe it's what we call human being's defect, right? It's human errors. Human being will always make mistakes.

Apart from the subjectivity of the admissions process, policy opponents also questioned the motive[s] of selective universities, believing that they were acting in the interests of their institutions rather than sincerely committing themselves to providing educational

opportunities to students with merit. Policy opponents argued that although selective universities publicly expressed their commitment to the principles of affirmative action (e.g., as a remedy for historic discrimination, or as a means to achieve student body diversity), they practiced affirmative action to serve their self-interests, which were linked to money and politics. For example, Jing believed that public universities practiced racial quotas in order to receive funding from the government.

I think private universities, relatively speaking, are not dependent on the government. It has its own board of directors, and it receives a bunch of rich alumni's donations, so there is no dependence on the government. When they are not dependent on the government, private universities can just ignore the government's so-called affirmative action, which we Asians think will hurt us. But for public universities, if the government says, "I have to give 5% [of seats] to Blacks and 10% to Mexicans," they would have to listen to it because it gets money from the government, and if they don't listen to it, there may be less federal funding allocated to their institutions.

Similarly, Harrison believed that "elite institutions," which he defined as "any university that has the luxury of being able to balance their class," could not be trusted in their practices of affirmative action. He did not believe that these institutions were pursuing diversity in a genuine manner. He started to distrust elite institutions after he got into a selective private university, and "seeing the types of students the institutions admit really disappointed" him.

If you actually go on these campuses, it's mostly just upper middle-income kids and they're all progressive. And is it really equity? Does it really represent the United States? The United States is around 70% white. It's around 20% Hispanic, and then 15% Black or something like that. If you really want to...And it's around like 70% Christian, it's like really weird that some of these campuses, there's like no Christian people on campuses. So, you know, they only want a balance of diversity interests that are good for them. They don't actually care what the actual country looks like.

What he saw on elite campuses was "a very superficial diversity," contrary to what elite universities claimed to care about (i.e., diversity and equity). He argued that "It's very clear they only care about certain types of diversity, or equity, or inclusion" and only wanted "a balance of diversity interests that are good for them". By emphasizing the lack of diversity on his campus, Harrison questioned whether the pursuit of student body diversity was the primary motive of selective universities to implement affirmative action.

Although policy proponents also distrusted selective universities because of existing unfair admissions policies and practices (e.g., admission preferences for legacies, donors, the emphasis on standardized test scores, implicit bias, and the opaque admissions process), they were different from policy opponents in two regards. First, they did not buy into the

American Dream narrative and believed that racism still existed in the United States, which made affirmative action necessary as a remedy for past discrimination, and/or as a means to address group differences in higher education. For example, Patrice, a highly educated Chinese researcher immigrating to the U.S. in 2011, supported affirmative action that helped minority students who suffered from the consequences of past injustices such as slavery, although she strongly opposed affirmative action that gave an advantage to contemporary African immigrants or affirmative action that disrespected Asian American students by giving them lower personality scores, a contentious issue in the Harvard lawsuit.

In the U.S., I do think, like I said, what happened historically [did happen]. It's not that it didn't happen. Although the U.S. ended racial segregation and apartheid in 1965...let's put it this way. Although China is saying that men and women are equal, but as women, we all know that China is not even close to gender equality, right? So for Blacks, if they feel that there is no equality between Blacks and whites, I cannot relate to him as if it had happened to me, but I may empathize with him. I believe that women in China and Blacks in the United States have something in common. I would like to believe what they say. That's why I think we should consider "giving" [them special treatment], but what we need to discuss is "to whom" [should it be given]. I think the children of Jamaican immigrants and African immigrants should not enjoy affirmative action. It should be the descendants of Black slaves and the descendants of indigenous people who enjoy affirmative action, and I think only these two people can [be the policy recipients]. At the time of outreach, for minorities, such as Hispanic and those who live in Chinatown, outreach efforts should be race conscious. There should be more outreach efforts in those places. Flyers in different languages should be distributed. These are many ways to make the whole process race conscious. However, we don't discuss about it. Now it is only about, "Alas, we are underrepresented, and that means we are oppressed. You owe me".

