
Chinese overseas and their descendants, estimated at 35 million around the globe, have never failed to capture the imagination and fascination of scholars and the general public. The exploration of the history, demography, socio-economic profile, political participation, cultural retention and change, family structure, and community organization of this ethnic group, as well as the experiences of individual group members, has grown over time, perhaps more so as a result of the rising Chinese economy and geopolitical power. The United States has the largest number of ethnic Chinese outside Asia, estimated at 3.5 million by the US Census Bureau's American Community Survey in 2007. As of today, the Chinese are the oldest and largest group among the Asian migrants, and one of the top three immigrant groups in the United States.

Among the numerous books written and published about Chinese Americans by scholars and other writers in the US, most delve into historical legacies and historiographies, some offer overviews of the historical and contemporary periods, and still others focus on specific subjects or places of Chinese America. However, few delve into important aspects of contemporary community dynamics and immigrant life in a single volume. There is hence a need for a general reference work for scholars and laymen on the transformation of Chinese America in the contemporary periods. Min Zhou’s Contemporary Chinese America: Immigration, Ethnicity, and Community Transformation fills the gap. As one of the most prominent scholars studying Chinese America, and an immigrant Chinese American herself, Min Zhou has built on her research into the “three coasts” of the United States — east, south, and west — over two and a half decades, and presented a comprehensive, in-depth analysis of contemporary Chinese America. The work, based on rigorous quantitative analyses and qualitative fieldwork, is informative, thought provoking, theoretically sound, empirically rich, while simultaneously humanistic.

Contemporary Chinese America opens with an insightful introductory chapter, “A Personal Reflection on the Study of Chinatown and Beyond,” which is an account of the author’s intellectual and professional journey from her initial study of New York City’s Chinatown and her intellectual development to her nuanced conceptual discussions of a community perspective for studying urban neighborhoods, ethnic enclaves, ethnic institutions, immigrant family, the new second generation, and the widely-cited “segmented assimilation theory” (coauthored with Alejandro Portes). Zhou also addresses the debate on classical straight-line assimilation versus segmented assimilation, ethnic retention and its discontents, and ethnic economies versus ethnic enclave economies. At the end of this chapter, Zhou makes the point that future works need to be done to fill the gaps in the existing literature and lays out her own research agenda.

The book is divided into five parts: Part I puts Chinese America in the context of Greater Chinese Diaspora. Zhou offers a historical overview of Chinese emigration, differentiating the largely intra-Asian Chinese trade Dispora prior to Western colonization from the Chinese labor-dominated international migration in the mid-19th century up to World War II, and between Chinese emigration since World War II in the contexts of decolonization, nation-state building, and economic development in
Asian countries on the one hand, and the contemporary international Chinese migration beyond Asia on the other. Zhou makes a strong argument that distinct streams of emigration from China, and remigration from the Chinese Diaspora, are contingent upon history and that the economy, diasporic communities, and migration networks interact with the state at the points of origin and destination to shape the direction and nature of international migration.

Part II looks at patterns of Chinese immigration, demographic trends, and community dynamics. It includes three chapters that respectively discuss the overall demographic changes and characteristics of Chinese America (Chapter 2), Chinatown in New York (Chapter 3), and a new Chinese suburban community in the San Gabriel Valley, Los Angeles (Chapter 4). Chapter 2 gives an overview of both the historical and contemporary demographic trends of Chinese immigration and population dynamics in the US, including numbers, sex ratio, nativity, and geographic distribution/concentration. The chapter also pays attention to intra-group diversity by looking at different cohorts of immigrants, their places of birth, socio-economic status (SES), and settlement patterns. Despite this being a data-rich chapter, Zhou brings out some critical conceptual issues that set the tone for the rest of the book by stating that “we should therefore start to look at the Chinese American community of the twenty-first century as integral to, rather than separate from, the mainstream society” (p. 53). The two following chapters provide portraits of two Chinese communities that have been formed in different periods by different immigrants who possess differential demographic and SES profiles, and under differential dynamics in different parts of the country. By comparing the contents of the two chapters, readers can discern the similarities and differences of the traditional downtown ethnic enclaves of Chinatown symbolized by the old Chinatown gate, and the recently-emerged suburban Chinese ethnoburb characterized by a bright shopping mall. Interested readers can even compare and contrast Chinese communities in different parts of the world in terms of the Chinese settlement pattern and community characteristics in the era of globalization and changing Chinese economy and population.

Part III looks at the organizational structure of Chinese America from three angles: immigrant entrepreneurship and the enclave economy (Chapter 5), the structure and roles of the Chinese-language media (Chapter 6), and Chinese schools and the ethnic system of supplementary education (Chapter 7). Ethnic economy and immigrant entrepreneurship have long been recognized as the backbone of Chinese immigrant neighborhoods and of upward mobility among immigrants in the receiving society. The issue of pros and cons of working for co-ethnics in an ethnic enclave has been hotly-debated among academics. Min Zhou addresses these issues by means of quantitative analysis and qualitative work and points out both the intangible benefits and pitfalls of doing such work. Ethnic-language media has often been perceived by mainstream society as hindering the integration of immigrants into the receiving society. Min Zhou’s analysis of the content and coverage of the Chinese-language print media, TV and radio, and on-line publishing reaches the conclusion that “ethnic-language media cannot simply be viewed as an ethnic institution isolated from the mainstream host society; rather, they are important facilitators of immigrant adaptation and integration” (p. 147). Similarly, in her analysis of Chinese-language schools she points out their role in maintaining Chinese language and culture while her discussion of the