CONTINUITY AND CHANGE

A PROFILE OF CHINESE AMERICANS

By PAO-MIN CHANG

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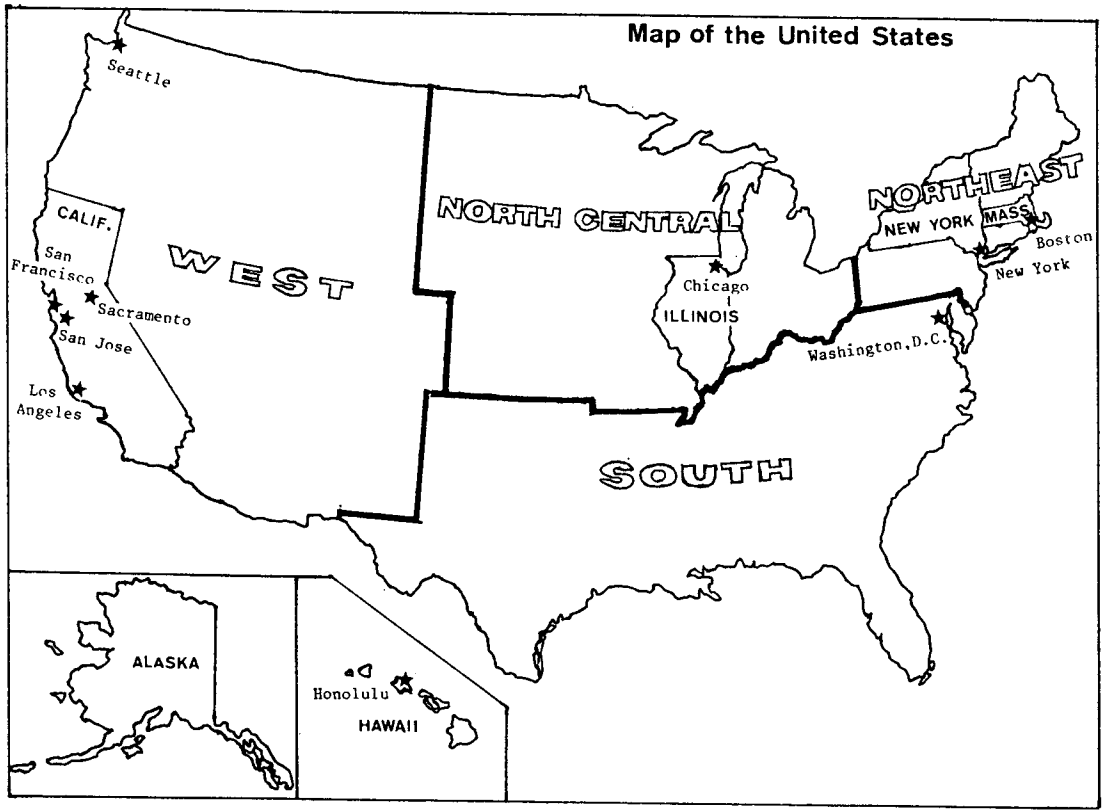
Preface

This little book evolves from a full year of intensive research in New York City between the years 1973 and 1974 and two subsequent trips to the United States in the late 1970s. In the course of preparing this volume, I have received assistance from a number of people who are actively involved in the Chinese community work in New York, particularly Mr. Daniel Yung, former director of the Research Section of the China Institute. I am also indebted to Ms. Fiona F. Chen and Ms. Nancy Kong for their unfailing help in the search of some obscure data. Moreover, I wish to express my gratitude to the Institute of Humanities and Social Sciences of the former Nanyang University for a timely grant that has facilitated the completion of the project in its final stages. Finally, my appreciation goes to those of my colleagues at the National University of Singapore who have read portions of the manuscript and made valuable comments. I only hope that this book will prove useful to all those who wish to know more about the Chinese Americans.

Pao-min Chang



Introduction

The population characteristics and socio-economic conditions of Chinese in the United States have undergone important changes since the first Chinese immigrant set foot in the country. To a large extent, such changes are closely related to the nature of Chinese immigration, which in turn has been determined primarily by the policies of the American government.

