



Education and Class: Chinese in Britain and the US

Yuan Cheng

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Introduction

Research goals

In this book, I shall compare the relative chances of occupational success of Chinese in Great Britain and Chinese in the United States in the 1980s.¹ Using existing large scale governmental sample surveys, I shall study the ethnic occupational attainment process. The focus is on the effect of education in determining occupational attainments.

Since the 1960s, there has been much research on Chinese in the U.S. Guided by liberal concern about racial and ethnic equality, many studies examined the effects of formal schooling and labour market experience on ethnic occupational attainments. Research of this kind primarily used secondary analysis of nationally representative sample data. Very often, comparisons were made between different ethnic groups. Findings concerning Chinese have generally reached a consensus that Chinese are relatively successful in obtaining professional occupations through extraordinary educational achievements.²

¹ This book studies Chinese who reported to be in work or unemployed. Therefore, it does not include illegal immigrants and those within working age but not in the labour force.

² More recently, studies of Chinese occupational attainments have shown that formal schooling has enabled Chinese to enter high paying occupations and industries. Yet within these occupations and industries, Chinese earn less than their white counterparts. This is because Chinese are under-represented in high paying positions, such as managerial positions. See Harriet Duleep, *Economic Status of Americans with Asian Descent: An Exploratory Investigation* (Washington: The United States Commission of Civil Rights, 1988).

Earlier studies of the ethnic occupational attainment process in Britain, however, paid scant attention to Chinese immigrants and their descendants.³ The limited number of published studies on Chinese are predominantly case studies, emphasizing the concentration of Chinese in the catering industry and their low social profile as a consequence of occupational encapsulation.

It is noticeable that most of the case studies from which these findings were obtained, were conducted in areas with large Chinese concentrations, for instance, Chinatown, where the traditional Chinese business of restaurants and take-aways prevails. The research findings are therefore relevant only to the catering Chinese community. They cannot be applied to the whole working Chinese population in Britain.

In this book, my first aim is to do an empirical study of the relative occupational attainments of Chinese in Britain. It is to draw an objective occupational profile for the working Chinese as a whole against the broader background of the British society. This suggests that findings on Chinese will be obtained through comparisons with other ethnic groups in Britain.

My second aim is to compare the relative chances of occupational success of Chinese in Britain with those of Chinese in the U.S. I want to see whether the occupational success of Chinese in the U.S is an exceptional case, or whether it can also be applied to other western industrial societies, such as Britain.

This comparison is important because of two related factors. First, the common perception is that Chinese are more occupationally successful in the U.S than they are in Britain. Does this reflect the true relative situations of Chinese in these countries or simply our limited knowledge of them? Secondly, on the basis of this commonly held perception, inferences about American exceptionalism are often made. Is it true that America is exceptional among western societies in allowing Chinese immigrants and their children to rise to the higher levels of the occupational structure? Do Chinese encounter more restrictive chances in Britain? Without making comparative results available, none of these questions can be answered.

This study also aims at answering a broader sociological question concerning the relative chance of occupational attainments for the same ethnic minority in two different industrial societies, i.e. Chinese in Britain and the U.S. The comparison will show whether the ascriptive penalty or advantage associated with ethnicity is the same in Britain and America, or whether it is true that America is exceptional in allowing ethnic minorities to succeed occupationally.

³ Home Affairs Committee. *The House of Commons Second Report from the Home Affairs Committee (Session 1984-1985): Chinese in Britain* (1985) 1.

Theories and hypotheses

Traditionally, discussions on ethnic occupational attainments are often centred around the theory of industrialism.⁴ According to this theory, industrialization requires more efficient use of human talents. Therefore, people of all classes should be given an equal chance to realize their own potential. As a result, occupational position should be increasingly legitimized by achieved status such as education and work experience, and not by ascriptive characteristics, such as ethnicity.

In spite of these suppositions about industrialism, previous studies have shown that ethnicity, often, still accounts for occupational disparity between majority whites and ethnic minorities.⁵ This is largely due to the fact that, given the same amount of education and seniority, some ethnic minorities do not achieve the same occupational level as their white counterparts. That is to say, minority members of all educational backgrounds suffer disadvantage in transforming their qualifications into commensurate occupational levels, although the degree of ethnic penalty may vary from one minority group to another. Because of this, the positive role of education in the advancement of ethnic minorities, which is implied by the human capital argument, is not generally supported.

Thus, the first hypothesis to test is whether the effect of ethnicity in general, Chinese in particular, is significant in Britain and America, once educational level and age are held constant. Can higher Chinese achievements in America be explained by higher educational attainments? Or are ethnic penalties simply greater in Britain?

