Tanya Domi: Hi. This is Tanya Domi. Welcome to the Thought Project, recorded at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, fostering ground-breaking research and scholarships in the arts, social sciences, and sciences. In this space, we talk with faculty and doctoral students about the big thinking and big ideas generating cutting-edge research, informing New Yorkers and the world.

Asian Americans total nearly 20 and a half million in population, the fasted-growing major racial or ethnic group in America today, growing 72% since 2000. Asians comprise 13% of the nearly 11 million unauthorized immigrants who live in the United States. Some of the biggest public debates involving Asian Americans recently include the Harvard admissions case that featured expert testimony by Asian Americans who have historically and contemporarily supported Affirmative Action policies for admission to universities.

This debate has become a major topic of interest in New York City elite high schools regarding the specialized high schools admission test that Mayor Bill de Blasio has radically proposed to do away with for admission, an idea that the Asian American community has strongly opposed. Today's guest, Professor Margaret Chin of Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York, has been at the center of these debates as a result of her research and advocacy.

Chin is a professor of sociology. She received her bachelor's degree from Harvard University and her PhD from Columbia University. Chin is also a faculty associate of the Roosevelt House Public Policy Institute, a member of the CUNY Mapping Asian American New York Consortium, and a trustee of the Tenement Museum. Welcome to the Thought Project, Professor Chin.

Margaret Chin: Thank you so much, Tanya. I'm glad to be here.

Tanya Domi: It's great. What is the state of immigration in America for Asian Americans? What is going on in the midst of this Trump policy? How has this affected Asian Americans? This very anti-immigrant tilt, I imagine has really had some strong pushback by the Asian American community.

Margaret Chin: Yes. I think Asian Americans are in general very worried. Asian Americans, in particular the Chinese, they account for 27% of all immigrants coming to the US. The second and the ... Or rather, China, the people coming from China is the second highest group. People from India and the Philippines rank the third and the fourth largest coming into the US. So immigration is something that's very, very high on the minds of Asian Americans. I'm talking broadly about Asian Americans of different ethnic origins, right?

Tanya Domi: Exactly.

Margaret Chin: Because Asian Americans is really broad-

Tanya Domi:	Large.
Margaret Chin:	... yeah, large, broad group of different ethnic groups, different income groups. So it's really important for all of them. The anti-immigrant tilt of the Trump administration has really, I think, affected the political attitudes of Asian Americans. I think many of them are against that anti-immigration rhetoric and threats on restriction to, especially, family immigration because I think that's one of the things that Trump has talked about. He wanted to limit, the Trump administration has wanted to limit family immigration-
Tanya Domi:	That which he calls chain migration.
Margaret Chin:	Migration. Exactly. Exactly.
Tanya Domi:	We know from studies in your profession of sociology that the more that you bring families together, the more likely they're to be stabilized after they have migrated.
Margaret Chin:	Yes, that's absolutely true because family networks, family support keeps people afloat generally. So even their whole new rhetoric about the public charge, if family members are here, in general, family members support others who are on their way to becoming a permanent resident. So if you take away family migration or chain migration, you remove a lot of the support.
	If we look at immigrant communities, if we look at cities where there's large immigration, you'll find networks of support for new immigrants. All of these things actually help immigrants become acculturated to US society.
Tanya Domi:	Right. Now, maybe some people don't realize, but approximately 13% of the estimated 11 million unauthorized immigrants in the United States are of Asian ethnicity. So the idea of deportation must cause concern within the Asian community. A lot of people may not think about that because we see so many Asian Americans in our communities. They're running a lot of typical businesses, dry cleaners in New York, laundries in New York, many people in food service of course. They're probably at the lowest end of the totem pole.
	At the same time, there's many, many Asian Americans that are in professional jobs. So a lot of people don't think of them, that community, being vulnerable to deportation. Can you comment on that?
Margaret Chin:	Yeah. I think this is an image, I think, that will come through throughout today's discussion is this image of the model minority. In general, Americans really believe Asian Americans as a whole have done really well and therefore, all of these other things like the undocumented, like mental health issues, just getting into regular, everyday schools, not the elite schools, all of these things are actually of concern to Asian Americans. It's not just about doing the best,

getting the best jobs. It's not about getting into the best schools, although those are issues too.

