

Racial and Ethnic Families in America

Third Edition

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Dedication

For My Parents

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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Chapter 1



The Chinese American Family

Introduction

The total Asian American population today is about seven million. Of this number, Chinese Americans are the largest group, as one out of four of all Asian Americans are Chinese. One of the basic reasons for their size is that they were the first Asian immigrants to arrive in the United States and, following the passage of the Immigration Reform Act of 1965, their numbers increased dramatically (See Table 1.1 on the following page).

In view of the social and economic diversity that characterizes the Chinese American community today, it would be a mistake to view the Chinese American family as consisting of a single monolithic ideal type, that is a family structure that is recognized for its low divorce rates, conservative attitudes, absence of delinquency, strong cultural values, and an indefatigable drive for success. And 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.

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 affecting the Chinese American family over a century and a half of development in this country was the negative impact of U.S. immigration laws. These restrictive immigration laws were not lifted until the end of the Second World War. Therefore many of the characteristics that we observe in the Chinese American family today developed and evolved in response to the flux and flow of immigration from China and the attempt of Chinese immigrants to

Table 1.1
Asian Population U.S.: 1990

Asian Group	Total Number	Percent of Total
Chinese	1,645,472	24%
Filipino	1,406,770	20%
Japanese	847,562	12%
Asian Indian	815,447	12%
Korean	798,849	12%
Vietnamese	614,547	9%
Cambodian	147,411	2%
Hmong	90,082	1%
Laotian	149,014	2%
Thai	91,275	1%
Other Asian	302,209	4%
Total Asian	6,908,638	100%

adapt to the conditions affecting their community in the United States.

History of Immigration to America

Although the actual date of arrival of the first Chinese immigrants in the United States is still being debated by historians, it is a well known fact 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 the United States in 1850. However, in ten short years their population increased to 35,000. Virtually all of the original Chinese immigrants settled in California, and most of these pioneers were concentrated in San Francisco. The Chinese who did not settle in San Francisco were attracted to the mining camps in the Sierra Nevada foothills, where they panned for gold or founded small businesses. By 1870 their population doubled to 63,000, and in the following decade their numbers increased to over 100,000.

The Chinese, like the thousands of European Argonauts, came to California to pan for gold. A distinct difference however was that most of the Chinese pioneers arrived as sojourners, as their goal 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. Almost all of these pioneers were either single men or married men who immigrated without their wives. For during this early period of immigration very few Chinese women made the long and difficult

Table 1.2
Chinese Population In The United States
By Sex, 1860–1990

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	—	—
1990	1,648,696	821,542	827,154	1.0	99.5	69.3	19.3

Source: Kung, 1962:33; U.S. Census, 1950–1990

voyage to America. As a result there were less than 5,000 Chinese women in the United States thirty years after the discovery of gold in California, compared to a Chinese male population of over 100,000 (See Table 1.1 Above). The historical record indicates that the majority of Chinese women in the United States during this early period of immigration were prostitutes (Hirata, 1979). Overall only a couple of hundred of these women were the wives of wealthy Chinese merchants.

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

For these, and other reasons 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 Chinese immigrants were even allowed to send for their wives and children (See Table 1.2 Above).

The Origins of the Chinese Family

For centuries the nuclear family served as the focal point of social organization and production in traditional Chinese society and the family was firmly anchored in the Confucian philosophy of filial piety and the universal belief that the family is more important than the individual (Chao, 1983:121–125). The source of power in the Chinese family was based on male dominance and male authority patterns. In brief, the family in traditional Chinese society can best be described as patriarchal, patrilineal, 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 considered the primary source of agricultural production, since each member was required to contribute, in their own way, to the survival of the family. The stem family pattern was the universal form of the family and 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. The three generational extended family structure consisted of the parents, their unmarried sons and daughters, their married sons and daughters-in-law, and their grandchildren (Chu, 1969:52–57). This elaborate extended family structure was maintained by the Chinese custom of arranged marriages. For all marriages that occurred in the village were arranged by the family elders. In traditional Chinese society marriage was considered a family affair and never a matter of individual choice (Baker, 1968).

Over time the stem family was transformed into a joint family structure, consisting of the parents with their married sons, daughters-in-law, grandchildren, and the siblings of the parents and selected tertiary relatives. In view of the stability that this family structure provided the extended family was the most prevalent family form found in thousands of villages across China at the time of the diaspora (Freedman, 1971:43–53; Lang, 1946:13–16).

