

## Book Review:

# The Culture Transplant: How Migrants Make the Economies They Move to a Lot Like the Ones They Left

Garett Jones, Stanford University Press, 2023

Reviewed by Aldric Hama

George Mason University professor of economics Garett Jones launches his book with a striking thought experiment: to boost “mediocre” (dismal, really) economies of Egypt, Paraguay and Indonesia by importing Chinese for “about a dozen years”, the equivalent of two percent of each nation’s population per year (p. ix). According to Jones’ math, this would lead to a total of “24 million” Chinese occupying mostly Sunni Muslim Egypt. (There were over 110,000,000 Egyptians in 2021, but who’s counting?<sup>1</sup>) There will be more Chinese and mixed Chinese over time if the immigrants marry natives. What kind of Chinese migrant would form the core of Egypt’s, Paraguay’s and Indonesia’s envisioned economic revival? Those with “no criminal record, high school graduate. . . maybe a little college or some trade school experience.” (p. x)

With respect to Indonesia, Jones suggests importing a total of 60 million Chinese into the world’s most populous Muslim country, despite its well-known history of anti-Chinese violence. He does mention, in passing, native “hostility” to Chinese immigrants and Chinese-Indonesians in a couple of sentences (p. 129), but goes on to claim that the prospect of “ethnic riots every decade that kills two thousand people” for an economic revival is “worth the risk.” (p. 136)

Whether the Chinese government will countenance exporting its citizens as a solution to its social problems (e.g., too many single males or “bare branches”) and whether receiving countries will actually welcome mass Chinese immigration, or anyone else who are phenotypically different from the natives, are real issues but well beyond the scope of Jones’ book.

Jones bases his thought experiment on the observation that Chinese immigrants and their descendants in Southeast Asia, including Indonesia, are “more prosperous and better educated than the indigenous populations.” (p. 123) While Jones optimistically imagines economic benefits trickling down from a well-to-do minority to the *Pribumi* majority, others are not so sanguine. In 2004, Yale Law School professor Amy Chua has pointed out in *World on Fire* that wealth accumulated by the “more prosperous” and “better educated” Chinese throughout Southeast Asia is preserved within Chinese groups via ties of kinship and support by the ruling oligarchy.<sup>2</sup> First-generation Chinese immigrants and their descendants, to varying degrees, retain Chinese cultural practices and language — as other immigrant groups do, as Jones will tell us. In the case of Indonesia, open expression of Chinese culture had the same effect as blood for sharks. Shrugs Jones, “Yes, there will be . . . ethnic backlash . . . but . . .” (p. x)

If one skips Jones’ bizarre migration policy suggestion, the rest of his book is in fact an informative and open discussion of immigration.

In the US, modern immigration policy attempts to straddle big business needs, “humanitarian protection” and promotion of “[racial] diversity”.<sup>3</sup> Widely held beliefs concerning immigrants in Western countries include immigrants will lose their old culture and values and adopt their new homeland’s values. Also, antagonism between natives and immigrants, who are culturally and genetically distinct from the natives, is the natives’ fault.

<sup>1</sup> <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?locations=EG>

<sup>2</sup> Chua, A. (2004). *World on Fire*. NY, NY: Knopf Doubleday.

<sup>3</sup> In the US, “promoting diversity” via immigration falls specifically under the Diversity Visa Program. <https://www.americani mmigrationcouncil.org/fact-sheet/how-united-states-immigration-system-works-fact-sheet/>

Jones squarely addresses whether immigrants in fact assimilate quickly to their new homeland — or do values and beliefs persist? Jones reports on multigenerational surveys of beliefs and values from the General Social Survey and World Values Survey, putting the “melting pot” process, the homogenization process of assimilation, to the test. He reports that immigrant culture is in fact “transplanted”, in that the immigrants’ culture “substantially survives migration” (p. 153); assimilation is “partial” and “incomplete” to approximately four generations. (p. 32) At the same time, immigrant values tend to become a part of the natives’ values. As the book’s title states, the countries that migrants move to will look more like the one they left.