Generally speaking, three major periods can be discerned in the history of Chinese immigration to the United States. The initial period, which one may date roughly 1850 to 1870, was one of free immigration, during which the Chinese were treated with more or less utilitarian indifference. On the one hand, the two decades witnessed a rapid industrial development on America's West Coast, including the discovery of gold mines in California and the construction of the transcontinental railway network. On the other hand, these were also years of internal turmoil and natural adversities in south China. Since there was already regular maritime trade between China and America at that time, the advantage of hiring cheap Chinese labor to work in the United States soon became obvious to many shipping companies and industrial entrepreneurs. Thus began the first wave of Chinese migration to the United States. Due to the acute shortage of labor on the West Coast, the arrival of Chinese was also viewed as a timely help and was, therefore, welcomed. Industrious and docile, the Chinese were primarily hired to work in the mines and on the railroads, as well as in other "dirty" jobs scorned by the whites.[1] In fact, there was a consensus among

prominent Californian industrialists and statesmen of the time that Chinese laborers filled gaps that would otherwise have been left unfilled, and, as such, they made a valuable contribution to the economy and development of California.[2] The Chinese were also small in number and scattered around in several Western states, thereby attracting relatively little public attention. Although life was hard and lonely for them, they encountered, in general, little hostility among the Americans and were able to keep to themselves in peace.

However, the steady growth of the Chinese population in the United States, which had approached the mark of 100,000 by 1870 as a result of a continuing influx of laborers from China, soon began to be perceived by the American working class and the general public as a potential threat to their livelihood and well-being. Although this threat has been superbly demonstrated by some authors as having never been a real one at any time,[3] the general economic lull that developed in the 1870s on the West Coast and the completion of several major projects involving Chinese workers, particularly that of the transcontinental railway in 1869, did provide politicians and workers alike with a viable pretext for launching an anti-Chinese campaign. The physical differences of the Chinese coupled with their retention of traditional dress and customs, further made them a distinct group to spot, a natural object of ridicule, and an easy target of attack. Agitation against Chinese began to gather momentum in the early 1870s; suddenly the Chinese found themselves to be the source of all labor grievances and the center of attack by white Americans. And it is only natural that antipathy toward the Chinese as a labor force quickly came to be couched in racist terms that gave it moral justification. As the anti-Chinese sentiment became widespread, often accompanied by violent flare-ups, a Chinese Restriction Act—the first exclusive racial immigration law ever passed by the U.S. government—was adopted in 1882, and this law was to remain in force until 1943, thereby ending the free admission of Chinese laborers, skilled or unskilled. This was soon followed by a long series of laws enacted throughout the last quarter of the nineteenth century and the

early decades of the twentieth century to make the exclusion of Chinese effective and to eliminate competition from those Chinese already in the country.[4] Whereas legal immigration from China was all but totally suspended, at least 20,000 Chinese residents on temporary visits abroad were also prohibited to return "on moral and racial grounds."[5] Moreover, unreasonably stringent rules were devised to harass and burden other admissible categories of Chinese, often to the point of exclusion. Chinese officials, merchants, scholars, and students landing for temporary visits were treated like common criminals, subjected first to suspicion and detention and then to a restriction of their movements while they remained in the United States.[6]

In the meantime, for those Chinese who remained in the country, life was also made miserable by excluding them from a wide variety of occupations, by depriving them of the right to own land, by restricting their areas of residence, and by denying them fundamental civil rights and legal protection.[7] Wherever provisions of the law turned out inadequate or inoperative, they were more than compensated by overzealous and prejudicial law enforcers and by widespread discriminatory practices among the public. Left entirely helpless, the Chinese were thus subjected to all forms of harassment and intimidation, even including lynching and massacre.[8] During these prolonged years of exclusion and oppression endorsed by government policy and condoned by public opinion, those who could afford to purchase—often with all their savings—a space aboard a cargo ship destined for China hurried back home. As a result, the Chinese population in the United States dwindled steadily from 1890 on. Those who were unable to leave but managed to survive began—voluntarily and involuntarily—to confine themselves to small deserted areas in large cities and to activities and services catering primarily to the needs of the Chinese community itself, such as restaurants and laundries. Indeed, the position of the Chinese was so precarious and hopeless that an American scholar has been moved to write: "If we follow the yellow thread through those troublous years, it seems a miracle that any Chinaman remained alive in the country.[9]

