

## FEATURE

# The Impact of Continuing Chinese immigration on Chinese American Life

{A Lecture at Chinese American Forum Seminar, St. Louis, October 18, 2003}

by Xiao-liuang Yin<sup>1</sup>

My talk this morning is about Chinese immigration to the United States since the 1960s. I wish to discuss how its continuing flow, the expansion of its trans-Pacific community, and the development of its cultural and economic networks have affected and changed the Chinese American experience.

The 2000 U.S. census reports there are 2.88 million Americans of Chinese descent. In reality, the Chinese American population is even larger than that figure. According to Chinese sources, there are more than 3.6 million Chinese in the United States. This is because Chinese records include ethnic Chinese from Southeast Asia who do not put "Chinese" on their census forms and recent illegal immigrants from China who are not always covered by the census studies. For example, 40% of refugees from Vietnam and

Cambodia are of Chinese descent. They identify themselves as Chinese in ethnicity though they may not claim themselves as Chinese on their census forms. In addition, it is estimated that more than 500,000 smuggled Chinese from China have entered the United States since the 1980s. Not all of them are covered by U.S. census reports.<sup>2</sup>

Chinese are not only the largest ethnic group among the 12 million Asian Americans, but also distinctive for two other characteristics: they are a predominantly immigrant community, and they are a highly diversified population in terms of human profile. Although Chinese have settled down in the United States since the mid-19th century, as Table One shows, about two

thirds of Chinese Americans today were born overseas; and the majority of them arrived after the 1960s. They came mostly from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, as well as other parts of the world.<sup>3</sup>

What impact has such a large-scale and highly diversified continuing immigration had on Chinese America? What is its implication for the Chinese American experience in the short and long run? And, in what ways has it transformed Chinese America life? These are the questions I will try to answer in my talk this morning.

Before I discuss these issues, it is necessary to review briefly the history of Chinese immigration to the United States. In general, Chinese immigration to North America can be divided into four major historical periods. Although individual Chinese coming to the New World can be traced back to the 18th century, it was not until the Gold Rush in the 1850s that Chinese immigration grew large enough to be visible in American society. Thus, the first period began in 1848 and ended around 1882. This is the free immigration era for the Chinese.

The discovery of gold at John Sutter's mill on January 24, 1848, precipitated a massive migration to California from all over the world. Among these migrants came a considerable number of pioneers from China. In fact, the Chinese happened to be among the first groups of people who rushed to the gold mines in Sierra Nevada. Chinese and American sources both report that on February 2, 1848, less than ten days after James Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's

sawmill on the lower reaches of the American River, three Chinese - two men and one woman arrived at San Francisco on the American brig Eagle. The two men - Chum Ming and Cheong Yun - immediately went to the mines.<sup>5</sup> Glowing tales of fabulous wealth in California quickly traveled back to Guangzhou (Canton), capital of Guangdong (or Kwang-tung) province on the coast of South China. As word spread in the Pearl River Delta around Guangzhou, Chinese gold-seekers hurried to make plans to embark upon the voyage across the Pacific. There were 325 Chinese forty-niners, called Jinshan Ke in Chinese (meaning "Gold Mountain Travelers").<sup>6</sup> In 1850, their number reached 789; two years later, the number of entries of the Chinese to California took a quantum leap—20,026 Chinese arrived in San Francisco in 1852. By 1882 when Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the Chinese population in the United States had reached about 150,000. If one were to include those who returned to China during this period, some 322,000 Chinese took the Gold Mountain trip from 1848 to 1882 before the exclusion law prohibited their entries.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1, Chinese American Population, 1890-2004**

Years	Population	Sex Ratio (M/F)	Overseas-Born %
1890	107,475	27:1	99.3
1900	118,746	13:1	91.7
1910	94,414	9.3:1	79.3
1920	85,202	4.7:1	69.9
1930	102,159	3.0:1	58.5
1940	106,334	2.2:1	48.1
1950	150,005	1.7:1	47.0
1960	237,292	1.3:1	39.5
1970	435,062	1.1:1	46.9
1980	812,178	1.0:1	63.3
1990	1,645,472	0.99:1	69.3
2000	2,879,636*	0.99:1	65.0 (est.)