Similar to Patrice, Selena, a second-generation Chinese American and a recent graduate from a competitive public high school in the Bay Area, also believed that race was tied to a lot of disadvantages minority students experienced in education and everyday life and thus she supported affirmative action as a remedy to past injustices. Selena argued that she was fine with the idea that Asian Americans' collective self-interest would be sacrificed a bit to help other communities of color get quality higher education, an important means of breaking the vicious circle of poverty due to systemic and structural racism in the United States.

I definitely don't think race should not be a part of the application process at all, because when you think about it, [when] you're applying to higher education, you're applying to get educated and hopefully make money, you know, and you think of stuff like generational wealth and how black Americans do not have as much of that wealth as white Americans just because slavery existed and all bunches of systemic racism, like redlining and all these things. You know, they just don't have the same opportunities as white people and also as other people of color. I think as an Asian person, I have more privilege than a Black person in some sense just because I mean, you can also get into the whole model minority myth thing and

that is a whole thing. But I'm just saying I don't think everyone has equal opportunities and I think some of that inequity is tied to race and to ignore race at the gate of higher education, is not smart. I think in that sense, I really support affirmative action because I think in some ways, it's like reparations. It's kind of like...In some ways, it's like, "We want to give you this chance to build up your wealth again and build up your knowledge again because for so long you were denied those chances. And we want to be assertive in giving them to you now," you know, because it's like if you...I mean, I think in some ways, it's essential because if you don't do affirmative action, if you don't have that, how are you going to break people out of that cycle of suffering. I guess there needs to be a way for them to get out. And also, if that means that Asian Americans suffer for a bit as other people get opportunities that historically have been harmed, I'm okay with that. I think in some ways, I have a...like responsibility to kind of give someone my spot or let someone have this opportunity because their people historically haven't, if that makes sense.

These findings support the racism belief argument (Oh et al., 2010; Hartlep et al., 2013) that Asian Americans are more likely to support affirmative action when they perceive that racism still exists in the United States. Policy proponents in my study believed that race played an influential role in racial minorities' educational success and thus saw affirmative action as a necessary "tool in the toolbox," in the words of Sophia, an interview participant and organizational leader advocating for affirmative action, to help them get access to higher education. By contrast, policy opponents perceived that individualism and merit, rather than race, were the key to educational achievements, and thus opposed merit-violating affirmative action practices (i.e., giving more weight to race in admissions decisions).

In addition to their disparate opinions on whether race mattered in the United States, policy proponents differed from policy opponents in that they had a different understanding of how race was used in the race-conscious admissions process and how affirmative action impacted Asian Americans. Specifically, policy proponents believed that race was not used as a decisive factor in the race-conscious admissions process. They believed that those who got into selective universities through affirmative action were as deserving as others, challenging policy opponents' claim that universities violated the merit principle by admitting less academically qualified minority students. They also maintained that Asian American students were rejected not because of their race and ethnicity, but because of other factors, such as the competitiveness of the applicant pool, the mismatch between the student and the institution, and the subjectivity of the admissions process. For example, Eva, an elite university sophomore and a policy proponent, believed that she was rejected from several Ivy League schools not because she was Asian, but simply because she "clearly just didn't have that

profile that they were looking for in some other ways”. Eva added that the visible presence of Asian Americans on elite campuses was the strong evidence that race did not work against Asian Americans in college admissions.

I remember reading or watching this Hassan Minaj video. So he’s like a YouTuber and he was like breaking down the admission scandals and he was like telling us about how Harvard is like 25% Asian. But Asian population in the United States is definitely below like 10%, so I think we’re actually overrepresented, at least in my university, I don’t know. I can’t speak to other ones, and I think we’re actually probably overrepresented in most high performing universities, so I personally don’t think that there’s that big of an issue, to be honest.

When elaborating on their support for affirmative action, policy proponents like Eva trivialized or denied the negative impact of affirmative action on Asian Americans, while emphasizing the necessity of affirmative action for racial equity and justice. They argued that racism and racial inequality still plagued the communities of color, and thus affirmative action should stay in place.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper first examined what Chinese respondents had in common regarding their perceptions of college admissions and affirmative action. The findings that the majority of Chinese respondents had heard of the Asian admissions rumors and had an inaccurate understanding of affirmative action are concerning because it indicates that misconceptions about what affirmative action is and how it is practiced have been perpetuated in the Chinese American community, especially among Chinese immigrants. Most of Chinese respondents relied on hearsay evidence from their proximal contacts (e.g., family, friends, schools) or news articles to learn about how race-conscious admissions worked, without validating whether those sources of information were trustworthy or not. Moreover, Chinese respondents revealed that the selective admissions process was so opaque and mysterious that it made them suspect whether race was used as a decisive factor in college admissions. Policy opponents worried that affirmative action would hurt qualified Asian Americans when it became the practice of racial quotas, racial balancing, and racial preferences. Believing in the American Dream ideology (e.g., individualism and merit) and the Model Minority Myth, they opposed affirmative action because it hurt their collective self-interest and violated the merit principle by “punishing” the excellence of Asian American students while lowering the bar for less qualified minority students. These anti-affirmative action narratives mirror the