The outbreak of World War II ushered in the third period of Chinese immigration, which witnessed a gradual liberalization of U.S. policy toward Chinese immigrants and the eventual acceptance of Chinese on an equal footing with their European counterparts. Among the major factors leading to such developments were the heroic resistance of the Chinese people against Japanese aggression during the first phase of the war and the subsequent China-U.S. partnership which led to a favorable turn of American public sentiments toward the Chinese. As the Chinese in the United States were economically castrated and geographically more dispersed becoming, therefore, physically less conspicuous, the issues of labor competition and racial purity also disappeared. The economic boom that followed the Great Depression of the 1930s was boosted by the war, which made the admission of the Chinese once again less objectionable, if not positively desirable. Thus, in an atmosphere of remorse and as a result of foreign policy considerations, the Chinese Exclusion laws were repealed in 1943, and an annual quota of 105 was stipulated for Chinese immigrants defined strictly in racial terms.[10] During the years immediately following the war, special pieces of legislation were also adopted to allow family reunion and to provide leeway for the admission of Chinese as part of a worldwide humanitarian program of accommodating refugees of the War.[11] The ensuing era of Cold War between the Communist bloc and the Western world further prompted the adoption of a new immigration law in 1952, which gave priority to the admission of highly skilled aliens in an intensive post-war scramble with the Soviet Union for talented foreigners. Whereas restrictions on admission of spouses and children of all Chinese-Americans were lifted, alien Chinese residents also became eligible for naturalization without discrimination for the first time in American history.

However, all these were by and large *ad hoc* measures, intended to meet the needs of a particular situation at a particular time, and the quota of 105 for the Chinese immigrants remained in force. What is more crucial, racial discrimination against the Chinese remained overt, pervasive, and unabated. The actual lot of non-white minority peoples in the United States did not see

real change until the late 1950s and the early 1960s, when the rapid post-war process of decolonization had led to the emergence of dozens of newly independent nations in Asia and Africa. With the growing impact of the non-white nations upon world affairs and with the Soviet Union assuming the role of self-proclaimed champion of Afro-Asian nationalism, it became increasingly untenable for the United States to persist in its policy of racial discrimination at home while still expecting to maximize its external influence vis-à-vis the Communist bloc.[12] In fact, the worldwide clamour for self-determination and racial equality also touched off an upsurge of civil rights movements in the United States during the 1950s and the 1960s. As a consequence, one witnessed, during the same period, a succession of positive steps taken by the U.S. government to liberalize its overall immigration policy and to outlaw the various discriminatory practices against all minority groups, Chinese included. These trends finally culminated in the enactment of a new, comprehensive immigration law in 1965, which granted the Chinese the same status as all other nationalities, with an annual quota of 20,000 new immigrants. The Chinese were therefore accepted, at long last, as equals of the white immigrants, at least legally.[13]

Obviously, the different policies adhered to by the American government toward Chinese immigration have had far-reaching effects upon the character of the Chinese in the United States during the past 100 years. Perhaps the major demarcation line may be drawn between those Chinese admitted before 1945 and those admitted after this time. Among the Chinese who came to the country prior to the end of World War II and stayed, the overwhelming majority consisted of voluntary and involuntary laborers of the peasant or worker origin.[14] In fact, this is also the only category of people who needed to emigrate during that period. Displaced by either natural calamities or war devastation, a substantial proportion of them had already become vagabonds and could not find a means of survival. Their primary motivation in emigrating from their native land was therefore little more than to escape economic disasters at home and to seek material profits. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the over-