\* The figure includes 447,051 Chinese with mix-raced background.

The second period in Chinese American immigration history covers the years from 1882 to 1943. In 1882, Congress passed the notorious Chinese Exclusion Act, which stopped Chinese immigration to the United States. The law

remained effective until December 17, 1943 when Congress, proposed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt, finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act. Therefore, the period between 1882 and 1943 is known as the "Exclusion Era" in Chinese American history. The Chinese American population declined drastically during this period because no Chinese were allowed to enter the United States in those years except the so called "exempt classes," i.e., Chinese students and scholars, diplomats, government officials, tourists, and merchants.<sup>8</sup> In the meanwhile, because U.S. immigration laws denied the entry of Chinese women, the Chinese American community during this period grew into a "bachelor society," with an extremely unbalanced sex ratio. For example, in 1900, the sex ratio between Chinese men and women was 12:1 in California, 36:1 in Boston, and 50:1 in New York.<sup>9</sup> Lee Chew, a Chinese laundryman in New York, complained bitterly: "In all New York there are less than forty Chinese women, and it is impossible to get a Chinese woman out here unless one goes to China and marries her there, and then he must collect affidavits to prove that she really is his wife. That is in case of a merchant. A laundryman can't bring his wife here under any circumstances."<sup>10</sup>

The third period in Chinese American immigration history covers the years from 1943 to 1965. After Congress finally repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1943, Chinese immigration to the United States resumed, and it soon gained momentum. Then came the turning point, the Communist victory in China in 1949, which brought about an influx of a new and different type of Chinese immigrants to the United States. Many of them were well-educated professionals, including some 5,000 Chinese students and scholars. They had come to America for advanced education and training, but the sudden change of government in their homeland left them stranded in the United States. Most of these "stranded students" later settled in the United States, and many have distinguished themselves in American academia.

Finally, Congress passed the new and landmark immigration act in 1965. For the first time in history, Chinese and Asians were granted equal immigration quotas as those of the Europeans. This is why Chinese American population has increased dramatically since the 1960s. In 1965, there were only about a quarter of a million of Chinese in the United States; but by 2000, the Chinese American population has been increased more than 10 times, to 2.88 million, thanks to the new and continuing immigration from the Chinese world.<sup>11</sup> As I mentioned before, in reality, the Chinese American population is even larger than that figure. The arrival of such a large and continuing immigration has changed

virtually every aspect of Chinese American life; and its effect on Chinese America is many folded.

First, the continuing immigration and the rapid growth of their population have greatly boosted cultural, political, and economic power of Chinese Americans, and it has had important academic consequences. Although Chinese and Asians account for only a small proportion of the U.S. population, about 4% nationwide, they represent almost 8% of college students. Their presence in top research universities is even more remarkable. As Table 2 shows, Asian Americans at UC Berkeley, Harvard, MIT, and Stanford constitute an amazingly large percentage of the student population in the four institutions.

**Table 2: Percent of Ethnic Composition of Undergraduate Students at 4 Universities, 2001/02**

<b>Institutions</b>	<b>Asian</b>	<b>Black</b>	<b>Latino</b>	<b>White</b>	<b>Other</b>
UC Berkeley	42.0%	3.9%	9.7%	31.7%	12.7%
Harvard	17.5%	8.0%	7.6%	43.2%	23.7%
MIT	27.4%	6.3%	11.1%	53.3%	1.9%
Stanford	23.2%	7.8%	9.9%	50.8%	8.3%

Furthermore, because Chinese and Asian American students are either the largest or fastest-growing student group on campus throughout the country, their strong interest in their ethnic background and in learning about their ancestral land helps build Chinese and Asian American studies at a time when financial difficulty constrains curriculum development in universities across the nation, raising the status of Chinese and Asian American studies as an academic discipline. For instance, when I lecture at Harvard University, Occidental College, or institutions throughout the United States, I find the majority of my audience to be students of Chinese descent, either children of immigrants or recent immigrants themselves.

report that until the 1940s, more than 80% of Chinese immigrants in the United States came from six counties in the Pearl River Delta around Guangzhou.<sup>13</sup> By contrast, today Chinese Americans include immigrants from all over the world, mostly from China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong, as well as countries in Southeast Asia. In addition, the adoption of thousands of Chinese children by mainstream American families since the 1980s has significantly increased the Chinese visibility in American life.

