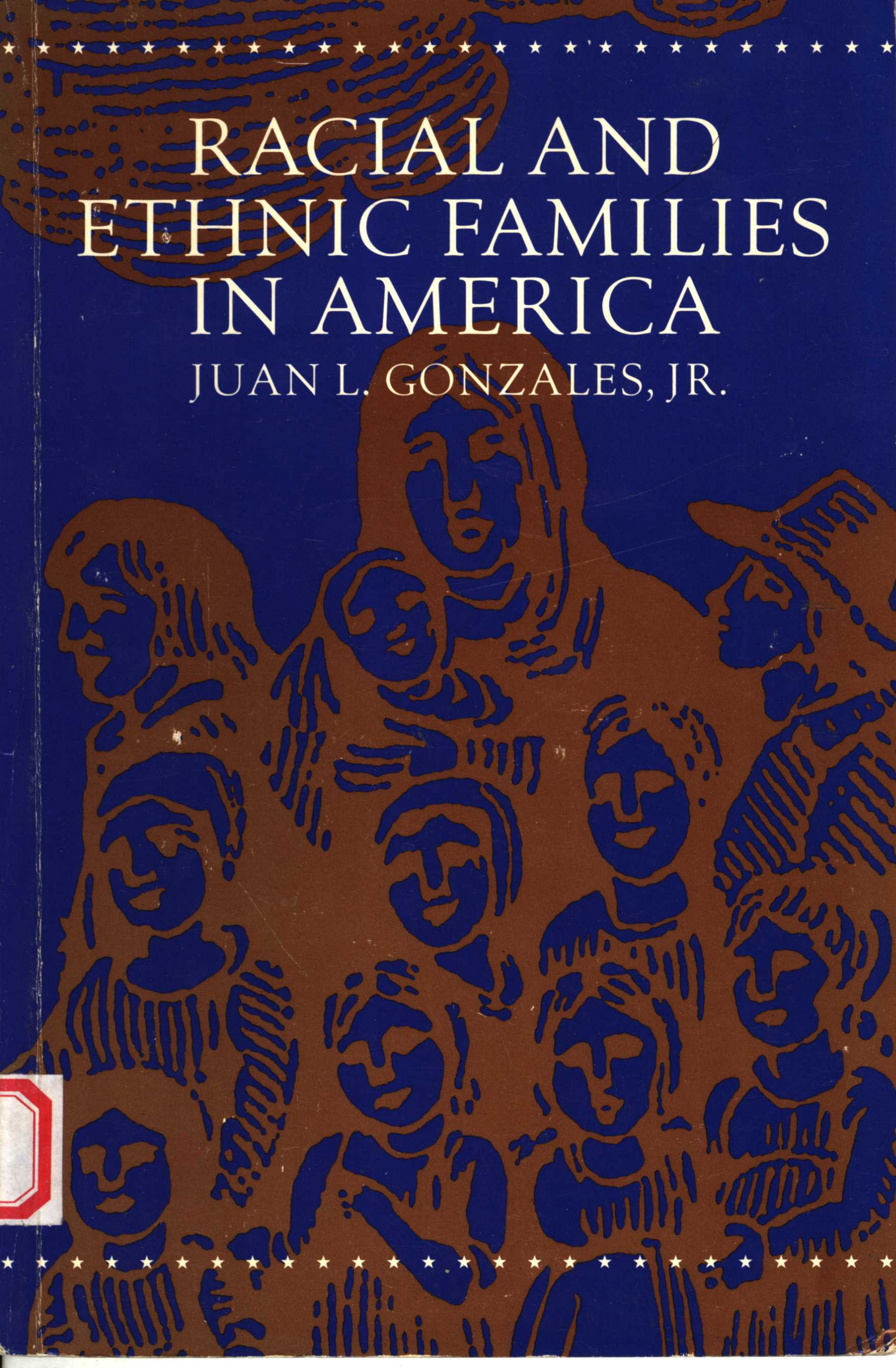
RACIAL AND
ETHNIC FAMILIES
IN AMERICA
JUAN L. GONZALES, JR.