whelming majority of Chinese immigrants arriving before 1945 came from one single province, namely Guangdong, which, apart from being conveniently situated on the established maritime routes, had also been most immediately and adversely affected by the long succession of foreign wars and domestic turmoils that plagued China throughout the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.[15] Pressed by acute economic hardship at home and shipped to the United States virtually as slaves or semi-slaves in the now notorious "pig trade," these Chinese were mostly single, predominantly male, and practically all of working age. What is more, they considered themselves as temporary sojourners, i.e., "Jin-shan ke" (guests of the Gold Mountain), and had little ambition except to make some money to bring home for retirement. Being illiterate, unskilled, and poor, they also had no chance whatsoever to move upward on the social and occupational ladder. Because of their low socio-economic status, the early Chinese immigrants thus inevitably carried with them the stigma of a vulgar, "heathen," and "barbarous" people in the eyes of white Americans and therefore could expect neither respect nor justice. Under the official policy of discrimination and exclusion, the Chinese also became a convenient object of intimidation and were easily subjected to various forms of unchecked exploitation and mistreatment. In a tight, vicious circle sustained by a hostile environment, their misfortune was therefore perpetuated. Out of all this also emerged the traditional image of the so-called "Chinaman," a stereotype that was associated with contempt and prejudice.[16]

In contrast to this early group of Chinese settlers, the Chinese immigrants who arrived after World War II—especially after 1950—have included a very large percentage of people with the middle- and upper-class background. Although economic considerations have remained important in many cases, the primary motivation of immigration for most of them has been to escape political uncertainties, if not outright persecution, at home. Therefore, practically all the new immigrants came to the United States with a clear intention to stay, often bringing along their families or sending for them as soon as possible after their

arrival, rather than leaving them behind. A large proportion of the "refugees" from this more recent period have actually represented the better educated and geographically and socially mobile elements of Chinese society. In fact, they included some four thousand Chinese students who had come to the United States on Chinese government scholarships toward the end of the war, and who were unable to return due to the Communist takeover of mainland China.[17] The rapid expansion of higher education in the United States in the 1950s and the 1960s and the huge investment in scientific and technological research further attracted thousands of Chinese students every year from Taiwan and Hong Kong to come for advanced study. And due to the combined effects of a less hostile social environment in the United States and the continuing political uncertainties in their homeland, most of these students have tried, often successfully, to find employment related to their academic pursuits after graduation; many have eventually decided to stay as immigrants. Highly skilled and no longer restricted in their occupational pursuits, these young men and women were able to explore the variety of opportunities available to them. As a result, a whole new generation of Chinese professionals in all fields, including science, education, industry, and public health, has emerged during the last three decades. Generally young, well-educated, and polished in manners, this rather large group of new immigrants and their performance have at least begun to modify, if not to change entirely, the traditional image of the stereotyped Chinaman among white Americans.[18]

This dramatic change in the character of Chinese immigrants is particularly significant for two major reasons: first, it has taken place in a relatively short period of twenty years; and second, it has assumed a magnitude that is unprecedented in the history of Chinese immigration. As a matter of record, not only have the two decades or so since 1950 witnessed the most rapid growth of the Chinese population in the United States of all times, but also the actual number of new Chinese immigrants admitted since 1950 has exceeded the total Chinese population in the country at any time prior to 1950. Between 1950 and 1970, over

150,000 new immigrants were admitted, and the total Chinese population increased nearly three times, from 150,000 to 431,583. During 1971-77, another 157,105 Chinese immigrants arrived in the country. This large influx of new Chinese immigrants in such a short span of time is bound to affect, in a variety of ways, the overall profile of the Chinese community as a whole. At the same time, the abolition of overt discrimination against Chinese with the enactment of a series of civil rights laws in the 1960s has also had a decisive and permanent impact upon the lot of the Chinese already in the country and especially of the native-born generation. It means that, for the first time in a century, they have been accepted as part of the American society and can at least hope for a better future. Thus, it is perhaps high time to examine the extent and manner of such changes within the Chinese population and to assess their implications for both the Chinese community itself and the American society at large.