Jones illustrates the persistence of values across generations by tracking values he says are crucial for national prosperity. To economist Jones, the benefits of immigration to raise national wealth outweigh any possible risks. Jones compares values of hyphenated Americans to those of citizens back in the home country. For example, frugality or saving rate tends to last to the third generation. Jones presents studies showing rate of savings in the home country generally predicts rate of savings of immigrants—countries with high savings rates predicted high rate of savings of immigrants, and countries with low savings rates predicted low immigrant savings rates. Furthermore, “people from high-trust societies pass on about half of their high-trust attitude to their descendants, and people from low-trust societies pass on about half of their low-trust attitudes.” (p. 14).

At the same time, other values decrease and “fade out” over generations, such as religiousness and trust in the police. Briefly mentioned is the persistence of other traits that do not bode well for stability of liberal democracies such as low social trust, strong role of government in solving social problems, and religiousness. The studies cited by Jones involved mostly European immigrants moving to European countries and the US. European groups show variance in values persistence, but what can we expect with immigrants from non-Western and Muslim countries? In the US, second-generation immigrants are allowed to vote. Regardless of what commentators claim, values of the homeland, rather than values of their adopted home, will affect their choices.

Interestingly, Jones points out that second generation immigrants tend to express stronger country-of-origin values than their parents. For example, some second generation immigrants from high-saving countries appear to save more than their parents. Similarly, not mentioned in the book, immigrants from non-Western countries, such as Muslims, show increased religiousness in the second generation.<sup>4</sup>

Jones suggests that desirable immigrant values are not necessarily good for the country. For example, he says that while “strong family values” sounds like it is good for national prosperity, “stronger family values predict poorer families.” (p. 22) Second generation adult immigrants whose parents are from countries with strong family values have lower wages than those with parents from countries with weak family values.<sup>5</sup> Jones (and the study authors) suggest that while job seekers will take jobs close to family, their preference will cause them to miss potentially higher wage jobs elsewhere. Furthermore, “strong family values” is also associated with job security. Immigrants with strong family values are also “more likely to believe that the government should save jobs or directly intervene to regulate wages.” (pp. 23–24) As an alternative hypothesis, perhaps poor families, because they are poor, need strong family values. Readers are not told what the effect of importing people with “weak” family values would be, but this should be apparent to those living in Western countries, even without immigrants, with weak family values.

For those who notice such things, economically well-off nations with high social trust and low government corruption tend to be those with high average national IQs<sup>6</sup>, and Jones in fact has pointed this out in his previous book—but not in his current book.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, within the US, IQ predicts

<sup>4</sup> Voas, D., & Fleischmann, F. (2012). Islam moves West: Religious change in the first and second generations. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38, 525–545.

<sup>5</sup> Alesina, A., et al. (2015). Family values and the regulation of labor. *Journal of the European Economic Association*, 13, 599–630. “Countries with strong family ties” were in Latin America, North Africa and Mediterranean Europe. Northern European countries tended to have weaker family ties.

<sup>6</sup> Lynn, R., & Vanhanen, T. (2002). *IQ and the Wealth of Nations*. Westport, CT: Praeger.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, G. (2016). *Hive Mind: How Your Nation’s IQ Matters So Much More Than Your Own*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

socio-economic status and propensity to antisocial behaviour.<sup>8</sup> Screening potential immigrants for IQ as well as for job skill level and compatible national values would be a rational measure. Despite the data and common sense, as one will see, Jones does not offer measures based on—the data and common sense.

The transmission of values over generations with gradual acceptance of some native values suggests the heritability of behavioral traits and a gene-culture interaction between behavioral traits.<sup>9</sup> While Jones side-steps heritability of individual traits, he does not entirely ignore genetics. What readers will need to do though is some reading-between-the-lines.

Jones introduces readers to the “‘Deep Roots’ of comparative economic development” (p. 55), which is based on the concept that current levels of national economic development are the culmination of historical developments such as state or government history since 0 AD, agricultural history “in thousands of years” and technological history since 1500. (p. 52) Obviously, the development of technology and transmission of values necessary for national well-being involve people, and some groups of people are better at developing and transmitting than other groups. Jones also introduces economists who utilized “Genetic Distance” and “Genetic Diversity” (p. 55) to explain why some countries are richer than others.

