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# Her earnings: Exploring variation in wives' earning contributions across six major Asian groups and Whites



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## ABSTRACT

Previous research on understanding race-ethnic differentials in employment and economic contributions by married women has primarily focused on Blacks, Hispanics, or Whites. This study investigates variations in wives' earning contributions as measured by wives' earnings as a proportion of total annual household earnings among six Asian groups, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese relative to native born non-Hispanic White. I disaggregate the six Asian groups by their ethnicity and nativity status. Using pooled data from 2009–2011 American Community Survey, the findings show significance of human capital, hours of paid labor market engagement and nativity status. There is strong and negative association between husbands' human capital and labor supply with wives' earning contributions suggesting near universality of male-breadwinner status. Notwithstanding the commonalities, there is significant intergroup diversity. While foreign born and native born Filipina wives despite their spouses' reasonably high human capital and work hours, contribute one of the highest shares, the same cannot be said for the Asian Indians and Japanese. For foreign born Asian Indian and to some extent Japanese women, their high human capital is not translated to high earning contribution after controlling for husband's human capital. Further, nativity status impacts groups differentially. Native born Vietnamese wives contribute the greatest. Overall, the findings underscore the relevance of employing multiple conceptual frameworks in understanding earning contributions of foreign and native born Asian wives belonging to the six Asian groups, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese.

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## 1. Introduction

A recent release by the Bureau of Labor Statistics reports among the married couple households in the United States (U.S. henceforth), 47.4% are characterized by both husband and wife participating in the labor market. Additionally, proportion of married couple families in which only the husband is employed declined from 35% in 1975 to 20.1% in 2013 ([Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2014](#)). This trend of rising labor force participation by married women has implications on multiple dimensions such as empowerment level, gender-role specialization and gender earning differentials ([Glenn, 2004](#); [Greenman and Xie, 2008](#); [Oppenheimer, 1994](#); [Shafer, 2011](#); [Winslow-Bowe, 2009](#)). Further, specific nature of the general trends have been documented to vary by both measurable characteristics such as macro level labor market structural factors and micro level socioeconomic circumstances and less measurable characteristics like gender ideology ([Davis and Greenstein, 2009](#)). The

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interaction among the above sets of characteristics has in turn been shown to systematically differ by one's ascribed attributes such as race/ethnicity as well as by the more exogenous cultural prescriptions (Browne and Misra, 2003; Kane, 2000; Tienda et al., 1992; Zinn, 1990).

The present study explores wives' earning contributions of Asians, the relatively understudied group. It investigates the differentials in wives' earning contributions among the foreign and native born households belonging to the six major Asian groups, namely, Asian Indian, Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese in relation to native born non-Hispanic Whites. Extant literature on race-ethnic differentials in employment and earnings contributions by married women tends to be limited to Blacks, Hispanics, or Whites. Despite the increasing numerical presence, Asians have received relatively less attention. In addition to the growing demographic significance, study of wives' earning contributions among Asians is important for the following reasons.

First, given that Asian men experience higher mean levels of earnings relative to the other two major minority groups, Blacks and Hispanics (Pollard and O'hare, 1999), it is reasonable to expect that Asian husbands do not experience labor market disadvantages to the same extent as other minority groups do. In order to acquire a more complete understanding of the intergroup differentials in the U.S., such variations in labor market opportunities call for testing whether the commonly employed conceptual frameworks to understand wives' earning contributions in married couple households are applicable to Asians. Further Asian households are overwhelmingly characterized by stable married two-parent family structures (Lee, 1998; Jacobsen and Mather, 2010). This suggests that the motive to take up paid work outside of home in anticipation of economic uncertainty stemming from divorce may not exist to a significant level in Asian households. Hence, it is likely that Asian wives do not experience the need to work primarily for economic reasons.

Second, the literature shows that status as an immigrant adds another dimension of complexity to paid employment behavior. Immigration is associated with several countervailing forces that make women's decisions regarding paid employment complex (England et al., 2004; Read and Cohen, 2007; Stier and Tienda, 1992). Employment and earnings of immigrant women in general and wives in particular are a function of the more structural characteristics such as acquisition of human capital and skills relevant to the host country labor market and the degree of cultural assimilation. Research evidence indicates that, while with greater length of stay, immigrants gain helpful skills and therefore improve their labor market opportunities (Chiswick, 1978; Melendez et al., 1991; Read and Cohen, 2007), it may not necessarily imply the break from traditional gender biased practices (Ferree, 1979; Foner, 1998). The latter potentially impacts immigrant married women's paid labor market participation. This may especially be so for the groups with greater adherence to the patriarchal ideology as is the case with Asian immigrant population groups (Amott and Matthaei, 1996; Bhalla, 2008; Lim, 1997; McGoldrick et al., 1982; Park, 2008).

This study using the pooled cross sectional 2009–2011 American Community Survey data examines economic contribution of Asian wives. The analysis assesses the roles of wives' and husbands' human capital, household characteristics, and immigration specific characteristics like length of stay (in the U.S.), English language proficiency and education acquired in the U.S. in predicting wives' earning contributions as a proportion to total annual household earned income for the six largest Asian groups, Asian Indian (henceforth Indian), Chinese, Filipino, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese disaggregated by ethnicity and nativity status (foreign born versus native born). Following the precedence of existing studies (England et al., 2004; Read and Cohen, 2007; Yamanaka and McClelland, 1994), I include native born (U.S. born) non-Hispanic White (henceforth White) as the reference category. Given that White comprises not only the (numerical) majority group but also the group that immigrants aim to emulate more than any other ethnic/racial group,<sup>1</sup> it is not surprising that comparison with Whites is predominant in research on immigration. Accordingly I address the following research questions. First, what are the relative roles of human capital, household and immigration specific characteristics for the six major Asian groups relative to Whites in explaining wives' earning contribution? Second, are there significant differences among the groups by ethnicity (nationality) and nativity (foreign born versus native born) status?

The investigation expects to make the following contributions to the existing body of work on intergroup variations in wives' earning contributions. First, it empirically assesses the role of factors that previous scholarship has deemed significant in predicting wives' economic contribution to household income. Second, the study helps examine whether the major theoretical perspectives employed to explain wives' economic contributions in the U.S. can be applied to the comparisons among the major Asian groups and with Whites. The examination gains significance in the light of the fact that a notable proportion of the Asian men are in the highest earning percentiles. Additionally, disaggregated analysis at the level of the major Asian ethnicities revisits previously identified variations among select Asian groups. It hence throws new light on the plausibility of the heterogeneity in the theoretical frameworks relevant to describe intergroup variations among Asians. Finally, by examining variables such as length of stay, English language proficiency and acquisition of education in the U.S., the analysis addresses the role of characteristics that are unique to the process of immigration and have been conceptually and empirically seen to play in role in making immigrant economic experiences distinct from those of natives. The present study consequently combines the literature on racial/ethnic differences with that on immigration in the context of the wives' earnings contributions in the U.S.

<sup>1</sup> This is not to deny the significance of the theories of assimilation that posit models of assimilation that are divergent to the straight line assimilation process towards the White group (Portes and Rumbaut, 2006).

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