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by Teresa A. Statler

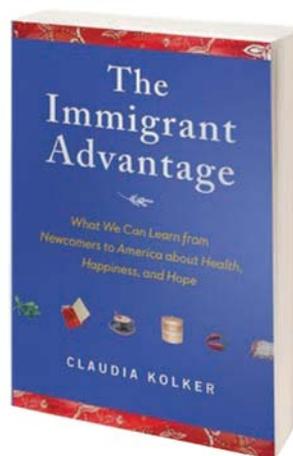
What We Can Learn from Newcomers to America About Health, Happiness, Hope

Intrigued by the success of immigrant friends, award-winning journalist Claudia Kolker investigated several customs brought to the United States by immigrants and their families. These customs are unfamiliar to most Americans, but Kolker believes that they help explain the “immigrant paradox”—why immigrants, even from poor and dangerous homelands, tend to be healthier and happier in many respects than native-born Americans.

In [The Immigrant Advantage: What We Can Learn from Newcomers to America about Health, Happiness, and Hope](#), Kolker discusses several customs, including the Vietnamese Money Club or *hui*; the *cuarentena* or Mexican custom of “mothering” a new mother for 40 days after giving birth; the South Asian “assisted” marriage (different from “arranged” marriage); and the Korean *hagwon* or after-school programs for children and teenagers. She also researches some of the reasons why residents of a poor Chicago barrio are healthier than equally struggling black residents in the next neighborhood.

Vietnamese Traditions

The most interesting chapters describe the Vietnamese Money Club. In the chapter, “How to Save,” Kolker starts a *hui* with her Houston friends and neighbors. A *hui* is “a centuries-old Vietnamese tradition that harnesses peer pressure to force its members to save money. [T]he *hui* hinges on one transaction: every month, cash in hand, members meet to contribute their dues. And each month, a different player takes that lump sum home, interest-free.” Kolker tells us about the “thousands” of *huies* that have launched successful businesses, restaurants, and fishing boats for Vietnamese immigrants here in the United States.



The Immigrant Advantage: What We Can Learn from Newcomers to America about Health, Happiness, and Hope

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The members of Kolker’s *hui* used their cash to pay off loans, finance a graduate degree, and make down payments on cars. Like the Vietnamese immigrants who trust each other, Kolker and her friends found that something so “foreign” became “utterly conventional: the promise that you could play by the rules and not be betrayed.”

Kolker, a working mother, dives into the Vietnamese custom of *com thang* or “monthly rice” delivery to her Houston home, and tells us about it in the chapter, “How to Eat.” Her excitement at having a fresh, healthy, and inexpensive evening meal delivered to her front door, after a long day at the office, is something anyone can understand and look forward to. She tells us that this delicious tradition hinges on two core Vietnamese values: “the importance of tremblingly fresh ingredients and the need to eat with other people. To serve these demands, *com thang* cooks . . . have devised a repertoire of services.” In the United States, and at least in Houston, these have morphed to include daily home delivery of a menu decided by the *com thang* provider, with a renewable, monthly subscription. *Com thang* helps busy families eat together. →



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A Mexican Tradition

In “How to Be a Good Neighbor,” Kolker interviews residents of Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood, who predominately hail from small Mexican towns and villages. Although there is a strong correlation between poverty and sufferers of asthma, especially in U.S. inner cities, Little Village has extraordinarily low rates of the disease, as well as other illnesses. Kolker learns that these statistics are attributed to the robust social interactions of Little Village’s residents. As they did back home, Little Village residents frequently pass the time on stoops and sidewalks, socializing and watching children. They also walk to small stores and markets, since many do not have cars. The outdoor activity not only raises their immunity, but the vigilance of people out and about also lowers the area’s crime rate, relative to similarly-situated neighborhoods.

A Korean Tradition

Kolker also finds impressive the Korean *hagwons*, intensive programs in different subjects that supplement Asian students’ regular curriculum. In “How to Learn,” she attributes the high academic achievement of Asian Americans to the *hagwons*, which incorporate the traits of the best schools and offer relationships with supportive tutors. As a result, students’ grades and their motivation tend to improve. Also, immigrant parents prefer *hagwons* because they are more affordable than private school tuition.

The Immigrant Advantage is a refreshingly positive portrayal of immigrants in America. This would be an excellent choice for book groups. ▀

Teresa A. Statler practices law in Portland, with an emphasis on family-based, asylum, and removal cases.



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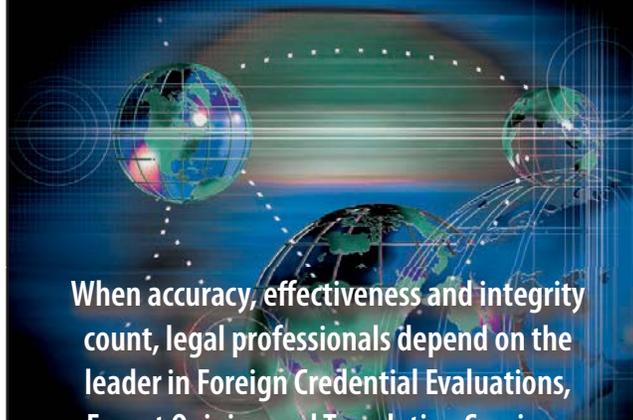
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