The null hypothesis is that Chinese with the same qualifications as whites and other non-white minorities, enjoy the same chance of occupational success. Ethnicity in general, Chinese in particular, makes no difference in occupational outcome for those possessing the same

⁴ See Clark Kerr, *Industrialism and Industrial Man* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964); Peter Blau and O.D. Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York: John Wiley & Son, Inc., 1967).

⁵ According to Blau and Duncan, ethnic minority members have to cross three hurdles in the process of occupational attainment. American Blacks, for instance, have lower social origins which entail lower levels of education than whites. Thus they are handicapped at the first hurdle. Secondly, even given the same educational qualifications, Blacks enter the job market at lower levels. Finally, given the same education and career beginnings, the income of Blacks is lower than that of whites. Thus, the authors consider the socioeconomic disadvantage of American Blacks to be a result of multiple handicaps. See Peter Blau and Otis Dudley Duncan, *The American Occupational Structure* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc. Press, 1964); Otis Dudley Duncan, "Inheritance of Poverty or Inheritance of Race," *On Understanding of Poverty: Perspectives from the Social Sciences*, ed. D.P. Moynihan (New York: Basic Books, Inc. Press, 1965).

educational backgrounds. The level of occupational attainments may vary from one ethnic group to another, but for all ethnic groups, given the same educational qualification and age, the level of occupational success should be the same.

The ethnic assimilation theory asserts that the longer an ethnic group stays, the more it assimilates to the host society. Structural assimilation in education and occupation is considered essential because of its positive role in helping immigrants and their children to be acculturated and subsequently assimilated.⁶ Occupational integration is expected to reach a higher level among native-born ethnic minority members than among foreign-born immigrants. Thus, the effect of ethnicity is expected to be weaker in accounting for occupational differentials among the second and subsequent generations of ethnic minorities. With regard to Chinese, the question is whether, given the same education and age, British or American-born Chinese display less disparity in occupation than Chinese immigrants, when compared with other ethnic groups. This is the second hypothesis to test.

In addition to the above theories on the role of education in determining ethnic occupational success (i.e. industrialism and human capital), a new theory on ethnic enclave economy has recently been developed. It argues that the enclave may provide no worse chances for occupational success than the outside labour market.⁷ In New York City, positive effects of occupational returns to college education and labour market experiences are found for Chinese working both inside and outside the Chinese catering industry.⁸ Thus, the third hypothesis to test is whether the enclave effect on Chinese occupational success persists after education and age are held constant.

All three hypotheses concerning ethnic occupational attainments will be tested for male and female Chinese separately in Britain and the U.S. To study ethnic effects on occupation, comparisons are made between Chinese and majority whites and major ethnic minorities in each country. In the British case, Chinese are compared with British whites, Indians, Pakistanis, African Asians, West Indians and Irish. In the American case, Chinese are

⁶ Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964).

⁷ See Portes et al. "Immigrant Enclaves: An Analysis of the Labour Market Experiences of Cubans in Miami," *American Journal of Sociology* 86 (1980): 295-319; "Unwelcomed Immigrants: the Labour Market Experiences of 1980 (Mariel) Cuban and Haitian Refugees in South Florida," *American Sociological Review* 50 (1985): 494-514.

⁸ Min Zhou and J. Logan, "Returns to Human Capital in Ethnic Enclaves: New York City's Chinatown," *American Sociological Review* 54 (1989): 809-820. Note, "returns" refer to earnings.

compared with American whites, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Indians, Vietnamese, Hispanics, and Blacks.

The last comparative hypothesis concerns national differences in the relative chances of Chinese occupational success. The null hypothesis says, that after controlling for education, age, ethnicity, and national differences in occupational distribution and education, being Chinese in Britain entails the same propensity to succeed occupationally as being Chinese in the USA. This is to say, Chinese Americans are not more successful than British Chinese. It follows that America is not exceptional in providing avenues for Chinese immigrants to rise to the higher levels of occupational structure.

Although Chinese form the centre of statistical analysis, sociological discussion of the results does not apply only to Chinese. Prompted by the theoretical propositions behind hypothesis testing, the discussion will also address the relative occupational positions of other non-white ethnic minorities. The purpose is to try to understand (on a speculative level) the larger social forces which form the occupational situation of ethnic minorities in industrial societies.

