Once Excluded, Now Ascendant

By

Min Zhou


Chinese Americans are the oldest and largest ethnic group of Asian ancestry in the United States. They have endured a long history of migration and settlement that dates back to the late 1840s, including some 60 years of legal exclusion. With the lifting of legal barriers to Chinese immigration after World War II and the enactment of a series of liberal immigration reforms since the passage of the Hart-Celler Act of 1965, the Chinese American community has increased more than ten-fold. The community grew from 237,292 in 1960 to 1,645,472 in 1990 and to 2,879,636 (which includes the Taiwanese population and some 447,051 mixed-race persons) in 2000.

Much of this tremendous growth is due to immigration. According to the U.S. Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS), 1,465,117 immigrants were admitted to the United States from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan as permanent residents between 1961 and 1998—nearly half of them between 1991–1998 alone. China has been on the INS list of top ten immigrant-origin countries in the United States since 1980.

The U.S. Census also attests to the big part played by immigration. As of 1990, foreign-born Chinese accounted for more than two-thirds of the ethnic Chinese population in the United States. Despite high rates of immigration, however, the foreign born share of the ethnic population dropped substantially to 47 percent in 2000, indicating that the Chinese American population in the 21st century will steadily grow more from child-bearing by those already in the country than by those arriving from the other shore of the Pacific Ocean. This chapter offers a demographic profile of Chinese Americans and discusses some of the important implications of drastic demographic changes for community development.

Historical demographic trends

The Chinese American community has remained an immigrant-dominant community, even though members of this ethnic group arrived in the United States at a much earlier time than many Southern and Eastern European-origin groups, such as Italians and Jews, and than any other Asian-origin groups. While the majority of Italian, Jewish, and Japanese Americans are maturing into third and fourth generation since their respective groups' arrivals in the

Today, the Chinese American community must face unique issues that involve their growing incorporation into American society.
United States, Chinese Americans at the dawn of the 21st century are primarily made up of first and second generation—47 percent foreign-born and another 20 percent U.S.-born with foreign-born parentage. The third generation (U.S.-born with U.S.-born parentage) accounts for 33 percent.

Legal exclusion that lasted more than 60 years between 1882 and 1943 explains the twisted demographic development prior to World War II. In the mid-19th century, most Chinese immigrants arrived in Hawai’i and the U.S. mainland as contract labor, working at first in the plantation economy in Hawai’i and in the mining industry on the West Coast and later on the transcontinental railroads west of the Rocky Mountains. These earlier immigrants were almost entirely from the Canton region of South China and intended to stay only as long as it took to “dig” enough gold to take home.

But few realized their gold dreams; many found themselves instead easy targets of discrimination and exclusion. In the 1870s, white workers’ frustration with economic distress, labor market uncertainty, and capitalist exploitation turned into anti-Chinese sentiment and racist attacks against the Chinese. Whites accused the Chinese of building “a filthy nest of iniquity and rottenness” in the midst of the American society and driving away white labor by “stealthy” competition and called the Chinese the “yellow peril,” the “Chinese menace,” and the “indispensable enemy.”

In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was renewed in 1892 and later extended to exclude all Asian immigrants until World War II. The number of new immigrants arriving in the United States from China dwindled from 123,000 in the 1870s to 14,800 in the 1890s, and then to a historically low number of 5,000 in the 1950s. This trend did not change significantly until Congress repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943.

**Moving eastwards**

Legal exclusion, augmented by extra-legal persecution and anti-Chinese violence, effectively drove the Chinese out of the mines, farms, woolen mills, and factories on the West Coast. As a result, many Chinese laborers already in the United States lost hope of ever fulfilling their dreams and returned permanently to China. Others, who could not afford the return journey (either because they had no money for the trip or because they felt ashamed to return home penniless),

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**Chinese American Population, 1890-2000**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Chinese Americans</th>
<th>Sex ratio*</th>
<th>% born in United States</th>
<th>% born in California</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>107,475</td>
<td>2,679</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td>67.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>118,746</td>
<td>1,389</td>
<td>9.3%</td>
<td>38.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>94,414</td>
<td>928</td>
<td>20.7%</td>
<td>39.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1920</td>
<td>85,202</td>
<td>466</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
<td>33.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1930</td>
<td>102,159</td>
<td>296</td>
<td>41.2%</td>
<td>36.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1940</td>
<td>106,334</td>
<td>224</td>
<td>51.9%</td>
<td>37.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1950</td>
<td>150,005</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>53.0%</td>
<td>39.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1960</td>
<td>237,292</td>
<td>133</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
<td>40.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970</td>
<td>435,062</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>55.1%</td>
<td>39.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980</td>
<td>812,178</td>
<td>102</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>40.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1990</td>
<td>1,645,472</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>30.7%</td>
<td>42.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2,379,536</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>52.9%**</td>
<td>40.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* *Male per 100 females.*

**Estimated from the 2000 Current Population Survey.**

*Source: U.S. Census of the Population, 1970-2000*

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More than half of Chinese Americans in 2000 were born in the United States. Four out of five of those U.S.-born Chinese were born in California.
The Chinese American community has remained an immigrant-dominated community, with the first and second generations comprising 67 percent of the population.

