



The New Chinese America

Class,
Economy,
and
Social
Hierarchy

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Xiaojian Zhao

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The New Chinese America

CLASS, ECONOMY,
AND SOCIAL HIERARCHY

XIAOJIAN ZHAO



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CONTENTS

	Acknowledgments	ix
	Note on Transliteration	xiii
	<i>Introduction: Rethinking Chinese America</i>	I
I	<i>Contemporary Chinese American Population: The Documented and the Invisible</i>	17
2	<i>Drawing Lines of Class Distinction</i>	39
3	<i>"Serve the People": The Ethnic Economy</i>	74
4	<i>The "Spirit of Changle": Constructing a Regional Identity</i>	102
5	<i>Surviving Poverty in an Ethnic Social Hierarchy</i>	132
	<i>Conclusion: Inclusion or Exclusion?</i>	160
	Notes	167
	Selected Bibliography	185
	Index	193

Introduction

RETHINKING CHINESE AMERICA

SCHOOLS WERE IN FULL SESSION in late April. Tests were scheduled and papers and projects were due soon. But few graduating seniors with college admissions in hand would let schoolwork spoil their celebratory mood. The air was filled with a palpable excitement. The few weeks ahead would be about proms, graduations, and gatherings reaffirming friendships before bidding farewell.

Within the Chinese American community, excitement was mixed with high anxiety over the mysterious college admissions process. The success (or failure in some cases) of the soon-to-be-college students prompted many questions from parents with younger children: Why was a particular student accepted by one college but rejected by another? Why did John win a scholarship while his equally outstanding friend Larry got nothing? What exactly were the universities looking for? How much did they weigh extracurricular activities versus grades and test scores? And how should the younger high-school students prepare themselves for the upcoming challenges?

Chinese American parents' high anxiety over the college admissions process and their strong desire to push their children ahead of the game were well anticipated by ethnic educational services. No time would be wasted. Before the departure of the senior class, programs were already scheduled to engage parents of younger children. On April 26, 2008, for example, a two-day "Education Show and Seminars" program was held in Los Angeles. This event was sponsored by *Shijie ribao* (Chinese Daily News), the most popular Chinese language newspaper in the United States; the Elite Educational Institute; and several professional services. Offering eighteen lectures and thirty exhibit tables, this education fair

made available bilingual information on a wide range of topics. Lack of English proficiency, however, was not the reason for those who drove for hours to Los Angeles from all over southern California to attend these seminars; most participants were well informed. They came to this event because they believed that their ethnic service providers would have more to offer than what was available from their local high schools. It was a great opportunity for strangers from similar cultural backgrounds and with the same anxieties to mingle and exchange information and knowledge with one another, using a familiar language. The lectures and materials were about American colleges and universities, but all were delivered and disseminated in a unique Chinese American style. This was apparent in the program highlights, including catchy topics such as "Realizing the Ivy League Dream: The Three Musts in College Application," "How to Ace the SAT!" and simply, "The Road to Harvard." Only those in the know were invited to speak; among them were admission officers or members of university recruitment teams, alumni of the Ivy League, and professional education consultants.¹

In the past few decades, accompanying the rapid growth of the Chinese American population, many ethnic business districts—the new Chinatowns—have emerged in New York, Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area, Houston, and other parts of the United States. Many different classes and programs are offered to both middle-class Chinese Americans and immigrant workers, and advice on education is only one of the hundreds of services provided by Chinese American entrepreneurs. This development reflects a high level of participation in the ethnic economy from a very diverse Chinese American population. There have been ups and downs in the U.S. economy in the past two decades, but even when the price of gas skyrockets and the unemployment rate peaks, a deserted parking lot is a rare scene in Chinese business districts. As many Chinese living in the United States have become Americanized, and a significant proportion of them have achieved middle-class status and become suburban dwellers, the growth of the ethnic economy and its ability to draw participants from the community as entrepreneurs, laborers, and consumers are phenomenal.

This book is not about how much the Chinese have achieved in the United States; other scholars have studied that aspect of Chinese American history.² This study is built upon the existing scholarship,

with a clear understanding that a substantial proportion of the Chinese American population has experienced significant upward mobility. Rather than repeating or adding to what has been done, the book will approach the ethnic community from a different angle and analyze the means through which such social mobility is made possible. If as a whole the Chinese in the United States have achieved remarkable success at a faster pace than people of other ethnic backgrounds, what in their unique experience has made such a difference? What price did they pay and exactly who paid it? To this end the book explores the inner workings and internal dynamics of the community. Through discussions of demographic composition, social hierarchies, economic networks, and group organizations, it traces the threads that bring the individuals together and illuminates the relationships among various social groups.