political discourse used by SFFA and Asian American organizations in their fight against affirmative action. These anti-affirmative action organizations painted Asian Americans as the morally deserving victims of affirmative action by highlighting their academic achievements (e.g., their higher grades and test scores and their higher admit rates without affirmative action, in comparison to other races), and by distorting the way race is used in race-conscious admissions process (e.g., by conflating it with the unconstitutional quota and/or point system). Anti-affirmative action activists also capitalized on Asian immigrants' belief in the American Dream, arguing that affirmative action blocked Asian Americans' path to achieving their American Dream. For example, in response to the U.S. Department of Justice's plan to investigate Harvard's race-conscious admissions policy, AACE issued a statement in August 2017, in which its president Yukong Zhao stated:

It is long overdue to the Asian American community, who follows the laws, works hard and has been making tremendous contribution to American economic prosperity and technology leadership in the world. We expect that the U.S. Departments of Justice and Education will take concrete actions to help restore the spirit of American Dream: reward individual efforts and merits, and treat all individuals equally.

The finding that some Chinese respondents, especially policy opponents in my research resonated with these anti-affirmative action activists is unsettling. However, the findings that Chinese respondents in general had a genuine interest in the notions of fairness and holistic admissions and that nearly 40% of Chinese respondents supported affirmative action made me optimistic about the possible changes in their attitudes toward affirmative action. The 2022 Asian American Voter Survey also showed that the share of policy proponents among Chinese Americans increased from 41% in 2016, its record low, to 59% in 2022 (Lee et al., 2022), suggesting that their attitudes toward affirmative action are not static but subject to change. Considering that many Chinese respondents in my research expressed interest for fairness and holistic admissions, I believe that it is possible to turn policy opponents into prospective policy supporters or at least being more tolerant of affirmative action, by debunking the myths surrounding affirmative action and more importantly, by emphasizing why it is an important and merit-upholding policy. In doing so, they might come to realize that affirmative action does not necessarily threaten their collective self-interest or challenge their belief in individualism and merit. My argument is supported by my finding that Chinese respondents supported affirmative action when they knew that affirmative action was used in

a narrowly tailored way that did not hurt Asian Americans, and when they knew that it was a necessary tool to remedy the results of past injustices and/or to address group differences in higher education. My optimism also derives from Reyna and her colleagues (2005) research examining the common ground between supporters and opponents of affirmative action. They found that policy opponents endorsed affirmative action policies that upheld merit values. It is by changing the political discourses on what affirmative action is and how it works that we could see changes in Chinese Americans' attitudes toward affirmative action.

What's more, the finding that policy opponents did not trust selective universities to implement affirmative action well and fairly has important implications for selective universities as well. Some Chinese respondents expressed the anxiety and fear of admissions officers making mistakes (i.e., implicit bias, personal preferences) in the admissions process. Such distrust is not groundless. Based on interviews with 50 admissions professionals at seventy selective universities (i.e., 35 percent or lower acceptance rates), Lee and his colleagues (2022) found that due to time constraint and fear of litigation and political hostilities, "few [admissions professionals] had experienced professional development or previous educational training, in college or graduate school, to help them engage deeply in research and theories about race, intersectional racism, education, and college access. Yet, all of these are key concepts in assessing student contexts in holistic admissions" (p. 144). To address Chinese respondents' concerns about the subjectivity of human perception, selective universities should put more time and resources in the professional development and training for admissions professionals.