But Asian Americans are a diverse group. That image has actually hurt many Asian Americans. That's one of the reasons you don't see them listed as the undocumented.

Tanya Domi: It's sort of like the silent and unseen, unauthorized immigrant.

Margaret Chin: Right. I think Jose Antonio Vargas, he's the Pulitzer Prize-winning author. I think he is that person. He himself hid and basically never told anybody he was undocumented. He became this author, this Pulitzer Prize-winning author, and now he's basically come out saying he has no way of becoming an American, although many people say, "Why don't you just apply," to him. And he just can't. There's no legal remedy to-

Tanya Domi: For his status. For his status.

Margaret Chin: Exactly.

Tanya Domi: We know that Asian Americans have been highly successful, that the average income of Asian Americans is about $73,000, and there's a huge drop-off to the next level for immigrants. It goes to about $52,000 or so approximately. I was looking at Pew data earlier before coming in here today. The idea about education is very, very foremost. It's a big driving, I think, factor in Asian American success where people have gone to school. They've studied hard. They've worked hard. It's part of the meritocracy of aspiration in America. Asian Americans have done that very, very well.

Why are these big debates now taking place? Your research has put you at the center of two of them, one here in New York City with regard to change in admission standards at the elite New York City high schools. That's a debate that's ongoing right now and your research, we'll hear you talk about it. There's been a radical proposal by Mayor de Blasio to withdraw the entrance exam for these elite schools as a consideration for admission. Why has this angered the Asian American community? Can you talk more broadly about this issue and your research?

Margaret Chin: Sure. I'm going to back up and give a little background to this. You had mentioned Asian Americans having the highest median income, which is so true. The reasons why they have this is because they are what we call a bifurcated group. Pew also did research and found that they are the group with the highest income inequality in the nation right now, more so-

Tanya Domi: Okay. Well, thank you for sharing that.

Margaret Chin:	So if you have the group who makes 100 and something thousand dollars a year on a group that, for example, Indian Americans do and then you have a group that's in poverty like Chinese Americans are and the Vietnamese and the-
Tanya Domi:	Food workers, working in nail salons, things like that.
Margaret Chin:	Exactly. Exactly like that. When you have the highest and the lowest, their median income when you average it out is going to be higher than normal. Okay, so that's one thing. You actually see this huge, bifurcated group. And then this huge, bifurcated group has always depended on education. They believe that education is the greatest equalizer. We're going back to this chain migration that you talked about.
	Immigrant groups come and immigrant groups who are wealthy, they set up resources in their communities. These resources in their communities made available to the wealthy are also made available to the very poor. So in New York City, for example, we have test prep centers. The very poorest of the immigrant groups have access to some of those same resources that can share information about good schools, that can share information about how you can get into these good schools, can share information about how you can get into good kindergarten and middle schools and neighborhoods where you can live in that are available.
	Therefore, you have this whole set of resources that poor Asian Americans then use. In this background, we have poor Asian Americans, especially Chinese Americans that can go to some of these specialized schools. So here we have the crux of it. We have wealthy and poor Asian Americans who go to schools that have standardized tests. They figured out a way of preparing for these tests in their communities. They have these resources. All along, they've been doing really well on these tests. These tests have allowed close to 70% of Stuyvesant High School to be Asian American.
	The mayor comes along with the chancellor saying, "We're going to get rid of this test now. We're going to change." Basically they're changing the rules of the game and how people can get into these schools. So of course, you're going to have Asian Americans upset. They figured it out. They've learned how to get into these specialized high schools. They have resources in their communities. Now what are they going to do, especially when they believe education is the great equalizer?
Tanya Domi:	Well, yeah. That makes sense, especially when you change the rules on how to be successful. Your research was mentioned last summer in The New York Times on why do these elite schools remain so white. We're talking about New York City elite high schools too in this context, as well as Ivy League schools, what you would call the Ivy League, Ivy-plus, Stanford, Chicago, Vanderbilt, Duke.