Studying contemporary Chinese America is a challenging task for a number of reasons. First, the current Chinese population in the United States is huge compared to what it was in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were only 77,504 Chinese residing in the United States in 1940. Two decades later the number had increased to 237,292. Since the 1965 Immigration Act abolished the racially biased quota system, the Chinese American population has doubled every decade. The 2000 census shows a record high of close to 2.9 million Chinese, even though a significantly large number of undocumented immigrants were probably left uncounted.³

Second, the demographic composition of contemporary Chinese America is strikingly different from that of the earlier period. The 1965 Immigration Act, with its basic provisions for family reunification and practical preferences for certain skilled labor and professionals, provides a legal framework that works to diversify the ethnic population. Unlike the immigrant laborers who originated from the Cantonese-speaking regions in southeast China, the new immigrants arrive from Hong Kong, Taiwan, various parts of the People's Republic of China, as well as Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. Their diverse regional background and their differences in former national allegiance are in sharp contrast to that of the pioneer Chinese immigrants from rural Guangdong. In today's Chinese America, several Chinese dialects are spoken along with English; some individuals cannot communicate with one another within the community due to their linguistic differences.

Third, unlike the old days, when the majority of the Chinese were restricted to segregated Chinatowns in large cities, post-World War II opportunities have dispersed the ethnic population, obscuring the geographic boundaries of the community. To a large extent, racial discrimination during the period of Chinese Exclusion (1882–1943), World War II, and the Cold War era worked to facilitate the construction of an ethnic identity, as Chinese Americans living in the ghettos reached out to each other in solidarity. Postwar geographic and social motilities, on the other hand, have fragmented the community, making organization along ethnic lines far more difficult. The heterogeneous rather than homogenous nature of Chinese Americans today poses a major question to the current study: does it still make sense, or is it feasible at all, to view all the Chinese living in the United States as belonging to one single community?⁴

Yet it is the amazing strength of ethnicity under new and ever more complex circumstances that makes studying Chinese Americans tempting. Regardless of the diversity of the population, the reduction of political pressure from the larger society, and the disappearance of confined ethnic ghettos, the Chinese have shown an unusual ability to bond to one another. Overcoming their differences in political ideologies and economic interests, individual Chinese have continued to use ethnicity as a base of personal identity and collective activities.⁵ This phenomenon makes it appealing to approach Chinese American history from a cultural perspective. Elements of a culture built on shared history, sentiments, ethos, and language that can be traced back to Confucian China are not difficult to find, and memories and feelings about the past still play an important role in group affiliations.⁶ But as many cultural history scholars have found, culture is not fixed and static but rather in constant flux under contestation and negotiation. The ways in which Chinese Americans practice their traditional culture through the arts, language, religion, festivals, and performance, for example, are often reflections of the changing circumstances surrounding them in America. The Chinese did not simply transplant their traditional culture in American soil; they reconstructed or reinvented it constantly.⁷ A substantial number of the narratives in this book are based on conversations with individual participants. While these conversations do reveal sentiments and ethos that can be identified as related to Chinese culture, the main concern is

not what is said or done, but rather the larger social context in which these individuals are embedded.

Instead of assuming that ethnicity is a given, this book traces the ways that ethnicity is utilized by a large contingent of Chinese of varying social, economic, political, and national origins to shape their fate in the United States. It explores the historical, economic, and social foundations of the Chinese American community and the ways that ethnicity is reworked in a society undergoing rapid change. The new mechanisms that work to connect Chinese Americans today developed after the decline of the organizational networks built by pioneer Chinese immigrants, and the ways in which these mechanisms pull otherwise unrelated individuals together are drastically different from those of the old days.

This book examines the internal class dynamics among individuals in contemporary Chinese America. Because hostilities and violence had halted Chinese immigration and kept the immigrants out of the mainstream job market, ethnicity more than class tended to determine social relations of the community before World War II. Racial oppression and the struggle for racial equality are central themes of scholarly writings on the early history of Chinese in the United States. Relatively few scholars have paid attention to class differences, partly because it is assumed that racial oppression against the Chinese determined the ethnic minority's low socioeconomic status during the years of exclusion.⁸ In contrast, access to mainstream opportunities after exclusion seems to have allowed Chinese Americans to be transformed from a low class of worthless, excludable, unassimilable subhumans to a group of hardworking good citizens most likely to be found on college campuses, in business circles and high-tech industries, and within well-maintained suburban neighborhoods. Although many social scientists have challenged the so-called "model minority" theory by providing evidence to show that success and wealth are not shared by everyone or equally distributed, they have often attributed such discrepancies to the existence of a large immigrant population.⁹ The hidden assumption is that moving up is only a matter of time for everyone who is willing to work hard, and that as a whole contemporary Chinese America is very much a middle-class community. To reduce ethnicity to class, however, is to refuse to see the relationship between ethnicity and class. If a large number of Chinese Americans have advanced in class terms and many

more are on their way up, what about the ones who have failed to do so or have little hope of achieving the same goals? Does the structure of the ethnic community pave the way for success for some individuals while denying opportunities to others?