RACIAL AND ETHNIC FAMILIES IN AMERICA

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Preface

Within the discipline of sociology the importance of racial and ethnic diversity has moved to the forefront of research and academic discourse. For this reason the study of sociology of the family is no longer centered on the sociological ideal of the monolithic Anglo American middle-class family. Fortunately most sociologists now realize that the idea of an American family type is simply an academic construct based on the pervasiveness and tenacity of a commonly held social myth that evolved out of the antiquated melting pot theory.

Today the focus of social science research is on the value of racial and ethnic diversity in American society. This change of orientation is a result of the gradual move from the monolithic Anglo centric approach in the theoretical and research perspective of American scholars to a greater appreciation and understanding of the pluralistic perspective. Today the pluralistic perspective has evolved into the more appropriate multicultural perspective in social science research and teaching.

The recognition of the racial and ethnic diversity in American society today constitutes the foundation for this book. The purpose of this book is to provide students and scholars with an insight into the cultural diversity of the family in American society in the last decade of the twentieth century. It is my belief that a study of the cultural diversity and the uniqueness of each of these families will make the reader more aware of their contributions to the social evolution of American society as a nation of immigrants. Furthermore, it is my belief that an understanding of the history and culture of these racial and ethnic families will not only result in a greater understanding of their contributions to American society but will also engender a new appreciation of their long struggle to adjust to and succeed in American society.

Juan L. Gonzales Jr.

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1
The Chinese American Family

Introduction

As a result of historical circumstances and decades of immigration, the Chinese American family today is very diverse in its social structure and level of cultural integration. One of the most important factors to affect the Chinese American family over its 140-year history was the impact of the U.S. immigration laws. These restrictive immigration laws were not lifted until the end of the Second World War.

Today the Chinese are the second largest Asian minority in America and their numbers have increased dramatically following the passage of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965. While Chinese Americans have very high levels of educational achievement and occupational distribution, they also reveal a great deal of diversity as a result of their socioeconomic conditions, period of immigration, generational level, and degree of integration into the main stream of American society. Therefore it would be a mistake to view the Chinese American family as consisting of a single ideal type, recognized for its low divorce rates, conservative attitudes, absence of delinquency, strong cultural values, and their indefatigable drive for success. But in order to understand the Chinese American family today, one must take into account their history, immigration patterns, and their long struggle to gain acceptance in American society.

History of Immigration to America

While the actual date of arrival of the first Chinese in America is still under dispute, it is clear that the first significant number of Chinese immigrants arrived in San Francisco shortly after the discovery of gold in California. The U.S. Census reveals that there were only 758 Chinese living in America in 1850, but in ten short years their population

increased to 35,000. Virtually all of the original Chinese immigrants settled in California, with most concentrated in San Francisco, while others established a foothold in the mining camps in the Sierra Nevada foothills. By 1870 their population doubled to 63,000, and increased to over 100,000 by 1880 (See Table 1.1 Below).

Table 1.1
Chinese Population in the United States by Sex
1860–1980

Year	Total	Males	Females	Male/ Female Ratio	Percent Females	Percent Foreign Born	Percent 14 & Under
1860	34,933	33,149	1,784	18.6	5.1	—	—
1870	63,199	58,633	4,566	12.8	7.2	99.8	—
1880	105,465	100,686	4,779	21.0	4.5	99.0	—
1890	107,488	103,620	3,868	26.8	3.6	99.3	—
1900	89,863	85,341	4,522	18.9	5.0	90.7	3.4
1910	71,531	66,856	4,675	14.3	6.5	79.3	—
1920	61,639	53,891	7,748	6.9	12.6	69.9	12.0
1930	74,954	59,802	15,152	3.9	20.2	58.8	20.4
1940	77,504	57,389	20,115	2.9	25.9	48.1	21.2
1950	117,140	76,725	40,414	1.9	52.6	47.0	23.3
1960	236,084	135,430	100,654	1.4	74.3	39.5	33.0
1970	431,583	226,733	204,850	1.1	90.3	46.9	26.6
1980	640,563	321,316	319,247	1.0	99.4	—	—

Source: Kung, 1962:33; U.S. Census Reports, 1950–1980

It is clear that the Chinese came to California, like the thousands of European argonauts, to pan for gold. But the Chinese pioneers arrived as sojourners, as their primary objective was to earn as much money as possible, in the shortest period of time, and return home to provide a comfortable life for their families. For the most part they were either single men or married men who immigrated without their wives. Very few Chinese women made the long and difficult voyage to America.