The measure for genetic distance used in studies Jones cites is the fixation index ( $F_{ST}$ ). This measure of genetic distance between populations is based on the variance in allele frequency between populations. Jones goes on to state that  $F_{ST}$ 's are calculated from “junk DNA” and takes up about two pages to assure us that large genetic distances between populations do not mean anything. Jones also blurts that genes do not “cause prosperity”. (p. 58) Genetic distances between the US, as the baseline country, and other countries were examined to explain cross-country differences in economic development: countries genetically similar to the US were richer on average.<sup>10</sup> (p. 58) That more prosperous countries (European countries) are genetically closer to the US (mostly European) highly suggests a heritable factor underlying prosperity.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, in the context of immigration, Jones addresses whether or not “diversity is our strength.” At the corporate level, following a literature review, specifically referring to racial (“racio-ethnic”) diversity, Jones finds no benefit — even a negative effect — on group performance. (p. 88) Jones points out that studies finding negative effects on group performance of either racial or skills diversity in the workplace usually conclude that “diversity” is a “double-edged sword.” Such language, Jones suggests, is a “triumph of hope over experience” (p. 89), that is, people will believe what they want to believe despite data to the contrary.

Increasing national ethnic and cultural diversity increases the risk of violence, but Jones mentions one other cost of increased diversity, the risk of diminished public goods. Underlying government spending on public goods, those goods that are shared and used by all such as “roads” and “public health systems”, is a “sense of community” by taxpayers. (p. 98) Increased ethnic diversity “dulls that sense of community” and “amplifies cultural differences”. (p. 99) Not only will there be less spending on public goods, but tax money will shift to “private goods”, such as “scholarships and government jobs”, which will be channeled to politically favored ethnic groups, perhaps as either rewards or bribes. While there appears to be overall no benefit to increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, Western elites, as Jones points out, have nonetheless doubled-down on immigration based on the “outdated, unscientific cliché” that “diversity is our strength”. (p. 100)

Jones' immigration suggestions, being framed with an economist's view, leave much to be desired. He suggests: Import immigrants who have more education and more job skills and more “pro-market attitudes” than the average citizen. (p. 100) Importing people who are genetically *distant* rather than genetically *closer* to the average citizen may well be preferable to the political class, but Jones prefers to leave this unsaid. To state otherwise would be xenophobic.

In addition, Jones suggests “welcoming refugees who've suffered great violence in their homelands” because this would be the humanitarian thing to do. Not mentioned is that refugees will most likely be low

<sup>8</sup> Herrnstein, R.J. & Murray, C. (1996). *The Bell Curve*. NY, NY: Free Press.

<sup>9</sup> Plomin, R. (2023). Celebrating a century of research in behavioral genetics. *Behavioral Genetics*, 53, 75–84.

<sup>10</sup> One of the papers Jones cites: Spolaore, E. & Wacziarg, R. (2013). *Journal of Economic Literature*, 51, 325–369.

<sup>11</sup> Hill, W. D., et al. (2019). Genome-wide analysis identifies molecular systems and 149 genetic loci associated with income. *Nature Communications*, 10, 5741.

IQ and genetically distant to the wealthy countries that take them. This suggestion, though, has nothing to do with boosting national wealth. It rather depletes it. Pointing this out and being against such a scheme, however, would be xenophobic.

It appears Western, and more recently East Asian, countries facing declining fertility and an aging population are attempting to utilize immigration to maintain current levels of productivity. Whether the current global pool of immigrants is capable of advancing technology and thereby increasing national prosperity is not all that clear. What to do with the underclass, low-IQ “refugees” as well as underachieving natives, has yet to be spelled out as well. Policies will need to be in place to prevent what Jones characterizes as the periodic but “worth it” Indonesian-style response to multiculturalism. It is likely that government coercion will be necessary, such as a quota system or “coerced assimilation and cultural eradication” as in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Thailand.<sup>12</sup> Whatever the measures and given current trends, the countries that migrants move to will likely look like the one they left.

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<sup>12</sup> Chua, *op cit.*