The continuous Chinese immigration has not only greatly increased the numerical strength of Chinese Americans, but also brought about profound changes in the human profile of Chinese population in the United States. Until the 1960s, the vast majority of the Chinese in America were immigrants from Guangdong and their U.S.-born descendants. In fact, statistics

The new immigration from the Chinese world also represents a more varied group of people. Unlike in the past, many of the recent immigrants are college educated, with high level of professional proficiency, reflecting the postwar immigration trend that witnessed thousands of immigrant intellectuals setting down roots in American society. Although Chinese students came to study in the United States as early as in 1820, not until the post-World War II era did Chinese student immigration gain momentum. (I use the term "student immigrant" here to refer to a person who

enters the United States on student/scholar visa but later adjusts to immigrant status) For example, between 1950 and the late 1980s, nearly 150,000 students from Taiwan came to the United States for education; a majority of them settled in the United States after graduation. The decades of the 1980s and 1990s also saw approximately 250,000 students and scholars from China study in American institutions of higher learning. Over 50% of them eventually settled in the United States.<sup>14</sup>

The arrival of such a large number of student immigrants has significantly changed the demographic and socioeconomic structure of Chinese America, and their settlement in the United States has given shape to today's Chinese American intellectual community. Adapting well to the mainstream job market, they have succeeded in their careers. Most prominent Chinese American scientists come from this student immigrant group or such immigrant families. The 7 Chinese American Nobel laureates in physics and chemistry, for example, share this background.

At the same time, immigration laws such as the "family reunion act" and the upheavals in Southeast Asia have also brought to the United States large numbers of non-English speaking working-class Chinese immigrants and refugees. "It is not true that all Asians come to the United States with suitcases full of cash," as a new immigrant from Hong Kong argues, "I came here with very limited resources."<sup>15</sup> With few readily transferable skills and limited resources, these new immigrants are forced to take low-paying manual and service jobs, which trap them in poor ghettos in urban centers such as New York and Los Angeles. There are also Chinese immigrant professionals who, failing to acquire positions in the United States comparable to those they held back home, get stuck in doing menial work in this country. Such highly diversified immigration has transformed the Chinese American community into a bi-modal socio-economic structure with two distinct groups: the "uptown" and the "downtown." The former, who are mainly

American-born or U.S. educated Chinese professionals, reside in suburban towns and are well integrated into mainstream society; the latter are predominantly working-class immigrants struggling to survive in isolated urban Chinatowns. Caught in a world of gangs, drugs, and poverty, the downtown Chinese differ dramatically from their uptown counterparts in American life.

In other words, the vast differences in their places of origin, political affiliations, cultural orientations and socio-economic status have transformed Chinese Americans into groups with separate or even conflicting interests. In real life, a restaurant worker in New York's Chinatown, who arrived as an illegal immigrant from a small village in Fujian province, and a medical doctor, who came from Shanghai and now lives in Beverly Hills in Los Angeles, may have very different experiences in their life in America. The widening gap between the downtown and uptown Chinese explains why Chinese Americans are more divided in politics than other minority and ethnic groups. Unlike blacks, for example, Chinese Americans tend to vote differently in elections, and their votes are often split between Democrat and Republican candidates. Their attitude towards affirmative action is a case in point. Some uptown Chinese are embittered with the "quota system" in college admissions and the mainstream job market because they feel affirmative action requirement reduces their children's educational opportunities, and sometimes stops their own career advancement. In comparison, the downtown Chinese, locked in dead-end jobs with little chance to move up, are more concerned for their immediate survival and tend to support affirmative action programs.<sup>16</sup>

