

# Remaking Chinese America

IMMIGRATION, FAMILY, AND COMMUNITY, 1940-1965



Xiaojian Zhao

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Xiaojian Zhao is an associate professor of Asian American studies and history at the University of California, Santa Barbara. A graduate of Fudan University in Shanghai, China, she received her M.A. degree from the University of Rochester and a Ph.D. from the University of California, Berkeley.

*To my mother  
and the memory of my father,  
and to Hai and Sue*

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## NOTE ON ROMANIZATION AND PSEUDONYMS

This book uses pinyin to romanize Chinese names and terms from Chinese-language sources. The Wade-Giles spellings of Peking and Toisan, for example, are rendered as Beijing and Taishan in pinyin. Exceptions to the pinyin system have been allowed for a few names such as Sun Yat-sen and Chiang Kai-shek. The other notable exception to the use of pinyin in this book is in the titles of Chinese-language community newspapers, books, authors' names, and names appearing in English-language archival records; they have been cited as presented. For example, *Zhongxi ribao* is rendered as *Chung Sai Yat Po*. An English, Chinese, and pinyin glossary appears at the end of the book.

A few people who were interviewed by the author requested pseudonyms. Each pseudonym is indicated with an asterisk in the Selected Bibliography.

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# *Introduction*



*W*orld War II and the cold war profoundly altered the lives of Chinese Americans. Between 1940 and 1965, what had been a predominantly male Chinese immigrant community was transformed into a family-centered American ethnic community. This study traces the changing basis of that community, focusing on immigration, family, gender relations, and the development of ethnic identity. The book explores the forces that unified all Chinese living in the United States into one group, even though internal conflicts within the community never ceased.

One of the major changes in the Chinese American community in the 1940s was the growth and transformation of families. From the late nineteenth century, seeking to bring their families to the United States, Chinese Americans had repeatedly challenged the country's exclusion laws in the courts. Beginning in the 1920s, they also lobbied Congress to gain admission for their family members, but achieved only minimal success. Not until the exclusion acts were repealed in 1943 and alien Chinese became admissible did the struggle for family unification begin to gain significant momentum. The 1945 War Brides Act allowed the admission of alien dependents of World War II veterans without quota limits. A June 1946 act extended this privilege to fiancées and fiancés of war veterans. The Chinese Alien Wives of American Citizens Act, enacted in August 1946, granted admission outside the quota to Chinese wives of American citizens.<sup>1</sup> These legislative reforms opened the door to a broader echelon of Chinese immigrants. Women constituted the majority of the newcomers and significantly changed the sex ratio of the Chinese American population. In 1940 there were 2.9 Chinese men for every Chinese woman in the United States (57,389 men versus 20,115

women). By 1960 this ratio was reduced to 1.35 to 1 (135,430 men versus 100,654 women).<sup>2</sup>

During and after World War II, the Chinese American community was pressured to grant women more serious consideration. A significant improvement in gender equality took place during the war, as many Chinese women, most of them born and educated in the United States, entered nontraditional occupations outside the home. A subtler, perhaps more important change along the same lines occurred within the family. A woman's importance in the traditional Chinese family had been largely associated with her ability to reproduce. Because most Chinese women gained admission to the United States as dependents of their husbands, they had been expected to subordinate their individual interests to those of their family members, especially to those of their husbands. Such expectations, however, were challenged in the postwar years. After thousands of Chinese war brides reunited with their husbands, the community came under increasing pressure to help Chinese American couples negotiate domestic tensions and improve the status of women within the family.

The postwar years also witnessed the relocation and dispersion of the Chinese American population, which changed the physical boundaries of the community. Chinese Americans since the early twentieth century had been mostly an urban-centered ethnic group, and they experienced extreme residential segregation in Chinatowns throughout the United States.<sup>3</sup> By 1940 71 percent of Chinese Americans lived in cities with a population greater than 100,000, and most of them were in the segregated sections.<sup>4</sup> World War II and postwar development, however, enabled Chinese American men and women to purchase property outside Chinatowns. Residing in small towns or suburbs of large cities and working for non-Chinese-operated firms, they became less dependent on their traditional clans and district and benevolent associations.

At the same time the political situation in China became more complicated, creating a new challenge to the Chinese living in the United States. The Communist victory in the Chinese Civil War in 1949 significantly altered U.S.-China relations and intensified conflict among Chinese American political groups. When the Chinese People's Volunteer Army confronted American military troops under General Douglas MacArthur in Korea in 1950, China became an archenemy of the United States. Caught in the middle of a war between the country of their ancestors and the country of their residence, many Chinese Americans had conflicting emotions and lived in fear of political accusation and government investigation. Tension within the com-



munity intensified, mirroring that between the Nationalists on Taiwan and the Communists in mainland China. The Nationalist government was highly influential among Chinese American merchants, who largely controlled the community power structure. In a bid to exterminate their political opponents, right-wing community leaders collaborated with the FBI and the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) in the investigation of Chinese American leftists. This collaboration, however, ultimately facilitated the U.S. government's effort to break up the old community networks that for decades had helped circumvent exclusion laws.

As political conflict deepened in China, more members of the community realized the importance of shifting their energy from China politics to the struggles for racial equality in the United States. When the cold war made the entire Chinese community a target for the investigation of Communist subversion, it also forced Chinese Americans to form a united political front. In this complex political environment a sense of group identity began to develop among Chinese living in the United States.

Scholars have studied a number of Chinese settlements in the United States. In a study of Chinatown in San Francisco, Stanford Lyman examined the different forms of social, economic, and institutional control that dominated the lives of ordinary Chinese immigrants in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>5</sup> In *Chinese Gold*, Sandy Lydon vividly illustrated the lives and struggles of the Chinese in the Monterey Bay region of California.<sup>6</sup> Studies by Clarence E. Glick, Paul Siu, Peter Kwong, Renqiu Yu, Judy Yung, Victor G. Nee and Brett de Bary Nee, Yong Chen, and others have recaptured the past of Chinese Americans in Hawaii, Chicago, New York, San Francisco, and elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> Works on contemporary urban Chinatowns have also contributed to our understanding of the importance of ethnic enclaves to the socioeconomic advancement of post-1965 Chinese immigrants and the complexity of race relations in America's multiethnic society.<sup>8</sup> These studies laid foundations for subsequent work in the field of Chinese American history.

Unlike previous studies, this book examines the Chinese American community beyond the confines of a particular Chinatown. It also focuses on a time period—from World War II through the cold war era—that has not yet been carefully studied. After the war, as the Chinese population spread out, the traditional community organizations such as *hui guan* (district associations) and family associations became less important in the day-to-day lives of Chinese Americans. The ties of Chinese America were now built upon a shared ethnic identity that was based on a common cultural sentiment and moral consensus, reinforced by pressures from the larger society.<sup>9</sup> Community news-