Although always important, material possessions are not the only measure of class identification. In recent decades, some social scientists have found that class is a form of social identity constructed by individuals to cement group affiliations. Because of the long history of Chinese immigration and legal restrictions, and because of the rapid historical, economic, and social changes that have taken place in both the United States and the immigrants' ancestral land, an individual's social class can be defined in a multitude of ways.¹⁰

This book uses class analysis to expose the other side of the Chinese American experience in the very place where the model minority was born. It shows the difficulties of everyday survival for some Chinese laborers, and reveals their positions in a new social hierarchy. The large inflow of an immigrant population has made it possible for the expansion of an ethnic economy, in which entrepreneurs can maintain a competitive edge given their access to low-cost labor; workers who do not have access to the mainstream job market due to their lack of marketability or legal restrictions can find employment and survive; and consumers can enjoy high-quality services at bargain prices. While the growth of the ethnic economy enhances ethnic bonds by increasing mutual dependencies among different groups of participants, it is hardly a win-win situation for everyone. As shown in the following pages, the economy functions to limit possibilities for disadvantaged groups, especially undocumented immigrants.

Relying on a wide range of sources, this study combines historical research with methodologies commonly used in sociological and anthropological approaches. The assessment of the scale of Chinese immigration and the size of the Chinese population is largely based on official government documents, including the U.S. census, Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) statistics, and surveys, case reports, press releases, and special investigation files of government agencies and research institutions. Most discussions of community dynamics are based on sources produced by Chinese Americans themselves. I rely on Chinese-language newspapers to trace historical developments and community

activities. The North American edition of *Shijie ribao*, the largest Chinese-language newspaper that operates through regional service branches in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Houston, Vancouver, and Toronto, provides the most comprehensive coverage. This Taiwan-based newspaper is truly a global enterprise. With branch offices in the People's Republic of China and Hong Kong and reporters covering different parts of the world, it offers transnational links between the ethnic community and immigrants' ancestral land as well as the Chinese diaspora. I also consult more than a dozen other Chinese-language newspapers published in California, Nevada, New York, and Texas, as well as convention proceedings, special reports, newsletters, and other miscellaneous publications from more than forty Chinese American organizations, archives, cultural centers, and churches in the Los Angeles and San Francisco Bay areas, Seattle, Washington, D.C., New York, and Boston.

The profile of ethnic businesses is drawn largely from the *Chinese Consumer Reports*, the *Chinese Consumer Yellow Pages*, and the *Chinese Business Guide and Directories* published in twelve regions in the United States, including metropolitan areas of San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Las Vegas, Seattle, Chicago, Houston, New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Washington, D.C., and Boston. Some detailed information about certain businesses is obtained from classified advertisements in Chinese-language newspapers. Although the number of specific businesses and organizations analyzed in detail is limited, together these materials inform my discussions of the changes within Chinese America.

A large part of the research is based on oral history interviews. Using personal connections and community networks, I have been able to recruit 128 individuals to participate in this project. The fifty-eight men and seventy women I interviewed are of diverse political, socioeconomic, and immigration backgrounds, including laborers and service providers, business owners and other employers of coethnic workers, and consumers of the ethnic economy; some of them also hold leadership positions in various community organizations (see table I.1). A total of thirty-six individuals interviewed are neither employers nor employees in the Chinese American economy: their affiliations with the community are limited to being consumers or having ties to religious organizations; political, business, and intellectual circles; and informal social groups. About 90 percent (115 individuals) of those

interviewed are immigrants who arrived after 1965 or are children of these immigrants; the other 10 percent (thirteen individuals) belong to the earlier immigrant generation. Of the 115 post-1965 immigrant interviewees, fifty-nine came from mainland China, thirty-four from Taiwan, and eleven from Hong Kong. Relatively few—a total of twelve—came from other parts of Asia. Fifty-two of the individuals are or were undocumented immigrants.