Can you talk about that? Because now this has become a major issue that actually went into court within the last two weeks in which you were an expert witness with respect to your research, and also you graduated from Harvard College. So you've got an intersection of your identities here, your profession and your professional life.

Margaret Chin: Yes, I do. I'm going to segue and continue a little bit with the high schools, then go into the college.

Tanya Domi: Okay.

Margaret Chin: For the elite high schools, we're talking about the SHSAT schools which at the top three, they have the majority Asian Americans. But for a lot of the other schools and including screen schools, there's still a lot of white students. That's where that article in The New York Times talks about. The mayor can actually do something about the schools that don't have the SHSATs and actually make them much more diverse.

Going into Harvard and the elite schools, yeah, they are still majority white, elite schools. Asian Americans have always felt like they're able to go to these schools as well. The case basically, let me give a background on the case. The case actually shows that Asian Americans actually have increased enrollment since I was there. I went to school there in 1980 to 1984 at Harvard. When I was there, the Asian American population was only 8% on campus. Now, the incoming class is about 23%. So this is class of-

Tanya Domi: That's significant.

Margaret Chin: It's a huge increase.

Tanya Domi: That's one quarter, nearly one quarter of the incoming class.

Margaret Chin: Right. So what this case is trying to show is that Harvard, in particular, by using Affirmative Action, they've actually discriminated against Asian Americans. But looking at any numbers-

Tanya Domi: Limiting them.

Margaret Chin: Limiting them. Limiting them.

Tanya Domi: Yes, because they exceed probably the numbers in the pool. I mean the vast numbers of Asian Americans probably are fairly significant in the pool to be considered. Is that correct?

Margaret Chin: Probably. That's probably true, except that the data actually shows that the admit rate for Asian Americans out of the data that they examined, four out of the six years is actually higher than for whites. The data also shows that over

time, Asian Americans have increased from that 8% to the 23% from 1980 and every year it goes up and down by just a little bit, which shows that there's no quota.

Tanya Domi: I see.

Margaret Chin: So the actual data actually shows that if you look at the actual data of the admissions, there probably isn't discrimination. What the SFFA people or Ed Blum's organization, Ed Blum is a legal strategist that actually funded-

Tanya Domi: He's the who brought the case, right?

Margaret Chin: And he's also the one that brought the Abigail Fisher versus U Texas case. So he failed twice in eliminating Affirmative Action there. In that particular case, he asked for the elimination of Affirmation Action using a white plaintiff. Here he's using Asian Americans as a plaintiff, and he searched for Asian Americans as a plaintiff to try to get rid of Affirmative Action.

In my view, if they find discrimination against Asian Americans, they should just fix the discrimination against Asian Americans. There's no reason to get rid of Affirmation Action-

Tanya Domi: Affirmation Action.

Margaret Chin: ... because Asian Americans have actually done well. Affirmation Action was there when I was there. Affirmative Action has continued to this day, which is race-conscious, whole-person admissions using race as one tiny little factor. Asian Americans are now 23% of the incoming class. So if there is still discrimination, if they think that there can be increases in numbers, they should look at those factors.

Tanya Domi: With respect to this court case, there was a piece out today in the Chronicle of Higher Ed saying, "Well, this really goes back to 1996 in California when Ward Connerly brought the prop on 209." I have to fully disclose here my role, because I was director of communications for the No Prop 209 proposition ballot initiative that did win at the polls-

Margaret Chin: Yes.