The ethnic Chinese population growth rate went up and down decade by decade, but basically remained stagnant in the span of half a century from 1890 to 1940. The gender imbalance for Chinese was nearly 27 males per single female in 1890. That dropped steadily over time, but males still outnumbered females by more than 2:1 by the 1940s.

The shortage of women combined with the “paper son” phenomenon and the illegal entry of male laborers during the exclusion era stilled the normal development of the Chinese American family. In 1900, less than 9 percent of the Chinese American population was U.S.-born. Since then, the share of the U.S.-born increased significantly in each of the succeeding decade until 1960. Accordingly, the proportion of children under 14 years of age increased substantially from a low of 3.4 percent in 1900 to a high of 33 percent in 1960. During and after World War II, more women than men were admitted to the United States as war brides, but the annual quota of immigrant visas for the Chinese was only 105 after the lifting of the Chinese Exclusion Act. In the 1950s, hundreds of refugees and their families fled Communist China and arrived in the United States.

These demographic trends led to the birth of a visible second and third generation between the 1940s and 1960s, during which the U.S.-born outnumbered the foreign born population. In 1960, over 60 percent of the Chinese American population was U.S.-born. However, the absolute number of the U.S.-born population was relatively small and much younger (a third was under age 14) than the average U.S. population. Even today, members of both second and third generations are still very young and have not yet come of age in significant numbers compared to the first generation, according to estimates culled from U.S. Census Current Population Survey data in 1998-2000. The 2000 Current Population Survey indicates that in the second generation, 44 percent of Chinese Americans are under 17 years old and 10 percent are between 18 and 24 (compared to 8

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cities* with Highest Proportions of Chinese Americans, 2000</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Chinese Americans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monterey Park</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arcadia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Gabriel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alhambra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rosemead</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rowland Heights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Temple City</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hacienda Heights</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cupertino</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diamond Bar</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Population of at least 30,000

Source: U.S. Census 2000
percent under 17 and 8 percent between 18 and 24 in the first generation).

Contemporary Chinese Americans: intra-group diversity
In much of the pre-World War II era, the Chinese American community was essentially an isolated bachelors' society consisting of a small merchant class and a vast working class of sojourners whose homeland was mainland China and whose lives were oriented toward an eventual return to that homeland. Since World War II, and particularly since the enactment of the 1965 Hart-Cellar Act, the ethnic community has experienced unprecedented demographic and social transformation from a bachelors' society to a family community. The ten-fold growth of the Chinese American population from 1960 to 2000 is not merely a matter of numbers but marks a turning point in the social development of the ethnic community and its group members. What characterizes the social transformation is the tremendous within-group diversity in terms of places of origin, socioeconomic backgrounds, patterns of geographic settlement, and modes of social mobility.

Contemporary Chinese immigrants have arrived not only from mainland China but also from the greater Chinese Diaspora—Hong Kong, Taiwan, Vietnam, Cambodia, Malaysia, and the Americas. In Los Angeles, for example, 23 percent of the Chinese American population was born in America, 27 percent in mainland China, 20 percent in Taiwan, 8 percent in Hong Kong, and 22 percent from other countries around the world, as of 1990. Linguistically, Chinese immigrants come from a much wider variety of dialect groups than in the past. For example, all ethnic Chinese share a single ancestral written language (varied only in traditional and simplified versions of characters), but speak numerous regional dialects—Cantonese, Mandarin, the Min dialect, Hakka, Fujianese, Chaoshounese, and Shanghainese—that are not easily understood outside the group.

Contemporary Chinese immigrants have also come from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. Some arrived in
the United States with little money, minimum education, and few job skills, which forced them to take low-wage jobs and settle in deteriorating urban neighborhoods. Others came with family savings, education and skills far above the levels of average Americans.

Nationwide, levels of educational attainment among Chinese Americans were significantly higher than those of the general U.S. population in both 1980 and 1990, and skill level increased over time. The 1990 Census showed that 41 percent of Chinese Americans at productive ages (aged 25 to 64) have attained four or more years of college education, compared to 21 percent of non-Hispanic whites. Immigrants from Taiwan displayed the highest levels of educational attainment with 62 percent having completed at least four years of college, followed by those from Hong Kong (46 percent) and from the mainland (31 percent). Professional occupations were also more common among Chinese Americans than among non-Hispanic whites (36 percent vs. 27 percent). The annual median family income for Chinese Americans was $34,000 in 1989, compared to $30,000 for the national median family.