Because of the complexity and diversity in their backgrounds, it is not surprising that Chinese Americans have different views on a wide range of issues, from changes in health-care regulations to welfare reform to bilingual education. In a sense, they have become both players and pawns in political games between

conflicting forces in mainstream American society, and they are used by both parties to further their respective agendas. The tragic story of the Chinese American nuclear scientist Wen Ho Lee and the controversy over the alleged Chinese campaign donations in the late 1990s are such examples. In short, we have to recognize the economic polarization on Chinese Americans, understand its impact, and develop a responsible agenda to deal with the problem. Only after narrowing the "downtown-uptown" divide, can we succeed in uniting Chinese Americans as one community.

Finally, I would like to talk about how recent continuing Chinese immigration has contributed to the development and expansion of trans-Pacific networks between the United States and the Chinese world. The arrival of new immigrants in America in recent decades has coincided with China's opening up to the outside world, and they are influenced by the powerful trends of globalization - the massive economic, technological, political, and socio-cultural changes that have occurred throughout the world since the 1970s. Thus, two parallel and interconnected developments have critically affected the growth of transnational linkages in Chinese America. One is the tremendous increase in trade, finance and other business activities between China and the United States. It has spun a rich and complex web of networking between Chinese Americans, especially new immigrants, and their family members and friends across the Pacific.

Another is a reverse flow of large numbers of Chinese Americans, both immigrants and U.S.-born, who return to their native land to start businesses or work for U.S. and Western companies to manage local offices in the Chinese world. In reality, most Chinese Americans who work for U.S. companies in China are hired because their employers believe their Chinese background helpful in promoting the companies' businesses in China. For example, a study shows that among those who run foreign companies and businesses in Beijing, 50% are of Chinese

descent.<sup>17</sup> Many of them are Chinese Americans. Ping K. Ko, an ex-UC Berkeley professor who now manages an American company in China, remarks: "It used to be that if you went to the U.S., it was 'Bye-bye, see you when you're 65.' But opportunity now is worldwide. (Working in China) is no different than working in California and looking for job opportunities in Texas."<sup>18</sup> The phenomenon is known as "reverse brain drain," or "brain circulation."

Of course, this reverse flow does not mean that Chinese Americans are now going back to their ancestral land. Even those immigrants who return to the Chinese world for better economic opportunities tend to keep their roots - residency and families - in the United States and prefer to commute across the Pacific.

It is now common to see the wife and children of a Chinese American family living in the United States, but the husband shuttles across the Pacific. Sometimes both parents work in Asia; only the children stay behind in the United States. Such a pattern of transnational migration and community networks has created a kind of new trans-cultural identity. In other words, because they have roots and ties in both China and the United States, these Chinese American migrants have carried with them a network of connections and have enhanced the flow of capital, entrepreneurial talent, and cultural activities across the Pacific.<sup>19</sup> It is also noteworthy that the continuing Chinese immigration has brought into the United States a huge amount of Chinese capital, which has transformed the economic structure of the Chinese American community. Stories about the average Chinese immigrant family bringing assets of \$200,000 to the United States are obviously overdrawn. However, the inflow of Chinese capital to the United States from economically prosperous, but politically unstable, regions in Asia is indeed astounding; it has varied from several billion to over \$10 billion a year since the 1970s. The capital has produced an enormous impact on Chinese America. For example, the Chinese population in Los Angeles County grew six times between 1970 and 1990,

but Chinese-owned businesses there increased more than 15 times, from 1,100 to 17,000, during the same period. The majority of these businesses are established with Chinese capital from Asia.<sup>20</sup> Because they serve as a gateway to America from the Pacific Rim, Chinese American communities have become a focal point for Chinese investment in the United States. In fact, the economic boom in China-towns throughout North America since the 1970s is mainly an outcome of such a large and continuing investment from the Chinese world.

