

IMMIGRATION,  
ETHNICITY, AND  
COMMUNITY  
TRANSFORMATION

# CONTEMPORARY CHINESE AMERICA



MIN ZHOU

Foreword by ALEJANDRO PORTES

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*Immigration, Ethnicity, and  
Community Transformation*

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ALEJANDRO PORTES



周敏



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# Contemporary Chinese America

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*For Sam Guo, Philip Guo, Zhou Leiming, Yao Yaoping, Zhu Lin,  
and my extended family in the United States and China*

## Foreword

It is commonly noted in the contemporary immigration literature in the United States that Asians are the fastest-growing segment of the foreign-born population. It is usually added that Asian immigrants, by virtue of their high levels of education and professional/entrepreneurial skills, do very well in the American labor market and usually reach middle- and even upper-class status in the course of one or two generations. Less emphasized are the great diversity of the Asian population and the fact that the positive characteristics associated with them are actually due to a few major groups, notably the Chinese. Even less often remarked are the vast differences in the immigration histories of individual Asian nationalities. Most of these immigrations are of recent vintage—the Chinese being an important exception. Chinese immigrants have been coming to America since the 1840s, although the circumstances of the earlier migrants' arrival and adaptation were a world away from those of the present.

The sociology and economics of immigration have made important strides during the last two decades through the formulation of novel concepts and hypotheses in sociology and the advent of an institutionalist perspective in economics. For the most part, however, studies of Asian minorities in the United States, including the Chinese, have paid more attention to chronicling the evolution and subjugation of a particular group or community than to linking them to more general theoretical concerns. This is where the work of Min Zhou comes in. For nearly twenty years now, she has painstakingly researched aspects of the experience of Chinese immigrants and, more broadly, Asian immigrants, in America, placing her results within a

theoretical framework that gives them broader scope and relevance. She has made insightful use of the latest theoretical literature in the fields of immigration and ethnicity to formulate original hypotheses that, when tested against empirical data, produce lessons of general import. In this manner, Zhou has advanced both our factual knowledge of Asian-origin groups in America and general scientific knowledge about the process of immigrant adaptation and incorporation into the developed world.

An early example of this happy mix of theoretical acumen and attention to empirical evidence was her first book, *Chinatown: The Socioeconomic Potential of an Urban Enclave* (Temple University Press, 1992). In this book, Zhou made use of the then-novel concept of ethnic enclaves to show that areas of ethnic Chinese concentration were actually quite unlike what scholars and the public at large believed. Earlier journalistic and scholarly accounts of America's Chinatowns had depicted them as dangerous and alien places where a variety of strange and often unlawful activities were rampant: opium use, gambling, prostitution, and coethnic exploitation. Even the most sympathetic accounts portrayed ethnic enclaves as sites of refuge where an impoverished and highly discriminated-against minority sought protection from nativist xenophobia.

Zhou's work showed that although some of these descriptions may have applied in the past, they are quite inaccurate at present. Instead of impoverished ghettos where crime, health hazards, and labor exploitation flourish, Chinatowns are actually enclaves based on longstanding social structures whose ethnic organizations and enterprises not only help meet the survival needs of coethnic members but also offer them economic opportunities, including entrepreneurship, and paths to upward social mobility. Old-fashioned patriarchal nepotism exists, along with the exploitation of unskilled workers, women workers, and undocumented immigrants, and a wide variety of informal economic activities take place in these areas. But Zhou's work contended that characterizations of Chinese enclaves and Chinese-owned businesses in these terms were deeply flawed. Chinatowns are, above all, entrepreneurial engines creating an effective path of economic adaptation for many immigrants. The overall economic success and the rapid social mobility of the Chinese in America provide ample proof that this entrepreneurial strategy has paid off.

Zhou's work on the socioeconomic potential of Chinatown has profound implications for her study of another topic of great importance in the dynamics of contemporary immigration—namely, the adaptation of the new second generation. In this instance, she frames the study of the second generation within the novel theory of segmented assimilation that she herself has helped develop. In contrast to the conventional assimilation story, the concept of segmented assimilation highlights three key facts. First, assimilation into American culture and society does not necessarily lead to upward social mobility, since the direction of mobility depends on *what segment* of the society immigrants and their offspring assimilate to. Second, the economic advancement of immigrants and the successful adaptation of their children do not depend solely on human capital



and economic resources; the level of internal cohesion and mutual support in immigrant communities—the *social capital*—is also important. Third, promptly shedding the cultural traditions and language brought from the home country is not the most effective path for economic and social progress among children of immigrants, since that loss can easily lead to *dissonant acculturation* in relation to the parental generation. In *selective acculturation*, parents and children learn the English language and American ways while preserving their own language and key elements of their culture. The theory hypothesizes that this strategy offers the best hope for educational success and economic advancement in the second generation because it preserves communication between parents and children and gives the latter a sense of their origins and history, reinforcing their self-esteem. Zhou has made use of her field research on the children of Chinese, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants to test and refine these ideas, as shown in her influential *Growing Up American* (with Carl Bankston, 1998) and some of the chapters in this volume.

In her more recent work, Zhou has fruitfully contributed to the theories of ethnic enclaves, segmented assimilation, and transnationalism, advancing novel ideas and empirical results. For example, she links the theories of ethnic enclaves and immigrant transnationalism by showing that the viability and success of ethnic businesses depends largely on ties to the home country that provide access to capital, goods, labor, and markets, and that the strength of an ethnic community depends largely on the vitality and growth of the ethnic enclave economy. Zhou also notes the unexpected efficacy of entrepreneurial enclaves in promoting the adaptation of the second generation. Vibrant ethnic enterprises give children access to afterschool activities and programs and a wealth of information about educational opportunities that are not available to youths outside the coethnic community.

Throughout her career, Min Zhou has been a practitioner of the mid-range approach to social theory and research most prominently advocated by Robert K. Merton. A well-established and renowned sociologist in the United States and worldwide, she has made durable contributions to the study of immigration and ethnicity in general and of Asian minorities in particular. This book presents a comprehensive collection of major articles on the determinants and consequences of contemporary Chinese immigration to America. It is required reading for specialists in immigration and ethnicity—and of interest and value for the general public as well.

—Alejandro Portes  
Princeton University  
November 2008

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