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Hence there were less than 5,000 Chinese women in America thirty years after the discovery of gold in California, compared to a Chinese male population of over 100,000 (See Table 1.1, page 2). Historians report that the majority of these women were prostitutes, as only a couple of hundred were the wives of wealthy Chinese merchants.

As a result of discriminatory laws passed at the local and state levels, and racist U.S. immigration policies, these early immigrants were restricted to Chinatown, where they formed a "bachelor society" of cyclical sojourners (Barth, 1964; Cather, 1932). In view of the shortage of women and their inability to start families, they were not given an opportunity to set firm roots in American society. In 1922 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that the Chinese, as members of the Mongolian race, were not eligible for citizenship. To exacerbate their plight the Immigration Act of 1924 prohibited the immigration of their wives and children, and in California the Alien Land Laws of 1913 and 1920 prevented them from becoming independent farmers or property owners (Wu, 1972).

It is clear that the Chinese were never given the opportunity to start their families and develop a close knit community in America. For it was not until the end of the Second World War—almost a hundred years after they arrived in America—that they were even allowed to send for their wives and children.

The Origins of the Chinese Family

Historically the nuclear family served as the focal point of social organization and production in China and was firmly anchored in the Confucian philosophy of filial piety and the firm belief that the family is more important than the individual (Chao, 1983:121–125). The source of power in the family was firmly anchored in male authority patterns. Consequently the Chinese family was patriarchal, patrilinial, and patrilocal. The traditional Chinese family assumed the nuclear form and consisted of the husband, wife, and their children. In an agriculturally based society the nuclear family was also the primary source of production, as each member was required to contribute, in their own way, to the survival of the family. The stem family pattern evolved with the marriage, usually at an early age, of the eldest son. The stem family structure allowed for the growth of dependent nuclear families in the protective environment of a three generational extended family structure, consisting of the parents, their unmarried sons and daughters, their married sons and daughter-in-laws, and their grandchildren (Chu, 1969:52–57).

This elaborate family social structure was maintained as a result of the custom of arranged marriages. All Chinese marriages were arranged by the family elders, for marriage was considered a family affair and not a matter of individual choice.

Over time, the stem family was transformed into a joint family structure, consisting of the parents with their married sons, daughter-in-laws, grandchildren and the siblings of the parents and other tertiary relatives. The extended family was the most prevalent family form found in the thousands of villages across China at the time of the diaspora (Freedman, 1971:43–53; Lang, 1946:13–16).

While the family was the most basic unit of social organization and production at the village level, it was the extended, or joint family, that contained the necessary labor power and influence to endure over the long term. Given the size and the complexity of Chinese society, it was only natural that the extended families would eventually organize themselves into clans (Serrie, 1985:274). The elders in the village were the clan leaders and they were responsible for the cultivation and harvesting of the crops and the maintenance of peace and harmony in the village (Baker, 1979:55–67).

A critical appraisal of the traditional Chinese family structure reveals that it existed for the sole purpose of allowing a group of males to reproduce themselves. To put it bluntly, China was an exclusively male dominated society. The monopoly on life in the village and the power that men held in Chinese society is very clear when we consider that the practice of ancestor worship was a cornerstone of the Chinese philosophical and religious belief system (Ahern, 1973). The father and his sons were the most important members of the Chinese family, as the male line of authority and inheritance could be traced back in time for a dozen centuries, and those men living in the present time owe it to their progeny, and to future generations, to preserve and continue the male line of descent. For a man without heirs will cut the trunk of the family tree, and without sons to burn incense at his grave and honor his name in death, he is doomed to perambulate in the "other world" as a long lost wondering soul (Baker, 1979:73–74, 76–77).