Working with undocumented immigrants requires additional effort because most of them could not afford to take time off from work. To get to spend time with them, I offered my own help. I accompanied non-English-speakers to medical clinics and served as an interpreter. I gave them rides and introduced them to services and English classes. Some individuals also consulted me on issues relating to their children's education or domestic disputes, and a couple of them asked me to communicate with immigration agencies on their behalf. These interactions helped me understand the everyday struggles of these men and women, which are as important as the other materials I have collected for my research.

TABLE 1.1

Characteristics and Geographic Distribution of the Interview Sample

	California	New York	Other States	Total
Male/female	29/52	23/14	6/4	58/70
Pre-/post-1965 immigrants	10/71	3/34	0/10	13/115
Origins: PRC/Taiwan/ Hong Kong/Others*	32/22/8/7	20/9/2/5	6/3/1/0	58/34/11/12
Documented/undocumented	54/27	15/22	7/3	76/52
Employer/laborer/others	23/33/25	14/18/5	2/2/6	39/53/36
Individual total	81	37	10	128

NOTE: Sample size = 128. Except for occupational characteristics, individuals born in the United States are counted according to the status of their parents. Some undocumented immigrants listed had gained legal status at the time of the interviews. Occupations are determined at the time of the interviews.

*Origins of pre-1965 immigrants are not recorded.

Although formally conducted and recorded interviews offer opportunities to examine individuals through their life experiences, they do have limitations. The participants are informed in advance that their identities will not be revealed in the published work, but some still do not feel comfortable speaking freely. One business owner in her late forties, for example, agreed to an interview after we met several times. She is lively, resourceful, well connected, and willing to help. But when the tape-recorder was on, even in the comfort of her own living room, she just could not be herself. Her tone was controlled, and she brushed aside several questions. She was reluctant to touch on certain topics; many of the rich and insightful details that she offered in our previous casual conversations did not surface at all in the recorded interview.¹¹

Beginning in the summer of 2004, I modified my research method. In addition to the in-depth interviews, I started to collect information in less formal settings. I continued to schedule meetings with officials or staff members while visiting a community organization. Once there, however, I would also take the time to look around, take pictures, pick up free brochures, check out news and ads on the bulletin board, and chat with other visitors. In ethnic clusters in New York, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Oakland, Boston, and other cities, I attended church services, Bible study sessions, social gatherings, and meetings of organizations. I also conducted research in employment offices, immigration firms, day-labor jobsites, dating services, bridal shops, travel agencies, beauty salons, motels, restaurants, and supermarkets (see table I.2). These field trips gave me many opportunities to observe and talk to people. In Chinese-operated motels, I talked to clerks and cleaning ladies and observed interactions between owners/managers and their employees. In Bible study sessions, I listened to the prayers of laborers and learned how these men and women justify their sufferings through their faith in God. These observations and casual conversations have helped me gain a better understanding of the workings of ethnic community and allowed me to reach out to many individuals who are largely invisible to the academic world.

Research trips to day-labor jobsites, employment agencies, and immigration firms have been most rewarding. In metropolitan areas with a highly concentrated Chinese American population, construction workers would gather on certain street corners every morning, looking

TABLE 1.2

Research Sites and Locations

	California	New York	Other States	Total
Restaurants	4	1	1	6
Day-labor camps	1	1	0	2
Employment offices	2	2	0	4
Immigration services	2	0	0	2
Motels/hotels	2	2	0	4
Churches	1	1	0	2
Travel/transportation	1	2	0	3
Community organizations/events	7	4	1	12
Other business/services	3	2	0	5

for a chance to work for the day. While waiting for potential job offers, the laborers would share their tactics in dealing with their employers and let out frustrations from time to time. The ways these laborers negotiated with their potential bosses—mainly construction contractors or middle-class Chinese American homeowners—offer invaluable insights into the power relations between coethnic employees and employers. Similar negotiations are commonplace inside employment agencies, where many job seekers are women. The stories that I heard from the workers and clients gathered in the waiting rooms of immigration law firms reveal rich details of the daily struggle of many Chinese immigrants who are not as fortunate as average Americans.

I made a major effort to reveal positions of underprivileged community members who have been largely absent in existing scholarships regardless of their indispensable roles. Table I.1 shows that a relatively large number of the interviewees are laborers, many of whom are undocumented. Some of the research sites listed in table I.2 were selected because these workers often congregate there. Most businesses included in the study tend to be small or medium in size, because these are typical of the ethnic economy.

My selection of research sites and objects invites questions that must be addressed. Are the participants in the project an accurate representation of the entire Chinese American population? Why is relatively little space devoted to the most successful members of the community, the