To summarize, in this book I shall study the relative occupational position of Chinese in Britain and America. By studying Chinese in relation to majority whites and major ethnic minorities, I shall extend my discussion to include all non-white ethnic minorities. The conclusions with regard to ethnic occupational returns to education and ethnic assimilation will also apply to all ethnic minorities. By drawing comparisons between the relative occupational levels of Chinese in Britain and the U.S, I hope to make some inferences about the degrees of openness in the two societies.

Chapter descriptions

Theory

I first review previous work by American and British researchers on Chinese occupational attainments. I also discuss the research questions of this book in the light of existing literature. Then, I lay out the theoretical foundations of the major analysis to follow. The aim is to guide future discussion on ethnic occupational attainment process. Therefore, the rest of this chapter considers concepts relevant to ethnic occupational attainments: industrialism, human capital, enclave economy and American exceptionalism.

Data and methodology

In this chapter, I first describe the data sets I use in the analysis. In brief, I use a pooled data set of British national Labour Force Surveys 1983-1989 for the analysis of Chinese in Britain, and the 1980 United States Census of Population and Housing Public Use Microdata Sample A for the analysis of Chinese in the U.S. Secondly, I discuss the statistical techniques used in each chapter of data analysis: cross-tabular analysis in Chapters Three, Four and Six and the logistic regression analysis in Chapters Five, Seven and Eight. I also illustrate how to understand the logit models. Explanations are given for measures of goodness of fit, such as G-square (G^2), degrees of freedom (d.f), change in G-square (ΔG^2), change in degrees of freedom (Δ d.f), significance (p-value), percentage reduction in G^2 (rG^2) and index of dissimilarity, known as the percentage of misclassified cases (ID). In addition, I explain how to understand the parameter estimates and their transformations from fitted log odds ratios into fitted probabilities. Included in this chapter is a list of variables used in the logistic regression equations, with notes on how they are coded and the grounds for including them.

Demographic profile of Chinese in Britain

This answers simple questions about Chinese in Britain, who they are, where they come from, when they enter the country, and where they live. Thus, I look at a series of demographic variables, such as ethnic origin, country of birth, sex, age, year of arrival and region of residence. The analysis is guided by the belief that certain demographic characteristics may contribute positively to the subsequent occupational success of an ethnic group. Thus, the aim of this chapter is also to find out the relative demographic potential Chinese possess as compared with British whites, Indians, Pakistanis, African Asians, West Indians, and Irish.

Educational attainments of Chinese in Britain

In this chapter, I present secondary historical material on imperial China to show that, in spite of traditional Chinese culture placing high value on learning for its own sake, the belief that education would eventually lead to upward social mobility may also motivate the pursuit of learning. Similar evidence is also available for urban and rural Hong Kong, where the majority of Chinese population in Britain originate. Next, I examine the educational level of Chinese in Britain, as compared with other ethnic groups. To test the strength of ethnic effects on education, I fit

multinomial logit models in which education is a function of age and ethnic origin for men and women separately.

Occupational attainments of Chinese in Britain

This chapter focuses on the occupational attainment process of Chinese in Britain. First, I look at the occupational distribution of Chinese in comparison with other ethnic groups. Then, I test hypotheses concerning occupational returns to education as well as sector difference in occupational returns to education. The hypotheses relate to industrialism, human capital and the ethnic enclave economy. These hypotheses are tested separately for male and female immigrants.

Demographic profile of Chinese in the United States

In this chapter, which is a comparison to Chapter Three, I explore a series of demographic variables on sex, age, year of arrival, region of residence, and level of English speaking⁹ for all ethnic groups in the U.S. The purpose is to see how, given their demographic potentials, Chinese are likely to fare occupationally, in comparison with American whites, Blacks, Hispanics, Japanese, Koreans, Filipinos, Indians, and Vietnamese.

Educational and occupational attainments of Chinese in the United States

This long chapter correspond to Chapters 4 and 5.¹⁰ I start by looking at the educational distribution of all ethnic groups in the U.S. As in Chapter Four, I test the strength of the relationship between ethnic origin and the highest educational level by fitting multinomial logit models, in which the highest grade is a function of ethnicity and age. Next, as in Chapter Five, I test the hypotheses concerning ethnic occupational attainments. Again, the same hypotheses are tested separately for male immigrants, female immigrants, native-born males, and native-born females.

⁹ The information on level of English speaking is available only in the American data set. Similar information is not available in the British data set.

¹⁰ This chapter is not split up into two chapters, with separate ones on education and occupation, because historical materials presented in Chapter Three "Educational Attainments: Chinese in Britain" are applicable to the Chinese in the U.S.. The empirical analysis on education is fairly short and can hardly form a chapter on its own. Thus, it is simply combined with the analysis on occupation.