Under this system of draconian patriarchy the daughters in the family did not in reality belong to their family of origin, since everyone knew that they would eventually be married off to another family, where their sole purpose in life would be to produce sons for their husbands and work as servants for their mother-in-laws (Lang, 1946:47-48). By way of

contrast the primary objective in life for all men was, (1) to marry for the benefit of the family, (2) to produce male offspring to continue the family name, and (3) to guarantee male heirs to carry out the rituals of ancestral worship (Baker, 1979:42).

This explains why all marriages were arranged by the family elders in China, as the bride and groom were not important in the historical scheme of things, but rather it was the family and the perpetuation of the male line that was of utmost importance. Consequently, arranged marriages were of critical importance in Chinese society and each family made every effort to find the right woman to produce the male heirs that were essential to the preservation of the family name and line of descent. To this end professional match-makers were employed and family backgrounds were carefully scrutinized (Hsu, 1948:79–93). In some cases, families would go so far as to betroth their children at the time of birth (Hsu, 1948:91; Yang, 1959:26).

The importance of producing a male heir is made very clear when we consider that a woman was not given social recognition by her in-laws until she produced a grandson, as the birth of a granddaughter was not always well received by the family. In some villages female infanticide was a common practice, and in others prepubescent daughters were sold into a life of prostitution or were auctioned off as servants to the wealthy (Baker, 1979:5–7; Kim, 1983:121; Yung, 1986:18, 20).

In the same vain a man was allowed to divorce his wife if she failed to provide him with a son, as barrenness was listed as one of the seven official reasons for divorce (Lang, 1946:40). However, in lieu of divorce the husband was allowed, by custom, to take a concubine who could provide his family with a male heir (Hayner and Reynolds, 1937:633; Hsu, 1981:50). And men of wealth and influence often had several concubines, or "lesser wives," because polygamous relations not only guaranteed a large extended family and kinship network, but also enhanced a man's prestige in the community (Yang, 1959:54–57).

The sons of concubines could inherit their fathers' property on an equal footing with the sons of the first wife, as the first wife was always considered the matriarch. But in no case were daughters ever allowed to inherit property (Baker, 1979:23). The only reward for women came in their twilight years when they could count on the respect and protection of their mature sons. Unfortunately this was the only time in a woman's life that she could expect to have any influence on family decisions.

For more than a score of centuries Chinese society was organized

around the belief that the family was the source of peace and harmony in society. Unfortunately, the social order in China was shattered in the early part of the nineteenth century by a series of political upheavals and natural disasters.

The Opium War (1839–1842) opened China for trade with the West and disrupted the social harmony of society. But more devastating was the civil war, known as the Taiping Rebellion, that began in 1850 and lasted for fifteen years. It resulted in the death of more than 25 million people (Mei, 1984a:227–232). To add to the national tragedy, between 1833 and 1880 China was plagued by a series of natural disasters, including droughts, plagues, infestations, and typhoons. These natural disasters resulted in the loss of crops and mass starvation. The coastal provinces of Kwangtung and Fukien were particularly hard hit (Wakeman, 1966).

Immigration To California

The discovery of gold in California in the spring of 1848 and the push of the natural disasters and civil war in China served as the magnetic force that drew the Chinese to America. However, those who made the long voyage to San Francisco were predominantly men, half of whom were single and the others were married but had left their wives and families at home (Coolidge, 1909:17–21). Chinese custom and law required their wives to remain with their in-laws, as a man's wife was considered his mother's domestic servant (Chao, 1983:58–60). It was also his wife's duty to perform the appropriate burial rites for her in-laws, should they pass away while their son was away. Having their wives in the village not only insured that their sons would eventually return home, but it also guaranteed that the sojourners would send money to their families (Liu, et al, 1984:286). As a matter of practice village elders often required sojourners to marry before they were granted permission to emigrate (Lyman, 1968: 323–324).