While major socioeconomic indicators are above the national average, the trend of bifurcation is equally striking, especially among immigrants from the mainland. For example, as of 1990, almost 40 percent of immigrants from China do not have high school diplomas, compared to 8 percent of those from Taiwan, 18 percent of those from Hong Kong, and 22 percent of all Americans.

Where they live
The settlement patterns of Chinese Americans today are characterized by concentration as well as dispersion. Geographical concentration, to some extent, follows a historical pattern: Chinese Americans continue to concentrate in the West and in urban areas. One state, California, accounts
A people of their own: Taiwanese Americans

Compared to the roughly 2.7 million Chinese living in America, the Taiwanese American population is a tiny drop in the bucket. The 2000 Census counted just 144,795 Taiwanese Americans in the United States, with more than 5,000—or about half—living in California. There are also Taiwanese clustered around Washington D.C., Houston, and the suburbs of New York City.

Like the Cantonese or Shanghaiese, the Taiwanese are ethnically Chinese, though like the above groups, they speak their own dialect in addition to Mandarin. Still, there are important reasons why Taiwanese Americans maintain a distinct identity. After being defeated by the Communists, the nationalist government—and a million-and-a-half Chinese—fled the mainland for the island of Taiwan in the late 1940s, where they established a U.S.-backed government. But repression during the early days of the regime—many Taiwanese opponents to the nationalists were killed or imprisoned—plus the blending of local traditions bred resentment.

Most native Taiwanese, unlike the newer arrivals, fiercely oppose reunification with the mainland. Today, Taiwan is no longer ruled by a military government. But the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) which represents the majority of Taiwanese population, is opposed to reunification with China.

Like most other Asian groups, the Taiwanese first started coming to the United States in large numbers during the mid-1960s under provisions in the new immigration laws that allowed in the skilled and highly educated. As a result, the Taiwanese American population is mostly well-educated and well-off. Among Taiwanese 25 years of age or older, 69 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher in 1990, compared to 28 percent of the United States. Among Hawaiians and Pacific Islanders (APIs), 42 percent had a bachelor's degree or higher in 1990, compared to 28 percent of the United States.

For 40 percent of all Chinese Americans (1.1 million). New York accounts for 16 percent, second only to California, and Hawaii for 6 percent.

However, other states that have historically received fewer Chinese immigrants have witnessed phenomenal growth, such as Texas, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Illinois, Washington, Florida, Maryland, and Pennsylvania. Among cities with populations over 100,000, New York City (365,000), San Francisco (161,000), Los Angeles (74,000), Honolulu (69,000), and San Jose (58,000) have the largest numbers of Chinese Americans. Small suburban cities in Los Angeles and the Bay Area also have extraordinarily high proportions of Chinese Americans in the general population. As shown in Table 2, there are 11 cities of over 30,000 people in the United States in which Chinese Americans share over 20 percent of the city's population.

Traditional urban enclaves, such as Chinatowns in San Francisco, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, and Boston, continue to exist and to receive new immigrants, but they no longer serve as primary centers of initial settlement. As many new immigrants, especially the affluent and highly skilled, are bypassing inner cities to settle into suburbs immediately after arrival. For example, as of 2000, only 2 percent of Chinese immigrants in Los Angeles, 8 percent in San Francisco, and 14 percent in New York live in old inner-city Chinatowns.

The majority of the Chinese American population is spreading to outer areas or suburbs in traditional gateway cities as well as in centers of new Asian settlement across the country. Most of the cities with the
Among those employed 16 years or older, 82 percent of Taiwanese Americans were either in "managerial and professional specialty occupations" or "technical, sales and administrative occupations," compared to 67 percent for all Chinese and 58 percent in the general population, in 1990. The average family income in 1990 was more than $62,000, versus $51,951 for all Chinese, and $43,803 for the general population. At the same time, 11.2 percent of Taiwanese families in 1990 were below the poverty level—higher than the overall population's figure of 10 percent.

Though Taiwanese communities can be found all over the United States, the unofficial capital of Taiwan America is the Los Angeles suburb of Monterey Park. More than 61 percent of the population in the year 2000 was Asian, with the largest slice being Taiwanese immigrants.

Monterey Park's transformation into "Little Taipei" is due almost single-handedly to the late Chinese American real estate developer, Frederic Hsieh. In 1970, two years before Hsieh bought his first property in Monterey Park, the city was about 50 percent white, 34 percent Hispanic, and 15 percent Asian, with the majority of the Asians being Japanese. Hsieh promoted Monterey Park to the new, increasingly moneyed immigrants, just then arriving from Taiwan and Hong Kong, who were seeking an alternative to settling in Chinatowns in San Francisco and New York. Eagerly, they translated Monterey Park from Chinese into Mandarin, becoming "Lush, Very Green Park." He promoted the city's telephone area code, 310, as the number 8 is considered lucky by the Chinese and many other Asians, and the suburb's medical schools always soliciting for immigrant families.

