



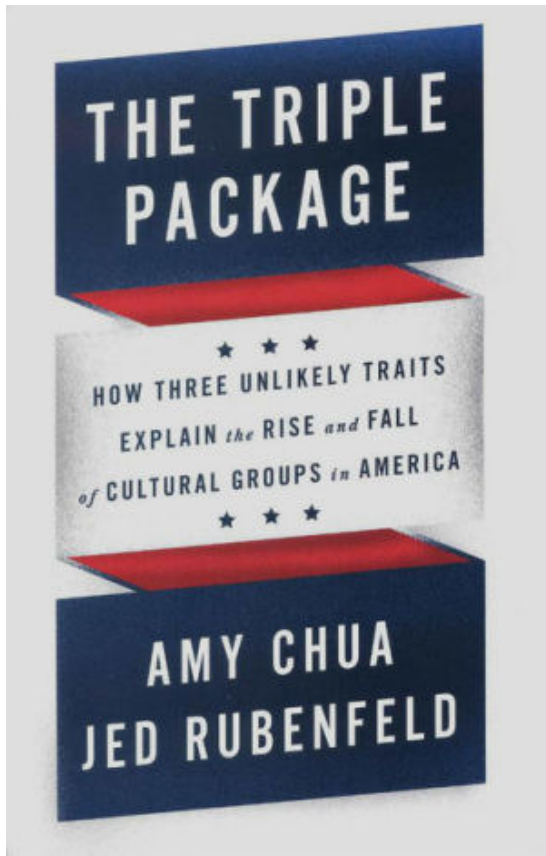
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DAILY NEWS

'Thought-provoking, entertaining analysis'

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"The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America" by Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld. New York, NY: The Penguin Press, 2014, 324 pages, \$27.95.



"It is one of humanity's enduring mysteries why some individuals rise from unpromising origins to great heights, when so many others, facing similar obstacles and with seemingly similar capabilities, don't rise at all," Amy Chua and Jed Rubenfeld note at the beginning of "The Triple Package: How Three Unlikely Traits Explain the Rise and Fall of Cultural Groups in America," their new exploration on success in America. "The paradoxical premise of this book is that successful people tend to feel simultaneously inadequate and superior. Certain groups tend to make their members feel this way more than others; groups that do so are disproportionately successful."

Chua is the John M. Duff Professor of Law at Yale Law School; her previous books include "Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother" and "World on Fire: How Exporting Free Market Democracy Breeds Ethnic Hatred and Global Instability." Rubenfeld is the Robert R. Slaughter Professor of Law at Yale Law School; his previous books include "Freedom and Time: A Theory of Constitutional Self-Government," and "Revolution by Judiciary: The Structure of American Constitutional Law." With seventy-seven pages of source notes at the conclusion of the introduction and eight chapters that form the main text, "The Triple Package" is one of the

more extensively researched books I have had occasion to read in recent months.

My initial introduction to Chua and Rubenfeld did not come in the usual way, which typically entails browsing the new titles at our local Barnes and Noble booksellers. Rather, I was flipping through the channels one Saturday morning and ran across them discussing "The Triple Package" on Book TV, one of C-SPAN's popular weekend programs. Hearing the married couple explain the basic tenets of their book, as well as seeing how they interacted with each other when responding to inquiries about their work, piqued my interest in the ideas they were presenting. I was especially intrigued when the conversation turned to specific cultures. We have all heard stereotypes regarding certain groups and why they are more or less successful than society at large. It was interesting to hear a plausible -- and empirically based -- explanation put forth as to why there is an element of truth to many of the generalizations we tend to use almost unconsciously in everyday conversation.

The “Triple Package” at the heart of Chua and Rubenfeld’s primary thesis consists of three traits that tend to characterize cultural groups that seem to do well when compared to their contemporaries. First, members of the group have a sense they are somehow exceptional or otherwise chosen for greatness. It’s not that they necessarily articulate this sense of superiority; it’s simply an inward feeling they seem to have about themselves and those who share their heritage. Second, members of the group seem to experience insecurities and inadequacies that precipitate a high need to constantly prove themselves in relation to their counterparts from other groups. Finally, members of the group tend to exhibit extraordinary patience and impulse control; i.e., they value delayed gratification.

Among the various groups the authors scrutinize in some detail are the Mormons. “If there’s one group in the U.S. today that’s hitting it out of the park with conventional success, it’s Mormons,” Chua and Rubenfeld assert in “Who’s Successful in America?” – the second chapter in the book. “Just fifty years ago, Mormons were often regarded as a fringe group; many Americans had barely heard of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. In 1980, Mormons were still a rarity on Wall Street and in Washington.”

“Three decades later, it’s hard not to notice the Mormons’ explosive success,” the authors continue. “Overwhelmingly, Mormon success has been of the most mainstream, conventional, apple-pie variety. You don’t find a lot of Mormons breaking the mold or dropping out of college to form their own high-tech start-ups. The real testament to Mormons’ extraordinary capacity to earn and amass wealth, however, is the LDS Church itself. The amount of American land owned by the Mormon church is larger than the state of Delaware.”

To be clear, Chua and Rubenfeld examine many different cultural groups during the course of their investigation. They are also quick to point out how their conclusions must be considered within the context of the overall portrait they are painting. When writing a book like this, the authors recognize the dangers inherent to an oversimplified interpretation of their key findings. Individual success is often the result of a variety of factors, and the three characteristics they identify as key to the enhanced efficacy of some cultures only tell part of the story when it comes to determining why a particular person achieves, or fails to achieve, personal or professional prominence.

Moreover, the cautionary spin they put on the potentially adverse consequences of those who achieve extraordinary success via these attributes is also appreciated. “Triple Package striving is by nature insatiable; it has no built-in limit,” they assert in “The Underside of the Triple Package,” sixth chapter. “Whatever arena you’re competing in, there’s almost always someone higher than you are, and even if you managed to make it to the top, fear of losing that spot would keep pushing you on. A simple, decent existence – with no scrambling to climb any ladders, without caring whether anyone thinks you’re successful enough – may be the most admirable life of all. But it is rarely available to people afflicted with the Triple Package.”

I highly recommend “The Triple Package.” Chua and Rubenfeld provide a thought-provoking and entertaining analysis on a timely topic with relevant implications for everyone.

— *Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*