In the foreseeable future, Chinese Americans are likely to be even more actively involved in the trans-Pacific migration and community networks. For one thing, the globalization of the world market and U.S. economy will increase the Chinese American awareness of the current situation in their "old home" because the advancement of information technology and transportation cuts short the distance across the Pacific and transplants the Chinese world into Chinese America. The daily activities of the Beijing leaders, details of Taiwan presidential election, and the changes on the stock market in Hong Kong are read daily or watched and heard frequently throughout the Chinese American community. As a result, Chinese Americans today are well informed of events that are happening on the other side of the Pacific. The access of such extensive China related news in media and the convenience of trans-Pacific transportation cannot be underestimated. It has created a life in Chinese American communities, generating a tremendous interest and motivation for Chinese Americans to participate and play a role in the cultural, economic, political, and social developments in the Chinese world. As we all know, it makes immigrants feel much more involved if their homeland is just on the other side of the U.S. border.

Economic globalization, the expansion of the trans-Pacific networks and continuing Chinese immigration are forces that will only grow stronger in the future. Demographic projections show that Chinese Americans will

remain a predominantly immigrant community well into the 21st century. Chinese and Asian American studies simply cannot ignore these emerging realities. In order to help new immigrants move forward and get better integrated into American life, we have to develop a responsible agenda. In other words, the continuing success of the Chinese in American life depends on whether we can set up an agenda that transcends divisions in our communities and tap the strength of the diversity of Chinese immigration. Only in this way, can we succeed in bridging the gap between the "uptown" and the "downtown," contribute to a better understanding of the Chinese American experience, and promote the progress of the Chinese community as a whole in American society.

<sup>1</sup> Xiao-huang Yin (Ph.D., Harvard), Professor and Chair of the American Studies Program at Occidental College, is author of *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* (University of Illinois Press, 2000) and co-editor of *The Expanding Roles of Chinese Americans in U.S.-China Relations: Transnational Networks and Transpacific Interactions* (M.E. Sharpe, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Lu Weixiong and Chen Lianhao, eds., *Qiaoting jiaotiu wenji [Anthology of Overseas Chinese Experience]* (Guangzhou: Guangdong Liuyiu, 2002), p.43, and Ko-lin Chin, *Smuggled Chinese: Clandestine Immigration to the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999), pp.3-93.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on Chinese immigration since the 1960s, see Xiao-huang Yin, "Immigrants from the People Republic of China: A Highly Diversified Community," in *New Americans: Immigrants since the 1960s*, eds., Mary C. Waters and Reed Ueda (Cambridge: Harvard University Press), forthcoming.

<sup>4</sup> 2000 U.S. Census Reports.

<sup>5</sup> Li Chunhui, et al., *Meizhou huaqiao huaren shi [A History of Chinese Immigration to North and South America]* (Beijing: Dongfang, 1990), p.115. Also see Jack Chen, *The Chinese of*

*America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), pp.5,11.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout history', America has been known to the Chinese as "Gold Mountain" both because of the 19th century Gold Rush in California and its image as "a land of opportunities."

<sup>7</sup> Him Mark Lai, Joe Huang, and Don Wong, *The Chinese of America, 1785-1980* (San Francisco: Chinese Culture Foundation, 1980), p.20; Him Mark Lai, "The Chinese," in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), p.218.

<sup>8</sup> Sucheng Chan, ed. *Entry Denied: Exclusion and the Chinese Community in America, 1852-1943* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Calculated from (*U.S.- Census.: General Population Characteristics 1900-1970*) (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1971). For more information on how immigration laws denied the entry of Chinese women, see Sucheng Chan, "The Exclusion of Chinese Women," in Chan, *Entry Denied*, pp.94-146.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Chew, "The Life Story of a Chinaman," in *The Life Stories of Undistinguished Americans as Told by Themselves*, ed. Hamilton Holt (New York: Potts, 1906), pp.281-299.

