Why do certain cultural groups achieve extraordinary and disproportionate amounts of success in United States? Chua and Rubenfeld’s book focuses on this question and attempts to answer it through a cultural lens. According to the thesis developed in the book, a unique configuration of cultural traits possessed by certain groups directs their members through a path of high achievement; defined in its most “vulgar sense” as the “gaining of money and position” (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2014, p.7). The focal question draws on factual data pertaining to the superior economic performance of certain cultural groups; some of which are relatively well-known (e.g. Jewish Americans) and some of which are less so (e.g. Nigerian Americans). The thesis developed in the book is of great relevance to the international business scholar with an interest in cross-cultural studies; though the thesis does not necessarily draw from or integrate well-established cultural theories familiar to JIBS readership (e.g. Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). Among international business scholars, there also has been a renewed and timely interest in high-skilled immigrants (e.g. Cerdin, Dine, & Brewster, 2014); and Chua and Rubenfeld’s book certainly speaks to that interest as well. More than anything else, the book does an excellent job deciphering the psychology of high-skilled immigrants as a generic cultural group, and why they almost have to become successful to survive, given the context in which they end up living and working.

The three cultural traits instilled strongly among members of successful cultural groups in America – the triple package - are first, a superiority complex which is a deeply-imbued belief that one’s group is exceptionally better or special in some way. The second element, insecurity, is an “anxious uncertainty about your worth or place in society, a feeling or worry that you or what you've done or what you have in some fundamental way is not good enough” (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2014, p.9). The third is impulse control, the ability to resist temptation and having the grit to persevere in the face of hardship. Seemingly paradoxical to one another, superiority complex combined with an inferiority complex (used interchangeably with insecurity by the authors) generates a super drive to prove oneself in a society where one does not feel secure; primarily, due to a feeling of or being perceived as an outsider. Combined with impulse control, the result is an individual who has a “chip on the shoulder” and has the self-discipline to work hard and persevere in order to prove his or her exceptionality to the world.

Chua and Rubenfeld hand-pick eight highly successful cultural groups to support their triple package thesis and use them as cases for analyzing the relative sources of their superiority complex, insecurity, and the ways through which impulse-control is imposed upon their members. Cultural groups picked by the authors are based on national-origin, ethnicity, or religion and consistent with definitions of culture across disciplines, have members who share a specific set of values, beliefs, habits, and practices passed from one generation to another (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). The cultural groups analyzed in the book through the triple package lens include Mormon Americans, Cuban Americans, Nigerian Americans, Chinese Americans, Indian Americans, Iranian Americans,
Lebanese Americans, and Jewish Americans. These groups were chosen by the authors for an in-depth analysis either because they were the most successful by standard measures of economic performance or were exceptional performers among a larger class of statistical underperformers.

While impulse control is the most unsurprising element in the package simply because there is an undeniable correlation between hard work, persistence and achievement; arguing that the combination of superiority and insecurity leads to high achievement seems counterintuitive and controversial at first. It seems as if though, the words used to describe these two sentiments were chosen to generate interest, and to some extent controversy. The success formula described in the book, in its essence, is referring to a specific high-skilled first-generation immigrant phenomenon. The majority of these cultural groups (except for the religious-based cultural groups) picked by the authors are relatively recent immigrant groups in the U.S. that also bring along skills and human capital; but experience a “status collapse” upon immigration to a country where no one cares about where they come from, how successful or respected they were back in their home country, or the prestigious institutions or social networks they were once affiliated with. Without any valuable social capital to lean on and a sense of insecurity in a new land, these cultural groups have to pursue impulse-control in order to reach a status comparable to what they believe they inherently deserve.

While there are some inconsistencies in how the triple package theory is applied to the narrative of each cultural group in the book, overall, the thesis provides a fresh and intriguing cultural perspective to succeeding in America as an outsider. Specifically, according to the main conclusion drawn from the thesis, success in America as an outsider requires not buying into the contemporary American narrative of success (be yourself, do what you love), and taking advantage of the disconnect between what Americans tell themselves about how to think and live and the reality of what the American economy rewards.