Although a growing number of scholarly works dealing with the general topic of Chinese-Americans have appeared during the last decade or so, practically all the major works have focused their attention upon the rosy aspects of the change that has been sweeping through the Chinese community. Also, little comparison has been made between the Chinese and other ethnic groups to place the Chinese performance in proper context. Moreover, the question of whether the fruits of progress have been more or less evenly distributed among all Chinese-Americans remains to be answered. As a result, the pictures derived from these studies are often not well balanced and are sometimes even misleading. The purpose of this study is therefore three-fold: first, to assess the overall demographic trends and socio-economic status of the Chinese in comparison with other Asian-Americans—primarily Japanese and Filipinos—as well as with the entire United States; second, to determine patterns of continuity, as well as trends of change of the Chinese population itself over time, with particular emphasis upon the period since 1960; and third, to find out uniformities and disparities within the Chinese population in terms of geographical divisions and residential patterns, as well as by various social and

economic criteria. These three objectives also delineate the general framework within which the materials will be organized. However, since the study is intended to serve only as a basic reference, emphasis is placed upon analyzing and interpreting statistical data in a comparative perspective, so as to give a general view of the overall situation, to identify problems that might exist, and to provide a rough projection of future trends in the next decade or so.

So far as the hard data are concerned, the primary sources of this study consist of the voluminous census data published by the U.S. Bureau of Census, particularly for the years of 1960 and 1970, the annual reports of the Immigration and Naturalization Service; the data on crimes tabulated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation; and the vital statistics compiled by the U.S. National Office of Vital Statistics. In addition, relevant studies done by scholars and Chinese community service groups in different cities are also utilized wherever needed, either to provide background information or to correlate specific findings. However, some reservations appear to be in order with respect to the census statistics. Apart from the always unavoidable human and mechanical errors that occur in any massive statistical operation such as the decennial census, most of the data collected are based upon 20 to 25 percent samples of the Chinese population in each locale, which presumably could still show considerable deviation from the true picture. The major limitations, however, lie in the degree of cooperation between the census takers and the target persons to be surveyed. Here it must be noted that the majority of the Chinese population are foreign born and a substantial proportion of it—especially among the older generation—understand little English and have little or no literary skills. For these Chinese, at least, to carry on effective communication with the census takers is often beyond their capacity. This is particularly true for those who are hard pressed by life and are often therefore unable to spare time or energy to answer questionnaires. All this would also present additional difficulties for the census takers who might not always have the patience or time to do their jobs well.

But what is perhaps most important: such problems of communication due to language or other barriers tend to be further compounded by a deep-rooted apprehension of many Chinese residents toward the government and those who represent it. And in view of the long history of repression the Chinese settlers have gone through, their fears are indeed natural and understandable. Their bitter experience and memory of the past alone would constitute a strong impetus to avoiding any contact with the government and to persisting in an attitude of suspicion toward any government undertaking. This is particularly true in the case of census taking, which can be easily mistaken for some form of investigation; presumably, withholding of information in general and under-reporting of actual population in particular would not be uncommon. All this is bound to compromise the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the data collected.

However, while the lack of literary skills and misgivings about census-taking appear to be mutually reinforcing in themselves, it may be safe to assume that the older, less-educated, and poorer Chinese would tend to be less cooperative with the census takers and more evasive in responding to questions about their personal or family conditions. On the other hand, the better educated, the younger, and the more affluent with little language barriers would presumably be more capable of supplying accurate information. Having little knowledge of the past, better aware of the nature and merit of census surveys, and without experiencing overt racial discrimination, they would also be, most likely, more responsive.

If the above analysis can be taken as generally valid, then it may be concluded that in the census data used in this study there are proportionally more feedbacks from Chinese of the middle and upper social echelons than from those of the lower ranks. One obvious consequence is that the overall socio-economic profile of the Chinese emerging out of the data could well be much rosier than is the actual situation. For one thing, the actual size of the Chinese population might well have been underenumerated, especially for the inner sections of large metro-

politan areas which traditionally have accommodated the most impoverished Chinese. Such a likelihood is all the greater for the period covered by this survey, in view of the large proportion of well educated Chinese admitted as immigrants. With all these reservations in mind, nevertheless, the data utilized in the study do serve our limited purpose of outlining the general conditions of, and patterns of change within, the Chinese community in the United States as a whole. And it is hoped that the findings of the report will provide a useful guide to any further in-depth examination of the topic that might be undertaken by other interested scholars.

Contents