<sup>11</sup> The term "the Chinese world" refers to countries and regions that are populated by Chinese. It includes China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Singapore, and some regions in Southeast Asia that are heavily inhabited by Chinese. For more discussion on this issue, see Tu Wei-ming, ed.. *The Living Tree: The Changing Meaning of Being Chinese Today* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Calculated from data publicized in the four institutions' websites.

<sup>13</sup> Xiao-huang Yin, *Chinese American Lectures since the 1850s* (University of Illinois Press, 2000), pp.11-52.

<sup>14</sup> Xiao-huang Yin, "The Growing Influence of Chinese Americans on U.S.-China Relations." In *The Outlook for U.S.-China Relations Following the 1997-1998 Summits*, eds. Peter Koehn and Joseph Y.S. Cheng (Hong Kong: Chinese University Press, 1999), pp.331-349; Peter Kwong, *The New Chinatown* (New York: Noonday Press, 1987), pp.60-62. Also see Hsiang-shui Chen, *Chinatown No More* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1992), p.129; Qian Ning, Liuxu meiguo [*Studying in the USA*] (Nanjing: Jiangsu wenyi, 1996), pp.277-300.

<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Timothy P. Fong, *The First Suburban Chinatown: The Remaking of Monterey Park, California* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1994), p.70.

<sup>16</sup> Xiao-huang Yin, "The Two Sides of America's Model Minority," *Los Angeles Times*, May 7, 2000, pp.M1, M7.

<sup>17</sup> Zhuang Guotu, *Huaqiao huaren yu zhongguo di guangxi* [*The Relationship between Overseas Chinese and China*] (Guangzhou: Guangdong gaodeng jiaoyu, 2001), p.303.

<sup>18</sup> Quoted in Rone Tempest, "China Tries to Woo Its Tech Talent Back Home," *Los Angeles Times*, November 25, 2002, p.B1, B6.

<sup>19</sup> For more information on this issue, see Xiao-huang Yin, "Changes and Continuity in Chinese American Philanthropy to China since the 1970s: A Case Study of Chinese American Transnationalism," *Journal of American Studies*, University of Kansas, forthcoming.

<sup>20</sup> Wellington K.K. Chan, "Expanding Networks and Prospects for Transnational Cooperation," in *The Expanding Roles of Chinese Americans in U.S.-China Relations: Transnational Networks and Transpacific Interactions*, ed., Peter H. Koehn and Xiao-huang Yin (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2002), pp.145-161.



## Xiao-huang Yin

Xiao-Huang Yin (PhD, Harvard) is Professor and Chair of the American Studies Program at Occidental College, a corresponding associate of the John King Fairbank Center for East Asian Research at Harvard University, and an associate of the Longfellow Institute of Harvard. He has taught at Harvard as a visiting professor of history and

ethnic studies and served on the Community Advisory Board for the Ford Foundation project on Asian and Asian American studies at California State University, Los Angeles. He is a recipient of many grants and fellowships, including the Haynes Faculty Fellowship, John D. Sawyer Fellowship, Smithsonian Fellowship, and Harvard-Yenching Fellowship. Specializing in Asian American studies, transnationalism, diaspora studies, and U.S.-China relations. Dr. Yin is the author of *Chinese American Literature since the 1850s* (Illinois, 2000) and coeditor of *The Expanding Roles of Chinese Americans in U.S.-China Relations: Transnational Networks and Trans-Pacific Interactions* (M.E. Sharpe, 2002). He is also an advisory editor of and a contributor to *New Americans: Immigrants since the 1850s* (Harvard, forthcoming), a contributor to *American Babel: Essays on Language, Immigration and Translation* (Harvard, 2002), *The Outlook of U.S.-China Relations* (CUHK, 2001), *Not English Only: Redefining "American" in American Studies* (Amsterdam, 2000), *Multilingual America: Transnationalism, Ethnicity, and the Languages of American Literature* (NYU, 1998), and many other books and academic journals. He is also a contributor on China, U.S.-China relations, and Asian Americans to magazines and newspapers, including the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Los Angeles Times*, *Boston Globe*, and *Il Mondo* [Italy]. He is currently working on a book project about the trans-Pacific migration and community networks.