Although 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 resources to endure over the long term. Considering the size and the complexity of Chinese society, it was only natural that the extended families in each village across China organized themselves into clans (Serrie, 1985:274). The elders in the village were designated as the leaders of each clan and they were held responsible for the cultivation and harvesting of the crops and the maintenance of peace and harmony in the village (Baker, 1979:55–67; Yao-hua, 1948).

An unbiased but critical appraisal of the traditional Chinese family structure reveals that the Chinese family 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 becomes abundantly clear when one considers that the practice of ancestor worship served as the cornerstone of the Chinese philosophical and religious belief system (Ahern, 1973). Under this system the father and his sons were considered 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 (Ching, 1988). The men living in the present time owe it to their progeny, and to all future generations, to preserve and continue the male line of descent. For a man without male heirs will cut the trunk of the family tree, and without sons to burn incense at his grave and honor his name in death, a man is doomed to perambulate in the other world as a long lost wondering soul (Baker, 1979:73–74, 76–77; Feng, 1948).

Under this closed system of draconian patriarchy the daughters in the family did not belong to their family of origin, since everyone knew that they would eventually be married off, or sold, to another family. Once they were married their sole purpose in life was to produce sons for their husbands and work as servants for their mothers-in-law (Lang, 1946:47–48). In sharp contrast the primary objective in life for all men was, (1) to marry for the benefit of the family, (2) produce male offspring to continue the family name, and (3) guarantee male heirs to carry out the rituals of ancestral worship (Baker, 1979:42; Wolf, 1968).

The universal acceptance of male dominance explains why all marriages were arranged by the family elders in China. For the bride and groom were not important in the historical scheme of things, 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 the male line of descent. To this end the Chinese relied on professional match-makers in arranging the marriages of their sons and family back-

grounds were carefully scrutinized by local genealogists (Hsu, 1948:79–93). In order to preserve the family lineage some 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 in traditional Chinese society is abundantly clear, since 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. Female infanticide was an acceptable practice in some villages and in others prepubescent daughters were simply sold into a life of prostitution or were auctioned off as servants to wealthy merchants in the city (Baker, 1979:5–7; Kim, 1983:121; Yung, 1986:18, 20).

The strong emphasis on producing male heirs and the importance of the male line of inheritance allowed a man to divorce his wife if she failed to provide him with a son. For Chinese family law listed barrenness as one of the seven official reasons for divorce (Lang, 1946:40). However, in lieu of divorce the husband was allowed by Chinese custom to take a concubine who would then provide his family with a male heir (Hayner and Reynolds, 1937:633; Hsu, 1981:50). For this reason men of wealth and influence often had several concubines, or lesser wives, in their households, since 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 in traditional Chinese society 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 tangible 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 (Yu-ning, 1992).

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 tranquillity and social order in China was shattered in the mid-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 Chinese society. But even more devastating to the social order was the civil war, known as the Taiping Rebellion, that broke out in 1850 and lasted for fifteen years. It is estimated that the Taiping Rebellion 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 served as the magnetic force that attracted thousands of Chinese immigrants to America. Therefore the pull-factor was the attraction of jobs and the possibility of striking it rich in California and the push-factors were all related to the disruption caused by the civil war in China.

The Chinese immigrants who made the voyage to San Francisco were predominantly men, half were single and the others were married but had left their wives and families at home (Coolidge, 1909:17–21). According to Chinese custom and law their wives were required to remain with their families, as a man's wife was considered his mother's domestic servant (Chao, 1983:58–60). A man's wife was also required to perform the appropriate burial rites for his parents, should they pass away while he was on his sojourn to America. Perhaps of greater importance, having their wives in the village not only insured that their sons would eventually return home, but it also insured that the sojourners would send money to their families (Liu, et al, 1984:286). And as a matter of practice village elders usually required sojourners to marry before they were granted permission to emigrate (Lyman, 1968:323–324).

Eventually the cultural prohibition on female emigration contributed to the drastic shortage of Chinese women in America. During the initial period of unrestricted immigration from China (1850–1882) approximately 220,000 men arrived in America (Sandmeyer, 1939:12, 16). But during the same period of time only 8,848 women immigrated from China (Lyman, 1968:322). As a result of this tremendous imbalance, 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 the United States fifty years after their arrival, the total number of females was less than four thousand (See Table 1.1 on page 2).

The skewed sex-ratio was exacerbated by the fact that almost all of the Chinese women in the United States during this early period were prostitutes (Hirata, 1979). 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 a \$1,000 in San Francisco (McLeod, 1948:18). And working as a prostitute in Chinatown, she