The strong cultural prohibition on female emigration resulted in a tremendous shortage of women in America. During the initial period of unrestricted immigration (1850–1882) some 220,000 men arrived in America (Sandmeyer, 1939:12, 16), compared to only 8,848 Chinese women (Lyman, 1968:322). As a result the total number of Chinese females in the United States only averaged five percent of the Chinese immigrant population between 1860 and 1900 (Lee, 1960:Table 7). While there were more than 100,000 Chinese males in America fifty years

after their initial arrival, the total number of females was less than four thousand (See Table 1.1).

Unfortunately, the majority of Chinese women in America during this early period were prostitutes. Most of these hapless women were either sold into prostitution by their families or kidnapped from their villages in China. In 1870, a woman who was bought for $50 in Canton could bring her procurer $1,000 in San Francisco (McLeod, 1948:18). Working as a prostitute, she could expect to earn her panderer an average of $3,500 per year (Hirata, 1979:15). This was at a time when Chinese laborers were doing well if they could earn a dollar a day (Ong, 1981:76). By 1870, there were over 150 houses of prostitution in San Francisco's Chinatown (Hirata, 1979:18). One historian estimated that eighty to ninety percent of the 6,000 Chinese women in California in 1876 were "daughters of joy" (Tsai, 1986:41).

The drastic shortage of women in Chinatown not only encouraged the proliferation of prostitution, but it also, (1) resulted in the creation of a bachelor society, (2) prevented the development of nuclear families in America, (3) delayed the procreation of a second generation of native born American citizens, and (4) made the majority of Chinese men perpetual sojourners. Furthermore, the shortage of women in Chinatown resulted in the creation of other social problems that were often associated with bachelor societies, such as prostitution, gambling, drugs (primarily opium use), and organized crime (the protection racket) (Lyman, 1974).

The Sojourner Family

The sojourner family consisted of a married man who spent most of his life working in America in order to support his wife and children who remained in China. Over a twenty or thirty year period the sojourner might make three or four visits to his village, where he would sire a child and then return to his job in America. A number of researchers have referred to this attenuated Chinese immigrant family form as the "mutilated family" (Sung, 1967), a "split-household family" (Glenn, 1983), or the "trans-Pacific family" (Mason, 1984:175).

Sometimes the sojourner experience was a generational phenomenon, since the sojourner tradition was often passed from father to son (Siu, 1952:39). This was most likely to occur when the aging sojourner returned to China to retire, whereupon he would order one of his sons to come to America to succeed him at his place of employment or to

assume control of his business (Nee and Wong, 1985:297). In the long term, the Chinese village reproduced the labor force for American industry, at no social or economic cost to American society (Hirata, 1979:7).

The majority of sojourners discovered that they had very few options and limited opportunities to establish a family in America. In large part this was due to the prohibitive cost of sending for their wives and children and the additional expense of maintaining a family in America. But of greater significance their inability to start their families was a direct result of the immigration restrictions imposed by the United States government, which in the end meant that family reunification for the great majority of sojourners was but a dream.

The Merchant Family

In reality Chinese merchants were the only ones who could afford to send for their wives and establish families in America. But more important, the merchants were the only ones who could legally bring their wives and children to America, following the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 (Tang, 1984:49).

Customarily the merchants arrived in America with sufficient capital to establish a business, but in a few cases ambitious and prudent sojourners worked for years to save enough money to start their own businesses. Many of these self-made entrepreneurs founded the laundries and restaurants that flourished in nineteenth century Chinatowns (Mei, 1984b:379–381). After five or ten years in business a merchant was prepared to return home and marry the woman selected by his family. It was essential that he accompany his bride, as a woman traveling alone faced extreme danger on the long voyage to America, and without her husband she would be mistaken for a prostitute (Yung, 1986:20).

When the wives of Chinese merchants arrived in America they could only look forward to a life of almost total seclusion. They rarely left their living quarters, for no woman of virtue would venture into the streets. During the nineteenth century any Chinese woman appearing on the street alone was automatically assumed to be a prostitute (Tang, 1984:48). When she did venture from her apartment it was only with her husband, who transported her in a sedan chair or a closed carriage.

During this early period the merchant family had little effect on the number of children in Chinatown. In 1900, children under the age of fourteen accounted for less than four percent of the Chinese population

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