Moreover, Chinese respondents revealed that selective universities should put in the time and effort to show that they cared about applicants, regardless of their backgrounds. According to them, increasing transparency is a way to win their trust amid growing racial anxiety and suspicion over the use of race in the admissions process, especially after the Varsity Blue college admissions scandal and selective universities were sued over their practices of affirmative action. Given the stakes were high for Chinese respondents who emphasized the concrete and abstract costs of not getting into a dream school to themselves and their immediate family, they suggested that selective universities should be more transparent about what kind of admissions criteria are used in the admissions process and

about how admissions officers justify their decisions to admit, waitlist, or reject an applicant. By unboxing the black box of college admissions, such as making admissions data accessible, and communicating with applicants and their parents about their admissions policies and practices, selective universities could possibly garner support from Chinese Americans who do not trust them to implement affirmative action well and fairly.

Lastly, although affirmative action has been depicted as a divisive policy, I believe that there is a common ground between policy proponents and policy opponents. In my research, Chinese respondents collectively opposed discrimination against Asian Americans and longed for equal opportunity in higher education. They were all happy to see that Chinese Americans were speaking up in the Harvard and UNC-Chapel Hill lawsuits, regardless of whether they agreed on their anti-affirmative action arguments or not. Chinese respondents' common pursuit of equal opportunity and common desire to have more influence in the political discourse made me optimistic about the possibility of solidarity among policy proponents and policy opponents. Both sides could engage in an honest, open dialogue about possible means to achieve their common ends, and possible ways to hold selective university accountable for their unfair admissions practices, such as corruption, negative action, and admissions preferences for legacy students and donors. It is highly possible that Chinese Americans have competing interests and opinions, but (re)engaging in this constructive dialogue is an important step forward.

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## Appendix A

### Interview Confirmation Email Template

Dear Participant,

Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in my research interview. I am excited to hear more about your opinions on college admissions and affirmative action.

Before we start the interview, I would like to highlight some important points mentioned in the consent form (see attachment):

- The interview will last about **45 minutes**. With the participant's permission, the interview will be recorded and typed up as a transcript. The transcript will not contain the participant's name or any information that can be identified with the participant.
- Here are some specific questions during the semi-structured interview:
  - § First set of questions are related to the participant's opinions on college admissions for Asian Americans:  
E.g., What kind of concerns have you had or heard about Asian Americans applying to colleges?
  - § Second set of questions are related to the participant's opinions on fair college admissions:  
E.g., How would you define a fair college admissions process?
  - § Final set of questions are related to the participant's opinions on affirmative action in college admissions:  
E.g., How do you feel about affirmative action in college admissions?
- After the interview, a follow-up email will be sent to the participant to review the transcript of the interview. Only approved content will be used in my project. If the participant would like to receive information about the results of the study, I will forward a summary of the findings to the participant at the end of the study upon request

If you have extra time to spare, it would be great if you could fill out an anonymous survey designed to collect basic demographic information. It is used only for research purposes. To participate in the survey, please click on the following [link](#).

Thank you so much again for helping me with my PhD project. I am looking forward to hearing from you. Have a lovely day!

## **Appendix B**

### **Sample Interview Questions**

- First set of questions are related to the participant's opinions on college admissions for Asian Americans:
  - What kind of concern have you had or heard about Asian Americans applying to colleges? How did you learn about it? What was your first reaction when you heard about it?
  - How do you feel about checking the box of "race" on the college applications?
  - What is your or your children's college application experience?
  
- Second set of questions are related to the participant's opinions on fair college admissions:
  - How would you define a fair college admissions process? Or what kind of factors should be considered in college admissions? Or what kinds of fair/unfair practices do you see in college admissions?
  - From 1 to 10, 10 being the highest, how much do you trust the admissions process of selective universities in general? From 1 to 10, 10 being the highest, how much do you trust the admissions processes of the universities that you applied to?
  - Do you think this is a relatively high or low level of trust? What are the reasons that you have a relatively high/low level of trust?
  - Do you differentiate your trust in public and private universities? If yes, what are the reasons for this difference?
  - What do you think selective universities should do to increase your trust in their admissions processes?
  
- Final set of questions are related to the participant's opinions on affirmative action in college admissions:
  - How do you feel about affirmative action in college admissions?
  - How do you feel about the impact of affirmative action on Asian Americans?
  - How do you feel about Asian Americans speaking up in the current debate over affirmative action?
  - Since the Supreme Court will hear the Harvard and UNC-Chapel Hill cases soon, what do you think will happen to the future of affirmative action?
  
- Before we conclude this interview, is there anything about college admissions or affirmative action that you would like to add? Or is there a message that you would like to share with the public through my dissertation?