In 1977, Hsieh told Monterey Park's incredible Chamber of Commerce, you may not know it, but Monterey Park will serve as the mecca for Chinese business.

By the 1980s, Hsieh's vision had come true. In 1996, at least three-fifths of Monterey Park's 5,000 businesses were owned by Chinese. Monterey Park had a Chinese mayor, and a predominantly Asian city council.

The influx brought a backlash. Will the last American to leave Monterey Park please bring the flag? A sign at a local gas station: The city council debated whether to make English the official language and force businesses to put up English-language signs. The conflict eventually subsided, and Monterey Park and the neighboring suburbs are now a relatively shining example of a multicultural community.

By the late 1990s, immigration from Taiwan slowed. The country's standard of living had risen, there was less economic incentive to leave, and in 1989, 13,974 Taiwanese immigrated to the United States. Twenty years later, the number was barely half that.

Also, many of the wealthier, more established Chinese and Taiwanese, had moved east to suburbs like San Marino or South Pasadena, or south to Orange County suburbs like Tustin and Anaheim Hills. But Monterey Park remains the cultural and business capital of Taiwan in Los Angeles and by extension, in the rest of the country.

highest proportions of Chinese are new immigrant suburbs that have become middle class immigrant cities only after the mid-1980s. As of 2000, half of all Chinese Americans live in suburbs. However, recent residential movements of Chinese Americans into ethnically concentrated suburban communities have tipped the balance of power, raising nativist anxiety of ethnic "invasion" and anti-immigrant sentiment.

Making it in America: different routes
Modes of social mobility among Chinese Americans also vary because of tremendous socioeconomic diversity. Three predominant modes are noteworthy. The first mode is the familiar time-honored path of starting at the bottom and moving up through hard work. This route is particularly relevant to those with limited education, few marketable job skills, and little familiarity with the larger labor market. In the post-industrial era, the globalized and restructured economy has fewer and fewer middle rungs in the mobility ladder. As a result, low-skilled workers starting at the bottom may well be trapped there with little chance of upward mobility even when they work hard.

The second mode is the incorporation into professional occupations in the mainstream economy through educational achievement. It has become evident in recent years that Chinese American youths enroll in colleges and graduate with bachelor and master degrees in disproportionate numbers. While many college graduates may have an easier time gaining labor market entry, however, they often encounter a greater probability of being blocked by a glass ceiling as they move up into managerial and executive positions.
Concerning citizenship, civil rights, interethnic/interracial coalitions, and political incorporation have acquired a high degree of urgency.

The future of Chinese Americans, foreign-born and U.S.-born alike, is intrinsically linked to the diversity of immigration and to the current social stratification system into which today's immigrants and their children are supposedly assimilating. Learning how to negotiate the culture of diversity and to redefine oneself in the new racial and ethnic stratification system is not only imperative but also inevitable.

—Min Zhou

Though no longer the primary centers of initial immigrant settlement, Chinatowns like those in New York and San Francisco still thrive commercially and continue to serve a contemporary immigrant population.

The third mode is ethnic entrepreneurship. Since the 1970s, unprecedented Chinese immigration, accompanied by the tremendous influx of human and financial capital, has set off a new stage of ethnic economic development. From 1977 to 1987, the U.S. Census reported that the number of Chinese-owned firms grew by 286 percent, compared to 238 percent for Asian-owned firms, 93 percent for black-owned firms, and 95 percent for Hispanic-owned firms. From 1987 to 1997, the number of Chinese-owned businesses continued to grow at a rate of 180 percent (from less than 90,000 to 252,377). As of 1997, there was approximately one ethnic firm for every 9 Chinese and for every 11 Asians, but only one ethnic firm for every 42 blacks and one for every 29 Hispanics. Chinese-American owned business enterprises made up 9 percent of the total minority-owned business enterprises nation-wide, but 19 percent of the total gross receipts, according to the 1997 Economic Census.

While ethnic entrepreneurship creates numerous employment opportunities for both entrepreneurs and co-ethnic workers, it also leads to problems that leave some workers behind in their pursuit of upward mobility. These problems include labor rights abuses, over-concentration of jobs with low wages, few chances for promotion or advancement, poor working conditions and few, if any, fringe benefits.

Conclusion
The current demographic trends mirror the linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity of the Chinese American community and its multifaceted life in the United States. These trends suggest that the community is being transformed from a predominantly immigrant community to a native ethnic community at the dawn of the 21st century. While issues and challenges directly relevant to immigration and immigrant settlement continue to occupy a central place in community affairs, new issues and challenges