What is missing from the book, on purpose or not, is the potential counter arguments and evidence that can be presented for each aspect of the triple package. For example, Chua and Rubenfeld argue that superiority complex creates a drive to prove oneself when one feels and thinks he or she is special, superior, or privileged in some way. On the other hand, superiority complex can also lead to narcissistic tendencies, limiting one’s ability to develop functional, trust-based relationships with others; hence their social capital that contributes to conventional career success. The second triple package element, insecurity, according to the authors, can also motivate individuals to work very hard in so far as it provides one with a sense that, no matter how much one does or accomplishes, he or she is never good enough. However, individuals with high self-esteem and self-efficacy tend to more readily jump on work-related challenges, raise their hands, voice their opinions, and are sought for and accept more visible work assignments, possibly achieving success as defined by the authors. Especially in the U.S. where corporate cultures require and reward extraverted behaviors as such, the authors’ argument for insecure tendencies requires more convincing arguments, further evidence, or statement of boundary conditions. Nevertheless, Chua and Rubenfeld do suggest both in the title and the book that the three aspects of the triple package cannot be separated from one another and that it is the simultaneous presence of all three, rather than each aspect in isolation, is what dictates the success of these cultural groups. That is, it is the synergistic psycho-cultural engine stemming from the presence of all three that drives individuals towards high achievement.

While the first chapter of the book introduces the research question, highlights key statistics, and overviews the thesis, it is also a disclaimer where the authors brace themselves for the criticisms they are aware the book will ignite among general readers. Indeed, the reaction to the book in the news media and the comment threads that follow those reviews - overwhelmingly negative – are almost worthy of scientific inquiry about why the thesis created such an outcry. The disclaimer embedded in the first chapter falls into responding to two broad categories of criticism manifested in the negative reaction to the book. The first is about the specific definition and measurement of success. The definition of success is relative depending on the individual, and can range from a life spent on doing the most good to a life filled with joy pursuing things one is passionate about, Chua and Rubenfeld
admit. However, “goodness, religiosity, and self-awareness are not what modern economies reward” (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2014, p.7,) they continue and define successful people and cultural groups as those who have more income, better education, and higher status compared to the rest of the population. Their approach to defining success is pragmatic and neutral; there is no indication that this form of success is better or worse than success defined in some other way; though clearly Chua and Rubenfeld – both from triple package cultural groups - are successful individuals in their book’s terms. The second disclaimer is more implicit, and loosely guards the thesis against potential criticisms of neo-racism where ethnocentric tendencies are based on the superiority of one’s cultural values, rather than the inferiority of other groups’ biological heredity (Balibar & Wallerstein, 1991). Chua and Rubenfeld’s position is once again pragmatic and neutral; their book attempts to explain an empirical fact with a theory that makes sense, without necessarily alluding to the absolute superiority of the cultural groups used to illustrate their theory. Like any good scientific theory, their thesis can be tested, while controlling for other potential contributors to success. They also refer to the issue of ecological fallacy such that while certain cultural groups tend to instill triple package values more strongly than others, Chua and Rubenfeld note that individuals can and do vary with respect to how strongly they possess triple package values regardless of cultural membership and as a function of upbringing, personality, and/or life experiences. The conclusion they draw in the introductory chapter, despite the disclaimers, is likely to touch a nerve though: “The overwhelming message taught in American schools, public and private, is that no group is superior to any other. In America, embracing yourself as you are – feeling secure about yourself – is supposed to be the key to a successful life …Whatever kernels of truth may underlie these propositions, the irony is this: America still rewards people who don’t buy into them with wealth, prestige, and power” (Chua & Rubenfeld, 2014, p.27).

Ultimately, Chua and Rubenfeld’s book is like an art house film, with its unconventional and controversial undertones open to either interpretation or criticism, commercially marketed to a mass audience. I believe most international business scholars and practitioners would find the cultural thesis developed in the book intriguing, insightful, and interesting.

References