Tanya Domi: ... and therefore gutted Affirmative Action in the University of California system. I see you wrote about this when you were an undergrad. The position has consistently been pretty much by Asian American advocates in support of Affirmative Action. So my question to you and I think it's a provocative one, has the success of the Asian American community, has this created a backlash in your view?

Margaret Chin: A backlash?

Tanya Domi: Yeah. A backlash against Asian American success in this Trump context of anti-immigrant, the idea of grievances, whites against others. Look at these Asian Americans. They're not from here. They're taking away our opportunities. I think that's part of the Trump dialogue. That's part of the discourse. That's how he has been successful maybe up through this past Tuesday on November 6th.

Margaret Chin: Yeah. I think so. I mean that's not something that the case is looking at. But yeah. I think there are grievances because I think that Asian American numbers, they don't ... This is what Asian Americans and people debate back and forth even in the lawsuit. If you believe that it's a zero-sum game, where are the Asian numbers coming from? Are they actually taking numbers from white student slots? Are they taking numbers from African American and Latino slots? Many whites would actually believe that Asian Americans are actually limiting or are taking away white student slots.

Tanya Domi: So limiting their opportunities.

Margaret Chin: Opportunities. Exactly.

Tanya Domi: That feeds that grievance wedge that Trump has so successfully utilized.

Margaret Chin: Exactly. And then so connecting that to the Stuyvesant case and the New York City case-

Tanya Domi: Yeah, back to New York City.

Margaret Chin: ... Ed Blum as well as Mayor de Blasio and Chancellor Carranza, they've fallen into this trap where they are using Asian Americans. They're actually not really addressing the issues, like we have to actually discuss this with whites too. They're using Asian Americans to divide them from other people of color when actually they should really look at how maybe you could limit or address questions about where white students should go to school as well.

Tanya Domi: That's fair enough. That's a fair enough distinction. Given your role, you're a trustee on the Tenement Museum board and your first book was on the garment industry. I assume that it's part of New York City but may go further afield. What are the issues? When you talk about the highest income gap among Asians, well then you put them down into New York City, which probably has one of the greatest income inequality of any city in the United States. As a matter of fact, the United States has, indeed, the highest income gap between the upper 1% and the rest of us.

In that context of New York City, which we all love, the lore and the history is you come here. If you can make it here, you can make it anywhere. We see so many immigrants came through the city. My own grandmother came to this city. To make it in New York City, it's a hard, difficult road. And then you layer on the income inequality that exists not only in the city, but for Asian Americans.

What are the biggest concerns that face this community at this time in your view?

Margaret Chin: I think the biggest concerns have to deal with the poorest Asian Americans in the community as well as issues that are never addressed because people believe Asian Americans as a whole are a successful group, as you said. They're successful. There's a backlash against them being so successful. One of the things is that they're always viewed as being forever foreigners. The whole Trump administration believes that many of the students coming here who are international students, in fact, are spies. They want to limit them, but then that image gets carried forth to the whole Asian American community. So that's one at the top.

But then for Asian Americans as a whole, you have mental health issues. You have housing issues. You have work issues. You have just healthcare issues that affect a lot of immigration, a lot of immigrants. But in particular, mental health is not really talked about, not discussed. We see that that's a big problem for immigrants, for Asian Americans in particular, up and down the whole income level-

Tanya Domi: Income scale. Yeah.

Margaret Chin: And housing and work, getting jobs. How do you get a job when you're trying to learn English? How do you get a job in the service economy when the community is actually getting smaller these days.

Tanya Domi: Well, these are all really timely issues, interesting issues. Your research has put you at the center of both Harvard admissions case and also here in the city in elite high schools. Your work is very interesting. We thank you for coming and sharing with us today.

Margaret Chin: Thank you so much for having me.

Tanya Domi: Thanks for tuning into the Thought Project. Thanks to today's guest, Professor Margaret Chin.

The Thought Project is brought to you with production, engineering, and technical assistance by Sarah Fishman. I'm Tanya Domi. Tune in next week.